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The Gordon Square Arts District in Cleveland's Detroit Shoreway Neighborhood

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Beginnings: The Playhouse Square Theaters and the Gordon Square Theaters

In 1921, post-World War I Cleveland was a bustling, industrial city that had benefitted from wartime production. Fueled by pre-war immigration from Europe and then the Great Migration north by African-Americans, Cleveland in 1910 was the sixth largest city in the United States. The city's cultural life was also growing with the opening of the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1916 and the formation of the Cleveland Orchestra in 1918. By 1920 Cleveland was the fifth largest city in the United States. Between February, 1921 and November, 1922 five vaudeville theaters opened downtown in what became known as "Playhouse Square".

Pre-dating the Playhouse Square theaters, the Gordon Square theater, built as a vaudeville theater, opened in 1911. And on April 8, 1921 another theater opened nearby in Cleveland's west side. Named in a contest, the Capitol Theatre was located in the newly-constructed Gordon Square Arcade (named for 19th century farmer and landowner W.J. Gordon) at West 65th and Detroit. It was built as a vaudeville and silent movie theater. These two neighborhood theaters were located at the center of a bustling commercial district.

In the 1970s, following a planning study by the City of Cleveland's Department of Economic Development on the loss of manufacturing jobs, the area eventually came to be known as the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood. As with the city of Cleveland, Detroit Shoreway had prospered from industry and its location bordering rail lines and near the Industrial Valley and the port of Cleveland. These industrial jobs had attracted immigrants, particularly the Irish, Germans, Italians, and Romanians.

Decline: Cleveland, Detroit Shoreway, and the Theaters

The neighborhood's population peaked pre-World War II in 1940 at 40,358. Postwar, its population began a long and continuous decline to only 11, 567 in 2010. Part of that population decline was attributable to the I-90 interstate freeway being built through southern part of the area. Beginning in the 1950s, the city of Cleveland also saw its population decline from its peak of 914,000 to just under 400,000 in 2010. Both the city of Cleveland and the Detroit Shoreway

neighborhood saw their most severe population loss in the 1970-1980 decade. In Detroit-Shoreway, a major factor in its decline was the closing of manufacturing plants by Eveready Battery (formerly Union Carbide) and Westinghouse.

Despite an ambitious urban renewal program, Cleveland's downtown declined. Between May, 1968 and July, 1969, four of the five Playhouse Square theaters closed. As the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood declined, so did the Capitol Theatre. In 1978, the parapet of the Gordon Square Arcade collapsed and damaged the marquee of the theater. Later, its roof began leaking. After its use by a promoter of ethnic films and hosting the Cleveland International Film Festival in 1981, it suffered from a fire and closed in 1985.

Revival

Playhouse Square

Following the Playhouse Square theater closings, two were threatened with demolition in the 1970s. A grass roots movement, led by a newly-formed Playhouse Square Association, fought to save the theaters. With successful fundraising, the preservationists prevailed and the neglected, closed theaters were renovated and re-opened. Eventually, all of the original five theaters have been restored and the Playhouse Square district, anchored by these theaters and with a business improvement district formed in 1998, has become a downtown Cleveland visitor success story.

Revitalization of the Detroit Shoreway Neighborhood

With the loss of manufacturing jobs and the ensuing population loss, the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood, as did other Cleveland neighborhoods, saw a steady decline. Both its housing and local businesses deteriorated. Biker bars characterized much of Detroit Avenue (many of the bars were closed as a result of a 1984 referendum). Drug dealing and prostitution were also to be found in the area. The deterioration of the anchor Gordon Square Arcade reflected the decline of the neighborhood. Ethnic churches remained anchors of the neighborhood, including St. Stephen's, St. Colman's, St. Helena's Byzantine, St. Mary's Romanian Orthodox, and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel.

