

Assembling Nashville: Creative Anchors and Art District Sustainability

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Wedgewood-Houston is New Nashville district zero. It does not (yet) provide the bar scene that animates Five Points in East Nashville. It is not (yet) the pedestrian scene on 12-South. It is not (yet) the high-rise, glass condo, valet-plex in the nearby Gulch.¹ Wedgewood-Houston is rather – in its current form at least – an unassuming industrial and residential area recently outed as an emerging art district and creative epicenter near the same time the *New York Times* proclaimed Nashville America’s next “It City.” WH has since witnessed a surge of media attention, real estate speculation, official zoning intervention, and much resident and artist concern about rising rents and the future of the district’s creative identity.

If this story is a familiar one, however, it is somewhat new to Nashville. Many American neighborhoods since the 1970s have witnessed a pattern of gentrification on the heels of a critical mass of artist occupants.² Sometimes called “the SoHo phenomenon” – New York City’s “South of Houston” district was perhaps the first case in the postindustrial era – Nashville’s own WeHo (Houston Street represents the northern border here too) holds more than some family resemblance. Visual artists in WH have occupied vacated manufacturing and warehouse buildings since at least the mid-1990s, before “artist” in Nashville referred to anything other than musician, and well before the city recognized its nascent contemporary art scene as an asset.

But cities everywhere in the 21st century have learned to view artists and other “creatives” in a different light. The publication of Richard Florida’s (2002) best-selling *Rise of the Creative Class* ushered in a new planning and policy discourse that situates creativity at the center of urban competitive advantage, and the arts as a source of creativity (Raitu 2013; also see

¹ Note, for example, one realty firm’s description of the neighborhood: “Reviving distressed urban areas and bringing them back to life is on the rise. Nashville and it’s developers have been perfecting this process over the past decade with neighborhoods like East Nashville, Germantown, The Gulch, Sylvan Park and now Wedgewood Houston” (see Kelton).

² This sentence describes the lay theory. Alternatively, artist-occupants have been explained as early-wave gentrifiers, responsible for a neighborhood’s cultural/symbolic transformation, though not property values *per se* (Ley 2003; Shaw & Sullivan 2011).

Markusen and Gadwa 2013).³ According to Florida, living in a creative place has become a lifestyle concern for many young professionals. Because of Florida, harnessing this so-called “creative class” has become a mandate for city officials and planners (Peck 2005; Macgillis 2009). Artists have learned to brand themselves as “creatives” for regional grant opportunities (see Shaw 2012). And, under this rubric, engineers and lawyers (among other occupations) simply became “creatives” (c.f., Florida 2002; Markusen 2006).

The trend is not lost on Nashville. Despite its sprawl and lack of pedestrian-scale urbanism (see Lloyd 2012), which are arguably incompatible with artistic production (i.e., unlike in New York City, argues Currid 2007), Nashville has made use of its existing cultural assets to rebrand itself a “creative city,” not just a destination for music professionals and country music tourists anymore, but a place where musicians, artists, and makers rub elbows with design, tech, and academic professionals, and where the arts are accessible and celebrated widely.

Wedgewood-Houston is the place where Nashville’s creative brand is currently confronting an inconvenient paradox, however, in which arts/creativity-led urban development tends to prove unsustainable for artists themselves, along with other long-time resident bystanders. If history is a lesson, we might predict that Wedgewood-Houston will not last as a site of artistic production, despite the discourse that privileges these very features and sets the creative brand in motion.⁴ But WeHo is not SoHo, Nashville is not New York, and the visible signs of change are only slowly materializing here. Most importantly, artists and other longtime residents have not (yet) been categorically priced out.

³ Creativity and innovation have long been considered basic elements of local economies among urban theorists (e.g., Jacobs 1969; Glaser 2004), but Florida’s book made this notion popular discourse. For a critical take on how this came to be, see Peck 2005.

⁴ See section below. When developers in SoHo realized the demand generated by artists for middle-class lifestyle aesthetes, they quickly allied with city officials to rezone artists’ live/work spaces for residential use, driving up prices and tax bases, inevitably driving out artists and an outmoded industrial past along with them (Zukin 1982).

The current state of things in WH thus presents an opportunity to ask questions about its future. As well it is an opportunity for Nashville to articulate its own variety of “creative city,” not as a brand in the service of middle class consumers and development interests, but as one that privileges sustainable, working arts districts, accessible to artists, makers, and citizens alike. Will WeHo go the route of SoHo, where a wealthier class of back-to-the-city residents demands and displaces current uses and users from their current space? Or, can creativity itself be harnessed to stem the tide of gentrification and turnover?

This report aims to contextualize Wedgewood-Houston as an open-ended case study of arts-related neighborhood change. Political-economic and materialist perspectives (the bread of butter of urban sociological theory) would surely predict that WH is not sustainable as a “creative” space because propertied interests tend to hold sway, and artists get priced out in the process of development and rising demand. But the purpose of this report is to draw attention instead to the current concerns of the many actors and interest groups whose struggles are intersecting to assemble a contested and communal “creative city” simultaneously in the present.⁵ I argue that “creativity” discourse (Raitu 2013) serves as a powerful cultural anchor, in WH in particular, and in Nashville generally, which gives a “thin coherence” to otherwise competing interest groups, allowing them to organize and solve problems around a common source of belonging (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011). Drawing from interviews with multiple sets of stakeholders – artists, residents, developers, and city planning/policy officials – this report offers a case study of a dynamic space that I intend first to serve interested parties in the neighborhood, and only secondly as a contribution to the scholarly literature on this topic.

⁵ See literature review below. For an overview of Assemblage theory see Bennett and Healy 2008; McCann and Ward 2012. For recent case studies that emphasize the competing interest groups, see Deener 2012; Wherry 2011.

Art Districts in Postindustrial and Creative Cities

Following SoHo's lead, postindustrial art districts emerged in the 1980s and 90s in second cities like Chicago's Wicker Park and off-center cities like Portland's Pearl District, among other places. The trend coincided with a pattern of global economic restructuring that saw many U.S. industrial centers transition from the production of material goods to the production of cultural and symbolic systems (Harvey 1991; Jameson 1991; Klein 1999) and services (Sassen 1991). While blue collar manufacturing jobs left northern U.S. cities in the later decades of the 20th century in favor of cheaper labor markets elsewhere, the population of artistic occupations increased at a rate much faster than the labor force as a whole (NEA 2011). Fine artists alone, for example, increased from over 130,000 to nearly 300,000 between 1970 and 2000. That artists are often the first to occupy the manufacturing and warehouse spaces left vacant by previous industrial users has been explained as a clear expression of this shift (Lloyd 2006; Zukin 1982).

Artists have always experienced a tenuous relationship to urban space in the postindustrial period, however, even as artistic and cultural production has become more integrated into the global economy generally. According to Sharon Zukin (1982), as "Artist" became a respectable, middle-class career choice, artistic lifestyles and their actual living spaces also became the objects of veneration and middle class consumption.⁶ Zukin referred to an Artistic Mode of Production as the recognition by development and real estate interests – in collusion with urban officials and politicians – that artist-occupants can do magic for generating demand and property value in districts left behind by previous industrial tenants, and they may

⁶ David Ley (1996; 2003) has added that artists' work, almost by definition, involves generating cultural and symbolic value where it otherwise does not exist. In fact, Ley's (2003) vignette of one "assemblage artist" in Vancouver, B.C., whose sculptures were composed of urban detritus, metaphorically illustrates a dialectical tension between conflict and unity in the 'assemblage' of neighborhood value, and thus forecasts the theoretical concerns at play here. Whatever else artists produce, thus, they also produce urban space. Artists are so good at valorizing the spaces they live and work in, in fact, that they do not always need to be present where real estate interests might profit. "Artist Loft" renovations and even brand new "Artist Loft" residential structures emerged in cities everywhere in the later decades of the 20th century as well (*see* Podmore 1998).

be effectively exploited to do so, regardless of the fact that artists usually cannot keep up with the property values and rents that they seem to induce.

