Vernacular Culture and Urban Economic Development

Thinking Outside the (Big) Box

James H. Carr and Lisa J. Servon

What makes a city an attractive place to live and work? A long line of urban theorists concur that the answer centers on the city’s diversity, uniqueness, and surprise factors (Filion, Hoernig, Bunting, & Sands, 2004; Florida, 2002; Gratz, 1994; Jacobs, 1961; Rypkema, 2003). Well-functioning urban neighborhoods are dense and dynamic and accommodate a mix of uses and users. Yet, many cities pursue development strategies that result in homogeneity rather than preserving what distinguishes them from other cities.

We argue for another way of pursuing neighborhood economic development, a way that leverages local culture. This topic is timely given that amenity-based development strategies are currently popular, but often ignore local culture. Some urban theorists argue that cities must compete for economic development not only by making themselves attractive places for industry to locate, but by offering amenities that continue to attract new residents (Clark, Lloyd, Wong, & Jain, 2002; Hansen, Ban, & Huggins, 2003). The challenge,

Takeaway for practice: We argue that it is both possible and preferable to advance an urban economic development strategy based on the local cultural assets that exist in urban neighborhoods. Our research illustrates different paths that places have taken to advance this kind of strategy and provides several ways for local planners and policymakers to integrate the maintenance of vernacular culture into their larger economic development plans.

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About the authors: James H. Carr (jcarr@ncrc.org) is chief operating officer at the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, an association of 600 local development organizations across the nation dedicated to improving the flow of capital to communities and promoting economic mobility. He is also a visiting professor at Columbia University in New York and George Washington University in Washington, DC. Lisa J. Servon (servonL@newschool.edu) is dean of Milano the New School for Management and Urban Policy. She teaches and conducts research in the areas of community economic development, community development finance, and urban poverty.

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we argue, is to do so in a way that does not compromise the vernacular culture of these places.

If local policymakers and planners care about preserving the diverse urban fabric of their neighborhoods, their economic development plans must also maintain vernacular culture. Enabling cookie-cutter commercial strips that mimic suburban areas is not a strategy with staying power. And, while tourist-oriented mega-development projects have their place, so too does a more neighborhood-based brand of economic development. Local planners and policymakers should consider incorporating an urban economic development agenda based on vernacular culture into their work for several reasons.

First, neighborhoods characterized by vernacular culture incubate a disproportionate number of small businesses. Many of these small businesses grow to be big businesses. Others remain small but become stable and serve key niche markets. Second, these neighborhoods attract tourism dollars, and cultural tourism is growing rapidly. Richards asserts that, “depending on the source and the destination, between 35 and 70% of international travelers are now considered cultural tourists” (as cited in McKercher and du Cros, 2002, p. 1). Failure to nurture the authentic flavor of these neighborhoods will ultimately arrest cities’ abilities to attract these tourism dollars. Public officials may need to create and enforce regulations that ensure that the culture that drew cultural tourists initially is not destroyed by the growth of tourism itself.

Third, the economic contribution of some types of culturally authentic urban neighborhoods, such as arts districts, has been significantly undervalued (Markusen & Schrock, 2006). And finally, capitalizing on a city’s distinctive tastes and preferences can result in important economic development agglomerations. Several researchers make the link between economic competitiveness and playing up a city or region’s uniqueness. Cortright (2002), for example, maintains that “being different is an essential source of innovations” (p. 14).

We argue that it is both possible and preferable to advance an urban economic development strategy that stems from neighborhoods’ local cultural assets. The primary research question we seek to answer is, “What are the most effective strategies for building on vernacular culture as an asset in neighborhood development?” The purpose of this article is to explore how a range of neighborhoods have used vernacular culture. We identify tools that advance the cultural preservation approach to urban economic development and describe instances in which planners and neighborhood groups have applied these tools successfully. We illuminate how a neighborhood development strategy based on vernacular culture offers an alternative to one-size-fits-all approaches. In order to accomplish this, we employ a literature review, case studies, and interviews to identify the characteristics of places that have used cultural preservation approaches. Fortunately, a number of strategies and examples exist to help us model what healthy, indigenous, community economic development looks like. Unfortunately, these examples are dispersed and the strategies are fragmented and insufficient for many areas; there is no consolidated toolkit to help local planners and policymakers buck current trends.

A Theoretical Understanding of Place, Vernacular Culture, and Neighborhood Development

Among planners, urban theorists, geographers, and sociologists, concern that cities are losing their distinctiveness is pervasive but not new (Billig, 2005; Gieryn, 2000; Gratz, 1994; Jacobs, 1961; Montgomery, 1998; Sorkin, 1992). Just what is unique to place and why should we care if it is lost? Hayden (1997) asserts that “place is one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid” (p. 15). The notion of place we invoke here has to do with the personality of a location, an amalgam of characteristics that elude indicators. As Jackson (1994) puts it, “we recognize that certain localities have an attraction which gives us a certain indefinable sense of well-being and which we want to return to, time and again” (p. 158). Gieryn (2000) contends that place has three features: 1) “A place is a unique spot in the universe;” 2) “place has physicality;” and 3) “without naming, identification, or representation by ordinary people, a place is not a place” (pp. 464–465).

