



Nelsonville, Ohio

Civic leaders in this historic coal mining community subsidize downtown storefront rent for artist retailers. Over a period of five years, artists clean up downtown storefronts and bring the town's downtown square back into economic productivity.

	Nelsonville
Population (2000)	5,230
Municipal budget (2006)	\$2 million ⁸⁴
Per capita income (2000)	\$11,600
Median household income (2000)	\$20,600
Poverty rate (2000)	34%
Minority population (2000)	5%
Proximity to urban center	12 miles from Athens, Ohio
Proximity to interstate highway	50 miles
Strategic approach	Entrepreneurship Downtown revitalization Creative economy
Time frame	2001–2006

From 2001 to 2006, Nelsonville's downtown square went from desolate storefronts to a bustling artists' haven with the help of subsidized rent for artist retailers. The town's historic architecture, anchored by the turn-of-the-century Stuarts Opera House, has been rehabilitated and brought back into productive existence. Coffee shops, restaurants and other social gathering places buzz with community activity. This contrasts with six years ago, when the downtown occupancy rate was 25 percent and buildings were crumbling. "Nelsonville is reinvigorating itself," one long-time resident said.⁸⁵

The community and its history

Nestled in the foothills of southeastern Ohio, Nelsonville is a small town with many assets. The town is surrounded by thousands of acres of national and state forests that attract millions of visitors annually. Nelsonville's largest employer is Hocking College, a two-year college with an international student body located on the outskirts of town. Hocking and Ohio University (12 miles away in Athens) have a significant influence on the civic, social and economic infrastructure of Nelsonville. The town's historic square is framed by buildings with stunning Victorian facades that, ironically, have been preserved through decades of neglect (there was never enough investment to tear them down or to renovate them in more contemporary styles).

⁸⁴ Interview with Kevin Brooks, Nelsonville city councilman, November 8, 2006.

⁸⁵ Interview with Jennie Friedhof, assistant district ranger, Wayne National Forest, November 8, 2006.

At the turn of the 20th century, Nelsonville was the hub of the region's coal industry. In 1910, an average of a million dollars worth of coal passed through Nelsonville every day.⁸⁶ The wealth and affluence that characterized Nelsonville in the early 1900s helped create a picturesque downtown square. The downtown anchor was the Stuarts Opera House. Built with local handmade clay, it housed performances from 1879 to 1925. Sadly, the collapse of the region's coal industry and the economic depression of the 1930s were major contributors to the economic and cultural demise of Nelsonville. But, crucially, the physical infrastructure remained. Today Nelsonville has 420 sites on the National Historic Register.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the manufacturing industry brought back a moderate degree of affluence to Nelsonville, but nothing compared to the town's heyday 50 years earlier. A brief resurgence in development came about in the early 1970s, when a group from the community came together to preserve some of the town's historic buildings. They formed a nonprofit organization and set about to establish a consistent set of standards for preservation. Hocking College purchased a number of the buildings on the downtown square. New streetlights were erected and overhead electric wires were buried, but the momentum brought about by these efforts slowly fizzled.

By 2001, Nelsonville appeared to be in desperate shape. Stuarts Opera House had reopened to the public in the late 1990s, but for the most part crumbling sidewalks bordered empty storefronts. The downtown occupancy rate was a mere 25 percent. At the time, only two businesses were open on the downtown square. Buildings were badly in need of repair, and many of the historic storefronts had been converted into student housing rentals. Windows overlooking the main square were darkened with curtains and tapestries.

The strategy

The revitalization of Nelsonville's downtown square is partially attributable to a strategy of subsidizing rent for artist retailers. In exchange for rent support, artists have been required to invest their sweat equity into rehabilitating storefront spaces. As the appearance of storefronts has improved and downtown activity has increased, others have taken note. "The artists on the downtown square, with their energy and creative enterprises, are making property much more attractive to outside investors," said one real estate agent.

