



How a music scene functioned as a tool for urban redevelopment: A case study of Omaha's Slowdown project

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ABSTRACT

Music scenes are increasingly included in the discourse of how art and culture function as tools for economic development, but they are rarely discussed in terms of being catalysts for urban redevelopment. This gap in the literature is important to address as music-based urban redevelopment projects gain traction in the United States. One recent example is the "Slowdown" project in Omaha, Nebraska. This paper will offer insight into how a successful music scene can function as a catalyst for urban redevelopment by examining the \$10.2 million dollar mixed-use Slowdown project and its connection to Omaha's music scene. Laissez-faire public policy, low cost-of-living, and inexpensive technological tools all played roles in the development of a local music scene capable of reaching international significance and fostering a project the magnitude of Slowdown.

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Introduction

As the core of the national economy continues to shift from the manufacturing sector to the technology and service sectors, urban economic development strategies are also shifting. Industrial recruitment is giving way to amenity-driven, human capital strategies that seek to attract the highly skilled labor that firms increasingly require (Currid, 2007; Florida, 2002). At the same time, authors have observed that a comparatively young, mobile, and highly educated workforce is likely to be attracted to locations high in amenities (Clark, 2004; Florida, 2002). In response, cities are working to attract this demographic, and subsequently firms, by leveraging art and culture as tools for economic development.

Currid (2009) analyzes the broad spectrum of literature concerning how art and culture are used as tools in urban economic development strategies and constructs a typology consisting of four uses: "(1) as an amenity or consumption product (2) as a redevelopment and development tool (3) as a way to "brand" place (4) as generator of jobs and revenue" (Currid, 2009, p. 368). Currid does not specifically address the cultural subsector of music in her article, but it is

included in the general discourse to varying degrees. This is true in terms of "music scenes," the cultural agglomerations formed around the production and consumption of popular music. While music scenes are considered in terms of operating as an amenity attracting a desired demographic to a neighborhood or city (Grant, Haggett, & Morton, 2009; Lloyd, 2004), as branding agent (Botta, 2007; Shank, 1994), and as the basis of an industrial sector providing jobs and economic impact to an urban area (City of Austin, 2001), music scenes functioning as a tool for redevelopment and development has been largely overlooked. Consideration of the connection is addressed briefly in terms of results (Botta, 2007) and public policy initiatives (Brown, O'Connor, & Cohen, 2000; Mizzau & Montanari, 2008; Street, 1993). In either case, little insight is offered as to how the process takes place.

This gap in literature comes as cities continue to develop significant arts and cultural infrastructure, often in the form of urban redevelopment projects (Strom, 2002). Interest in placing music scenes in the discourse of economic development is also increasing. As Florida (2002) states, "...finding ways to help support a local music scene can be just as important as investing in high-tech business and far more effective than building a downtown mall" (Florida, 2002, p. 229). This article will address the gap in literature and answer the question of how does a music scene function as a tool for urban redevelopment by pre-

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senting a case study of the “Slowdown” project in Omaha, Nebraska.

Although results are similar in nature to a flagship cultural project, the cultural economic framework underpinning Slowdown is different. Results of this case study will help city leaders and policymakers understand the potential of music scenes in economic development strategies, not as agents of gentrification or displacement, but as catalysts for urban redevelopment. While the process of artists serving as agents of gentrification and displacement (often their own) is documented (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005; Catungal, Leslie, & Hii, 2009; Zukin, 1982), the point is moot regarding the Slowdown project as the redevelopment took place on a parcel of land devoid of prior residential habitation. The result is similar to Cameron and Coaffee’s (2005) analysis of post-recession gentrification in the UK wherein the authors found most residents in redevelopment projects caused “no displacement of existing residential population” (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005, p. 45). The scenario described by the authors extends to Omaha’s larger “North Downtown” redevelopment area that Slowdown inhabits. Results of this paper will also further detail Currid’s (2009) typology of how art and culture are used for economic development and help to answer the author’s broader call for a better understanding of how art and culture operate in terms of the urban economy.

