

**URBAN REVITALIZATION OCCURS
IN MANY FORMS AND AT DIFFERENT
PACES. IN PITTSBURGH'S GARFIELD
NEIGHBORHOOD, A SLOW BUT
STEADY TRANSFORMATION NURTURED
BY PATIENCE, COMMITMENT AND
CREATIVITY IS BEARING
APPEALING FRUIT. BY BEN WECHT**

In a once-neglected, more-than-a-century-old pocket of Pittsburgh's elsewhere-thriving East End, something unusual is happening. With neither a Starbucks nor a Target to anchor community development, a vibrant new urban center is coalescing around business owners who are likelier to be local artists than numbers-crunching MBAs. And the new energy is bringing the Garfield neighborhood together.

"When you walk down Penn Avenue, you can truly feel the positive effect of artists on the neighborhood," says Janet Sarbaugh, The Heinz Endowments' Arts & Culture senior program director. "You can sense it's a place people are gravitating to."

It has been a long time coming. But from world-renowned cultural institutions to tiny storefront galleries, from innovative eateries to urban gardens, all indications are that Garfield, particularly the bustling Penn Avenue corridor at its heart, is finally on the rise.

Just over a decade ago, when Pittsburghers thought of Garfield, it was as a passing landscape of vacant storefronts and empty streets. The community is situated along a critical artery connecting the East End and Downtown and nestled on one side by the historic beauty of Allegheny Cemetery. But it had lost much of the stability and diversity it enjoyed early in the 20th century when it was developed to provide housing for millworkers.

Rick Swartz, who moved to the neighborhood in 1981 as executive director of the Bloomfield-Garfield Corp. (BGC), remembers when dwindling investments, declining schools and gang violence had residents worried about the future.

"From 1965 to 2005, it was really unknown what the outcome would be," he recalls. "But in the last 10 years, progress has been more in leaps and bounds than in the 40 years leading up to it."

The BGC has helped the Endowments invest nearly \$1.25 million into the community over the past dozen years and is at the center of a constellation of endeavors ranging from youth education to

veterans housing. Having helped form the Penn Avenue Arts Initiative (PAAI) in the late-1990s, BGC also has played a pivotal role in realizing a strategy based on using

the arts, rather than chain stores, as economic generators.

Of the buildings originally identified for intervention, most have been purchased and rehabilitated by artists themselves. Dozens of unique businesses and neighborhood venues have been drawn to Garfield, such as Verde Mexican Kitchen & Cantina, the Irma Freeman Center for Imagination community center, the Mr. Roboto Project performance space and art gallery, The Alloy Studios and the Center for PostNatural History museum. In addition, major cultural institutions like the Pittsburgh Glass Center have established homes in or near the community.

The influx has meant that vacancies along the neighborhood's stretch of Penn Avenue have been reduced from nearly 80 percent to about 20 percent, and activities such as the monthly gallery crawl, "Unblurred," and the Garfield Night Market have

added to its vibrancy. Best of all, residents have a renewed sense of belonging, notes Jeffrey Dorsey, who ran the PAAI from its inception until 2007. "What I saw was a heck of a lot of people getting an equity stake," he recalls. "It created a really good opportunity for people to create the change."

Looking to the future, planners are taking care not to allow Garfield to fall into the gentrification trap.

"Garfield is an embodiment of really strong, incremental community development activity sustained over a long period of time," notes Rob Stephany, director of the Endowments' Community & Economic Program. "Now that the market is starting to grow, it's also the embodiment of what outside market forces might mean to people in the neighborhood."

Adds Mr. Swartz, "We want to be sure people who are blue collar, who work in service industries and rely on public education—that these people—have a long-term place in the community." *h*

**EAST
END
ECLECTIC**



When Jeff Catalina, owner of Lawrenceville's Tender Bar & Kitchen, was scouting locations for a second business several years ago, he wanted an "interesting space with a little bit of character in it." He hadn't bargained on finding the lime-colored façade and patios of Penn Avenue's Glass Lofts building, now home to his crowd-pleasing Mexican restaurant and cantina, Verde. "I think the signature building stands out," says Mr. Catalina, who views it as "a beacon for the neighborhood and maybe a symbol of transformation."

VERDE MEXICAN KITCHEN & CANTINA

ARTISTS' RESIDENCE



Along Penn Avenue's "Bride Row" — so named for the late Judy Penzer's iconic mural on the side of an apartment building — the nearby Pittsburgh Glass Center is preparing to renovate a house for use by visiting artists who flock to the internationally renowned educational center by the dozens, from as far away as Iran and Australia. "I would love to see the whole row turned into artist housing," says PGC Executive Director Heather McElwee. "It's an exciting concept, and it could make a huge change."

Like a pair of fully grown kids in their own candy shop, artist-entrepreneurs D.S. Kinsel, center, and Thomas Agnew, left, could barely contain their excitement when they took over a formerly vacant Penn Avenue storefront and created BOOM Concepts. Described by Mr. Kinsel as a “creative hub,” BOOM combines aspects of a gallery, a performance space and a community center to promote collaborative creativity, which can include advocacy projects such as supporting the #Blacklivesmatter movement. And although the two are grateful for philanthropic support, as they look to the future, Mr. Agnew says they want to be self-sustaining.



BOOM CONCEPTS

Brian Cohen

THE ALLOY STUDIOS



One of the anchors on the Penn Avenue corridor in the heart of Garfield is The Alloy Studios, formed by the 2012 merger of Pittsburgh Dance Alloy with the nearby Kelly Strayhorn Theater. A home to classes, residencies and performances, the space has benefited from a growing perception of neighborhood safety, says Executive Director Janera Solomon. “When I started, six years ago, everyone asked about parking, which mostly was a veiled question [about crime]. Today, we get fewer of those calls.”

Nicole Gaudes/Pittsburgh Black Media Federation's Urban Agenda



As a historically working-class neighborhood, Garfield knows how to let its hair down. On the first Friday evening of every month, Penn Avenue showcases its galleries and artworks such as glass blowing, along with lively entertainment, during “Unblurred.” Longtime organizer Jason Sauer describes it as “a community event and a gathering of the like-minded and arts sympathizers throughout the city.” According to Mr. Sauer, owner of Most Wanted Fine Art and Pittsburgh Art Car, such events are “really important to the identity of our neighborhood.”

Joshua Franzos

UNBLURRED

GARFIELD COMMUNITY FARM



High up on a hill overlooking a wide swath of Pittsburgh's East End lies the Garfield Community Farm, a 2.5-acre plot part-owned by the nearby Open Door ministry and managed by its associate pastor, the Rev. John Creasy, center. By providing greens to local restaurants, offering grocery subscriptions to low-income residents and coordinating other food-related services, the farm's mission is to alleviate nutrition needs within Garfield's “food desert.” Adds Rev. Creasy, “We really want the farm to be by the neighborhood, for the neighborhood and of the neighborhood.”

Brian Cohen