Art districts also provide important cultural functions for cities generally, beyond their capacity to generate residential demand. For artists themselves, spatial concentration increases the prospects for exchange of relevant cultural information and/or innovative ideas in day-to-day encounters (Jacobs 1969; Currid 2007; Lloyd 2006; Uzzi and Spiro 2005). For arts audiences, art districts provide a venue to access and consume specialty products and cultural information, even if artists remain structurally ambivalent to their audiences' concerns (Shaw 2013; also see Bourdieu 1993; Becker 1965). Further, robust concentrations of artistic fields have been shown to generate measurable economic dividends for whole cities (Markusen 2006).

Art districts also provide concrete local links to global cultural flows. Even off-center cities like Nashville are increasingly integrated in a global economic and cultural order in the 21st century, and artists play a key role in inter-urban integration. Specifically, artists are adept at drawing outside attention to a city, in part because local artists' own careers depend on the kind of attention that their city can attract from art world gatekeepers in other places (Shaw 2014). Thus, cities where artists thrive are poised to become visible globally. Conversely, artists are consummate travelers. Because few off-center cities contain the kinds of markets and institutions that can sustain many artistic careers alone, artists living in places like Nashville strive to create and maintain translocal networking opportunities (which may lead, for example, to exhibition, market, or academic opportunities in other places) (Shaw 2014). For these reasons, artists, curators, and dealers, and the many commercial galleries and project spaces that exist between them in any given art district invariably exhibit a healthy proportion of traveling artists monthly. Art districts thus serve as conduits for translocal exchange of culture, ideas, networks, and

people, linking places like Nashville to global knowledges and discourses (e.g., contemporary art, design, etc.) not available through popular media channels.⁷

Nevertheless, while art districts provide critical functions for 21st century urban economies and for the cultural health of cities generally, their emergence is usually also riddled with gentrification pressures that make them unsustainable. Maintaining affordable space in WH is not only important for artists, it is critical for Nashville in the long run as well.

Assembling Creative Space

The literature on arts-led gentrification (partially reviewed above) is often divided into supply-side vs. demand-side explanations, which privilege the role of urban elites or “growth machines” (Logan and Molotch 1987) or the “new middle class” (Ley 1996), respectively. Other studies have taken seriously the social logics of artists as pioneers, pointing out that vacant industrial space fulfills artists’ material (ample space, natural light), symbolic (“grit-as-glamor”), and social (networking) needs (Lloyd 2006; Bain 2003). Zukin’s (1982; 1987) approach has been to highlight the confluence of “culture” and “capital” in the postindustrial city, which appears holistic at a conceptual level, but gives agency to no one in particular.

More recently, scholars working on various urban development questions (mostly geographers) have argued that theoretical accounts could do better to account for the messiness of urbanization, understanding the city not only as a cumulative texture (see Suttles 1984), but as an *assemblage* of multiple actors and interest groups at once; the ongoing result of their cumulative efforts; caught between points of stability and dynamism; a non-linear, uncertain process (see Bennett and Healey 2008; McCann and Ward 2012; McFarlane and Anderson 2011). From this perspective, Wedgewood Houston is not simply a product of particular

⁷ This paragraph summarizes finding from my dissertation: *Off Center: Art Careers in Peripheral Places*.

economic patterns, middle class demand, or a savvy design firm thinking to name it an “art district.” It is each of these as well as a confluence of actors operating independently and simultaneously within a field of contemporary art, a field of policy-making, a housing market, all vying for a foothold in a common space. It is not just a ‘top-down,’ or ‘bottom-up’ process, but it is both simultaneously. An assemblage approach allows us to “study through” urban processes from multiple points of view (McCann and Ward 2012), rather than, for example, testing hypotheses related to the tired question ‘Who Benefits?’ Still, if assemblage thinking asks us to identify a unity among differences (not least of which the space that multiple contending actors have in common), it also implies that struggle underlies coherence.

Creativity as Discourse and Cultural Anchor

Creativity is of course more than a structural feature of local economic growth, just as artistic production is more than a mere functional element of postindustrial capital and cultural flows. But whatever else it is, “creativity” has also become a discursive tool that privileges particular kinds of belonging and enables particular kinds of action (Raitu 2013). As a discourse, creativity is more an ethos than a trait, more a manifesto than a policy handbook.⁸ It is a “magic bullet” (writes Raitu 2013: 127) that makes art and culture the central concerns of urban development and inter-city competitiveness.

Despite the many criticisms that many scholars have leveraged against the term as such, against Florida’s “elitist” class prescriptions (Raitu 2013), for example, and against the diffusion of this discourse generally (see Pratt 2009; Peck 2005; Scott 2006), however, “creativity” also turns out to be a prevailing cultural anchor that serves much more than merely the interests of policy-makers and developers. As Ghaziani and Baldassarri (2011) have described, a cultural

⁸ See *Memphis Manifesto* (Colletta et al)

anchor is a mechanism that allows diverse interests to address differences through their commonalities. Cultural anchors can preexist struggles to unite unequal parties, and they can be generated in the process of sorting through differences.

In conjunction with an assemblage perspective, thinking through “creativity” as a discourse and anchor as such helps illuminate the struggles and debates that surround the production of space and place in the 21st century city. It allows us to think beyond Florida’s (2002) “Creative Class” and his many critics. As we will see, creativity is deployable in myriad ways, including in the service of citizenship, access, and expressive lives among city officials, as a source of belonging among artists and makers, as a guidepost for new development projects, and as a wellspring of enlightened living in the 21st century generally. In WH, ideas of creativity and commitments to an emerging Nashville identity enable otherwise competing groups to recognize common concerns and (sometimes literally) come to the same table to discuss the future of the neighborhood together.

Case and Method: Wedgewood Houston

In their 2008 report, the urban imagineering group Nashville Civic Design Center described Wedgewood-Houston as a residual space, left over after nearby districts had previously been demarcated, studied, and named. “Extensive attention has been given to adjacent neighborhoods, but the Wedgewood Houston neighborhood hasn’t achieved the same recognition,” reported the CDC (2008). The South-of-Broadway district to the North, the site of the new convention center, had been the focus of considerable planning and redevelopment. The areas to the East and West (across 8th and 4th Avenues) had been examined as low-income and/or public housing districts, threatened by gentrification pressures. The area to the South (across

Wedgewood) contains the State Fairgrounds and other low-income housing. The CDC plan drew the boundaries that include Wedgewood Avenue, 4th Ave, Chestnut Street, and 8th Avenue.⁹

This zone includes an eclectic mix of several commercial fronts along 8th Avenue, a number of industrial users, warehouses, and several blocks of modest homes. Wedgewood-Houston is also the home of Greer Stadium, which will be closed after the 2014 minor league baseball season, and whose future use remains undetermined. The park's guitar shaped scoreboard stands as an iconic symbol for those entering the district from the West, and is rumored to be torn down by its future owners, much to the dismay of local residents wanting to preserve the neighborhood's character. WH is the home of United Record Press, a building of historical importance to American music history, and one of the only remaining vinyl record presses in the U.S. WH is bordered by the Tennessee State fairgrounds to the South, a largely unused complex of buildings and lots whose future is also not yet determined, but which also stands to impact WH's future. Fort Negley, the Civil War structure that never saw a battle, represents WH's north side yard.

Most industrial uses in WH are concentrated at the North and West ends of the district. Artists, makers, and art dealers have also set up shop here in buildings vacated by former industrial tenants. The Chestnut Square building, also known as the former May Hosiery Mill, features an outmoded punch clock still attached to a wall in a hallway that now leads to several artists' studios. There are still many industrial occupants in the neighborhood as well. By day, WH is still mostly an industrial district. By night (First Saturdays), it is an art district.

Wedgewood-Houston was likely named such by the South Nashville Action People (SNAP) (now the official neighborhood association of WH) before they commissioned the

⁹ Houston Street is one block parallel to Chestnut. Why the neighborhood is not called Wedgewood-Chestnut might be attributable to the fact in its current form, WeHo can be related to SoHo.

