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Urban Revitalization and Renewal in Downtown Dayton, Ohio

When a city is thought about, most people can and will remember certain features or identifiable landmarks that provide unique memories and experiences. Examples of these can include major historical monuments, a vivid mural spread across the side of a brick building, or even the smell of different foods when entering a downtown area during lunch time. Although these physical manifestations differ greatly, they all have one basis on common: people. Humans lie at the root of city design ​and are the beings fueling the continuous change of the urban societies and cultures needing proper and efficient management. As stated in “The Influence of District Visual Quality on Location Decisions of Creative Entrepreneurs”, is was said that “…beautiful cities (having a high number of leisure visits) featured economic and population growth and disproportionately attracted highly skilled professionals…beauty and aesthetic characteristics of cities had a significant effect on community satisfaction for a large sample of Americans with diverse income and education levels” (Smit 170). For a city’s economy to thrive and continue to do so, not only does a good job market need to be present, but it has to also look the part and inspire creativity while providing a safe environment for the people living there.

The initiative to physically improve the appeal of downtown Dayton is meant not only for inspiration and creative purposes, but to bring a better sense of community and safety to the space, that in turn will positively cater to the needs of the students, employees, employers, and visitors inhabiting those places daily. In addition, outside sources may feel more inclined to invest in the area or move their business practices back inward, which would be highly beneficial since small businesses drive city economies and begin to add to the desired individuality and culture within a city. With Dayton facing serious opioid crises, high rates of crime and violence, and lacking proper access to all basic needs within the official city limits, these issues will also be the focus of the design propositions. The design propositions will influence behavioral change that can positively influence social interactions, human reaction and productivity, and the environment.

With issues of urban renewal, the city of Middletown, Ohio shares some of these same concerns. A study conducted there about its “dilapidated downtown” presents similar issues faced in Dayton, Ohio, and because both cities are near the other and have a similar history, the findings can be beneficial. Based on her research, DePriest found that:

“Small cities present different planning challenges than the large-city contexts that attract the majority of research on city functions and social interactions, ties to one’s community, and documented cases of community participation in planning and design. These challenges are especially evident in the downtown environment where inactive streets and vacant buildings stand as reminders of decentralization. Decades of increased mobility and shifting market forces have steadily drawn populations from urban settings to new growth on the city perimeter. Such conditions result in shrinking cities…” (10).

As this argument strengthens, the revitalization of Dayton’s downtown will have to focus on transforming the preexisting structures into spaces that can be effectively utilized by the current population, unlike many of the closed businesses that remain empty. This method will allow for renovations prices to remain lower than they would be completely rebuilding specific buildings, and can possibly allow for a sense of community and group effort that will benefit how inhabitants feel about their environment, mixing nostalgia with progressive change.

Many major social advancements have occurred in downtown Dayton within the past few years, such as the construction and opening of the Dayton Metro Library and the Levitt Pavilion, as well as renovating other spaces downtown and investing in better infrastructure, transportation, and the promotion of a more active lifestyle, with many bikes and bike paths being made a part of Dayton’s streets. Yet even with these progressions, the overall attractiveness of the downtown layout could still use some work. A major physical issue that would drastically add to the downtown curb appeal would be adding more colors to the existing buildings, which is much more hassle free than having to build all new structures, keeping the historical element while beginning to colorize the city view from the street and highway. Also, the use of specific colors can aid in comfortability and productivity, such as green being usually associated with attributes such as calmness, relaxation, peace, and reduced stress levels (Jalil, N.Ab., et al 813), and these can begin to be spread throughout the area possibly leading to twenty-four hour aid facilities for those dealing with drug addiction or other side effects of living in poverty stricken areas. The importance of signage in a community is great, providing a means of communication that can inform the public and allows for proper navigation of a space. The proper signage can begin to tell a story with interpretive visuals and place making tools as means to give a purposeful identity to a neighborhood. Along with physical objects, it also considers how digital design components can be connected to the experience of a place (Schwanbeck 87).