In 1973, Father Marino Frascati, pastor of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, founded and became the first president of the Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization (DSCDO), one of the first of what would become many similar community development organizations dedicated to the revitalization of Cleveland's neighborhoods. Longtime resident and lawyer Ray Pianka became the executive director of DSCDO and continued until his election to Cleveland City Council in 1985 representing Ward 17. He has been the elected Cleveland Housing Court judge since 1996. DSCDO moved into the Gordon Square Arcade. In 1979, DSCDO took the gamble of purchasing the declining arcade, including the Capitol Theatre, with financing that included a federal Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) (one of the first in the country for a neighborhood project). Thus, this landmark building was saved from demolition. In 1988, DSCDO was able to convert the upper floors of the arcade into 64 units of subsidized, low-income apartments and convert the long-vacant market area into an atrium for offices. This enabled DSCDO to have the necessary

income to maintain the arcade, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Affordable housing became a major focus of DSCDO. While the neighborhood does contain a notable historic residential district along Franklin Boulevard and West Clinton Avenue, due to a rising poverty rate (40 percent in 1990), there was a growing need for subsidized low-income housing. DSCDO-developed housing projects include an additional 13 projects which total 195 units. In addition it has sponsored 742 units in 10 more projects. This makes a total of 1,001 housing units developed and sponsored by DSCDO. A mixed income project with 15 affordable units is to begin construction in March, 2014. A primary housing goal of the DSCDO is to maintain a mixed-income population in a revitalized neighborhood.

In 1990, the median sales price of a single family home in Detroit Shoreway was only \$16,000. DSCDO spurred construction of new market rate housing with the development of the Tillman Park townhouses, Bridge Square, and Franklin Boulevard Homes. Working with the Cleveland Restoration Society, DSCDO obtained a National Register of Historic Places designation for the Franklin Boulevard-West Clinton Historic District. Low-interest loans were made available to homeowners. DSCDO also pioneered the Cleveland Eco-Village project near the RTA rapid station at Lorain Avenue and West 61st Street. This national demonstration project features “green” housing for sustainable development.

As a result of DSCDO’s work to build market rate housing, Detroit Shoreway has attracted for-profit development, most notably Battery Park. The developer planned to build over 300 townhouses, condos, and lofts on a 13-acre site between West 73rd and West 76th Streets adjoining the railroad and the Shoreway. Begun in 2006, its first phase resulted in the construction of more than 200 housing units. Most recently, in early 2014, the NRP Group, a locally-based national developer, announced a plan to build a 300 unit rental project called “Breakwater Bluffs” on an 11-acre site overlooking the Shoreway at the north end of West 58th Street. These major developments are testament to the increased attraction of Detroit Shoreway to new residents. Housing projects on these large scales will provide a significant addition to the resident base for the GSAD theaters and the adjoining restaurants, bars, art galleries and shops.

The Detroit Shoreway neighborhood borders Cleveland’s largest lakefront park – Edgewater. However, access by residents is limited by a railroad and expressway between their neighborhood and Edgewater Park. Tunnels providing passageways from the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood to the park that existed were in poor condition and uninviting. However, the commitment of \$50 million in funding by the Ohio Department of Transportation in 2002 and the adoption in 2005 of a lakefront plan by the city that included a goal of turning the Shoreway into a lower-speed boulevard gave hope of much better access. While it took many years for work on improving the tunnels to occur and only in 2014 will work actually begin on the transformation of the Shoreway, these developments (along with the 2013 transfer of operation of the city’s lakefront parks to the Metroparks from the state) make Detroit Shoreway a more attractive choice both for potential residents and also visitors.

In his survey of residents’ choice to live in Detroit Shoreway, Sam Abbott found that for younger (under the age of 35) residents, amenities such as shops, entertainment venues and restaurants

were major reasons for their choosing to live in the neighborhood, in addition to its proximity to other Cleveland neighborhoods and downtown. His interviewees Councilman Matt Zone and former Cleveland Planning Director Hunter Morrison attested to the growing attraction of Detroit Shoreway attributable to the impact of the GSAD. In a survey of 15 Detroit Shoreway businesses, of the eight that had located there within the past 5 years, a majority cited the following as the most important locational factor: sense of activity and vibrancy in the neighborhood. Second was that they “heard about the efforts of the GSAD”.

