



LEVERAGING PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS

The Role of Arts-based Economic Development Strategies
in Rural Georgia Communities

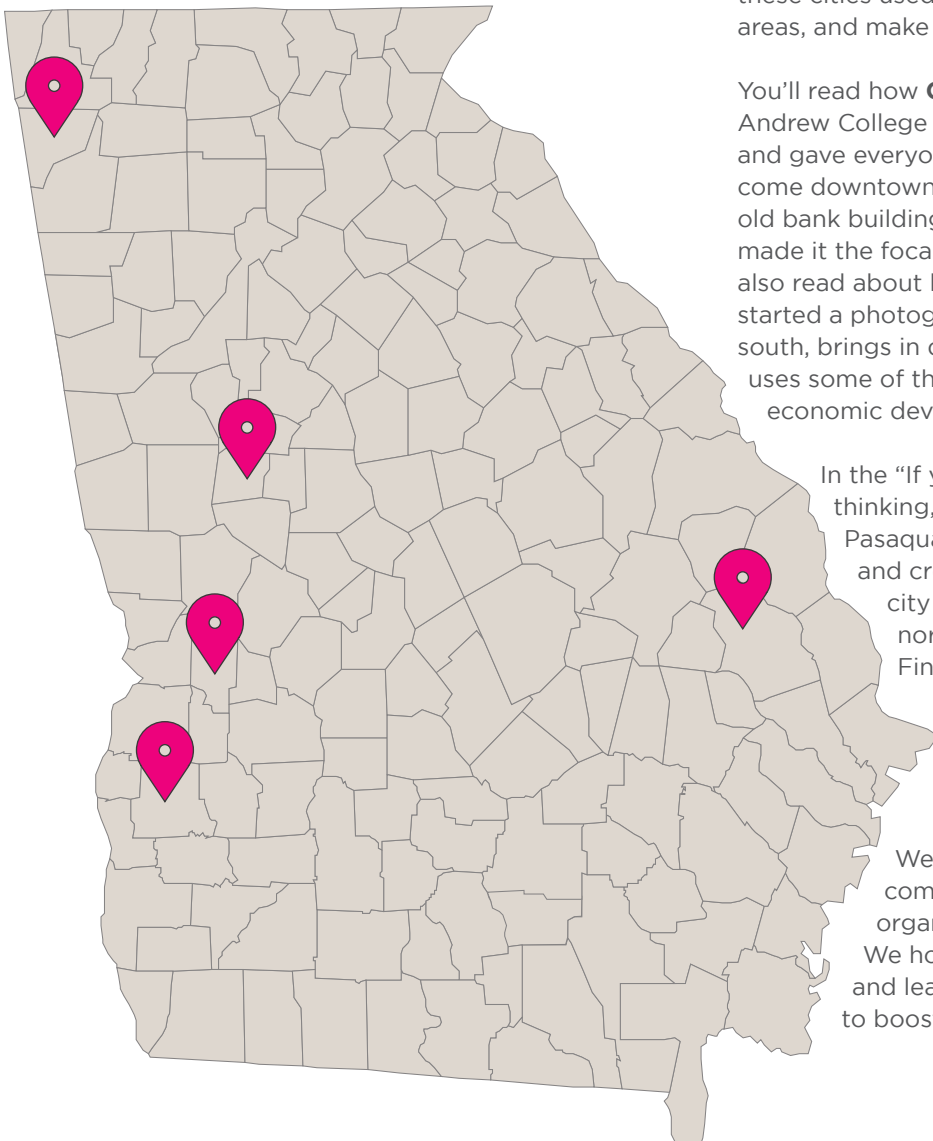
Using the Arts to Revitalize Downtowns

The rural Georgia communities highlighted in this report have several things in common. First, they determined a way to use the arts to boost economic development. Second, in order to do that, they capitalized on one element unique to their communities that would serve as a catalyst for turning their downtowns around. Whether it was a partnership with an arts center or a local college or creating an arts event that brought in lots of tourists, these cities used the arts to jumpstart their downtown areas, and make their cities a destination.

You'll read how **Cuthbert** formed a relationship with Andrew College that helped beautify the downtown and gave everyone a reason – locals and tourists – to come downtown. You'll learn how **Statesboro** took an old bank building, transformed it into an arts center and made it the focal point of their downtown. And you'll also read about how a group of women in **Pike County** started a photography festival that showcases the rural south, brings in droves of people to see it each year, and uses some of the proceeds for historic preservation and economic development.

In the “If you build it they will come” way of thinking, the city of **Buena Vista** restored Pasaquan, the home of Eddie Owen Martin, and created a reason for tourists to visit. The city of **Summerville** – 200 miles directly north – did the same thing with Howard Finster’s home known as Paradise Garden. Restoring these artists’ environments spurred revitalization efforts in both communities and made Buena Vista and Summerville tourist destinations.

