

Gordon Square Arts District in Cleveland wins national recognition

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Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer



Chan/The Plain Dealer Cars line up to be valet parked at the Capitol Theater for a "Sex and the City" Girls Night Out party and screening in May. The Gordon Square Arts District is being recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts and the National League of Cities.

Gordon Square, the emerging art district in the Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood on Cleveland's West Side, has won big time kudos from the **National Endowment for the Arts** and the **National League of Cities**.

It has also pulled down \$2.7 million in recent federal, state and local grants, which will be used to build or renovate community theaters that are central to its vision of using the arts to revive a city neighborhood. "Lots of good stuff is happening," said Joy Roller, the district's executive director. "To me, it's an acknowledgement that what we're doing is not only successful, but is a novel approach, a unique approach on how to revitalize an urban core."

The NEA announced earlier this month that Gordon Square is one of 14 case studies in a new publication, "Creative Placemaking."

Co-authored by arts advocates **Ann Markusen** and Ann Gadwa, the document is a project of the NEA's Mayor's Institute on City Design. The mission of the agency is to educate U.S. mayors to become the "chief urban designers" of their cities.

The case studies are intended to encourage mayors to think creatively about how everything from loft housing to art galleries can build economic value and encourage investment.

The chapter in the case study on Gordon Square praises the project for helping to leverage an estimated \$500 million in related investments on the West Side of

Cleveland over the past eight years, much of it in housing, even though Gordon Square is only halfway through a \$30 million revitalization.

The project is a collaborative venture among three non-profit organizations, the **Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization**, **Cleveland Public Theatre** and **Near West Theatre**.

The goal of the district is to renovate two historic theaters -- Cleveland Public and the **Capitol** -- and to build a new home for Near West. By using the arts as an anchor for related retail, restaurant and housing development, the district is sparking new life in a 15-block corridor from W. 58th Street to West 73rd St., with Detroit Avenue as the spine.

The Capitol Theatre, located in the historic Gordon Square Arcade at W. 65th Street and Detroit Avenue, reopened in 2009 as a movie theater after a renovation. Work on Cleveland Public Theatre is ongoing. And the arts district has raised roughly half of the \$6.5 million it needs to build a new Near West Theater, designed by Cleveland architect **Richard Fleischman**, Roller said.

"Creative Placemaking" said the district has "revitalizing the area's commercial core with arts offerings and new retail businesses while preserving and adding low-income housing units."

Echoing the praise from the NEA, the National League of Cities has invited Roller to represent Gordon Square as one of 26 programs from the across the country that will be showcased in its upcoming **National Congress of Cities** in Denver, starting Tuesday.

In addition to the outside attention, Gordon Square announced it has received a \$1 million matching grant from the Fowler Family Foundation and a \$500,000 matching grant from the Gund Foundation, both for the Near West Theatre project. Roller said her organization has another \$3.5 million to raise before it can build the theater.

"With Near West, we are inching closer to realizing our dream of building a new home for that theater," Roller said.

A separate grant of \$1 million in federal stimulus funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act's State Energy Program will be used immediately to air condition Cleveland Public Theatre for the first time, which means it can be used year round, Roller said.

The State of Ohio has also kicked in \$200,000 for asbestos removal at Cleveland Public, which will make the theater safer to use, Roller said.

The national attention focused on Gordon Square shouldn't create the impression that the project has gone unnoticed locally. In June, the district won a Cleveland Arts Prize.

The national recognition for the district offers more proof that "Cleveland should be very proud of this model we've created in the Gordon Square Arts District," Roller said. "It's good news for Cleveland."