CDC's study of the neighborhood in 2008. No artist that I spoke to that had been in the neighborhood before that time recalls referring to the neighborhood as Wedgewood-Houston. The CDC's report is also likely the first to refer to the area as an "art district" (although artists had been working there for much longer), and this report may have helped set its current physical transformations in motion (which were likely hampered by the 2008 recession).¹⁰ More recently, an old warehouse has been renovated as a private event space (ca. 2011-12). Fort Houston arrived in the spring of 2013, to much media attention (see below). In the summer of 2013, commercial galleries and a monthly First Saturday art crawl had arrived. As of April 2014, new "live/make" developments are in the planning phases, new artisan tenants have been announced, and new restaurants are on their way in. Demand has skyrocketed (the asking price for the 'not-for-sale' Chestnut square building is rumored to have increased 5 fold in the last year alone), and the area has been thoroughly mapped and photographed for big commercial brokers (by independent brokering information service firms like CoStar).

Wedgewood-Houston offers a unique case study as an emerging art district in a Southern "creative city." Nashville's built environment, for one, is drastically different than that which is found in other studies of gentrifying art districts like SoHo, where grid blocks of high rise loft buildings provided artists with ample live/work space, which was not incredibly difficult to convert to residential use. In WH, there are few such buildings; the industrial building stock is rather in the shape of multi-purpose garage/warehouses.

The report that follows is based on months of ethnographic observation and interviews conducted with artists, developers, residents, and city officials. In addition, because my previous research followed artists' career pathways in Nashville, I have also followed artists in WH since

¹⁰ The act of re-naming, labeling, and drawing boundaries around a neighborhood is a significant accomplishment that serves to give identity, belonging, and purpose to particular interest groups, often at the expense of long-time users (Kasinitz 1988).

the Fall of 2009, and so my familiarity with that group is understandably a deeper one than with other groups represented here. In addition, much of the “data” presented below comes from local media accounts of happenings in WH. Indeed, because WH is a hot neighborhood, it has been covered thoroughly in sources from *The Scene*, an alternative weekly geared toward younger (perhaps ‘creative’) audiences, to *BizJournal*, which caters to business and investment interests.

Because the neighborhood is both a communal and contested space, and because it is a small world (i.e., where most of the people that are currently active in the neighborhood know each other), some of my informants featured in this study have made clear to me that they should “watch what they say,” especially those (whom are many) whose interests lay in multiple directions, and/or those who play brokerage roles between otherwise conflicting interest groups. For this reason, I have either been careful to ask permission to use real names, or I have tried to de-identified persons from particular comments. Below, I treat artists, city officials, developers, and residents separately, as there is little overlap between these groups. In each case I begin with a vignette, before outlining a groups general concerns, and diversity among them, and in particular, their orientation to the arts and creativity as a source of negotiating belonging in WH.

Artists and Art Worlds

The Fugitive – an artist and curatorial collective – consisted of several prominent Nashville artists (20- and 30-something guys and few gals), whom in the mid-late 1990s pooled their resources to rent out the bottom floor of a two-story derelict warehouse space on Houston Street. The rent was cheap, and the building was in rough shape, seemingly untouched since its original tenant moved out decades prior; parts of the building were falling apart. Nevertheless, The Fugitive utilized whatever means they could to set up studios spaces and a gallery near the front of the building. They curated work from local and out-of-town artists, and hosted opening

parties with “lots of beer,” said one long-time member who still works in the neighborhood. Their opening parties spilled out into the street, because then, Houston Street was otherwise entirely unused at night.

A nascent art scene took shape around The Fugitive, informed by a contemporary arts discourse that to this point was not exactly common in Nashville. Their members were not represented by local galleries (which exhibited much more conservative, sellable paintings), but the Fugitive’s energy and enthusiasm radiated outside the city. Together they thrived, and the reputation of the collective became decidedly more forceful than any single artist among them. Their buzz caught the attention of 2002 Whitney Biennial curator Larry Rinder, who came to Nashville to size up their work. Unfortunately, none of these artists were selected for that Biennial, but Rinder’s visit indicated to at least a few that Nashville and The Fugitive were ‘on the map’ of the American contemporary art world.

The Fugitive also achieved some local recognition from then Nashville reporter Dave Maddox, whose 2002 *Scene* article, despite its praise, unfortunately brought the attention of the codes department, which shut the operation down: misuse of an industrial-zoned building; building itself not up to code. The eviction process was slow anyway, probably because no one else cared to use the building then; artists continued to use studio space there under the radar until at least 2009.

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Artists have come and gone from Wedgewood-Houston since. Among them, some are Nashville natives; some have set up in WH after having moved from places like Chicago; and many, including many original Fugitive members, have moved on to larger cities. The current artistic profile of WH includes: many professional artists’ studios at the Chestnut Square

building, the maker cooperative/vocational-school Fort Houston, new commercial art galleries on Hagan and Humphries Streets, the non-profit contemporary arts organization Seed Space currently housed in the Track One building, several pop-up project spaces, and a few other vanity galleries (e.g., galleries in people's homes, which likely would not exist without the First Saturday Art Crawl) scattered throughout. Many artists and musicians live and/or work in residential space in the neighborhood as well, including avant-guard, experimental musicians and major label acts.

I have suggested above that art districts like WH provide affordable space for interaction and productive exchanges among artists, which benefits the whole city. But the benefits for artists extend far beyond artistic production. In carrying on the social business of being and identifying as artists, musicians or makers among others like them, these “creatives” formulate a community and a scene, which is more socially productive than the sum of its parts. Participation within a local scene is an important part of establishing a career in the arts, but artists' interest in being part of a local scene as such is not limited to that scene alone. For visual artists in particular, careers can go much further when a local scene is visible or reputable within a larger, global contemporary art world. Maintaining a career in the visual art world is an enduring accomplishment in and of itself, but, as the case of the Fugitive demonstrates, artists in off-center cities like Nashville can cope with limited markets and arts institutions by drawing outside attention to the spaces and places where they live and work.

As actors dually embedded in local scenes and a larger, global field, visual artists' dispositions toward WH thus extend well beyond simply procuring studio space. Whatever outside attention the neighborhood and/or the local scene garners, the better the prospects for local artists in making and maintaining connections and reputations in the larger global field. A

conundrum arises when outside attention rises enough to effect demand for area real estate, and artists are caught between taking credit for a neighborhood's popularity, and doing what they can to fight for affordable housing.

Not all creative workers in WH confront the same type of social logic as visual artists. For musicians, resources for career mobility are relatively abundant within Nashville alone. Still, being in or from Nashville is no doubt a symbolic benefit for most musicians navigating the music world as well, but being in a reputable or "creative" neighborhood within Nashville might afford non-industry musicians some added benefit as well.¹¹ For the makers of WH, there appears to be a wide variety of interests and motivations. Some make high end goods for select buyers, while others appear to reap the social benefits of proximity to the leading edges of the new "creative" economy (which as we will see, is privileged by other types of actors). In each case, however, each group benefits from proximity to other creative producers; they benefit from the "creative" reputation that the neighborhood accumulates; they benefit when the city of Nashville garners outside attention as a hub of artistic or "creative" activity; and they benefit to the extent that the city of Nashville privileges and prioritizes their presence as representative of Nashville's "creative" image (e.g., Kavass 2014). As such, each also has a stake maintaining affordability in the neighborhood, while simultaneously working to draw attention, and hence (paradoxically) demand to the neighborhood.

Art Crawl: Generating Popularity

Artists need audiences, but this relationship is a peculiar one, as it is often the social characteristics of the audience that determine perceptions of the artist and the art (DiMaggio

¹¹ Just as being from New Orleans or New York affords Jazz musicians higher reputations than those in San Francisco, regardless of talent or skill (Pinhiero and Dowd 2009). For that matter, being from New York affords visual artists higher status and reputation, regardless of talent or skill (Plattner 1996; Gieryn 2008; Wolfe 1975), but place-reputations are moving targets, and are always at stake in artists' career struggles (Shaw 2014).

1982; 1987). Artists can be ambivalent towards their audiences (Becker 1965; Bourdieu 1993), and may attempt to manage them in particular ways (Shaw 2013). They may seek out the broadest audiences possible if they are aiming only to sell their work in an open market; or, as is more often the case where art markets are tenuous (e.g., off-center cities like Nashville), they may distance themselves from outsiders not versed in the special discourse of their work. The difference has to do with the type of social reward that artistic communities can collectively negotiate as being legitimate or not, namely markets success versus symbolic capital (or, money vs. reputation/legitimacy). Besides the struggle for material or symbolic rewards, artists and audiences are mediated by brokering roles; played in the case of the visual arts by art dealers and curators, and in the case of the music industry through media and PR channels (which vary tremendously in terms of their reach). In Wedgewood-Houston, many artists and makers, and some musicians too, work independent of dealers or PR professionals. But in the creative city, the relationship between artist and audience is aided and abetted by city officials, property developers, and some residents as well, who also have stakes in drawing public attention to the neighborhood as a “creative” space or “art district,” as we will see.