We are grateful to the civic, government and community leaders as well as the artists and organizers who shared their expertise with us. We hope other communities can be inspired and learn through these stories to use the arts to boost economic development.



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CUTHBERT



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CUTHBERT: Capitalizing on a 'Town and Gown' Relationship

Though the residents of Cuthbert couldn't have known it at the time, the appointment of Linda Buchanan as president of Andrew College in June 2015 would have a major impact on their downtown.

When Buchanan took the helm of the small two-year liberal arts college located just off the square, she had two goals in mind: helping to revitalize downtown and growing the college's enrollment. She believed the two were not mutually exclusive.

"I had this inclination that Andrew College needed to play a role in downtown revitalization," she says. "And I wanted to do it through the arts - bringing visual arts, music and theatre downtown. At the same time, a vibrant downtown can help with college recruitment efforts."

What has happened over the last four years is a collaborative effort between the college, the city, the Randolph County Chamber of Commerce and the Randolph County Historical Society to repurpose and revitalize downtown. The efforts have not only brought downtown back to life, but they've given tourism a shot in the arm and provided a sense of community pride to the residents. Here is their story.

Start with a Plan

Cuthbert, the county seat of Randolph County with a population of just under 4,000, is located in Southwest Georgia, about 60 miles south of Columbus and about 25 miles east of the Alabama state line. State Route 82 is the main east-west thoroughfare that goes right through Cuthbert, connecting Eufaula, Ala. and Dawson, Ga. State Route 27 also goes through Cuthbert, taking travelers on their way to Florida. That generates a lot of traffic, especially on the weekends.

“I had this inclination that Andrew College needed to play a role in downtown revitalization, And I wanted to do it through the arts - bringing visual arts, music and theatre downtown. At the same time, a vibrant downtown can help with college recruitment efforts.”

- Linda Buchanan, President, Andrew College



Photo courtesy of Andrew College

The key was to give those travelers a reason to stop in Cuthbert, as well as to bring students and residents downtown.

"Like downtowns in many rural towns, ours had languished," Buchanan says, "partly because of big box retail. But our version of that was the fact that a lot of businesses - like the grocery store, the drug store, and a restaurant - moved a few blocks off the square. That hurt the downtown."

The catalyst for the improvement efforts came out of a visit from the Georgia Department of Economic Development's Tourism Product Development Resource Team in 2016. Their report provided a blueprint for ways to improve the downtown area and increase tourism and quality of life in both Cuthbert and Randolph County.

"The college needed to spearhead those efforts," Buchanan says. "I wanted a more interesting student experience, and the city needed quality occupancy. One of the most influential forces in all of this was Patricia Goodman who at the time was the head of the Chamber and integrally involved in bringing the TPD team to the county. They validated some of our early thoughts about how the college and downtown could be linked, and inspired a lot more good thinking."

Cover photo courtesy of Andrew College

“Andrew was like an island, completely separate from the city. One of Linda’s chief goals when she came here was to bridge the gap between the college and downtown. And she’s done that.”

- Steve Whatley, Mayor, Cuthbert

Bringing the Arts Downtown

At first, the college seemed like an unlikely partner. Cuthbert Mayor Steve Whatley says up until that point, the two had been separate entities.

“Andrew was like an island, completely separate from the city,” he says. “One of Linda’s chief goals when she came here was to bridge the gap between the college and downtown. And she’s done that.”

Revitalization efforts began when Andrew College began expanding into downtown. The college bought two buildings and received four others through gifts. One donated building – believed to be the oldest building in downtown – was renovated and dedicated in 2017 as a ceramics studio. Of the buildings the college purchased, also in 2017, one is now used for jazz performances, event space and an art gallery and the other is currently under renovation and will serve as a music building for the college. An old theatre building has been renovated and is now a scene shop.

“The school’s efforts are turning the lights back on in downtown,” says Mayor Whatley. “These buildings were not being used.”

It’s also created more pedestrian traffic downtown.

“We now give our students a reason to walk downtown to take a music class, or a ceramics class or a theatre class,” says Buchanan. “It’s not hundreds of students, but it’s dozens of students every week that are making their way downtown and back.”

When it comes to promoting the arts, Buchanan credits the trio that makes up her Fine Arts Department – Chris Johnson, assistant professor of visual arts, Deborah Liss-Green, assistant professor of theatre and Dan Kolan, assistant professor of music – for making a concerted effort to bring the arts downtown.

Johnson, an artist, literally did that by putting art on the buildings.

“I had been traveling around looking at small towns and how they had used murals to improve the city,” he says. “I was surprised there weren’t any in Cuthbert.” So he decided to change that.

His first mural was called “Randolph Ramblings” and it featured Cuthbert native and jazz legend Fletcher Henderson, Jr. In 2017, Johnson was approached by the city of Shellman, 10 miles down the road, to paint a pair of murals on grain bins in the center of downtown. The Randolph County Chamber of Commerce secured a grant for him to do this. The two murals created a focal point for downtown Shellman.