Lighting, outside of aiding in the process of sight, is great for providing feelings of safety and an awareness of a person’s surroundings, and for these reasons should be more heavily implemented throughout the downtown. Information obtained by the U.S. Department of Energy revealed that Dayton, Ohio provides an example of limited ownership with full capital cost responsibilities for any street light replacement, conventional or LED. Miami Valley Lighting, a division of Dayton Power & Light, is the majority owner of the street light assets and bills the city for all capital, energy, and maintenance costs, which is still a great expense with the city owning roughly twenty-seven percent of the total of 19,700 lights in Dayton. To help fund the cost of LED upgrades for city-owned street lights, the Dayton City Commission approved a city ordinance which allows for a six-year assessment (2014-2020) of all customer groups —residential, commercial, and industrial — to finance a $3 million LED upgrade and related lighting system expenditures (U.S. Department of Energy). Using this approach to pay for community advancements over a period of time allows for smaller changes to actually be made while larger, more expensive movements are in the works. Focusing on the appeal and safety of the downtown can also allow for more events to happen in the evenings and for there to begin being a nightlife in the city, rather than becoming very vacant after work and business hours.

In the article “Greening as an Urban Design Metaphor: Looking for the City’s Soul in Leftover Spaces”, a city is referred to as the personification of the taming and suppression of nature (30). To begin combatting this idea, the downtown meeting areas and public spaces should contain much greenery and organic design elements that breathe fresh air into a currently bland, static layout. Attempting to incorporate all of these elements into city design can significantly reduce or eliminate downtown menace by attracting pedestrians into transformed spaces, such as a back alley being used for group gatherings or children’s activity areas implying a new found safety measure, or incorporating a climbing wall and distinctive street furniture that can create a sense of awe and wonder that the community can appreciate (Structurist 34). A similar project of downtown revitalization in Tempe, Arizona had a budget of around $2,060,000 for expenses associated with the proposed project ranging from beautification efforts to administrative fees. With the median income in Tempe, Arizona being $50,474 (https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/tempecityarizona,daytoncityohio/INC110216), there is more money available in the community to drive these efforts and allow for more advancements, while in comparison to that of Dayton, Ohio being $28,894 (<http://www.city-data.com/city/Dayton-Ohio.html>), there will most likely be less money available to put into the community that will result in smaller or fewer projects. Based on this budget, it can be assumed that a similar criteria could be met in downtown Dayton having a budget of around $1,100,000, being used for the proposed short term social and environmental changes.

With downtown Dayton holding over 42,000 employees, 40,000 students, 20,000 residents, and over seven million visitors per year, this is the audience that needs to be greatly taken into account, especially since some of the most successful cities have high rates of tourism and make decisions that will effectively manage issues of density and transportation (<http://plan.downtown-dayton.org/>). The urban population in Dayton had a median household income of $28,894 in 2016, which in comparison to that of the entire state of Ohio was more than $23,000 less (<http://www.city-data.com/city/Dayton-Ohio.html>), so making sure that the needs of the lower and middle classes surrounding the downtown area are taken into consideration is imperative. The demographics of the population of Dayton are heavily African-American and Caucasian, with around ten percent being Hispanic, Asian, Indian, or classifying as “other” (<http://www.city-data.com/city/Dayton-Ohio.html>).

Even with other ethnicities being of low numbers in the Dayton community, 4.3 percent of the Montgomery County is foreign born and the overall immigrant population has doubled since the mid-2000’s (U.S. Census). Many of these immigrants move to the city because of the low housing costs and more affordable living, so there needs to be a space in the downtown area that can be a safe haven for all types of cultures and people. Just as important as businesses and revenue are for the sustainability and growth of an urban economy, places that create and imply cultural appreciation and acceptance will positively benefit the city as well. At least half of Dayton’s population identifies as Caucasian, but many of the inhabitants of the direct city are African-Americans, so issues could arise of the majority being listened to, but not always those who are most effected by the changes made and accommodations offered within the city. The method of planning and promoting cultural quarters instead of planning for creative entrepreneurs, from a user perspective, begins to form social relationships within the seemingly individualistic city life routine, aiding in a “stew pot” society that can appreciate all people and progress as a unit (Smit 169). A movement to revitalize the neighborhood life around a university in West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania shared some similar views and ideas about social reform and progression. Rolin expands on some methods and findings of this project:

“We would never again expand our campus to the west or to the north into residential neighborhoods. We would expand only to our east, which was made up entirely of abandoned buildings and commercial real estate. We would not act unilaterally. Instead, we would candidly discuss what we could do with the community, and we would operate with transparency. We would not promise long-term financial assistance. Instead, we would invest heavily in the short term to leverage these investments by stimulating major longer term investments by the private and public sectors” (240).