Contributing to Gieryn’s (2000) third feature that places become what they are through the people who live there, Jiven and Larkham (2003) argue that it is the people “that integrate the features of topography, natural conditions, symbolic meanings and the built form through their value systems, to form a sense of place” (p. 118). Hayden (1997) adds that “indigenous residents as well as colonizers, ditchdiggers as well as architects, migrant workers as well as mayors, housewives as well as housing inspectors, are all active shaping the urban landscape” (p. 15). Indeed, we use the term vernacular to convey that the people who create the culture and the businesses must own the culture and be rooted in place. We recognize that notions of culture and cultural production shift over time, that most communities incorporate layers of residents, each contributing to the personality of the place. Our approach values all the various cultural layers that together define a community’s culture.
Although urban areas have historically celebrated their unique cultures, economic development planners have not always recognized the importance of place to their work. Teitz (1989) argued that neighborhoods are “problematic as targets of economic development strategy” (p. 112) because they lack power and capacity, and are influenced by external economic forces. This line of thinking has merit, but it is possible to think of neighborhood economic development from another perspective. Perhaps local economic development planners and policymakers can create positive outcomes by leveraging neighborhoods’ undervalued assets.

Teitz (1989) argues that a neighborhood contributes four primary assets to its regional economy: the human and other capital resources of its residents; its physical stock of buildings, infrastructure, and amenities; its location within the region; and the political strength of its residents (p. 118). We argue that many possess a fifth asset, bringing to the economy the unique, locally rooted characteristics of the neighborhood that can attract investment. We call this vernacular culture.

Although economic development strategies typically aim to attract investment, succeeding at this has dangers. Typically, rising real estate costs displace low-income residents and indigenous businesses. Neighborhood revitalization efforts may destroy authenticity in communities with great traditional and cultural significance, especially for low-income people of color. When private investment changes the physical environment of poor communities, it may not benefit residents unless they own assets in the neighborhood. Understanding gentrification processes is important because culturally strong neighborhoods often experience gentrification pressures. In addition, once a neighborhood finds itself within the gentrification stage, it is generally too late to shift the trajectory of neighborhood change. And, while neighborhood revitalization can support more equitable and diverse neighborhoods, it can also lead to gentrification and increased inequality (Servon & Rausch, 2008). In this article, we recognize, but do not fully resolve, the implicit tension between maximizing vernacular culture and seeking development and growth. Achieving a balance between culture and commerce is not easy and, as the cases below demonstrate, requires significant capacity at the local level.

An economic development strategy grounded in vernacular culture achieves a balance between small, culturally diverse businesses and larger chain establishments, develops and celebrates the historical character and nature of the community to make it attractive to residents and investors, and fosters uniqueness that serves the needs of the resident community and likely attracts outside shoppers and tourists as well.

Methods

In order to probe the concepts outlined above more deeply, we devised a research strategy that included a wide-ranging literature review focusing on cultural tourism, equitable development, inner-city competitiveness, gentrification, historic preservation, and downtown redevelopment. We also conducted interviews with 43 people, most of whom were involved in projects promoting vernacular culture. This group included community development practitioners, local merchants, bankers, policymakers, and community residents and entrepreneurs. We developed protocols for each category of interviewee. We employed the snowball method, asking each of these interviewees for names of other practitioners and field experts. Given the stature of the interviewees and the kind of information sought, we conducted the interviews as guided conversations, using the interviewees’ responses to direct interview flow (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). We analyzed the text of our interview notes to discern trends and to ensure that the quotations we used to illustrate points typified interviewees’ comments.

Case Studies

Our interviews and literature review helped us to create a short list of likely places to conduct case studies. We then conducted telephone interviews with key actors at each place on our short list to determine if it met our criteria. We sought places that were exemplars of the concept we are trying to articulate here, but that have traveled different paths to achieve it. We also looked for places in which enough work had been done for us to study results. Ultimately, we conducted case studies of six sites in five cities. One of the neighborhoods we studied, the U Street corridor in Washington, DC, is a culturally authentic neighborhood at risk of losing its uniqueness; although currently an exemplar of vernacular culture, homogeneity may not be too far down the road. For each of the case studies, we toured the sites, met with and interviewed key stakeholders, reviewed relevant documents, and, when possible, sat in on meetings.

The case studies we conducted illustrate the potential for economic development to stem from, preserve, and celebrate the unique cultural attributes of a community. We discovered through our interviews that places characterized by strong vernacular culture all had a public market, an arts-and-culture venue, or an area of ethnic significance or heritage site that helped to stabilize the area and attract people and businesses. We call these sites anchors. We discuss these anchors in greater detail below.
We conducted case studies at the following locations: The area around 14th and U Streets in Washington, DC, is a heritage district; the District del Sol in St. Paul, MN, is an ethnic neighborhood; Mercado Central and Midtown Global Marketplace in Minneapolis, MN, are public markets; and Market Creek Plaza in San Diego is primarily a market but combines elements of all three types of anchors; an arts venue anchors Chinatown in Honolulu, which is also an ethnic neighborhood that contains public markets. We collected information about each site in order to compare their development methods, processes, and results.

Findings

Table 1 summarizes key attributes from the cases. The sections that follow provide brief descriptions of how each site employed a cultural preservation approach to urban economic development.

St. Paul: Building a Destination

District del Sol is a mile-long commercial corridor located on St. Paul’s West Side, which is separated from the rest of the city by the Mississippi River. The West Side has been recognized as a Latino community since the 1930s and is home to the city’s oldest Mexican restaurant. Prior to the redevelopment efforts, Concord Street on St. Paul’s West Side was an unimpressive commercial corridor marred by vacant buildings, absentee landlords, and crime. Local Latino businesses saw each other as competitors and did not work together. Efforts to improve the West Side and brand the commercial corridor began in 1999 with a public awareness campaign by the Riverview Economic Development Association (REDA), a community development corporation (CDC) that received funding from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) to pursue commercial revitalization under the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street program.