Nelsonville's strategy was not initiated or driven by elected or other public officials, but rather developed and evolved somewhat organically. In fact, the city council was firmly opposed to investing in this kind of development, preferring instead to focus on industrial recruitment. The financial resources for Nelsonville's strategy came from Hocking College, private donations and a small grant from the Ohio Arts Council.

The initial catalyst for Nelsonville's strategy was the Foothills School for American Crafts, which moved into a downtown storefront in 2000. Foothills School was an outgrowth of the creativ-

⁸⁶ Interview with Paul Harper, ACE-Net board chair, November 7, 2006.

ity emanating from Ohio University and Hocking College. The school teaches craft skills to students of all ages and supplements this instruction with lessons in business management and lifestyle skills to help artists cope while building an artistic enterprise. The Foothills School created positive activity downtown, which led a group of civic leaders to see the value of an economic development strategy based on creative enterprise.

Once they saw and understood the potential value in leveraging local assets and the creative economy, a group of civic leaders came together in an ad hoc manner to initiate Nelsonville's strategy of attracting artists by subsidizing their rent for downtown spaces. This group included many owners of downtown real estate. According to one prominent Nelsonville resident, "If you don't like the way things are, then you have to go cut the grass yourself."⁸⁷ This seems an apt metaphor for how Nelsonville's strategy evolved.

Since 2000, artists have been quietly moving into vacant storefronts, and a bustling arts community has given new life to buildings where oiled floors and tin ceilings and walls are commonplace. Following on the heels of the Foothills School, Starbrick Clay (gallery and pottery classes) moved downtown and rehabilitated a Victorian storefront. Hocking College now offers classes for credit in this location.

Between 2002 and 2006, the civic entrepreneurs who provided the initial support for artist retailers went further to identify ways to boost local commerce. For example, one group helped raise funds for a marketing brochure that is distributed to tourism agencies throughout the region. The downtown artist retailers worked with town officials to get better signage to draw visitors from the highway that passes through town. The town also developed a logo based on its heritage as a famous brick-producing region in the early 1900s. A concerted effort is now being made to highlight the Nelsonville Starbrick motif.

The results are undeniable: downtown occupancy rates went from 25 percent to 85 percent in four years. The Nelsonville public square was recently added to the National Register of Historic Places. In 2005, local elections led to a major shift in the city council. As of today, new public leadership is establishing itself in Nelsonville. According to the director of the local Rotary Club, volunteerism and participation in civic life are on the rise. Mike Brooks, the president and CEO of Rocky Brands, an international manufacturer of boots and outdoor clothing, recently commented, "I've seen more happen in this town in the last eight to 10 years than in my whole life here."

What are the lessons from this story?

A community of artists can reinvigorate a dilapidated downtown. Subsidies for artist retailers catalyzed downtown development. The development of the arts community created activity in

⁸⁷ Interview with Stuart Brooks, Nelsonville businessman, November 7, 2006.

Nelsonville's downtown square. This activity has been a means to attract higher value development projects. The presence of art studios and creative energy attracted local and regional investment into a new coffee shop and restaurant. Downtown real estate values are climbing. As the downtown artist retailers increase their revenues, the initial subsidies that the town offered are being repealed.

Artist-driven development can help a small town attract tourists. Not only have artistic activities created economic activity and helped to maintain historic buildings, but they are recreating Nelsonville's regional reputation. The arts community has put together a Final Fridays event to showcase local artists, which is held every month and has received substantial press coverage as far away as Cincinnati and Lexington.⁸⁸ This level of positive publicity would cost thousands of dollars in paid advertising. Additionally, the Stuarts Opera House, with its historic character and performance lineup, attracts visitors from distant locations. As with tourism in general, enticing people to visit a community is a vital step in revitalization because visitors have the potential to become new home and business owners.

Small groups of committed residents can jump-start development in small towns. The arts community in Nelsonville was the outgrowth of small, informal, grassroots groups of collaborators who refused to see their town die. They did not wait for elected officials. They partnered with property owners and other residents with the means to activate their strategy.

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⁸⁸ Edwards and Kelcey. The Comprehensive and Economic Plan for the City of Nelsonville. August, 2005.