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Hapeville: “Pop Up” Art Adds to Revitalization Efforts

What do you do when you want to make the arts a cornerstone of your plan to revitalize the city — but you don’t have any gallery space? If you’re Hapeville, Ga., you buy shipping containers.

Earlier this year, the nonprofit Hapeville Arts Alliance purchased a pair of used shipping containers to convert into “pop-up” art galleries. The 8-by-40-foot containers were painted and fitted with windows and doors, and placed on a concrete slab. By late spring, the galleries would be open to the public, with artists displaying their works in a rotating series of exhibits.

“We don’t have a lot of buildings,” explains David Burt, executive director of the Arts Alliance, “so this seemed like a creative and cost-effective way to get space and get art into Hapeville.”

Burt started doing research and found a company – ConGlobal – that sold both new and used containers. The group went with used containers since they were less than half of the \$5,500 cost for new ones. The company made modifications so windows and doors could be added. Once the containers were delivered, local vendors installed windows and doors, interior framing, drywall, insulation, heating and cooling, and landscaping.

Burt estimates that the total cost for each container was about \$16,000, which was paid for out of a combination of a Georgia Council for the Arts Tourism Product Development (TDP) grant, a grant from the Community Foundation Neighborhood Fund, and community fundraisers. The city is offering in-kind help by providing the land, pouring the concrete, and doing the electrical work.

“The cost is a bit more than we originally anticipated,” Burt admits, “but we will be able to cover it. We could have shaved several thousand dollars off each one by making them simpler, but we want these to really be interesting architecturally.”

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A juried committee from the Arts Alliance will choose the artists who will display work, and the art will be for show and in some cases, for sale, with the Alliance getting a commission.

The pop-up galleries are permanent fixtures on cement slabs, and more can be added at any time. Burt says no zoning changes were necessary because the containers are on city property and exempt from zoning requirements. But the city is thinking ahead in case others would like to try this idea.

“We are looking to have the zoning changed in the downtown arts district to allow private property owners to have the opportunity to also install these containers,” Burt says.

Using Arts As A Destination

The pop-up galleries are just part of the arts equation calculated to bring new economic life to Hapeville. It’s been a tricky equation to solve. Since the closing of a Ford Motor Co. plant in 2006, the city has battled an image problem – perceived as unsafe, too close to the airport, with nothing to do.

“Several years ago, downtown Hapeville was in decline and in pretty bad shape,” Burt says. “Some buildings were empty, but the majority were underutilized with tenants that tended not to stay very long. And most were the color of battleship gray.”



But he and others saw the situation as a canvas on which to paint a new Hapeville. In 2010, Burt was serving as president of the Hapeville Main Street board. He and fellow board members Ann Ray and Charlotte Rentz “put their heads together” to come up with a plan to revitalize the city.

“Every community needs to find its niche,” Burt says. “We believed Hapeville was well-positioned to become an arts community because of its safe environment, close proximity to downtown Atlanta and an atmosphere that is diverse, tolerant and welcoming.”

The trio formed the Hapeville Arts Alliance, leased an old house downtown and renovated it with volunteer labor to create the Norton Arts Center. The new enterprise provided an incubator space for local artists as well as a gallery and classrooms.

While the vision was clear – make Hapeville an arts village, a place where people want to spend time – a plan was needed. Burt’s professional background and education in city planning proved to be useful; already a consultant to other cities, he contracted with Hapeville to develop “Blueprint 2020,” an economic development plan.

A key goal was positioning Hapeville as an arts destination, and the strategy was a collaborative initiative involving the Arts Alliance, the Hapeville Historical Society – headed by Charlotte Rentz – and the newly relocated Academy Theatre. A key fourth partner in the initiative was the City of Hapeville.

“You absolutely have to have buy-in from the government,” says Ray, who as vice mayor has a dual interest in Hapeville’s success. “And you get that buy-in by having a cohesive vision and implementing it step by step. Without it, you won’t have the collaboration you need.”

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Next Step: Getting Businesses On Board

While the Arts Alliance was gaining momentum, Burt went about trying to recruit new businesses to the city. In the last year, Drip Coffee has opened its second location in Hapeville, and Volare Wine & Bistro and Beer Girl, Growlers & Bottle Shop, have also come to downtown.

His recruitment efforts weren't limited to for-profit enterprises, however. When the Avondale Estates-based Academy Theatre, a nationally recognized professional theatre company, was looking for a new home, Burt persuaded its leadership to move to Hapeville. The theatre relocated in 2013, providing a performing arts component to the scene.

“The theatre allowed us to create some nighttime traffic,” Burt says, “and that traffic is conducive to bringing in restaurants.” Now he’s hoping the pop-up galleries will attract more businesses, and more people will come into downtown, especially on weekends.

“The galleries will be open two Saturdays a month – maybe more in the future – and the art will rotate out,” explains Burt. “People can come back and not see the same art twice.” To generate more foot traffic, Burt says they are planning to pair the gallery openings with shows at the Academy Theatre.

While it seems that things have been coming together pretty quickly in Hapeville, Burt and Ray say it’s all been calculated with the intention of getting it right. “The bar has to be set pretty high from the beginning,” Ray says. “We can’t just do substandard work to fill the space and expect it to last. If you do that, people might come here once, but they won’t come back. If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well.”

“Seven young entrepreneurs have opened businesses here within the last several years,” says Karen Smith, Thomasville’s Main Street director. “When these people see a thriving, bustling downtown, they say, ‘this is where I want to be.’ The community embraces new ideas and supports new businesses.”

Creative Redevelopment

While making plans to redevelop an underutilized area of historic downtown, the city, along with input from TCA, decided to designate a “creative district,” an area devoted to public art, galleries, and creative entrepreneurs such as Sturdy Brothers.

The city, in partnership with TCA, first pulled together a design charrette, a collaborative brainstorm session commonly used by architects and designers when planning a project. In March 2014, experts in economic development, landscape architecture and master planning, as well as community members, came together for a three-day meeting funded by the city, TCA and the Main Street program. From that meeting came a written plan that detailed everything the creative district could be.

“We first thought of it as an ‘arts district,’” Arwood says, “but due to input from the community during the charrette, we decided to target a more ‘creative’ group, including businesses like sign makers, landscape architects, illustrators and interior designers.”

The plan also calls for a 14-mile trail system that connects the city through all of its parks. A multi-use park will anchor the trail downtown, with a stage and lawn seating for outdoor performances — providing yet another reason for people to come downtown.

Another new development – independent of the creative district – is the old Rose’s department store, a run down building on the edge of downtown that the city now owns. Beverly says the city plans to make it

into a new events center and will work with TCA on the concept to maximize the potential of the project. With the collaboration of TCA, the creative district, the multi-use park and new businesses continuing to open up shop in Thomasville, Mayor Max Beverly is confident Thomasville is becoming a more attractive place to live, as well as a place where businesses want to come.

To demonstrate the strength of the arts in Thomasville, a copy of “Thom,” a magazine that TCA started publishing last year, is included in information packets to prospective companies and potential residents. Supported by corporate partners, the book-like publication features stories about the people and ideas shaping the creative life of the Thomasville community. “That magazine tells more of what Thomasville is than most brochures,” Beverly says.



“When you look at economic development, you’ve really got to differentiate yourself as a community to attract outside businesses. The arts is one of the things that we use to distinguish ourselves from the cities we’re up against when a company is looking to move to a certain area.”

– Max Beverly, Mayor, Thomasville