In 2000, after a collaborative effort between REDA, local businesses, and a marketing consultant, the area was renamed District del Sol to reflect the Latino character of the neighborhood and to create a positive image for the commercial corridor. The branding effort also included selecting a vibrant sun logo, installing adobe-style benches, trash bins, murals, and other public art, and changing the main street’s name from Concord Street to Cesar Chavez Street. These changes helped to emphasize the area’s uniqueness and to create a recognizable identity. REDA has also used building and store design to prevent crime through façade and lighting improvements, in turn, making the district more hospitable to new shoppers and developers. REDA’s efforts have transformed the West Side of St. Paul into a destination community and have encouraged business owners to work together for the benefit of the entire district. Even the local Burger King has voluntarily used District del Sol logos on its tables and followed the local design guidelines for its exterior.

The marketing of District del Sol is closely connected to the annual Cinco de Mayo Fiesta, which draws more than 100,000 people to the neighborhood (C. Romano, personal communication, July 2006). The district’s redevelopment builds on the success of two longstanding Latino businesses, Boca Chica restaurant and El Burrito Mercado grocery and restaurant, which anchor opposite ends of the district. Authentic Latino foods and the Cinco de Mayo Fiesta draw Latino and non-Latino customers to this small but vibrant section of the city. In addition, new locally owned businesses in District del Sol have benefited from REDA’s partnerships with other CDCs that offer Spanish language entrepreneurship classes.

Although REDA’s work in District del Sol to date has been impressive, much remains to be done. In the center of District del Sol, a street carrying a high volume of traffic between the city and its suburbs cuts through the community, making it appear that the commercial district has ended. This area contains undeveloped land, a vacant boarded-up building, and wholesale businesses with no sidewalk presence. REDA intends to revive this section of the district and has a purchase agreement for the vacant building, but still needs to obtain a partner for the development process.

To some extent, District del Sol’s small size and relative isolation from the rest of St. Paul provide natural protection for its uniqueness. The district does not have the physical space required by many national chains, and therefore may not need to limit businesses’ size or restrict formula businesses (C. Romano, personal communication, July 2006). Both its separation from and proximity to downtown St. Paul allows District del Sol to serve as a destination district within the Twin Cities. Metropolitan area residents come for dining and to attend festivals such as the Cinco de Mayo Fiesta and the Taste of Minnesota festival at nearby Harriet Island. These special events draw diverse patrons to District del Sol. The 2006 Cinco de Mayo Fiesta drew a crowd that included 54% non-Latinos, with 21% of the attendees coming from more than 15 miles away (Salk & Schneider, 2006).

The case of District del Sol demonstrates that even a small neighborhood can become a tourism destination while continuing to serve local residents. This case also illustrates that bringing business owners to the table and creating a unique identity can be a way to recognize underutilized assets and use them to achieve commercial success.
Minneapolis: Immigrants as Assets

Mercado Central and Midtown Global Market, located half a mile apart on Lake Street in Minneapolis, are both thriving public markets created by immigrant entrepreneurship. Mercado Central, which opened in 1999, is a Latino cooperative and retail business incubator envisioned and developed by the Minneapolis Latino immigrant community with the assistance of Whittier CDC, the Neighborhood Development Center (NDC), and the Project for Pride in Living. NDC offers entrepreneurship training classes in Spanish, and many of the business owners in Mercado Central have taken these classes. The Midtown Global Market is an internationally themed public market with a mission of building on the surrounding community’s economic, social, and cultural assets.

Midtown Global Market anchors the ground floor of a redeveloped Sears building, an historic property that the City of Minneapolis wanted to preserve and connect to the ethnic diversity of the neighborhood. The Latino Economic Development Center (LEDC) and a group of Latino business owners expressed interest in opening a chain Latino grocery and began meeting with Latino business owners and NDC. Local residents and business owners advocated for a diverse international marketplace to reflect the diversity of the local immigrant population rather than a culturally linked big box store, and the concept of a global market emerged out of these discussions. Instead of national chains like Subway, Taco Bell, and McDonald’s, the Global Market includes Holy Land Grocery and Deli, Manny’s Tortas, West Indies Soul, Starlight Cafe, Pham’s Deli, and La Loma Tamales. These businesses reflect the range of ethnic groups in the area. This diversity of local vendors makes people want to return “again and again,” and links the commerce to vernacular culture (Jackson, 1994, p. 158).

The Midtown Global Market’s development partners include NDC, the Powderhorn Philips Cultural Wellness Center, the LEDC, and the African Development Center (ADC), as well as the for-profit developer Ryan Companies. These organizations were able to obtain small business assistance to meet the needs of entrepreneurs from various immigrant groups, for example, offering financing that accommodates Muslims whose religious beliefs do not allow the payment of interest. Patricia Brown, a market

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Table 1. Case study characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Anchor(s)</th>
<th>Types of key actors</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U Street Corridor, Washington, DC</td>
<td>Ethnic neighborhood</td>
<td>Local elected official</td>
<td>Main Street program (now defunct)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District del Sol, St. Paul</td>
<td>Ethnic neighborhood</td>
<td>Community-based organizations</td>
<td>Branding, Main Street program, Special events, Purchasing vacant properties, Spanish-language entrepreneurship classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercado Central and Midtown Global Market, Minneapolis</td>
<td>Ethnic neighborhood</td>
<td>Community-based organizations, Local for-profit developer</td>
<td>Business incubator, Linkage of small business training with commercial real estate development, Spanish-language entrepreneurship classes, Creation of private/nonprofit partnerships, Co-op-based business ownership opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market Creek Plaza, San Diego</td>
<td>Public market</td>
<td>Community-based organizations, Community foundation</td>
<td>Deep and broad community participation, Incorporation of a range of vernacular culture, Community development initial private offering, Mix of chain and locally owned businesses, Policy to hire locally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinatown, Honolulu</td>
<td>Arts venue</td>
<td>Community-based organizations, Community foundation</td>
<td>Local ownership of key property, Key partnerships, Community organizing</td>
</tr>
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specialist from NDC who formerly managed the Mercado Central, manages Midtown Global Market and ensures that it retains an international character. Mercado Central and Midtown Global Market demonstrate the value of integrating place-based commercial redevelopment with people-based microenterprise. They also illustrate how diversity and uniqueness can contribute to downtown revitalization (Rypkema, 2003).