The Beginning of a Neighborhood Arts District

Neighborhood Arts Districts

Districts featuring arts, culture and entertainment have long been featured in the downtowns of American cities. The Cleveland Playhouse Square theater district is a prime example of an entertainment district. Cleveland’s University Circle district is a leading example of a cultural (as well as “Eds & Meds”) district with its several museums and Case Western Reserve University, as well as the home of the Cleveland Symphony. These districts are seen as being prime attractions for visitors, as well as residents.

In some cities, this idea has spread to neighborhoods. In Cleveland, the Little Italy neighborhood on the city’s east side pioneered regular “art walks” featuring art galleries amidst its restaurants and bakeries. The west side neighborhood of Tremont later followed suit and has an annual arts festival. Now the east side Northeast Shores Collinwood neighborhood is promoting a Waterloo Arts district, with a monthly arts walk, an annual arts fest, and low cost housing for artists. The Gordon Square Arts District differs from these three other Cleveland neighborhood examples because of its unique collaboration among three organizations promoting the theater arts. It does have a monthly “Third Friday” arts event featuring the 78th Street Studios open house.

Cleveland Public Theatre (CPT)

Cleveland attorney James Levin founded the Cleveland Public Theatre (CPT) in 1981. Initially a volunteer organization providing free theatre, it shifted its emphasis on Shakespeare to emerging playwrights and performing artists. It includes several acting ensembles and does considerable programming for youth. The year before the closing of the Capitol Theatre, James Levin brought his Cleveland Public Theatre to the corner of 65th and Detroit, diagonally across from the Capitol Theatre. He leased the dilapidated Irish Dance Hall, A decade later, after making necessary improvements and undertaking a fund raising drive, Levin bought the theater with a \$100,000 mortgage loan from the city of Cleveland (later forgiven by Mayor Jane Campbell’s administration). In 1995, Levin acquired the adjoining building, which had housed the Gordon Square Theatre built in 1911. And in 2009 CPT purchased the de-sanctified Orthodox Church properties next to the CPT. Along with these purchases CPT accumulated debt. When he arrived as Levin’s successor as head of the CPT in 2006, Raymond Bobgan inherited CPT’s financial problems. While he has been able to address the debt in the midst of improving the condition of CPT’s home, his board accepted Levin’s idea of the formation of an arts district which included CPT.

Near West Theatre

The Near West Theatre (NWT) was founded in 1978, has been directed by Stephanie Morrison-Hrbek, and housed in the Club Building of St. Patrick's Church in the west side Ohio City neighborhood which is adjacent to the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood. It initially focused on programming for youth (later expanded to adults). In 1999 the NWT agreed to search for a new performance facility. After a lengthy search that focused on the Ohio City and Detroit Shoreway neighborhoods and after rejecting possible adaptive re-use of existing buildings, the NWT decided in 2004 to construct a new building in the Gordon Square district at West 67th and Detroit and to join the CPT and DSCDO to form the Gordon Square Arts District (GSAD). Ground was originally broken in December, 2012 for the new NWT building with an energy-saving design by architect Richard Fleischman.

Gordon Square Arts District (GSAD)

