

Kathryn Foote

Instructor: Jean von Barga

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Location, Location, Location

An Appropriate Location for a Community Art Center

A community art center is a place where community members can come together strengthening ties and friendships. It is a learning environment, focused on art education and expression. The presence of a facility of this type can be the center of a neighborhood and community, both strengthening and enriching the life of a place. The most ideal location for a facility of this type would be in a community that is diverse economically, ethnically, and generationally, but that does not have a place specifically for community members to interact. It would be in a community that is not served by the major downtown amenities of cities near by, perhaps the distance is far or the route onerous. In order to be successful, this type of amenity would need to be centered in the community, allowing easy access for all residents and visitors. There needs to be an active street life with a variety of businesses and shoppers as well as many residences in close proximity, ensuring that the center has activity at all hours. A successful location for a community art center coupled with workforce housing is in the Lents neighborhood in Southeast Portland, Oregon near the intersection of SE 92nd Ave. and SE Foster Rd.

Lents is one of these communities that are not served by the amenities of the downtown area of the metropolitan area it is a part of. Lents is a neighborhood approximately seven miles southeast of downtown Portland, it is considered part of the City of Portland, but is far enough from the main hub that it feels more like a separate town. In 1995, Lents was designated as a town center on the Metro 2040 Plan. In 1998, Lents was designated an Urban Renewal Area, making funding available for redevelopment projects with the intent to encourage the development of the town center concept. It is an area with many needs, but also with many assets. The historical center of the community was demolished with the arrival of the I-205 Freeway in the 1980s (PDC). The sense of community immediately and for many years after

this faded. Recently, with the designation as an URA, and with the involvement of the PDC in pursuing redevelopment, community involvement has grown. This area has no center that provides community services, retail, or business space. The goal of the Town Center designation is to repair the damage done by past actions and create a bustling area that is a center for the community, one that provides retail, business, housing and community services and amenities. A community art center with adjacent work force housing would complement these goals and create an immediate center to the area.

The Lents community is diverse in many ways; it is the current melting pot area of Portland, providing a home to youth, seniors, and everyone in between, as well as recent immigrants, and those whose income is below average. The Lents community is unique in the length of residence of it's residents, nearly 50% of the residents lived in the same house as they do now, in 2006, as they did in 1969. This number is mind boggling when less than 10% of Portlanders from the rest of the city lived in the same house prior to 1969 (Spencer). This longevity of residence is an indication of the commitment to the community and the investment that these community members have made in this place. These longtime residents provide insights and knowledge to new comers, often welcoming their new perspectives and cultural difference. A community art center is the venue that would best support this interaction, proving a space and a means of community building, strengthening and enriching the community of Lents.

Another factor in an appropriate location for a community art center is that there be a diverse population in the area it is to serve. Lents is a neighborhood that has a diverse group of residents. Many minorities as well as immigrants call Lents home. Approximately 23% of the population is foreign born, a number greatly higher than the region, 13% of Portlanders are immigrants. People from all over the world live in Lents; the largest groups from Mexico, Ukraine, Vietnam, Russia, Philippines, Romania, China and Germany (Spencer). This diverse population is the ideal group to share their unique history and learn from each other in a community art center. Each area of the world that is represented by immigrants in the Lents area brings a different perspective to the activities that would happen at a community art center. This facility will be the place where multi-generational and multi-ethnic groups can meet, strengthening themselves and the community.

Next, one must consider the income level of the area, whether it is an area in need of this kind of place. The Lents median family income is \$40,472, while Portland's MFI is \$50,721. Nearly half of the families in Lents reported making below 50% MFI (Spencer). This population group is ideal for benefiting from the programs offered at a community art center, programs for all ages and all income levels. Oregon is a state that does not adequately fund public education, impacting the population of Lents directly, since they would not be able to afford to send their children to private school, and may not be able to afford higher education. The opportunities of the community art center to supplement the education provided in the public school system would be the only chance for many residents to experience art.

The sizes of households also indicate whether an area may be appropriate for a community art center. Lents is also unique in Portland for having 30% of households with more than 5 occupants (Census). This number, when compared to the housing stock, indicates that overcrowding must be occurring in most of these large households. There simply are not that many houses of this size in the area. Therefore, relief is needed. One way to supplement these small homes is to provide community facilities that can be used as part of the living space. The Lents Community Art Center will have spaces for people to interact in a casual manner, in effect an extension of their living room down the street. This is also the supporting evidence for including workforce housing in the proposal. This area needs improvements to the housing stock all throughout; the addition of several housing units immediately adjacent to a community art center would be a benefit to both. The families living in the housing units can take advantage of the opportunities offered at the community art center, while at the same time bringing life to the center at all hours. This activity will enhance the center and in turn bring other members of the community in to the center, making it more successful.