A clear break occurs in Wedgewood Houston with the arrival of the First Saturday Art Crawl in July of 2013. First Saturdays are monthly art-opening events that allow arts audiences to attend multiple proximate openings in the course of an evening.¹² Since First Saturdays began, development interest and real-estate speculation in WH has snowballed. Before First Saturdays, artists and curators working in studio spaces in the Chestnut Square Building and earlier at The Fugitive on Houston Street had coordinated open studios and/or independently curated openings from time to time, but these events were irregular; they did not fall on a given day of the month. Attendees of these openings were those already in the professional and friendship circles of

¹² See Shaw 2013 on the proliferation and the role of Art Crawls in the creative city.

organizing artists and curators, whom would send out email or (later) Facebook announcements for their shows. No money was expected to be exchanged at those events. The benefits of organizing and curating were instead social, symbolic, and geographic; they allowed artists to dialogue, network, exchange ideas and identities, formulate a community of local artists and other affiliates, and circulate other artists and global discourse about art from outside the city. First Saturday Art Crawls change this dynamic by giving secondary audiences a regular time and date to expect an art opening event without the prerequisite social requirements of being ‘in the know’ and/or belonging to a particular group.

First Saturday art crawls had been occurring in the downtown area around the “Fifth Avenue of the Arts” since 2006, so the decision to coordinate openings on First Saturdays in WH meant that the WH art crawls would directly compete with the already established downtown events, only 2-3 miles away. This move was strategic, although not universally admired. While the downtown events have been popular among Nashville arts audiences, they were never been universally embraced by local artists, whom might accuse audiences there of only being interested in scoring a free drink, or a “cheap date,” with no real appreciation or predilection for art (Shaw 2013). First Saturday organizers in WH felt Nashville needed an alternative to the downtown crawls. More artists lived and/or worked around WH anyway, which would have made this neighborhood a more natural location to have a regular event. The WH event thus signals a rejection of the old downtown scene, and a claim that the artists/scene in WH represents the ‘real’ Nashville art world.

The decision to bring First Saturday’s to Wedgewood Houston, however, was not exactly one that was made by artists in the neighborhood. Rather, the First Saturday events here coincide with the arrival of commercial galleries. The first commercial gallery in the neighborhood,

Zeitgeist arrived in their newly renovated building on Hagan Street in the summer of 2013 (Zeitgeist previously existed in Hillsboro Village). As a commercial gallery, Zeitgeist is in the business of advertising and selling art to a wealthier set than had regularly passed through the neighborhood to that point, and their change of location to a previously unknown industrial area would require that they do something to draw attention their way. Monthly art crawls were a proven method of generating foot traffic, as demonstrated by their success in other districts and other cities. The arrival of Zeitgeist thus represents a new kind consumer base in the neighborhood, and First Saturdays represent a new mode of consumption.

But Zeitgeist's role is a complicated one. The gallery does not merely represent an incoming commercial aspect that is incongruent with the local scene's sensibilities. Zeitgeist is subsidized by the architecture firm housed in the same space, and so making an art market is not their primary concern. Local artists frequently name Zeitgeist as the best commercial gallery in Nashville, in part because they program experimental work from both local and out-of-town artists, which is not always expected to sell. In fact, Zeitgeist's director, Lane York, has a long history in the neighborhood; he was a part of The Fugitive collective 1990s (see below), and is well admired within Nashville's art community at large.

Moreover, the events are not only beneficial to commercial galleries, and Zeitgeist was not alone in planning and coordinating the event. When the idea was sprung, there were already a number of other willing participants, including: a nascent project space at 444 Humphries, a few open studios in the Chestnut Square building, the newly publicized Fort Houston, and a willing landlord at the new Track 1 building who allowed some local artists to program events and thus draw attention to his (in-the-process-of-being-renovated) space. In fact, while regular art crawls were non-existent to that point, other artists had planned one-off art crawl events in an effort to

unite artists and draw attention to the neighborhood. Since the arrival of First Saturdays, new commercial galleries have set up and new project spaces have opened.

On First Saturdays, arts patrons can number upwards of 1000 people between all the venues. These include: artists, curators, and those that had circulated through the neighborhood for art events before; well-dressed art collectors; select residents in the immediate area; and a bevy of accomplices blurring these categories. At the David Lusk gallery one will find a well-dressed slightly older ‘clientele’ drinking wine. At the Packing Plant across the street – a pop-up project space that will share space with a future pub – one will find a younger set that looks like an art school campus, hanging outside drinking Pabst. At Fort Houston, a very similar crowd gathers around a keg of doesn’t-matter-what. The 444 Humphries project space manages to keep contemporary art real without having a regular curator, and the Julia Martin Gallery is rumored to be the best place to spot local celebrities. Zeitgeist is the one place that everyone goes. Crowds spill out of venue doors onto sidewalks and mosey from place to place.

Displacement Anxiety

Artists and other creative workers in WH vary in their perceptions and opinions of the popularity that the neighborhood has achieved, however. Many proclaim happiness about the attention, and some have worked closely with developers to better position themselves within the local scene. Others are ambivalent. They enjoy being part of a scene that is more vibrant than ever, but lament the possibility that they might not be able to continue to afford their studio space. Some rally against the specter of wholesale displacement, even if their rents are not (yet) increasing.

These fears are understandable, however. One artist who was previously evicted from a studio building 10 years ago (though not for rising rents) has witnessed property owners and

developers stake claims and make maneuvers in the district, especially since First Saturdays began. He asks, “Where will we, “the Creatives” go next?” He perceives that these propertied interests hold all the cards, and may do whatever they want (and with whom they want) in the neighborhood. Another artist watched a very similar thing happen in another city to a former “art district” where artists no longer live. This same artist tells a story about another Nashville development project Rolling Mill Hill in which the developer told what he thought were sympathetic listeners at a public meeting that, “Because artists like to move around a lot, we can make our building affordable for artists for a couple years so they can make it cool, and then raise the prices for those that can afford it.” This story might sound fantastic, but it is corroborated by another artist attending the same meeting, and this is exactly the process described by Zukin (1982) as the Artistic Mode of Production. For these artists, WH represents a familiar narrative: when a district gets public attention, when it is labeled an “art district,” end times are near.

If their fears are understandable, however, they are not always entirely accurate. Many dislocation stories could not be verified. One involves the landlord of an event space in the neighborhood agitating city officials to have neighboring artists kicked out so that he could make a move on the vacant building. But that same landlord has since come out as a supporter of artists because he knows that their presence also generates demand and thus value for his own building as well. The Chestnut Square building, where many artists currently rent studio space, has been the subject of particular anxiety. Said one artist about her studio, “When this building gets sold, it’s all over... it’s just a matter of time.” Regardless, that building owner, who is notoriously secretive, has publicly announced that the building is not for sale. Another rumor goes that one local major-label recording artist has bought the same building.

That no artists have been displaced by rising rents or change of building ownership yet does not mean that it will not happen, however. Still, more may be said of artists' apparent anxieties about their situation. Similar to the pattern in which racial or ethnic minority identities are keyed by gentrification pressures in other neighborhoods (Kasinitz 1988), artistic and "creative" identities can become a source of neighborhood belonging and a political weapon as well; they allow artists to organize around common interests and issues, even if artists are complicit in generating the demand that threatens affordability. "We were here first!" said one artist who recently brokered a deal between a developer and an art dealer.

Such sentiments are far from ironic. They represent artists' contradictory social and economic position in the neighborhood. In the "creative city" in particular, however, these sentiments also represent artists' political position, which appears to be much more privileged than in pre-"creative city" iterations of arts enclaves elsewhere. Here, artists are prized agents not only of neighborhood development trends, but of Nashville's emerging brand as well.