NDC’s approach of linking small business training with commercial real estate development has proven to be an effective strategy for both the community and its residents, and the community played an important role in starting and stabilizing both Mercado Central and the Midtown Global Market. Both developments serve primarily as start-up and expansion locations for low-income entrepreneurs from South Minneapolis, not just as outlets for well-established ethnic businesses (Project for Public Spaces, 2005; Reid, 2006). Atum Azzahir of Powderhorn Phillips Cultural Wellness Center emphasizes the grassroots nature of local revitalization in Minneapolis, saying, “We are the ones that we’ve been waiting for” (A. Azzahir, personal communication, July 2006).

The combination of asset-based community development and technical assistance has helped Mercado Central succeed and seems likely to do the same for the newer Midtown Global Market. Ramón León, former Mercado Central co-op president and current director of LEDC, says Mercado Central has surpassed expectations; sales are now over $7 million per year from the 43 small businesses in the market (R. Leon, personal communication, July 2006). The Midtown Global Market opened too recently to provide similar evidence of success, but it already has a booming lunch business from a ready base of potential customers in and around the Midtown Exchange building where it is located.

John Flory of LEDC does worry that rising rents resulting from the area’s success may drive away businesses that do not own their buildings. But Mercado Central and Midtown Global Market show that low-income immigrant communities can contribute substantial assets to local commercial revitalization if flexible support mechanisms are in place to foster entrepreneurship and ownership by the entrepreneurs themselves.

San Diego: The Power of Community Ownership

Market Creek Plaza is a mixed-use commercial and cultural development project in a diverse and undercapitalized area in the Diamond neighborhoods of San Diego. Developed through a partnership among the local Jacobs Family Foundation (JFF), the affiliated Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation (JCI), and neighborhood residents, the project turned a blighted 10-acre site into a retail and cultural center that includes the first major grocery store to locate in the area in 30 years, locally owned ethnic restaurants, a fitness center, a bank, a gift shop where local craftspeople rent space to market their work, a coffeehouse, a bill-paying center for the regional utility company, and an open-air amphitheater. Some of the businesses are locally owned and some are national chains, reflecting the preferences of the community. Unlike the other cases highlighted in this article, Market Creek Plaza is a created place; there was no history of culture or commerce. Although our concept of vernacular culture generally relies on history and a layering of cultural influences over time, the developers of Market Creek Plaza have successfully created a place that includes Gieryn’s (2000) three defining characteristics of a place: it is unique, it has physicality, and it is named, thus giving it an identity.

Market Creek Plaza was designed and built, and will be owned and operated, by residents, combining social, economic, and physical development into one model project. Early in the development process, JCI facilitated the creation of the following community teams to shape and implement the various facets of the project: community outreach, business development, art and design, construction collaboration, ownership design, employment development, and resource development. These were intended to leverage neighborhood residents’ creativity, problem-solving abilities, and willingness to take risks, as well as to distinguish Market Creek Plaza from other developments.

As facilitator of the Plaza development, JCI both trained local residents in construction skills and provided access to capital by creating a local Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) to make loans to commercial tenants. JCI also monitored local hiring and minority contracting policies for the Plaza and helped residents design the $501(c) 3 community foundation that will reinvest Plaza profits into the neighborhood. According to Jennifer Vanica, president and chief executive of the Jacobs Center and of the Jacobs Family Foundation, “For community revitalization to be effective, residents must own their own change, including planning, implementation, and ultimately the assets” (J. Vanica, personal communication, July 2006). As a result, this development appears to reflect the needs and culture of Diamond Neighborhoods of San Diego.

As the development evolved, community residents expressed a desire for literal ownership of Market Creek Plaza. JCI responded by creating the nation’s first community development initial public offering (CDIPO), which offered community members the opportunity to
purchase shares of the shopping center for as little as $200. As a group, residents can own up to 20% of the company. JCNI will own 60% and the Neighborhood Unity Foundation will own the remaining 20%. By 2017, JCNI “plans to retire its shares so that Market Creek will be completely owned by residents and the Unity Foundation, which residents control” (Stuhldreher, 2007, p. 1).

The development has an outdoor public art collection of mosaics, totems, and murals, and the architecture of the Plaza’s buildings reflect the artistic traditions of the neighborhood’s ethnic and cultural groups. Relatively early in the development process it became clear that community art could foster social integration. One concept that received overwhelming support was a project honoring local heroes by hanging their portraits on the outside of the development. In early meetings of the art and design team (made up of artists, architects, and community residents), participants were encouraged to bring in samples of items from their cultures. One table was full of traditional clothing and fabrics, and it became apparent that many of these were common to more than one of the cultures represented locally. It was on that table that the potential to unify these cultures around the project first became apparent. In honor of that discovery, tiles on three walkways at the Plaza reproduce culturally significant fabric designs: African batik, Samoan tapa cloth, and traditional Laotian cloth. The back wall of the amphitheater also consists of leaves made of tiles painted by neighborhood children, which are attached to a copper tree. The amphitheater itself seats 500 and hosts performances by local dance studios, spoken word groups, and cultural music groups.