This practice of making the community apart of the design process and being honest about it, and having good intentions for those living in those areas, will allow for people to feel more comfortable with change and for communities to start witnessing the growth in their communities.

With projects such as this, funding is usually a major issue. Larger projects tend to need repeated donations and/or grants to be completed, which has been the reason for many urban beautification efforts failing, so smaller investments seem to be the best way to ensure that these proposals can happen. The 2016 budget for infrastructure and neighborhood development throughout the entire city of Dayton, Ohio, including contingency costs, equaled to $33,765,100 (<https://www.daytonohio.gov/Archive/ViewFile/Item/66>), so it could be assumed that at least $15,000,000 would be need to begin implementing these facilities and structural renovations throughout the downtown in the long term. This investment can spark the movement of businesses and retailers back into the downtown area, allowing for the surrounding population to have more of their needs met closer to where they live, which will make the local economy thrive.

The active investors in Dayton, Ohio are large in number and diverse, varying from universities to banks and local companies (<https://daytonregion.com/ddc/regional-investors>), but it would be beneficial to look at those organizations specializing in community development and aesthetic design. Some useful grants based around public benefit and access, artistic and cultural vibrancy, and organizational capacity are the General Operating Support Grants (GOS) and the Community Arts Development Grants (CAD) (<http://cultureworks.org/community-arts-grants/>). Also, The Community Development Block Grant could be used for "the development of viable urban communities, by providing…a suitable living environment and expanding economic opportunities, principally for persons of low and moderate income” (<http://www.mcohio.org/departments/community_development/cdbg.php>). Grants like this allow for financial help or coverage of land acquisition, construction, design, and engineering. The State Energy Program (SEP) would be a beneficial sponsor for adding sustainable elements to the design choices and materials used, pushing an issue that every citizen should be thinking about, which is how to conserve and benefit the environment in the midst of social advancements (<https://development.ohio.gov/cs/cs_grantsloansbonds.htm>).

Since Sinclair Community College is located downtown, and The University of Dayton is in close proximity, it would greatly benefit the universities to invest in the appeal of that area since it would directly affect the student body and those associated with those students, which in turn will provide increases in revenue and social interaction. Although many businesses may have issues donating to a cause outside of themselves, because often budgets are tight, a group effort of small donations could begin to greatly change the chances of design proposals being completed. Many services offered in downtown Dayton aid the community and their well-being’s, such as Public Health and Planned Parenthood, and would greatly benefit from servicing the public outside of general office hours and in emergencies, so an investment in twenty-four hour spaces or public stations that are safely accessible could begin to change the life of the downtown area. Organizations that deal with and bring awareness to these issues, such as the Montgomery County Medical Society and the many health facilities across the Miami Valley, would be ideal partners for funding these initiatives, as well as firms such as Barge Design Solutions that focus on commercial and private development (<https://daytonregion.com/ddc/regional-investors> , <https://www.bargedesign.com/markets/land-planning-and-design>).

Many forces must work together for the improvement of the daily experiences and functions within a city, and especially in its downtown. When focusing on its appeal and aesthetics, there must be certain choices made that begin transforming what is seen to what is felt and experienced. The proposed changes of color and signage, using sustainable building materials, transforming “undesired” or “forgotten about” spaces into safe gathering areas, and incorporating natural elements into design will create a more inviting and inclusive downtown that can hopefully offer the city more individuality and a better sense of community. Since Dayton has a history of being a strong, innovative city that rebuilds itself after natural disasters and economic shortcomings, there is no doubt that with the help of passionate planners, investors, and citizens that care enough to implement much needed change, downtown Dayton can begin transforming again into an exciting place oozing success, vitality, and creativity.

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