Creative City Officials

In June of 2014, Metro Nashville Arts Commission chair Jennifer Cole gave an impassioned talk at the annual Americans for the Arts Convention, which was hosted in Nashville this year, which meant that Cole also played a central organizing role. "I don't care about a cultural plan!" she pronounced, "I want arts and culture to be a priority for the whole city so that the onus doesn't fall totally on me and my staff." The audience, 150-or-so arts policy professionals from other cities (San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Birmingham, Seattle, etc.) erupted in applause. Cole's talk was part of a session called, "What Does it Mean to Shift From Cultural Plan to Creative Cities?", which produced a lively discussion about how to

get other government offices to partner in implementing arts agendas, what strategies worked, and what pitfalls to avoid.

“What do arts plans actually do?” Chicago’s Michelle Boone chimed in, “They don’t generate new ideas [anymore]... but they can unite city offices around common goals... they are a platform that brings different parties to the table.”

“Not to say that planning is dead,” added Cole, “but nobody cares until you institute behavior change. Throw the plan out and have a conversation that brings everybody to the table.” Indeed, this session likely succeeded more in uniting arts policy leaders around the country under a common mantra than in developing specific strategies for action. The audience learned, for example, that not all cities share the same resources or the readiness to pursue arts and culture agendas at the same pace, but each could go back to their respective cities with renewed purpose, to at least “create” a wider creativity dialogue locally.

...

Creative city governance has picked up in Wedgewood Houston as the district has been targeted as a “creative” hot spot. Current local government offices that hold stake or have played a role in the neighborhood’s redevelopment include the Metro Nashville Arts Commission, the Metro Planning Commission, and the new Office of Innovation.

In fashionable theoretical models, city officials bend to the interests of powerful stakeholders (e.g., development capital), or they are seen as explicitly designed to facilitate development interests as co-conspirators of an urban “growth machine” (Logan and Molotch 1987). Either way, pro-development governance holds sway over the interests of less powerful residents and stakeholders. If left unchecked, such relationships would make gentrification and displacement logical outcomes. In WH, however, creative city discourse adds nuance to this

picture. Here, the city of Nashville appears genuinely invested in allowing and sustaining an artistic and creative space, and not merely for the sake of generating demand. Development is welcome in WH, but city resources have been deployed to favor “creative” uses and users. Creative city officials have stepped in to save Fort Houston from a zoning “kerfuffle” (see Maloney 2013) that would have forced them out of their building, and they are now in the process of drafting new permanent zoning amendments to protect “creatives” against future similar entanglements. The city has also explicitly made sustainability here a public issue, given mounting gentrification pressures.

Creative Zoning Interventions

In spring of 2013, the Metro Arts Commission advocated to get the zoning department to rescue the newly established Fort Houston over a zoning restriction that involved the group’s particular use of their building. The codes department’s rather creative solution was to classify the organization a “vocational school,” which meant that, in addition to charging membership fees for co-operative use of their woodworking, screen printing, motorcycle repair, and various other creative/craft shop equipment, Fort Houston would also institute a number of community classes as well. But according to city regulations, the new designation would also require paved parking space, which would in turn require bringing a rumored-to-be-onerous landlord to the table and a public hearing before the Zoning Appeals board.

“They said they’d never seen so many people show up to a zoning hearing,” Ryan Schemmel told me, one of the entrepreneurs behind Fort Houston. Imagine a cast of Fort Houston regulars – 20 and 30-something guys (and a few ladies) in jeans and tee shirts – ready to testify alongside “creativity” advocates from Metro and the development community. The event might have evoked for some another round of “Art vs. The Man in a battle for the city’s soul,”

but that things were resolved smoothly instead revealed that everyone seemed to be on the same page: “As the city grows, and works to encourage its creative class, there will be more of these irregular land uses popping up,” wrote *Scene* reporter Sean Maloney (2013).

“I think just really [the future is] having the neighborhood develop as a neighborhood for working artists,’ says developer Scott Chambers... It’s exciting that Planning and Zoning are behind the kinds of changes that might happen or be needed, because they can take a long time if there isn’t support.” [ibid]

Nevertheless, the zoning intervention here effectively represents the difference between New Nashville and Old. Just ten years earlier, one block away, The Fugitive was closed by city officials for similar zoning infractions; well before “creativity” (in its current form) was a part of the city’s soul at all. That the event coincided with the advent of (and that Fort Houston became a regular stop during) First Saturday Art Crawls has solidified WH’s identity as an arts district. Moreover, the event likely prompted other investors to note that the city is more than willing to reward creative uses and users in questions of irregular land use (see developers, below). Indeed, creativity is a multivalent social property. It is: a) what some artists do, b) what some young entrepreneurs do, c) an end-goal for city officials, d) a discourse around which all parties can rally to recognize common interests (i.e., a cultural anchor), e) a neighborhood identity, and f) a (as we will see) target for future developers.

Innovative Policy Makers

“[The city] almost botched it,” Nashville Office of Innovation co-chair Yiawey Yeh told me, overlooking Downtown, the Cumberland River, and the Rolling Mill Hills development in the foreground outside the window of Crema, as I was sipping my 8 ounce (w/room) Americano, “they almost lost Fort Houston.” Yeh went on to describe how, given the paper-heavy bureaucracy of inherited local government, the right decision makers were slow to come to the

table to act to keep Fort Houston. Yeh is the former Mayor of Palo Alto who gave up his seat at the heart of the “creative class” epicenter in Silicon Valley¹³ to start again in Nashville. A product of forward thinking on the Mayor’s part (similar ‘Offices of Innovation’ are no more than seven years old in the U.S.), Nashville’s OI was instituted as a branch of the Mayor’s Office in 2013, shortly after Fort Houston stood before the city. The OI appears to be an ideal position for the city to welcome Yeh’s leadership, and creative expertise.

Although it was before his time, the Fort Houston case represents Yeh’s agenda. “Zoning is bureaucratic legalese,” Yeh told me, “I love local government... My portfolio [at OI] includes Entrepreneurship, Tech, and the Creative Class.” Yeh envisions a Nashville government that might one day resemble an open-source, “creative” think tank, where innovative solutions to problems like the one Fort Houston encountered can be met pro-actively and efficiently; not a series of sterile buildings where workers push paper through cubicle walls; more like the campus of Google (which by the way, has followed Yeh to set up in Nashville). Currently, Yeh is working with the Metro Planning Department, Zoning Commission, and Arts Commission to draft what he calls a “zoning text amendment for the creative class,” which would help future Fort Houston’s (“light artisan manufacturing”) – as well as any other savvy business owners or developer for that matter – bypass similar zoning entanglements.

Indeed, Nashville policies that favor “creative” uses and users will likely increase as Nashville government in Nashville evolves in the direction of creativity advocates. But while the Office of Innovation appears to advance a vision of creativity that falls on the side of economic development, the Metro Arts Commission pursues a different creative city vision.

¹³ Silicon Valley is a primary Creative Class case for Richard Florida (2002) for its concentrated “Tech” industry (tech being one of his three main creative class ingredients (albiet for curious theoretical reasons) alongside “tolerance” and “talent”), although his data picks up the trend in San Francisco.

“Framing [creativity’s] importance by only talking about one touch point [development] does a disservice to the role of arts and artists,” Jennifer Cole told me, “Art and arts policy leaders must stop framing their work in an economic only context, it simply doesn’t tell the story of why people create and why we should support that calling.”

Cole took the helm of the Arts Commission in 2010, four years before addressing her peers at the Americans for the Arts convention. In this time Cole has re-organized her office and its mission from one that passively administered local grants and public art projects, to one that actively facilitates a creative life for all of its citizens. This is a different view of the creative city than the one that animates “creative class” debates. Cole describes her vision instead with terms like “livability,” and “emotional intelligence;” it is one that separates art and culture from class terminology altogether, and makes arts participation and access a basic right. From this point of view, creative cities still need creative spaces, however, and so the Arts Commission has taken much interest in the future of Wedgewood-Houston.