Soon it wasn’t unusual to see Johnson on a hydraulic lift in downtown Cuthbert painting beautiful murals on the sides of buildings. Two murals now adorn opposing walls in an alleyway that showcase the history and people of Cuthbert – including Henderson as well as former football player Roosevelt “Rosie” Greer and current county singer/songwriter Cole Taylor. Johnson also painted a “Welcome to Cuthbert” banner on the side of the theatre building.



Magnolia Alley before and after. Photos courtesy of Andrew College

“People are stopping and getting out of their cars to look at them,” says Mary Jane Salter, special assistant to the president for development at Andrew College, who has been responsible for writing many of the grants to pay for the murals. “They want to get their pictures taken in front of them.”

“These murals have really given the locals a sense of pride in their downtown,” adds Mayor Whatley. “It’s an opportunity to introduce history they may not be aware of and talk about the people who are from here.”

Johnson and a student intern finished the murals just in time for the 2019 “Arts in the Square,” an annual arts festival the college started in 2018 that brings regional musicians and artists into Cuthbert and features art, theatre, music and creative writing.

“There is a sense of permanence in these programs, and the murals give us the foundation,” says Kolan, the music professor. “Developing buildings for homes for our programs – those are permanent structures that will continue to last. You have to have permanence for repeated experiences.”

Liss-Green’s theatre department has also given residents a reason to come downtown, starting with a murder mystery dinner theatre that was actually staged in two locations. Attendees walked across the street for the second act. Both nights almost sold out at 60 seats apiece.

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– Dan Kolan, Assistant Professor of Music, Andrew College



Ceramics Studio before and after. Photos courtesy of Andrew College



Photos courtesy of Andrew College

She also helped orchestrate a haunted house around Halloween that was a big hit. “The college did this for the town and it was bigger than expected,” says Liss-Green. “These can be huge attractions for locals as well as tourists.”

On top of those efforts, Salter says she has submitted a grant that would fund an art event in the community for eight months in a row – with a variety of music, visual arts, theatre and a lecture series. “We feel like we have the ‘brick and mortar’ in place so we can do even more events downtown,” she says.

A Spirit of Collaboration

While the college has played a huge role in bringing new life to downtown, the city is doing its part as well. Whatley says they bought an abandoned fast food restaurant



Open mic night. Photos courtesy of Andrew College

that was an eyesore and tore it down. The city has also spruced up its streetscapes, making the square look more appealing. The Randolph County Courthouse has been renovated and serves as the city's welcome center as well as a history museum.

The Randolph County Chamber of Commerce – which is housed in the old courthouse – has also stepped up its efforts to get more people downtown and attract new businesses. This includes increasing its social media presence and determining ways to encourage citizens to shop downtown and create more foot traffic.

“We’ve been able to write grants to secure more funding for more projects due to what the college has done and continues to do,” says Rebecca White, the Chamber’s executive director. “We are marketing and promoting

““ We have to be here for each other. The college is here for the community and the community is here for the college and that has to be demonstrated. We have to show what we are doing to support the community and develop ties – the arts is one of the best ways to do that. It brings people together. ””

– Linda Buchanan, President, Andrew College

all the things happening on the square to drive people to shop local, attend events and take more pride in our downtown - with hopes that these efforts along with marketing will spark excitement and bring new business and tourists to our area.”

Though people give Buchanan and Andrew College a lot of the credit for transforming Cuthbert, Buchanan insists that at the heart of all of these efforts is collaboration – everyone working together to make downtown the best place it can be.

“We have to be here for each other,” she says. “The college is here for the community and the community is here for the college and that has to be demonstrated. We have to show what we are doing to support the community and develop ties – the arts is one of the best ways to do that. It brings people together.”

Her staff, at the forefront of it all, agrees.

“All of these efforts have really developed the ambience of downtown and opened the space to allow for more collaboration between the college and the city,” says Kolan. “It’s been a remarkable experience as a new faculty member here. Just to have so many things going on downtown that you can draw a creative influence from and use as an excuse to start developing new projects and really have a great time with it.”

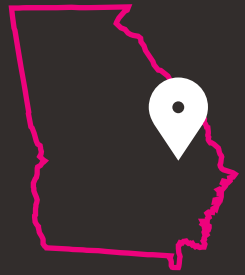


Peachtree courtyard jazz. Photo courtesy of Andrew College

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STATESBORO: Saving Downtown with Art

On a sunny summer day, the Averitt Center for the Arts in downtown Statesboro is hopping. Parents are dropping their children off for a fun day of camp and soon the rooms in this historic building are filled with children learning to paint, dance, sing and perform.

Looking at this vibrant building in the middle of downtown, it's hard to believe it once was called "an eyesore," and the busy downtown around it was considered "dead."