The community has plans for an office building to be located adjacent to the Plaza. The first floor of the building will hold a community center and public meeting space; the rest of the building will house community organizations and a catering training kitchen.

**Honolulu: The Arts as a Bridge to Social Integration**

Chinatown is a neighborhood adjacent to Honolulu’s central business district that, until recently, was home to successive waves of Asian immigrants as well as drugs, prostitution, and other crime. “It was a war zone,” says Andrew Friedlander, principal of real estate company, Colliers Monroe Friedlander, one of the pioneers in the area’s rebirth as an arts district (A. Friedlander, personal communication, August 2007). The arts are newly prominent in urban economic development agendas (Florida, 2002; Markusen & Schrock, 2006; Strom 2002), and Honolulu’s Chinatown is one example. In recent years, restaurants and galleries have begun to open, drawing in tourists and local office workers, and crime has decreased. The neighborhood, which has a historic preservation designation and consists largely of appealing two-story buildings, is now home to a range of old Chinatown businesses that include traditional Asian restaurants, bakeries, and lei shops, as well as new galleries, restaurants, and clubs catering to a younger clientele from outside the neighborhood. The result is an amalgam similar to what Hayden (1997) describes as she praises the vernacular.

The ARTS at Marks Garage (Marks) is a project of the Hawai‘i Arts Alliance. It was founded with seed funds from the city and county in 2001 as an incubator for arts enterprises. It contains a collaborative gallery and performance and office space for businesses and nonprofit organizations, and demonstrates that culture and arts businesses are economically viable and contribute to the vitality and quality of life in the community. Erik Takeshita, executive director of Marks, wants his organization to help move the arts from “a luxury to a necessity, a vehicle for connecting people” (E. Takeshita, personal communication, August 2007).

As a collaborative neighborhood-based arts center, Marks is a key player in the emerging Honolulu Culture and Arts District, intended to create an aesthetic, social and economic renaissance in historic downtown Honolulu. In 2006, for example, Marks hired community organizer Wiwik Bunjamin-Mau to facilitate a discussion with the entire range of community residents about the transition the neighborhood is undergoing. Bunjamin-Mau invited those who live, work, and play in the area to the Talk Any Kine (TAK) festival. Over 300 people came to Smith-Beretania Park to participate in this interactive exhibition. They were given the opportunity to speak out and share their concerns and recommendations on issues such as getting around Chinatown, homelessness, affordable rental housing, creating a better business environment, and safer neighborhoods. This information was presented at a summit organized by the Honolulu Mayor’s Office.

As part of its community organizing work, Marks provides residents of affordable housing with afterschool and out-of-school arts programming as a way to build a stronger sense of neighborhood identity and community pride. Marks also produces a map that initially showed 6 galleries and now features 39 galleries and other art venues, guiding the approximately 5,000 people who now attend gallery walks on the first Friday of every month. Marks is also launching a collaborative Healthy-Bound Chinatown initiative that aims to strengthen the community using food as a common denominator. As part of this initiative, Marks is working with other community-based organizations on a guide to the neighborhood’s public produce...
markets, aiming to leverage these local assets by helping locals and visitors navigate the markets and prepare their more exotic offerings.

Other community-based organizations, such as the Honolulu Culture and Arts District Association, have reinforced this revitalization effort, helping to create a district for the arts, entertainment, and dining out. “Change never happens as fast as everyone wants it,” executive director Ed Korybski told us. “But we have seen a great deal of progress in the last three years” (E. Korybski, personal communication, August 2007).

Washington, DC: The Risk of Gentrification

The U Street corridor on the northwest side of Washington, DC, is in the midst of a period of rapid residential and commercial redevelopment. This corridor, in a neighborhood once called Uptown and now called Shaw, has fostered the creation of indigenous businesses and leveraged its own unique assets, but does not have the necessary tools to protect its vernacular culture. We include this case to illustrate the need for innovative policy tools and strategies for maintaining the unique attributes of neighborhoods such as this one.

This neighborhood was once a thriving African-American community, including an entertainment district called Black Broadway. But when Stokely Carmichael urged black owners to leave their businesses following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., more than 400 of these businesses were torched, resulting in damages of more than $24 million. This was followed by a period during which the neighborhood was characterized by poverty, and many storefronts stood vacant. Then, in 1986, the Reeves Center, a municipal office building, opened at the heart of this community on the corner of 14th and U Streets. The U Street Metro station on the system’s new green line opened in the center of the U Street corridor in May of 1991. These developments helped spur new businesses, primarily restaurants, to open along U Street in the early 1990s. This was followed by a second wave of businesses in the mid 1990s, some started by Ethiopians who moved to the area at about this time. These were joined in the late 1990s by a wider range of primarily indigenous businesses and some larger chain establishments, including some retail stores.

Many now tout the rebirth of the U Street corridor as a pure success story. In 2001, the Historical Society of Washington, DC, and Cultural Tourism DC opened what they called City Within a City: Greater U Street Heritage Trail, one of a citywide system of historic walking trails, to celebrate the culture of the area and to contribute to the branding of the neighborhood. Businesses are now thriving and the neighborhood is currently racially and ethnically diverse. An array of public and private initiatives and redevelopment projects helped to restore historic homes and make the area a destination for locals and tourists by investing in historic signage, facilitating façade improvements, and restoring important local sites.