“I’m very interested to see how [WH] evolves, because unlike some of the other ‘creative’ neighborhoods [in Nashville], WH doesn’t have housing or a clear retail structure,” says Cole. This presents some problems. For the arts and creativity to be accessible, the neighborhoods they exist within have to be accessible as well. Creative cities must have creative neighborhoods from this perspective, which must be multi-functional, mixed-use, democratic spaces. For this reason, Cole supports housing and retail development in Wedgewood-Houston, even though her vision of the creative city lands far beyond economic development concerns. The Arts Commission’s role in the neighborhood has largely been as a mediator and advocate for all interested parties. They have worked with artists, art dealers, developers, and residents,

facilitating conversations and solutions to problems like the one Fort Houston faced. But against the spectre of rising rents, Cole's vision of a democratic creative city blurs far-sighted.

"This is the perfect question," Cole said, when asked whether or not MNAC is prepared to deal with mounting gentrification pressures. Besides being poised for arts-policy leadership in WH, Cole envisions a city where every neighborhood is a "creative" one, whereby rampant development are not isolated in particular pockets, thereby diluting demand and rent pressures. That future remains to be seen, however. While other Nashville districts Five Points, 12th South, and the Gulch have witnessed gentrification around the image of "arts and culture," and/or "creative class," Wedgewood-Houston might count as the first under the watch of Jennifer Cole, Yiaway Yeh, and Nashville's new commitments to a sustainable "creative city."

Despite their diversity of perspectives (that emphasize economic/creative-class development vs. arts and cultural participation) New Nashville policy leaders are equally committed to "creativity." As an adaptable and enabling policy discourse and cultural anchor, commitments to an emerging creative city provide both a platform to advance their agendas. Interestingly, both Cole and Yeh describe their influence within local government as conduits, making (creating) connections and opportunities within government that serve to solve problems and, perhaps more importantly, unite actors around the promise of "creativity." While Markusen and Gadwa (2010) have pointed out that cultural/arts/creativity led planning is a normless, goalless discourse that allows different parties to enact disparate interests, it is also an anchor that unite different interests around common stakes and rewards.

Developers, Brokers, and Owners

Wedgewood-Houston's built environment, retail, housing, and artisan-use profiles are all soon to accumulate. Among the many newcomers, Core Development – the group behind several

high density residential and mixed-use projects in other Nashville neighborhoods (e.g., Downtown, Germantown) – has recently been approved a Specific Use Plan (SP) to build a complex of structures that include one six-floor “live/make” residential building, and retail, artisan, and other ‘creative’ production facilities on a lot that currently serves as a parking space for tractor trailers. As in the case of Fort Houston, much of the area where the arts are thriving in WH currently is zoned industrial, reflecting the economic mode of a previous era, which is incongruent with trending uses. And like Fort Houston, and Core’s development plans rest on an industrial-zoned parcel, and their SP required cooperation from the public as well as the Metro zoning department.

“The SP is a customized plan, and is the result of a conversation between Planning Commission, developer, and in our case, neighbors,” Andrew Beard, the lead on the project, told me. Beard shares the ideas that creative city officials also relayed (above), that industrial zoning is a product of an outmoded economy, which obstructs current “creative” trends. In Beard’s words, “The SP pioneers a plan that accommodates the needs of artists, but also mixed uses; including retail,” a mix of uses that Beard feels is more up to date with the contemporary creative city, not the industrial city that the old zoning accommodates.

Core began the process of building in WH by pitching the idea to residents at the monthly meetings of the South Nashville Action People (SNAP) in the late fall of 2013. Beard knew that new development could be a source of tension in the neighborhood, and so he sought resident input and approval before bringing their new SP to the Metro Planning Department.

“Some concern has bubbled up,” Beard told me, “but there has been no groundswell of opposition.” Concern from older residents has to do with the effect of new development on property taxes. One local artist attended these SNAP meetings as well, and voiced her own fear

that artists might get priced out if demand gets too high. Despite their concerns however, Beard reports that SNAP has been appreciative of Core's efforts to initiate dialogue with residents and seek their approval, which for all intents and purposes has been achieved (though SNAP, like many neighborhood associations in gentrifying areas, is not representative of the neighborhood's demographic diversity). Beard reports that even though some artists have voiced concern, they still "understand the constraints" that developers like Core are working within. One artist in particular has found avenues to voice concerns alongside, not against, Core's efforts to build in the neighborhood. Indeed, all parties appear to be on board with WH's creative identity.

Core's interest in WH is not to maximize their bottom line. Beard identifies as an 'urbanist.' In his terms: "I am a developer with an urban planning background, so I am concerned with how cities work and developing responsibly..." Indeed, Core's mixed-use developments in other Nashville neighborhoods are part of a late movement to counter the sprawl that typified earlier Nashville developer strategies. And like many artists, city officials, and many residents, Beard is also concerned about long term problems associated with rising rents and property taxes. But against these unfortunate effects of development and increased attention in the neighborhood, which Beard says are "inevitable," he believes that sustainability is possible and is a goal worth working toward. Sustainability from his perspective requires not just affordable housing policies, but social, environmental, and economic development and those three aspects involve a set of constraints for all parties involved. Beard asks, "Is there a more participatory way" to go about things that merely generate demand and then seek to capitalize. "I believe it is an economic advantage to retain [current] tenants and operators," says Beard. Indeed, Core's development is staked on WH's current artistic and creative identity.

“It is the Fort Houston’s of the world that are contributing to Nashville’s visibility on the national level,” says Beard. On this national level, Beard benefits by working to sustain a visible art district. The ability to do so might afford Beard many social benefits not ordinarily considered by political-economic theories that articulate developers as only looking out for their bottom line. For one, it allows Beard to be a participatory member of a local community (i.e., in organizing SNAP, artists, and city officials to work toward “creative” solutions to zoning and planning regulations). The sustainability orientation might also offer some symbolic credit in a restricted field of professional developers (whereby a sustainable art district might attract much attention from “creativity” advocates everywhere, in contrast to, for example, a suburban strip mall that is less risky).¹⁴ Finally, given that the visibility of Nashville itself is clearly on the table here, the project may give Beard intrinsic benefits related to place-identity in an increasingly placeless world, as well as the satisfaction of being an integral producer of such an identity.¹⁵

...

Property investments and development interests have increased rapidly in WH since the summer of 2013, around the time First Saturday Art Crawls began and the Fort Houston issue was publicized and resolved. Core and Beard do not represent all developers in the WH, however, although commitments to community and creativity are a common refrain among those that have made themselves visible. In addition, some evidence suggests that these actors construct a sense of belonging in the neighborhood against large-scale, impersonal developers. I

¹⁴ See Bourdieu (1977; 1993). Bourdieu’s “field” theory of social action explains that actors are united by common sets of stakes and rewards, which (re)produce hierarchies within fields, but those stakes and rewards are always being contested as well. I am suggesting here that, like the “field of cultural production,” a field of development professionals might be divided between those oriented to winning the largest market share versus those oriented to attracting the most peer recognition. Indeed, in our conversation Beard pointed me toward several other artist live/work places in other parts of the world that serve as role-models to him, or that have gotten some attention in the development/planning literature, apparently as developments of similar kind that might achieve some sustainability.

¹⁵ For discussion of place identity as a source of security (or “ontological mooring”) in an increasingly ephemeral, “postmodern” world, see Harvey 1991; Lippard 1997; Kwon 2002.

include in this group a range of developers, brokers, and business and building owners, whom are united by their position in the neighborhood vis-à-vis property and investments, but whom do not make up a homogenous interest group.

Local media outlets have been covering developments in WH for the last year. News sources emphasize developers' and business owners' perspectives (rather than artists, city officials, and/or residents), which make their particular perspectives publicly accessible, and not at all contentious, thus making local news media an excellent source to examine the discourse that investors evoke when staking belonging in the neighborhood as the dominant one. From these perspectives, the neighborhood is described as a "grassroots community," and as a "creative space."

"It's really been a grass-roots kind of a process as compared to a major redevelopment," said architect Manuel Zeitlin, who moved his offices and his wife's art gallery to a building in the neighborhood a year ago. [Ward, May 2014, *The Tennessean*]

Zeitlin's own architecture firm rehabbed the current, former-industrial building (that they now occupy) for developer Scott Chambers, who is poised to add new buildings and tenants on his lot on Hagan Street. I have already described Zeitgeist Gallery as a major catalyst in instituting the WH Art Crawl, and the Art Crawl as one event that moved WH past a "creative" tipping point.