But that was indeed the case in the late 1990s, when many buildings in downtown Statesboro were in disrepair, including the Statesboro Bank building, a neighboring theater and the old Jaeckel Hotel.

In looking for a way to revitalize downtown, several city leaders – led by then mayor David "Hal" Averitt – had an idea: Restore the bank building into an arts center. The thinking was the rest would follow.

That plan worked. The \$5 million project – paid for out of a combination of private and public funding – took two years to complete. Now 15 years later, the Averitt Center for the Arts – named for the man who championed the cause – is the centerpiece of downtown Statesboro. It has built itself into a solid program in the arts, offering visual arts, dance, theatre and music through performances, classes, camps and after school programs. In the meantime, other buildings have been restored, new businesses have opened and downtown Statesboro has come alive again.

"The Averitt Center is now at the heart of this community," says Statesboro Councilmember Phil Boyum. "It's a constant presence that gives people a reason to come downtown."

The Averitt's success can be attributed to the core group of people who helped see it to fruition, a visionary board, commitment from the city and a collaborative relationship with Georgia Southern University, located two miles from downtown. Here is their story.

“ The Averitt Center is now at the heart of this community. It’s a constant presence that gives people a reason to come downtown. ”

– Phil Boyum, Statesboro Councilmember



Averitt Center for the Arts. Photos courtesy of Danielle Brannon

First, start with the bank

The Bank of Statesboro – Bulloch County’s first bank – has a history dating back to 1895. It re-located several times before it settled at 33 Main St. The bank fell victim to the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression and permanently shuttered in 1932. Though it was used for several purposes throughout the years, the bank building eventually stayed empty and fell into disrepair.

The building next door – the Georgia Theater – had a similar rise and fall. It opened in 1936 with a showing of “Ladies in Love” and entertained theater-goers with first run movies like “Gone with the Wind.” It later struggled with competition from larger theater complexes and people leaving downtown. The theater ultimately closed in 1984, and also remained empty for years.

“It was a success out of the gate, there was a lot of excitement in the fact they took two dead buildings that were decayed and tied them together to breathe life into them.”

– Carol Thompson, former executive director of the Performing Arts Center at Georgia Southern University

When a group of city leaders realized something needed to be done to turn downtown Statesboro around, those two buildings became the focus of redevelopment efforts. In 1997, both buildings were purchased by the city. Mayor Averitt had the vision of transforming the bank into an arts center and appointed a committee to conduct a feasibility study.

After the committee determined an arts center would be a viable option, it set a plan in place. “We decided we wanted to build a community theater,” remembers DeWayne Grice, a business editor for The Statesboro Herald who served on the committee. “We wanted to present something the community could buy into.”

Beyond saving downtown, the committee saw a benefit for its citizens. “Part of that study showed the positive impact of arts education,” Grice says. “Having an arts center could make a difference in lifestyle.”

There were skeptics: some people were wary of the arts and the type of people that it would bring into the city. Yet the committee prevailed and through private dollars and public funding – including a \$1 million Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST), money from the hotel/motel tax and other public sources – the city was able to renovate and restore both the bank and the theater. On September 9, 2004, the Averitt Center for the Arts opened on 33 Main Street, as did the Emma Kelly Theater next door, which was renamed for the Bulloch County singer and pianist who was known as the “Lady of 6,000 Songs.”

“It was a success out of the gate,” says Carol Thompson, who is the former executive director of the Performing Arts Center at Georgia Southern University, an Averitt board member and an actress. “There was a lot of excitement in the fact they took two dead buildings that were decayed and tied them together to breathe life into them.”



Photos courtesy of Danielle Brannon

Growing the Averitt

Before the doors opened, a board of directors was in place and they had hired the first executive director: Tim Chapman, a Georgia Southern University (GSU) graduate who was currently teaching at the university.

“From the very beginning, we had a good structure for programming,” says Chapman, who served as executive director until 2016. “We did a lot of community theater. We had gallery openings and some educational programs. That first year, when we announced our season, we sold almost the entire theater in season ticket sales. That is unheard of in most venues. It was a great first year.”

The Averitt also benefitted from an unofficial partnership with GSU, the region’s largest employer located just a few miles away. In fact, Kathryn Grube, wife of GSU’s then President Bruce Grube, was an original board member and was instrumental in helping to get the center off the ground.

“Georgia Southern art, music and theatre faculty were involved in the programming from the beginning,” says Chapman. “It wouldn’t have worked as nicely without the school as a partner. The relationship helped elevate what we could do in terms of the level of performers and people exhibiting.”

Kelly Berry, director of Georgia Southern’s theatre program, who came to the university about the same time the Averitt was opening and now serves on the board, agrees that it was a collaborative relationship from the beginning. “There was never any competition,” he says. “We have always shared resources and helped each other out. It works very well that way.”