Investors also stimulated the opening of new and former businesses. In the latter half of the 1990s, many area business owners signed 10-year leases for $8 to $10 per square foot. As the neighborhood has revitalized, rents have increased. Scott Pomeroy of Midtown Redevelopment Associates, who formerly headed the U Main Street program, worries that these businesses will be unable to afford rents likely to go as high as $40 per square foot when current leases expire. Over the past four years, property taxes in the area have increased 400% as new development has raised property values. Although community groups helped several businesses to purchase their properties, most did not have the resources to do this. As in many cities, the few resources that do exist for small businesses in DC are fragmented and burdensome to access.

As the neighborhood began to redevelop, residents faced the risk of displacement as well. Pomeroy worked with Deborah Thomas of the Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) to keep 102 housing units valued at from $350,000 to $1,000,000 as affordable co-ops, enabling current residents to purchase them for between $110,000 and $145,000. Although the neighborhood is currently thriving from an economic development perspective, the increases in rents and housing prices threaten to destroy the unique character of the area.

Anchors of Places Characterized by Vernacular Culture

Our interviews and case studies showed us that neighborhoods with strong vernacular culture possess three types of anchors: 1) markets; 2) ethnic areas and heritage sites; 3) arts-and-culture venues and districts. Neighborhoods characterized by vernacular culture often contain two or even three of these anchors. For example, the historically African-American Overtown neighborhood in Miami is a heritage site, and as its first project, the Black Archives, a nonprofit organization, restored a theater, adding a cultural dimension as well. Public markets, such as the night market in San Francisco’s Chinatown, give some ethnic neighborhoods their identities. At Market Creek Plaza in San Diego, what began as a retail center anchored by a grocery store has evolved into a cultural and community center, bank, and retail stores tied together by public art. Thus, the
categories of anchors are narrowly drawn, but help organize and analyze the characteristics of culturally authentic places.

Public Markets
We use the term public markets to refer to markets that embody many of the characteristics of vernacular culture. According to a report by the Project for Public Spaces and Partners for Livable Communities (2003), public markets “include vendors or merchants who meet at the same location on a regular basis under the aegis of a sponsoring entity that has legal and financial responsibility to oversee operations and, sometimes, structures or facilities to house the market activity” (p. 6). The same report defines public markets as: a) having public goals; b) being located in and/or creating a public space in the community; and c) being made up of locally owned, independent businesses operated by their owners (p. 7). We depart from this prescription in that we studied some places that, rather than banning chain stores in their markets, sought balance between national retailers (some of which are franchises) and local businesses.

Markets exist in many forms, from temporary flea markets and farmers’ markets to fixed establishments such as the former Mart 125 in Harlem and Market Creek Plaza in San Diego described above. Local public markets can provide important opportunities for small entrepreneurs to meet customers. These markets often attract tourists as well as neighborhood residents and bring together diverse people.

Ethnic Areas and Heritage Sites
A populous urban area may contain neighborhoods densely populated with people sharing a common culture or national origin, and thus can support businesses catering to these specialized clienteles. Such businesses serve recent immigrants from the immediate neighborhood, those who moved elsewhere in the metropolitan area but return for products and services, and cultural tourists from within and outside the city. Visiting one of these areas provides a taste of a different culture. Stores in these areas sell clothing and food that is unavailable in the rest of the city, and restaurants sell ethnic food prepared in the authentic manner. Historically African-American neighborhoods such as Harlem in New York, Overtown in Miami, and the U Street corridor in Washington, DC, also fit this category.

Heritage sites are locations that leverage the historic attributes of an area and market these in a way that attracts tourists and new residents. Heritage sites are perhaps the most difficult of our anchors to define. When a city recognizes the market potential for cultural and heritage tourism it sometimes erases a place’s gritty aspects to sell it to moneyed visitors, losing attributes that sustain the inhabitants in the process. Successful heritage sites balance preservation with dynamism that keeps communities relevant. Commercial strips such as Liberty Avenue in Richmond Hill, Queens, NY, and the Chinatown night market in San Francisco, CA, often enhance the vernacular culture of ethnic neighborhoods. A recent study of immigrant entrepreneurs in New York City shows that “immigrant-run businesses are . . . helping the city recapture tax revenue from suburban shoppers . . . [as] ethnic retail strips . . . have become destination shopping districts throughout the region” (Bowles, 2007, p. 4).

Arts Districts
Artists are often at the forefront of revitalizing particular neighborhoods in cities. The arts have become a focal point of many cities’ economic development efforts (Currid, 2007; Florida, 2002; Markusen & Schrock, 2006; Strom 2002). According to Strom (2002), this relatively new inclusion of the arts in city economic development agendas results from: a) cities becoming more dependent on consumption; b) an expanded definition of arts and culture that now includes popular as well as high art; and c) urban cultural institutions’ demonstrated interest in “improving their surroundings” (p. 3). At one end of the spectrum, these efforts include large-scale projects such as the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark and the Avenue of the Arts in Philadelphia. On a smaller scale, many cities have promoted mixed-use development and live and work housing that is attractive to artists (Fulton & Newman, 2003). The latter, more neighborhood-based efforts, are more likely to integrate vernacular culture.

Researchers at the Social Impact of the Arts Project found that arts-and-cultural institutions play an important role in strengthening neighborhoods (Stern & Seifert, 1998). Currid (2007) focuses on the “cultural production system.” Her interviews with a range of actors within the cultural economy lead her to argue that “artistic and cultural producers are densely agglomerated” and that the arts-and-culture industries “depend on unique kinds of social interaction” (p. 455). Markusen and Schrock (2006) argue that the arts’ contributions to regional economies have historically been underestimated, and that what they call the “artistic dividend” for regional economies consists of both “current income streams and . . . returns to the region as a whole on past investments” (p. 1662).