Rather than CPT going it alone financially, the CPT joined with DSCDO and its goal of re-opening a restored Capitol Theatre and the Near West Theatre (NWT)(which planned to build its own theater in Gordon Square) to form the Gordon Square Arts District (GSAD). Its boundaries along Detroit Avenue within the area served by the DSCDO are from West 54th to West 78th. Discussions among CPT, the NWT, and the DSCDO about a collaborative effort began earlier in 2002. The GSAD was a successor to a West Side Arts Consortium that Levin had formed in 2001 in an effort to obtain state capital funds for his buildings. Levin initially directed GSAD but gave way in 2007 to Joy Roller, a summer legal intern who had moved to Cleveland from New York City, where she had been a television producer. Attorney Jan Roller, her sister and the wife of Dave Abbott, head of the Gund Foundation, persuaded her to take the position. Joy Roller, with help from Jan Roller, played a key role in fundraising for the GSAD. A key event was their meeting with Tom Sullivan, head of the industrial firm RPM. He was born in the west side of Cleveland and knew Jan Roller from their involvement in the Urban Community School, Cleveland's City Year program, and the Near West Theatre. His wife Sandy was also involved in the Near West Theatre. Tom Sullivan not only agreed to be an honorary co-chair of a capital campaign but he also contributed a significant amount of funding to help GSAD get started. Jan Roller recruited Richard Pogue of the Jones, Day law firm and Cleveland City Councilmember Matt Zone joined Joy Roller and the heads of the organizations which formed the GSAD to recruit Albert Ratner of the Forest City development firm. These three civic leaders and co-chairs (known as the "Three Amigos") gave the GSAD fundraising efforts immediate credibility among potential funders. Cleveland City Council member Matt Zone, a life long resident of the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood, gave Pogue and Ratner a tour of the area that reinforced their participation in the planned capital campaign. Zone would also play a key role in winning the city's support for the theaters and the Detroit Avenue streetscape improvements. Both of Zone's parents served on the Cleveland City Council representing this west side area. Zone and his wife Michelle were honored at a May, 2013 fundraiser.

In order to launch a joint capital campaign to raise \$30 million, the three organizations were persuaded by their directors to agree to not individually seek capital funding. Instead, the GSAD was made a legal entity in 2007 and a Mutual Reliance Agreement (MRA) was drafted by local

attorney Larry Schultz (later chair of GSAD's board) that specified exactly how fundraising revenue would be apportioned among the three organizations. This unique collaborative capital fundraising agreement has proven to be critical to the success to date of the GSAD.

The September, 2007 Detroit Shoreway Master Plan (p. 2) prepared by Kent State University's Urban Design Center of Northeast Ohio stated:

“The emerging Gordon Square Arts District has become a true destination point for entertainment, business, and recreation. The completion of the Detroit Avenue Streetscape will create an authentic and vibrant urban experience. The re-opening of the Capitol Theatre as an art and independent film cinema, the construction of a new auditorium for Near West Theatre, and the continued growth of Cleveland Public Theatre offers a unique blend of affordable, entertainment options found in any other neighborhood in the region. The three theatres are spark plugs for new business development that includes unique restaurants, hip night clubs, and art galleries. When the buildout of the district is completed, over 300 new jobs will have been created in a vibrant, urban commercial district”.

A 2010 study by Team NEO projected that the GSAD would generate \$317 million in investment and 643 permanent jobs in the neighborhood (940 in the state of Ohio) by 2013 (assuming completion of the planned construction). This buttressed the arguments of the promoters of the GSAD that it would be an economic success worthy of investment by those public and private sponsors being courted.

Capitol Theatre

With the renovation of the Gordon Square Arcade and the arrival of the CPT, the restoration and re-opening of Capitol Theatre was a major goal of DSCDO in the improvement of Gordon Square. In 1997, City Architecture did a study that recommended the creation of an Arts and Entertainment District that included the renovation of the Capitol Theatre. It concluded:

“With careful planning, commitment to the vision, and the appropriate public/private investment, the Detroit Shoreway Neighborhood can become one of the premier neighborhoods in the City of Cleveland. This Community is an active and dynamic place where people and businesses are choosing to locate. The neighborhood, however, is lacking a unique and identifiable image. The Gordon Square Arts and Entertainment District Plan, with the Capitol Theatre at its core, will harness the energy that already exists and create a wonderful place that will attract people from around the region. The district will serve the residents well by providing additional amenities such as restaurants, shops, art galleries, etc., as well as greater employment opportunities. Detroit Avenue can become a ‘main street’ and create a focus for the community that people will use, enjoy, be proud of”.

Detroit Shoreway commissioned an economic feasibility analysis of an art theater within an Gordon Square arts district. It was conducted by the Council for Urban Economic Development and Orinsby & Co. They recommended renovation of the Capitol Theatre as one of the three keystones for the Gordon Square Arts District.