Redeveloping Downtown

Though the Downtown Statesboro Development Authority (DSDA) was created in 1987, most say it got its sea legs after the Averitt opened. Suddenly there was a downtown to preserve and create. City Hall – housed in the old Jaeckel Hotel building – was renovated and restored. The DSDA played a role in sprucing up downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods, buying buildings, renovating them and selling them. The organization helped the Averitt acquire the building that is now the Mical Whitaker Black Box Theater (named for Georgia Hall of Fame thespian Mical Whitaker), located a few blocks from the main building.

“Every shopping center needs an anchor tenant,” says DSDA Executive Director Allen Muldrew. “Averitt is downtown’s anchor tenant. It’s the biggest draw and offers the biggest variety.”

When the DSDA puts on its signature events – such as the Farmer’s Market and First Fridays – the Averitt keeps its doors open so people can use the restrooms, enjoy the air conditioning and get a look at the inside of the building.

“The Averitt has an excellent partnership with downtown,” Councilman Boyum says. “By constantly participating in these activities, it helps create a collaborative environment. You can’t have one group doing everything. Everyone has to work together.”

Muldrew says that they also use the Averitt as a selling tool in attracting new businesses.

“We bring all new prospects through the center,” he says. “We give them the numbers, and tell them what this organization does. And the Averitt is pretty good about partnering with businesses – they understand their role in economic development. It’s not only to bring people downtown, but also to facilitate them going to other businesses. It is an economic engine.”



Photos courtesy of Danielle Brannon

“The only way you save buildings is by putting them to use, so by putting the arts center in downtown, we achieved multiple wins.”

– Allen Muldrew, Executive Director, Downtown Statesboro Development Authority

The Averitt Today

Besides the main building and the Emma Kelly Theater, the Arts Center has expanded to include several buildings: a Center for Performing Arts (which includes the Black Box Theater), and the Roxie Remley Center for Fine Arts, which houses a pottery studio. The Emma Kelly Theater hosts 57 shows a year in performances, rentals and recitals.

After Tim Chapman left in 2016, Carol Thompson served as interim director for a year. In 2017, the board hired Jamie Grady, a theatre professional with an arts management background, as its executive director. Under Grady’s leadership, the Averitt has continued to grow. The center now has 11 fulltime and six part-time employees and 30 seasonal employees. The Averitt relies on income from membership dues, the city, the hotel/motel tax and programming. (Note: Grady left in July 2019).

Though the Averitt is a success – the programs continue to grow with summer camps and after school programs – those in Statesboro say there is still room for improvement in terms of downtown.

“We need to do more to get the students downtown,” says Grice.

City leaders are hoping that will change with “The Blue Mile” revitalization project, which is focused on the one-mile stretch of Main Street that connects downtown with the GSU campus. In 2017, the city was the third place winner of the America’s Best Communities competition, earning them \$1 million to put towards the project.

Kelly says the fact that the university has moved some of its programs downtown – including a digital fabrication laboratory called FabLab – should help to bring students and faculty downtown. FabLab is housed in the City Center – a complex of three buildings that the city owns and is leasing to GSU. The University’s Business Innovation Group, the Small Business Development Center and the Center for Business Analysis and Economic Research all occupy space in the City Center.

The hope is these efforts will also solve another problem – getting more restaurants downtown. “There are about 13,000 cars that come through here a day,” says Grice. “Yet there is not a lot after 5 p.m.”

Still, challenges aside, no one discounts the impact the Averitt has had on downtown Statesboro.

“The only way you save buildings is by putting them to use,” says Muldrew. “So by putting the arts center in downtown, we achieved multiple wins. That’s probably the best you can do in downtown - save a building, bring in a businesses, and the icing on the cake was the arts center.”



Photos courtesy of Danielle Brannon

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PIKE COUNTY: Using Photography for Preservation and Revitalization

Andrea Noel remembers a conversation she had with her good friend Christine Curry. They were driving down the road lamenting the fact that buildings in Zebulon and neighboring communities in Pike County were being torn down and farmland was being turned into subdivisions.

“She said ‘wouldn’t it be a great idea to use photography to showcase the vanishing South?’” remembers Noel. “I agreed. And the next thing I know I’m knee deep in photographs trying to mount a show in the old high school building downtown. The rest is history.”

And for the last 17 years, Noel, Curry, and four others – they call themselves the “group of six” – have taken the lead in organizing a photography exhibit that showcases the rural South and has helped transform Pike County, located 45 miles south of Atlanta, and the small cities within it. From the very beginning, all proceeds from the show have gone towards preserving historic buildings in Pike County. These shows have brought visitors into Zebulon, Concord and Molena and have spurred growth and enthusiasm in renewing the downtown areas. Here is their story.

Planning a photography show

After she came up with the idea, Curry gathered her five friends – including Noel – on the porch of her farmhouse and they began sowing the seeds of what would become SlowExposures (SlowE for short). It would be a juried show and they would invite photographers to submit photographs that showcase the “Contemporary Rural South.” Photographers could be from anywhere, but their photographs had to be set in one of 16 southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

“We had 188 entries from four states and 77 images were chosen, representing 40 artists. Jurors selected photographs from slides in a blind entry process. Noel hung the show in a large meeting room in a late 1800’s building that served as Pike County’s first high school.”