"The neighborhood is a big part for us... We believe that Wedgewood-Houston is really primed," said [Bruce] Boeko. "It just felt the right place to put a creative business like a craft distillery," Boeko said. [Boyer, April 2014, *BizJournal*]

Boeko is the owner of Nashville Distillery, slated to move into a 3,900 square foot building on Chambers' property in late summer of 2014.

For Darek Bell, picking the Wedgewood-Houston neighborhood to expand his growing Corsair Distillery was a no-brainer. "I have people ask me all the time, 'What's the next Gulch?'" Bell said. "Wedgewood-Houston has a lot of character. It's very industrial. There's a lot of artists, there's a lot of makers, there's a lot of

art galleries going in. It has all the things going for it where it can be a great neighborhood. (It) reminds us of where Germantown was 10 or 15 years ago. [Ward, May 2014, *The Tennessean*]

Corsair's arrival in Chamber's future development, alongside the new Nashville Distillery, which is slated to move into Core's new building, means that there will be two distilleries in the neighborhood, which "creativity" discourse and zoning amendments are plenty flexible to include, alongside artists and makers. But if business owners like Bell are looking for the next Gulch or the next Germantown, then they are also looking for a gentrifying neighborhood that will not retain its current artists and makers.

[Scott] Lewis, who has owned the building at 1211 Fourth Ave. S. since 2000, intends for any development of [his old industrial building] space to complement the surrounding community of artists and makers... "I would like to see the area stay [as is] with all the creative folks around and I want to provide space for them to show," Lewis said." [Boyer 2/11/2014 *BizJournal*]

Indeed, Lewis has succeed in drawing attention to his "Track 1" development – an old industrial garage/warehouse building that is currently being renovated and partitioned to house miscellaneous project spaces, offices, and other "creative" uses (similar to Cummins Station or Marathon Village) – by allowing artists to program events and throw Art Crawl after-parties. [Lewis himself may or may not have supplied much of the alcohol during these parties.] The renovations have been slow to develop, but Lewis has already added long-time WH contemporary arts non-profit Seed Space. The new location for Seed Space, which was previously housed in a building that director Adrienne Outlaw did not want to bring public attention to, appears beneficial for Lewis, who is more than happy to identify his building with art and creativity. Whether this relationship will last is another question, however, as starting rents for the new space are rumored to be well beyond what artists renting studio space in the neighborhood currently pay. Given that Seed Space is a non-profit, grant-funded organization,

the current arrangement will likely only last if Seed Space's tenancy is subsidized (which appears within Track 1's interest).

[Scott] Chambers also has preliminary plans for an 8,000-square-foot building immediately to the north of the existing building at 516 Hagan occupied by Zeitlin, Zeitgeist gallery and David Lusk Gallery. "It's an exciting area because of the artistic, creative population that's been there for a long time," Chambers said. "There's some interesting old industrial buildings that provide a ... good starting point for redevelopment." [Ward, May 2014, *The Tennessean*]

As a developer, building anew alongside the adaptive re-use of old industrial buildings might make for interesting work in and of itself, but Chambers and Lewis (above) and Beard (above) also construct a sense of belonging in the neighborhood by making clear alignments with artists and "creatives."

This small group of local developers does not represent all propertied interests in WH, however, but they have been the most publicly visible, their projects being the subjects of reports by *BizJournal* and *The Tennessean*, and their names were the most frequently mentioned by local artists, residents, and city officials as I inquired into the neighborhood. As early agents in a dynamic space, they are able to align their interests in the same terms that city officials, artists, and some residents do. Their commitments to a "creative community" also allow them construct boundaries around much larger, impersonal investment developers.

"Price points are going up rapidly. Things are escalating rapidly," Beard told me. His timeline in the neighborhood begins with the rehabilitation of the building formerly occupied by The Fugitive, now an event space called Houston Station (one block away from Fort Houston), "but demand for brokers and developers has increased profoundly, only very recently," Beard says. He feels fortunate to have begun his project when he did.

Beaird is wary of the other end of the real-estate spectrum. “[They] are a different animal entirely...” he explains about large firms like [Prudential or Caldwell] that can hold properties and plans in multiple cities and suburbs. Firms like these work in an impersonal industry that maximize profit and minimize risk in a bureaucratic manner. Within this industry are information service firms like CoStar, which collect property data, take pictures, and sell this data to development firms in cities across the U.S., making it possible for developers to speculate on property values in a particular district without ever setting foot there. For firms like these, “art districts” are investment opportunities, “... but they’re not interested in sustaining the arts identity in the district,” says Beaird. Rumors circulate that another (suburban) developer, which is responsible for the planned demolition of an historic RCA studio on Music Row, is also interested in buying in WH.

Collectively, local development efforts in WH have thus far bumped up the arts profile of the neighborhood, adding commercial galleries, giving long-time projects sleek new spaces, and (possibly) adding artist housing. But the toll that increasing speculation and demand might exact on artists in the near future is not a problem that concerns developers directly. Whether these propertied interests will remain committed to current artistic uses and users as gentrification pressures mount remains a question. But what is clear here is that in the case of local developers, creativity discourse provides a means of negotiating belonging in the neighborhood. It is a cultural anchor that relates them to artists’ and makers’ work, the interests of city officials, and select residents as well.

Residents

Lauren and Jon got married in the street outside their old (1920s) house in the neighborhood because, said Lauren, “I always wanted to be able to look out my window and say,

‘hey that’s where I got married.’” Jon had bought the house in 2004, and officially sold it to Lauren around the time they hitched in 2010. The house is unique for WH, one of few that sit among the many industrial warehouses and garage buildings on the North side of the district near Chestnut and Hagan Streets.

In their decade of owning, the house has been gutted, reassembled with materials Jon found himself scavenging the city. They built outward to the edge of their lot adjacent to an industrial printing service, and they built upward, adding a small theatre above what was once the house’s rooftop. From the deck that now sits on top of the house, one has a partial view of the Chestnut Square and Fort Houston Buildings in one direction, the backside of the guitar-shaped scoreboard at the ballpark in another direction, and the newly renovated building the houses Zeitgeist and David Lusk galleries in another.

Crime was rampant when they moved into the neighborhood. One time, the original doors of their house were stolen right off their hinges. Lauren once chased a group of teenagers down the street with a knife after one of them threatened to kill Jon in his front yard. “I work with kids, so I’m not scared of them,” explained Lauren.

They renovated without regard to building restrictions or zoning codes. The area seemed neglected by the city anyway, so they made DIY improvements in any way they saw fit. But they rubbed against the city eventually. The city issued a Stop Work permit, when early in those years, the flooring was completely torn out of the house, and Jon hosted punk rock shows on the dirt. Later, when their add-ons began to crowd the printer next door, they discovered that their neighbor had been complaining to the city, trying to force an eviction and sale of the house so it could be razed. Over time, they learned how to interact with and navigate the city’s building

restrictions. The city has, in turn, become an ally in their efforts, realizing the value of Lauren and Jon's sweat equity extends well beyond the comfort of their own living arrangements.

"I think of us as third-generation pioneers," Lauren tells me, making rather self-conscious use of the civilizing/frontier ideology that some scholars have used to characterize early gentrifiers' efforts. Lauren is highly educated, and she is quite familiar with critical gentrification scholarship. Still, she takes pride in her vision for her home and her neighborhood. But she recognizes that there were others before her. She references [Bob] ("first generation"), the old man down the street who bought his home decades before she did, when the district was known as a haven for the homeless, prostitution, and drug deals. But while Lauren positions herself somewhere in the middle of a long line of individuals taking a risk on their choice of residence, her timing coincides with a decisive break. Lauren and Jon moved in after The Fugitive had been evicted, but before the neighborhood was named an "arts district," and just before the city had taken an active stance in the neighborhood. Lauren and Jon represent the beginning of a particular new wave of homeowners that have also taken an active role in the neighborhood and community; they participate in neighborhood association (SNAP) activities, and participate in and have helped to catalyze First Saturday Art Crawls in at least two ways.

During the First Saturday that I interviewed Lauren, Lauren and Jon were projecting the film *Metropolis* on the side of their house. In recent years, Jon has acquired an old packing plant on their same street, which now houses a pop-up art gallery, and which he intends convert to a pub/restaurant and office space. Lauren and Jon have also convinced other friends to buy in, and/or operate other art spaces in the neighborhood.