The first section of this article will review literature concerning the connection between music scenes and urban redevelopment. The review will consider sub-topics pertinent to the subject: music scene dynamics, public policy initiatives, and the broader relationship between art and urban redevelopment. The second section of this article will discuss research methods used. The third section will present the case study and analysis including an examination of site location, planning goals, city leader interaction, and local music scene dynamics. The final section will examine relative success in regards to desired outcomes and place the project in the larger framework of culturally led urban redevelopment. In addition, directions for further research will be offered.

Theory

Connecting music scenes and urban redevelopment

Music-based cultural agglomerations, commonly referred to as “music scenes” are a mix of human and physical capital with musicians, entrepreneurs, gatekeepers, and consumers all integral as actors while studios, venues, and rehearsal spaces serve as locations for the production and consumption of music allowing for “information flows and exchanges” amongst the actors (Bennett & Peterson, 2004; Connell & Gibson, 2003, p. 102).

Thriving music scenes have been traditionally located in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville; however, smaller, “independent” music scenes located in cities such as Denton, Texas; Seattle, Washington; and Omaha, Nebraska have emerged during the later half of the 20th-century. This shifting economic geography of the music industry is a result of digital technologies related to the production and distribution of music and the rise of independent record labels (Florida & Jackson, 2010). Similar

observations made concerning the thriving music scene in Halifax, Nova Scotia underscore Florida and Jackson’s (2010) insights concerning the emergence of successful music scenes in smaller metropolitan areas. Grant et al. (2009) posit that technology advancements in the production and distribution of music and the decline of the corporately owned “major label” music industry have encouraged musicians to be independent producers free to locate in smaller urban areas with a comparatively lower cost-of-living.

Research concerning the connection between music scenes and urban redevelopment is sparse, yet not entirely absent. The differences between “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches policymakers take during the development of music-based cultural quarters is a common focal point. Successful redevelopment efforts in Manchester, England’s “Northern Quarter” were largely organic. Government involvement was non-existent in the initial stages of redevelopment and only minimally present after the area was thriving – a situation praised by entrepreneurial members of the music scene who saw government’s role best relegated to facilitating growth through “removing barriers” (Brown, O’Connor, & Cohen, 2000). Manchester’s music scene found a home in a blighted section of the city and ultimately served as a catalyst for the adaptive reuse project, FAC 51 The Hacienda – a music venue owned by entrepreneurs with ties to the band, New Order and label, Factory Records. Eventually, “an urban cluster formed, as new clubs, record stores, small shops opened in the same area, while the club became famous all over the world” (Botta, 2007, p. 66). Conversely, Sheffield, England’s policymakers redeveloped a collection of vacant buildings near the city center creating a “Cultural Industries Quarter.” Success in the form of employment and further economic development was realized in the CIQ, but largely in facets of cultural production other than music. Many members of the city’s thriving music scene either moved to London or continued to do business in that city as the CIQ was too focused on infrastructure and ineffective in supporting music-based business and social networks (Brown, O’Connor, & Cohen, 2000).

Mixed results in Manchester and Sheffield prompt Brown, O’Connor, and Cohen (2000) to suggest local policymakers should engage music scenes by foregoing direct intervention and instead address “the need to locate these networks, to understand how they operate and try to find ways of adding value to their existing operations” (Brown, O’Connor, & Cohen, 2000, p. 449). Mizzau and Montanari (2008) offer similar sentiments regarding the contrast between successful policy initiatives in Piedmont, Italy that focused on music scene participants and the failure of a state-initiated redevelopment project in Milan that excluded the input of local music scene participants. The authors offer, “local governments should better shift their strategy from a ‘monument’ logic to a ‘movement’ one” (Mizzau & Montanari, 2008, p. 667).

A single project with elements of both a bottom-up and top-down approach to urban redevelopment can result in friction if the project symbolizes oppositional values. Street (1993) presents a case study of a state-initiated, adaptive reuse project in Norwich, England that was a result of the local music scene initially working with government repre-

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