– Christine Curry, SlowE exhibit organizer



Photo courtesy of Dale Niles

That first year, they reached out to every friend they had – “anyone we knew who took photographs” says Curry – spreading the word by phone as well as a brochure they put together. They also had help from Atlanta Celebrates Photography, a nationally-ranked photography festival. One of its founding members, Jan Fields, served as one of SlowE’s first jurors.

“We had 188 entries from four states and 77 images were chosen, representing 40 artists,” says Curry. Jurors selected photographs from slides in a blind entry process. Noel hung the show in a large meeting room in a late 1800’s building that served as Pike County’s first high school. Volunteers constructed the display boards and helped with the lighting.

“After the first year, we knew we wanted to keep on going,” Curry says.

It became a bit of trial and error. The first SlowE was held every weekend for a month but they determined it diluted the viewing and burned out the volunteers. They tried different variations of weekends and months before settling on one three-day weekend in September. Curry says they also tried having two separate divisions – one that featured images of Pike and one for images from the southern states.

“We took an unattractive alley and transformed it. We blew up photos into banners, added landscaping, a wooden fence and pea gravel. We took an eyesore and turned it into a place people wanted to be, and the process we created a yearlong awareness of SlowE.”

– Beverly Walter, head of the Zebulon Downtown Development Authority (DDA)

“We consolidated after six years to keep it simple and make room for a solo show awarded to the last year’s first prize,” says Curry.

The show still stays at about 75 photographs, but has grown so much that the jurors now have to select photographs from nearly 1,000 submissions. There is also a youth show for budding photographers in grades K-12, which is sponsored by the Pike County Arts Council.

“It really has been slow, steady, incremental growth and now we’re at about 900 entries plus-or-minus every year,” says Curry, noting that in 2019 they received entries from photographers representing 21 states.

While SlowE has expanded beyond anyone’s expectations, one thing that hasn’t changed is the grass roots effort it takes to pull it all together. Curry says it involves about 75 volunteers, many of whom have been volunteering since first show. And with a shortage of lodging options, some even open their homes to jurors and visiting photographers. Andrea Noel still hangs the show every year. The jurors also serve on a volunteer basis.

“It’s a community effort and it has sparked community pride,” says Curry. “We couldn’t get it done without the volunteers – they give of their time, talents and even their homes.”

The show is paid for through grants, sponsors and contributions. A \$50 entry fee is also collected from the photographers.

“We’ve always done SlowE with our fingers crossed,” Curry says. “We’ve been the recipient of a grant from the Georgia Council for the Arts that’s been a lifesaver. We have loyal local businesses and ‘Friends of SlowE’ who contribute.”

One challenge they have is capitalizing on the benefits of SlowE beyond the one weekend in September. Four years ago, they developed an Artist in Residence program in which photographers apply to spend a week focusing on a project about the rural south. Curry selects two photographers and they stay in an Airbnb she owns.

“It gives them a reason to come to Zebulon and Pike County,” she says. “We get a lot of repeat artists.”

Through a tourism product development grant, the city of Zebulon created the Southside Photo Walk.

“We took an unattractive alley and transformed it,” says Beverly Walter, the head of the Zebulon Downtown Development Authority (DDA). “We blew up photos into banners, added landscaping, a wooden fence and pea gravel. We took an eyesore and turned it into a place people wanted to be, and in the process we created a yearlong awareness of SlowE.”



Photos courtesy of Dale Niles

Preserving Pike County's buildings

From day one, historic preservation has been at the heart of SlowE. The show is always held in one of the county's historic buildings in order to "highlight their usefulness and potential for repurposing it in the 21st century," Curry says. And the committee always picks one building as the recipient of a donation of profits from each show.

Donations from SlowE – usually between \$2,000 and \$8,000 a year – are made to Pike Historic Preservation (PHP) Inc., a 501(c)3 that was started a few years before SlowE. Curry calls it the official "parent organization" of SlowE. These funds have allowed the organization to restore historic buildings with the hopes that they can be brought back to life for another use.

The Whiskey Bond Barn - believed to have been built around 1870 – is one of those buildings. Back in the day, whiskey bonding barns were used as warehouses to store whiskey as it aged. The PHP saved, restored and repurposed the county's Whiskey Bonding Barn and financed its sale to a local family-based event firm. It is now used for weddings, parties and other gatherings.



Photos courtesy of Dale Niles

“It’s important to preserve a part of the town’s history. Having SlowE in the building not only gives visitors a view of the history, but it also brings people to Concord.”