"The 'arts' aspects of the neighborhood just sprung up overnight," Lauren tells me. While artists have occupied buildings and hosted events in the neighborhood since at least the 1990s,

Lauren's comment indicates that these were not visible until very recently. Lauren and Jon did not do anything art-wise in the neighborhood (besides the punk shows in Jon's house) until the advent of the Art Crawl in July of 2013. Now, participating in the Art Crawl gives them a means of connecting and belonging in their neighborhood. It also gives them a way to express their version of what kind of "art district" they want in the neighborhood, which, again, became highly visible when Zeitgeist, and later David Lusk galleries moved in.

"I don't *dislike* the commercial galleries," Lauren tells me. "I actually appreciate those spaces, but I'd like the neighborhood to be more than just for the middle class. I'd like to see more affordable housing and a lot more diversity."

Divided over Diversity

Residents in WH are among the many groups responsible for the shift in the district's popularity and creative identity, which Lauren sees as a trend that could potentially make things unaffordable and too homogeneous for her tastes.

Lauren would be mistaken that the neighborhood is not currently socioeconomically and racially/ethnically diverse, however. According to American Community Survey estimates (2006-2010), there are just over 2000 households in census tract 161 – about 75 percent of which is within the Wedgewood-Houston area. Among residents in WH, [65 percent] were black/African-American and [less than 30 percent] were white. Meanwhile, the vacancy rate has declined, and housing prices have gone up. On the other hand, Lauren might be right to suggest that this diversity is simply not visible to her. The population that frequents art events and SNAP meetings is predominantly white.

Much like the discursive properties of "creativity" that I am emphasizing here, "diversity" is also a "powerful and plastic symbol" that can be used differently by different

interest groups to stake out belonging in a gentrifying spaces, but often ends up downplaying actual racial/ethnic disparities (Berrey 2004). Further, prior research reveals a similar dynamic regarding arts-development and race relations in other gentrifying neighborhoods. As a symbolic system (or here as a “cultural anchor”) arts/creativity-led development can have racially differentiating effects, rendering minority groups invisible and/or compromising their sense of belonging in the neighborhood (Deutsch and Rose 1984; Shaw and Sullivan 2011), regardless of current residents’ preferences to live in a diverse neighborhood.

South Nashville Action People

The South Nashville Action People is an organization that was developed out of a Community Block Grant in the late 1970s. According to Ward (2014), the initial impetus of the group was to drive a nearby tavern out of business. Its existence has been maintained through the decades as a vehicle to organize community concerns regarding crime, and who or what kind of business may set up in the neighborhood. Day to day concerns of SNAP include: Cleaning up a nearby creek; Fixing someone’s broken porch; and delivering children toys at Christmas. Its board has evolved over the years, but now is made up mostly of new, young, educated residents, many of whom are involved in the arts in the neighborhood.

The mission and logic of SNAP has likely evolved as participating residents and businesses have evolved. As indicated on its website, SNAP currently serves business and resident interests of Wedgewood-Houston, but while SNAP has been in existence since the late 1970s, WeHo has been named as such only since 2008. Now, rather than driving nuisances out of the neighborhood, SNAP has been instrumental in “guiding the neighborhood’s growth” (Ward 2014). SNAP also commissioned the Civic Design Center’s Wedgewood-Houston neighborhood study (2008), which has likely done much to instigate change. The name

Wedgewood-Houston itself likely emerged within SNAP, as resident came to self-conscious understanding of the boundaries that delimit the area that contains their political concerns.

SNAP is also an example of what Japonica Brown-Saracino (2004) would call a “social preservationist” organization. Although many of the primary actors involved in SNAP (i.e., its board) are young, educated, white, and homeowners, SNAP participants (including Lauren, above), have been very vocal about preserving the neighborhood’s identity which includes preserving its affordability, and its arts/creative identity, even while they are complicit in encouraging new development and attracting public attention. Recently, for example, SNAP has also organized a separate task force to explore prospects for affordable housing amidst gentrification pressures, a solution that came out of meetings with local developers.

Finally, a nascent arts association has also grown out of the efforts of SNAP participants to promote the neighborhood’s identity as an arts district. Their interests include building a promotional website for the neighborhood, bringing on sponsors, having shuttles transport art crawlers between WH and the downtown event, which takes place on the same night, and getting food trucks to come to the neighborhood during the art crawl. In a curious twist, the arts association has also served as mechanism to enlist art workers to make up the SNAP task force to explore prospects for affordability.

Whether or not the arts-identity efforts will help to drive up demand and rents despite their interest in affordability remains to be seen. What I hope I have accomplished in this paper is to distribute the burden of that responsibility beyond artists themselves. If the neighborhood is sustainable as an art/creative district, then it cannot also become “the next Germantown” or “the next Gulch” at the same time. While there is diversity among artists, developers, business owners, city officials, and residents, each of these groups appear highly invested in advancing

the neighborhood's arts/creative identity. Such investments are tantamount to attracting attention to the neighborhood, which in turn means driving up demand, which is also threatening to the creative identity that the neighborhood and the city currently enjoy.

Conclusion

I have argued here that the discourse that surrounds the term “creativity” is itself highly generative, both socially and spatially. Criticisms of the creativity paradigm (I have cited my own work among these) have charged that: the creative class concept is elitist; that “creativity” is mere discourse, a “magic bullet” that can always hit a moving target (Raitu 2013); that creativity wrongly characterizes the contemporary U.S. economy (Markusen 2006); that most cities simply do not have the resources to carry out responsible arts-led development (Macgillis 2009); that symbolic and political boundaries between artist and ostensibly “creative” audiences appears structurally durable anyway (Markusen 2006; Shaw 2014); and that arts/creativity led urban development schemes tend to benefit developers and middle class residents at the expense of less powerful stakeholders (Shaw and Sullivan 2011). But I have shown here that “creativity” has also prevailed as a powerful cultural anchor, despite of these criticisms, and perhaps because of the “cultural power” (see Griswold 1987) contained within the term to allow (or charm) otherwise contending parties to recognize shared interests.

Now I will concede that despite this nuance, the many criticisms listed above are yet to be disproven in Wedgewood-Houston. Like “diversity” as a discourse and a common language among different interest groups in other gentrifying neighborhoods, “creativity” discourse can also obscure inequalities among the many parties guided by its mantra. Developers, brokers, and property owners, for example, stand to benefit the most if and when prices go up. City officials, despite the diversity of creative visions among them, still define their interests in terms beneficial

to developers as well, as “urban growth machine” perspectives would suggest. Young homeowners will likewise benefit as demand increases. Artists and other “creatives” might still feel the squeeze of rapidly escalating rents.

Understanding the city as an assemblage does not require that we jettison perspectives that emphasize larger economic forces, or the privileged positions of powerful stakeholders. It does mean taking seriously the unique logics and actions of a variety of actors and interest groups (e.g., not just developers and urban “elites”). While artists, residents, city officials, and development and real-estate professionals are each committed to “creativity” and an emerging Nashville identity, and while each have WH (in this case) as a common site to converge, each are also motivated by a unique field of possibilities and interests – different opportunities for social, symbolic, and financial stakes and rewards. The promise of assemblage thinking, however, and what I hope to have accomplished in this paper, is to emphasize unity among contending parts, and conflict where common narratives also prevail.

I end with one final tension. While this report offers prospects for rethinking the “creative city” as a cultural anchor, despite the gentrification pressures that it tends to generate, this report also focuses on the privileged sets of actors in Wedgewood Houston at the expense of other, marginal voices. Particularly, omitted from this equation are long-time industrial users of the space, and long-time residents, especially poor and racial-ethnic minorities, who in fact make up the majority of residents and workers in WH, but whose political concerns and opportunities to voice them fall outside of “creativity” discourse and the dominant organizations power and the dominant channels of political process. In fact, while “affordability” has been a common concern among those advocating for the “creative city,” affordability concerns in WH are almost always issued as an interest of artists and creatives, not long-time residents or industrial users. Indeed,

while artists and “creatives” are cast as potential victims of “creative” development, their position is powerful to those that continue to be marginalized by the “creative city.”

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