At the same time, the movement of artists into a particular neighborhood is often a leading indicator that gentrification will follow, ultimately pricing out these same
artists. The promotion and maintenance of arts districts is therefore a tricky endeavor which requires awareness of the local risks of gentrification.

Arts districts provide direct and indirect economic benefits and host a mix of nonprofit organizations, retail, and live and work spaces. Both for-profit and nonprofit arts organizations provide employment and generate local and tourist spending. Non-arts organizations also benefit from increased spending at restaurants, and in the retail and hospitality industries. Taken together, these businesses generate significant tax revenues and stimulate the local economy. Nationally, nonprofit arts organizations and their audiences pay $6.6 billion per year in local government taxes and fees (Americans for the Arts, 2003). The clustering of creative energy and opportunities in arts districts attracts individuals and businesses, which furthers local economic development. Beyond these financial benefits, arts districts also benefit the public in less quantifiable ways (McCathy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004).

**Lessons From the Case Studies and Interviews**

The case studies demonstrate that an economic development strategy based on vernacular culture must bubble up from the grassroots. The balance between preservation and development will be different in each place, but we did cull some widely applicable lessons from our fieldwork. These broad themes applied at all the sites and were echoed by many interviewees:

- **Involve Residents.** Members of the local community played key roles in all six sites. Ownership of key decisions and processes by a broad group of stakeholders fostered community buy-in. Community-based organizations were also major actors in the development of five of the sites and the remaining site (Market Creek Plaza, where a community foundation played a lead role) had a very high level of community involvement at all stages. Many planning and visioning processes pay lip service to the idea of resident involvement; the success stories we witnessed were distinguished by the genuine authority given to community members.

- **Find Assets in Local Needs.** Each site we studied crafted renewal out of distress by finding local assets and putting them to work. The stimulus for developing Market Creek Plaza was the presence of blighted property in a neighborhood with insufficient commercial opportunities; a viable market existed, but only the visionaries recognized it. In Minneapolis, low-income immigrants rejuvenated the Lake Street commercial corridor. Capitalizing on unique local assets and opportunities creates more sustainable success than is possible by focusing only on needs.

- **Transfer Lessons; Don’t Replicate.** Too often, cities redevelop by trying to import what worked elsewhere, as with festival marketplaces. During our interviews and site visits, we were told again and again that each place is unique and requires a strategy tailored to its uniqueness. This finding resonates with the work of others discussed earlier in this article (Filion, et al., 2004; Gratz, 1994; Jacobs, 1961; Rypkema, 2003). While it is important to learn from successes in other places, we advocate transferring lessons rather than replicating what was done someplace else. This lesson counters perhaps most directly the copycat school of economic development that has resulted in so much homogeneity in the urban landscape.

- **Create Opportunities for Ownership.** The importance of local ownership cannot be overstated. With ownership comes control and a true stake in the community. Tools must be developed and used to create opportunities for both business and home ownership. A specialist in the development of co-ops was brought in to ensure entrepreneur ownership of Mercado Central. In the case of Market Creek Plaza, the community development initial public offering allows residents and others involved in the community to experience ownership after investing as little as $200, providing residents with an opportunity to own a piece of the community.

- **If It Doesn’t Exist, Invent It.** When the mechanisms or policies to do what they wanted to do did not exist, key actors in the communities we studied created them, even after being told something could not be done. Stubbornness and creativity led to the creation of the Market Creek Plaza community development initial public offering. We saw similar examples in other interviews and the literature: the application of the land trust strategy in Overtown; the opening of a grocery store in a distressed area of Kalama-zoo; the adaptation of the Planned Industrial Expansion Authority (PIEA) in the Crossroads Arts District; and the formation of an immigrant-owned co-op in Minneapolis. Shaffer, Deller, and Marcouiller (2006) call this practice, “changing the rules,” meaning that “the community seeks a change in rules that would benefit the community or seeks a reinterpretation of rules” (p. 71).

- **Balance Culture and Commerce.** Neighborhoods like the U Street corridor and Honolulu’s Chinatown have benefited from investment, but are at risk of losing their uniqueness. Community actors must “anticipate gentrification pressures at a point when the process can still be affected, and build the political capital needed to implement or expand the strategies in the neighborhoods undergoing gentrification” (Kennedy & Leonard, 2001, p. 3). Only in
this way can these neighborhoods avoid overgentrification and achieve a balance of culture and commerce.

Generalizing From the Cases

We believe our case studies represent the larger universe of transitioning urban neighborhoods and are not unique. We assembled these case studies in hopes that they would advance understanding, and would permit generalization.

Our analysis suggests that, in order for a neighborhood to pursue an economic development strategy based on vernacular culture, it should have at least one of the three types of anchors we identify and have strong, community-based organizations. The importance of the latter cannot be overstated as community-based organizations have been extremely proactive as shapers of urban space. The sites diverged on the strategies they employed to promote vernacular culture, employing a range of locally appropriate strategies to balance the attraction of commerce with the preservation of culture. These strategies ranged from conducting entrepreneurship classes in Spanish to purchasing vacant land.

Identifying these necessary preconditions is important because the vernacular culture approach is not the answer for every transitioning neighborhood. Possessing assets is a necessary but not sufficient condition for this kind of approach. We recognize that the neighborhoods studied here are somewhat exceptional. And, although the community-based organizations that played key roles at the case study sites had significant capacity, most community-based organizations lack the resources, political capacity, and technical expertise to shape development (Kromer, 2001). Neighborhoods that lack anchors and local actors with sufficient capacity would be wise to hold back from investing in an economic development strategy based on vernacular culture.