– John Strickland, Mayor of Concord

The PHP is partnering with the Zebulon DDA to restore the old Zebulon School building, which was built in 1926 and closed in 1979. According to Walter, the building was literally falling in. It has taken nearly 20 years, but renovations are close to starting, with plans to turn it into a boutique hotel. Zebulon DDA has been piecing together a mix of funding, including community donations, state and federal funding sources, and historic tax credits. A new roof has already been installed, and plans call for the six classrooms to be turned into 13 hotel rooms. The old auditorium will house a bar, restaurant and event space. Curry and Walter say the project should be finished in mid 2020.

Besides preserving the older buildings, SlowE has served as the catalyst to improving downtowns. The square in downtown Zebulon is lined with businesses around the perimeter – including Curry’s bookstore “A Novel Experience.” At the center is the Pike County Courthouse – rumored to be the oldest working courthouse in the state. Dan Dunnahoo, a retired high school art teacher and head of the Pike County Arts Council, is renovating a former insurance office into a coffee shop.

For the last several years, SlowE has been staged at the old Strickland’s building in nearby Concord. The Strickland family settled in Concord in 1887 and built a thriving family business, and this building was at the heart of it where they processed cotton and fertilizer and on the main floor housed a general store. John Strickland, part of the family’s fifth generation, held on to the business until 1992 and when it closed, gave the building to the city of Concord. It is now used for events.

“It’s important to preserve a part of the town’s history,” says Strickland, who now serves as the town’s mayor. “Having SlowE in the building not only gives visitors a view of the history, but it also brings people to Concord.” He admits that Concord is still a work in progress as they try to bring new businesses, but having a reason to come into the city is a big help.

“Tourism is a great economic development tool, and with SlowE and the things we are doing with the arts throughout the year, people have a reason to come to Pike County.”

- Beverly Walter, head of the Zebulon Downtown Development Authority (DDA)

Molena - just a few miles away - is also undergoing a transition. One block was snapped up by a businessman from out of town who came to SlowExposures. He has leased every building and the town now has a bed and breakfast with a restaurant and several boutiques.

Walter says there are still challenges in these towns that they are hoping to address. For example, there are no “white table cloth” restaurants, and lodging has always been a challenge. But she’s hopeful that all of that is changing.

“Tourism is a great economic development tool,” she says. “And with SlowE and the things we are doing with the arts throughout the year, people have a reason to come to Pike County. They need places to eat, places to shop, something interesting to look at and a place to sleep. You need a critical mass of these things, and we are almost there.”



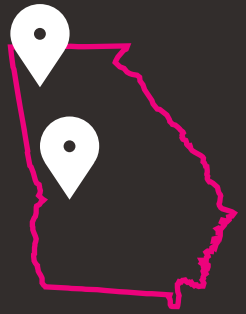
Photos courtesy of Dale Niles

LEVERAGING PUBLIC
INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS

The Role of Arts-based Economic
Development Strategies in Rural
Georgia Communities

PARADISE GARDEN

PASAQUAN



A division of the
Georgia Department of
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PARADISE GARDEN AND PASAQUAN – Artists’ Environments Boost Tourism

In 1977, Howard Finster and Eddie Owen Martin were invited to attend an event for folk artists at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. A contingent from Georgia – led by then Georgia First Lady Mary Beth Busbee – met at the airport to fly up together. The way Martin – who called himself St. EOM – tells it, he showed up at the airport in his traditional Indian regalia and they went “by procession” onto the plane.

“Mrs. Busbee had me by the right arm, and the Reverend Finster was on the other side of her. And he was blowin’ a harp, and I was beatin’ on my African talkin’ drum and chantin’ at the same time as we walked on the plane. I think Mrs. Busbee was kinda startled.”

– Eddie Owen Martin

This example highlights the personalities of two artists who were known for their eccentricities, and who had just as many similarities as they did differences. Both men were self-taught artists, both were inspired by “visions” from the spiritual world, and both built their homes into artists’ environments that visitors now flock to.

The main similarity between their stories is that both of their homes – Finster’s Paradise Garden and Martin’s Pasaquan – and the art, buildings and structures that went along with them fell into disrepair after their deaths, and in both cases, community groups banded together to try to save and restore the properties.

Those efforts were successful, and now Paradise Garden in Summerville and Pasaquan in Buena Vista are tourist attractions that have helped breathe new life into the communities and have spurred economic development in both small towns. Here is their story.



Howard Finster, a self-taught artist from Chattooga County, sits atop his “Paradise Garden,” a sculpture garden filled with mixed-media creations next to his home in Pennville. Finster began work on the garden in 1961. Photograph by Bud Lee.



Photo of Eddie Martin courtesy of the South-Central Georgia Folklife Project collection (AFC 1982/010), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Photographer: Carl Fleischhauer.