While blighted during the many years of its closure, the basic structure of the theatre was still sound. While some of the original decorative features could not be retained and all of the seating had to be replaced, it was determined that the building could be successfully converted to a three-screen complex. Based on an estimate of an annual regional audience of approximately 100,000, financing in the amount of approximately \$7 million was obtained and finally closed on July 1, 2008 just before the financial crisis that crippled the economy and sharply limited borrowing. Financing sources included: \$4 million equity by PNC Bank (then National City Bank) through federal New Markets and federal and state historic tax credits. The Greater Cleveland Partnership is also a partner in the tax credit financing. Government support included a State capital grant, a loan from the city of Cleveland, and a grant from Cuyahoga County. The project also received a capital grant from the Cleveland Foundation, operating support from the Gund Foundation, and a grant from Marous Brothers Construction, a Cleveland-based contractor which conducted the renovation without major problems. On October 1, 2009, the Capitol Theatre was re-opened with a benefit gala. Detroit Shoreway resident Eddie Veltrie, once formerly an usher at the Capitol Theatre, spoke along with major figures in its renovation. The historic Capitol Theatre once again welcomed audiences (just as its downtown counterpart theaters had earlier in Playhouse Square).

However, in the midst of the planning and renovation, movie theater technology had changed. A more expensive digital system (and 3D capacity) was installed. Jon Foreman's Cleveland Cinemas was hired to manage the theater, which would still be owned by DSCDO. Cleveland Cinemas owns the Cedar-Lee theater in the east side suburb of Cleveland Heights and manages six theaters in Greater Cleveland and Pittsburgh and also manages the annual Cleveland International Film Festival. Its marketing manager is a resident of the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood, who has organized special film showings and events (e.g., a Sunday brunch and classic movies series) to generate interest in the theater. Cleveland Plain Dealer movie critic Clint O'Connor wrote in October, 2012 about its rebirth:

“The Capitol Theatre never should have succeeded. It's not off a major highway. It's not in a giant shopping center. It doesn't have 24 screens, and it's not surrounded by asphalt acres of parking spaces”.

Detroit Avenue Streetscape

In its decline, Detroit Shoreway's main public street - Detroit Avenue – did not present an attractive face for either residents or visitors. A key contribution of City Councilman Matt Zone was his role in obtaining city and NOACA financing of a streetscape project costing \$3.5 million to improve the face of the four-block area around the intersection of West 65th and Detroit. The concept of the streetscape project included wider sidewalks, new street lights, underground utilities, plantings, additional surface parking and public art. The public art included designs by artist Susie Frazier Mueller, working with Cleveland Public Art and City Architecture. Additionally, Zone got the City of Cleveland to invest nearly \$1 million for surface parking to expand one existing parking lot and create three new parking lots.

The State of the GSAD

Joy Roller left the GSAD after six years to become President of Global Cleveland, formed to attract new residents to Cleveland. She was succeeded as Executive Director of GSAD in 2013 by Judi Feniger, who previously was the Executive Director of the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage and is and has been associated with several Cleveland community organizations. As of February, 2014, GSAD has raised all but \$1.5 million of its \$30 million capital campaign goal. On June 13, 2014, Dick Pogue and David Doll, co-chairs of the GSAD Board, will be honored at a fundraising event at the CPT.

Still to be completed are the construction of the NWT and renovations to the CPT.

As of the beginning of 2014, the economic impact of the GSAD has been an estimated \$500 million in overall investment and 77 new businesses. As Albert Ratner envisioned, the GSAD has become a catalyst for economic development beyond just its narrow boundaries.

A major issue still facing the GSAD is parking. With its success in attracting new businesses within the immediate area of the intersection of West 65th and Detroit, there is only limited parking. The three new surface parking lots and on street parking do not meet the needs of all visitors to the GSAD at its busiest times. Stakeholders agree that a public parking structure would help to resolve this issue but for the moment its estimated \$8 million prohibitive cost does not make this likely. Nevertheless, the popularity of the theaters and the growth of new businesses suggest that this is not such a deterrent as to discourage many visitors and DSCDO plans to develop valet parking to lots further from the core of the district.