Additionally, a community art center needs to be located centrally for all residents to be able to gain access. The selected site at the intersection of SE 92nd Ave. and SE Foster Rd. is right in the heart of the Lents neighborhood. This allows residents to travel approximately equal distances from any of the farthest reaches of the neighborhood to participate. Lents has an area of 2,472 acres (PDC). If this type of center were located anywhere but the geographic center, it would be too far and onerous for residents, especially children and the elderly, to travel. Additionally, this location is on a frequent service bus route and a MAX light rail station is

planned to open nearby in 2009 (Tri-Met). This particular location within the greater area as well as the availability of mass transit support a community art center being created here.

Being an urban renewal area (URA), there is funding available for a project like this. The goal of the designation has been to encourage the development of the town center concept of the Metro 2040 Plan, something that has made a sizeable amount of progress recently with the 2009 arrival of the green line MAX light rail (Tri-Met), the construction of which will begin soon. With the interest of the city of Portland government directed at Lents currently, feasibility of a project like this is very high (Miller-Dowell). There is great interest in finding ways to strengthen the Lents community. A center like this is something that residents have expressed interest in.

I really like the idea of creating an "arts center for the artist".....it would [defiantly] give the Lents area its own "vibe" and [cater] to a different group of people then the ones that just buy art and display it.....I know I'd love to have a place that could facilitate my desire to metal/glass sculpt that didn't have to take up room at my house. (Alan)

Alan voiced his interest in a community art center, one of many residents who are in support of a project like this at its early stages. This coupled with the current political situation and the funding made available by the URA designation contributes to Lents being an appropriate place for a community art center.

There is a need for a place in which the community can hold meetings and other various functions, these needs would be provided for in a community art center. Currently there is a Lents community group called Lents Neighborhood Association (LNA) that holds meetings in a local church ("ilovelents"). This arrangement may have worked in the past, but with the growing diversity of the Lents community, a church is no longer an appropriate location for a group such as this to hold meetings. Unfortunately not all community members will feel comfortable using a facility so closely connected to a specific religion, a topic very important to many groups. Therefore a new, secular facility is needed for community groups to meet and be able to adequately represent all members of the Lents community. Additionally, the space required for a community like Lents that is expected to grow substantially in the next 20 years to hold meetings of this sort is different than what the church option offers. This group, LNA, needs a place like a

community art center, which welcomes community functions and provides a dedicated space for their needs. This need strengthens the likelihood of success for a community art center in this location. The user group is already there, awaiting the arrival of their new building.

An example of a building of this type in a neighborhood with similar characteristics to Lents is the Roundhouse Community Art and Recreation Centre in the Yaletown neighborhood of Vancouver, B.C. This facility is located in a dense urban mixed used district of the city. The facility provides space for community functions, art education and exploration, art exhibits and performances, and physical activity such as basketball and ping-pong, all the while with open doors, welcoming any member of the community (“Roundhouse”). This example demonstrates the revitalizing impact a facility such as this can have on a community. Yaletown was just beginning to see new development when the Roundhouse opened. It was an area like Lents, that had been ignored and neglected for many years, but had a core group of residents who supported the idea of this facility. With no other planned center for the neighborhood, the roundhouse naturally acquired this role, functioning in all the intentionally programmed ways, but also bringing an identity to the neighborhood that is unique in the city. The Roundhouse serves a multi-generational, multi-ethnic, multi-lifestyle community that was not being served by the amenities provided by the greater Vancouver area. The Lents Community Art Center will serve a similar function in the future of Lents as a community. A clear identity is needed and will naturally be formed around this place, a place that highlights the unique things about Lents.

There is no facility similar to the Lents Community Art Center currently. Because of the diverse population, the personal investment by residents in the community, the needs of the lower Median Family Income, and the opportunities offered by the designation as an urban renewal area, Lents will be a successful location for this facility. The Roundhouse offers a success story for this type of relationship between the community art center and the rest of the community, one that highlights that the right mixes of social factors and the right location can be a successful combination for the location of a community art center. Therefore, a community art center coupled with workforce housing would be ideally located at the intersection of SE 92nd Ave. and SE Foster Rd in the Lents neighborhood in Portland, Oregon.

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