Conclusions

Our case studies illustrate the economic development potential of vernacular culture. Too many urban neighborhoods are changing in ways that put their distinctiveness at risk. If trends continue, cities will become as homogenous as their suburbs, losing their uniqueness, their competitive edge, and their ability to nurture indigenous businesses. In short, they are regressing to the mean rather than lifting up what makes them special. It is imperative that local planners and policymakers confront these issues because they concern the long-run competitiveness of cities.

According to Jackson (1994), the Latin expression *genius loci*, often literally translated as sense of place, means “not so much the place itself as the guardian divinity of that place” (p. 157). Unique urban neighborhoods are endangered and need local economic development planners and policymakers to play the guardian’s role. If local policymakers and planners care about preserving the diverse urban fabric of their neighborhoods, they must integrate the maintenance of vernacular culture into their larger economic development plans.

Although we are encouraged by the examples of economic development leveraging vernacular culture that we uncovered in the course of conducting this research, these examples remain isolated. To a large extent, their successes have not come from public policy, but in spite of it, since supportive public policy is generally lacking. We recognize that pursuing vernacular culture as a component of a larger economic development strategy requires a change in orientation for many local planners and policymakers, but our recommendations match other recent research. For example, Currid (2007), focusing on the relationship between place and culture, argues that “places can strategically encourage environments that are conducive to the production of art and culture” (p. 465).

We hope that the examples and lessons we have identified here will inspire other communities to devise locally appropriate economic development strategies based in vernacular culture. At the same time, we recognize that these tools are insufficient and that many neighborhoods lack the grassroots capacity and monetary support to adopt similar programs. We hope that local officials will abet these processes by first recognizing and then fostering and protecting their cultural authenticity.

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Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, we adopt Teitz’s definition of a neighborhood as “a contiguous subarea within a city or region that is seen by its inhabitants and others as possessing internal coherence and social meaning” (1989, p. 114). According to Teitz (1989), neighborhoods are “best seen as social communities” rather than economic ones (p. 111).

2. We recognize that there are often tensions between tourists and the communities they visit. See Harrill and Potts (2003) for a closer look at this issue in Charleston, SC.
3. The part of the West Side where District del Sol is located is predominantly Mexican and Mexican American (C. Romano, personal communication, July 2008).
4. NDC is a community-based nonprofit organization that works in the low-income communities of St. Paul, Minneapolis, surrounding suburbs, and elsewhere in Minnesota. NDC helps emerging entrepreneurs develop successful businesses and helps community groups build stronger neighborhood economies. Project for Pride in Living is a nonprofit organization assisting lower-income people and families throughout the Twin Cities metropolitan area to work toward self-sufficiency through housing, employment training, support services, and education. Whittier CDC is a nonprofit organization that works to strengthen the business community located in the Whittier neighborhood and South Minneapolis. Whittier CDC provides property management services, bookkeeping, financial and consulting services, as well as loan origination with several community-based loan funds.
5. For a thorough look at Mercado Central’s development, see Sheehan (2003).
6. Policy Link (2005) is a case study that documents the process of building Market Creek Plaza in much more detail than we can provide here, although we do mention developments that occurred after the Policy Link research was conducted.
7. Supermarkets remain a large unmet need in many inner-city areas. See Pothukuchi (2005) for a discussion of the economic development issues related to inner-city supermarket development.
8. Although 150 new businesses opened during its years of operation, the Main Street program ended in 2005 due to lack of funds.
9. The anchors we identify match the findings of Filion et al. (2004), who found that healthy downtowns of small metropolitan regions in the United States and Canada are characterized by, among other things: cultural activities; historical character; and an active, street-oriented retail scene (p. 331).
10. At Market Creek Plaza, for example, the Cold Stone Creamery and Curves franchises are owned by locals.
11. Over the past several years, the Ford Foundation has worked with the Project for Public Spaces to place public markets at the center of efforts to strengthen neighborhoods with vital public spaces. (Project for Public Spaces & Partners for Livable Communities, 2003)
12. McKercher and du Cros (2002), citing the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), define heritage as “a broad concept that includes tangible assets, such as natural and cultural environments, encompassing landscapes, historic places, sites, and built environments, as well as intangible assets, such as collections, past and continuing cultural practices, knowledge, and living experiences” (p. 7).
14. The idea of linking arts and culture with community revitalization is not new. In 1996, for example, the William Penn Foundation launched an initiative called Culture Builds Community, which had two broad goals: 1) to build future audiences for the arts and culture; and 2) to foster the community-building potential of community arts programs, particularly in poor and disadvantaged areas of the Philadelphia region. See http://www.williampenfoundation.org/user/doc/cbc_web_posting.pdf. Working papers from this project are available at http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/SIAAP/.
15. Stern and Seifert (1998) found that: “sections of the city with a strong arts presence had greater population growth and a more rapid decline in poverty during the 1980s; that this revitalization does not fit common notions of gentrification; that patterns of participation of community arts programs contribute to revitalization by breaking down social and economic barriers separating communities; and that community arts programs are strategically located to serve as facilitators of community economic revitalization” (p. 4). This research was conducted in Philadelphia. In later work testing these findings in Chicago, Atlanta, and San Francisco, the authors argue that the findings hold across these sites (Stern, 1999).
16. Some publications sell the arts district idea to economic developers. A 2001 report distributed by the NGA Center for Best Practices, for example, focuses on the potential of arts-oriented strategies to bring in dollars without mentioning the costs of such success to indigenous populations (Psilos & Rapp, 2001).

References