Another possible concern to visitors to this inner city neighborhood might be safety. However, this does not appear to be a significant deterrent to those coming to the attractions of the GSAD. Neighborhood property owners voted to create a Business Improvement District (“BID”) and funding from the BID helps to pay for off-duty police and security. Additionally, DSCDO coordinates a volunteer “Neighborhood Ambassador” program. Enhanced lighting, litter pick-up, and prompt graffiti removal help enhance safety.

The renovated Capitol Theatre enjoys popularity but the original viewer projections have not yet been met. In 2012, the attendance was approximately 65,000. The shortfall in part reflects changes in movie watching including Netflix and movies on the Web. While it is meeting its operational costs, DSCDO had to receive an extension of the date of repayment of the city’s \$1.5 million loan, postponing payments due until the end of 2014 and granting an extra 5 years on the 30-year note.

DSCDO, CPT, GSAD and neighborhood businesses have worked together to promote the district. Cultural events have included the return of the Cleveland International Film Festival to the Capitol Theatre, recitals by members of the Cleveland Symphony at neighborhood venues like the Happy Dog bar, an annual Dyngus Day celebration (a Polish holiday), and the annual pARTy in Gordon Square. Joy Roller produced a comedic YouTube video on GSAD.

The GSAD has been praised in articles in journals like The Economist and the Smithsonian Magazine. It was a featured case study in a 2010 white paper entitled “Creative Placemaking” sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In a September 20, 2011 appearance at the Cleveland City Club, NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman said:

“I wish I could transplant what is happening in Gordon Square all around the country, because not only are they engaging their own artists and their own artistic ethos, but they are transforming a neighborhood, a community”.

In the March 2012 issue of Planning Magazine the GSAD executive director Joy Roller and Professor Norm Krumholz of the Levin College at Cleveland State University praised the GSAD in their article entitled “Here Comes the Neighborhood: A Cleveland success story”. They concluded: “The arts-based strategy has worked”.

The GSAD has won several awards recognizing its work. A notable example was its being named the winner of the 2010 Cleveland Arts Prize (the Martha Joseph Prize for Distinguished Service to the Arts), which is usually awarded to individuals, not organizations. In 2012, James Levin, founder of the CPT (and Ingenuityfest) was awarded the prize.

Conclusion

A resident of Cleveland’s Detroit Shoreway neighborhood in 1973, seeing its decline, could hardly have imagined its transformation four decades later. Then, the city’s and the neighborhood’s troubles were mounting in a decade of setbacks and huge population losses. Yet, it was that year that marked the beginning of the neighborhood’s long and persistent revitalization efforts with the creation of the DSCDO. Through the dedication of its four executive directors (currently Jeff Ramsey since 2003), staff and board, DSCDO became one of the best performing community development corporations in the city of Cleveland. Despite the population decline the neighborhood has suffered, DSCDO can point to many accomplishments both in physical redevelopment and in improving the image of the neighborhood.

Certainly, the creation of the GSAD in 2006-2007 was a major stepping stone for both. While completion of its capital campaign and the construction of the NWT building remain to be achieved by the GSAD, the collaborative efforts of the three member organizations is inspirational and has been recognized both locally and nationally. It is a model for using the arts as a catalyst and magnet for the revitalization of an urban neighborhood. The success of the GSAD is a testament to the vision and dedication of many leaders and supporters of this ambitious project.

Timeline

1973: DSCDO formed

1979: DSCDO purchased the Gordon Square Arcade

1984: CPT relocated to Gordon Square

1985: The Capitol Theatre closed
2004: The New West Theatre decides build its new home in Gordon Square
2006: The GSAD launched its collaborative 3-theater capital campaign
2009: The Capitol Theatre re-opened
 The Detroit Avenue Streetscape project was completed
2012: Groundbreaking for the new NWT building in Gordon Square

GSAD Information

For additional information about the GSAD and its three member organizations, consult their websites:

Cleveland Public Theatre: www.cptonline.org

Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization: www.dscdo.org

Gordon Square Arts District: www.gordonsquare.org

Near West Theatre: www.nearwesttheatre.org

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