Paradise Garden

A visit to Paradise Garden today is almost an assault on the senses. With so much to see, the eye doesn't know where to look. Concrete walkways that thread around the property shimmer with pieces of broken glass and mirrors – and maybe the odd fork. Sculptures and statues were created from everything from concrete to textile spindles to Coke bottles and Cadillac hubcaps. Finster also built several buildings, including the Rolling Chair Ramp, the Meditation Chapel, the Mirror House, the Bible House, the Cadillac Shed, the Bottle House and the icon of Paradise Garden, the World Folk Art Church. How he put it all together in a cohesive pattern is probably the reason he has been called a “visionary genius.”



Photo provided by the Paradise Garden Foundation

Reverend Finster, as he was known, settled in Trion, Ga., from Alabama in the late 1930s shortly after he was married. Though he started preaching when he was 16, it became official when he was ordained as a Baptist minister in 1940.

In 1976 Finster, who said he had visions from God from time to time, received one that told him to “paint sacred art.” By that time, he had moved his family to an unincorporated area known as Pennville outside of Summerville and called his property Paradise Garden. From that moment on, Finster created art with an evangelical message. Bible verses peppered everything he painted – from buildings in his backyard to paintings to Coke bottles – in what has been described as “preaching with his paintbrush.”

Finster created nearly 47,000 individual works of art over a 26-year period. Artists like Keith Haring visited Paradise

“When Paradise Garden was in private ownership, it struggled to get the funding and resources it needed to save it. People in the community realized it was something worth saving.”

– Jason Winters, Commissioner, Chattooga County

Garden. Members of the Athens-based rock group R.E.M. helped Finster with his garden and shot the first video for their song “Radio Free Europe” there. Finster collaborated with R.E.M. lead singer Michael Stipe on the album cover for *Reckoning*. Finster also painted the cover art and promotional images for the Talking Heads’ album *Little Creatures*.

Finster died in 2001, and his property changed hands several times. Built on a swamp, a small army of volunteers could not maintain what Finster created, and Paradise Garden began falling apart.

Enter leaders from Chattooga County – led by Sole Commissioner Jason Winters – who stepped up to figure out a way to save Paradise Garden.

“When Paradise Garden was in private ownership, it struggled to get the funding and resources it needed to save it,” says Winters. “People in the community realized it was something worth saving.”



Photo provided by the Paradise Garden Foundation



Photos provided by the Paradise Garden Foundation

“Paradise Garden has turned into an economic development engine for northwest Georgia, northeast Alabama and southern Tennessee.”

- Tina Cox, Executive Director

They needed a funding model that would make it feasible for the county to buy Paradise Garden – what Winters calls a “pathway.” Luckily he found that pathway in the form of a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC).

In 2003, Chattooga County acquired four acres of Paradise Garden for \$125,000, including all of the buildings and three adjacent lots. Thanks to another grant from ArPlace America as well as private funding, the county was able to obtain another \$600,000 to restore the buildings and secure much of the collection. The county now owns the land but leases it to the Paradise Garden Foundation for a dollar a year over 50 years.

The foundation hired Jason Poole, a Summerville native who had just overseen the renovation of Mt. Vernon – George Washington’s home in Virginia – as its first executive director. Under Poole’s leadership, the swamp was cleared, buildings were stabilized and restored, and the mosaic pathways were uncovered and additional mosaic sidewalks discovered in the process. Paradise Garden became a tourist attraction.

And that’s just what Winters and others in Chattooga County had hoped would happen. All along, they had been looking for something to jumpstart Chattooga County’s economy.

“During the time we were right in the middle of the recession,” he remembers. “Unemployment in the county was at 17 percent. Our downtown corridor was really suffering. Part of this project was really reaching for anything we could do to increase tourism and increase traffic in our community. We realized this is a great draw for us.”

It worked. Winters says there has been a substantial increase in businesses opening in downtown Summerville since Paradise Garden reopened.

“Paradise Garden has turned into an economic development engine for northwest Georgia, northeast Alabama and southern Tennessee,” says Tina Cox, who took over as executive director in 2018 after Jordan Poole left. “We attract visitors from all over the region, the U.S. and internationally. New businesses including art galleries, restaurants, art studios and shops have opened.”

And it spurred beautification efforts. Harry Harvey, Summerville’s mayor, says the look of downtown has improved with streetscape projects, better signage and murals. “Having people come into downtown enhances what we are doing,” he says. “Visitors spend time and money here. We are fortunate to have Paradise Garden nearby.”

Neighboring Trion has benefitted as well. “Paradise Garden brings major tourism traffic to Trion’s restaurants and retailers,” says Mayor Larry Stansell, a personal friend of Howard Finster’s and supporter of Paradise Garden.

Cox estimates Paradise Garden brings in about 6,500 people annually to Summerville and Trion.

Another big tourism draw is “Finster Fest” a weekend-long arts festival that started in 1991 to celebrate Finster’s life. The event lost steam when the property began deteriorating. But it’s now back and held at Paradise Garden every Memorial Day weekend, showcasing southern self-taught contemporary artists and folk artists.

“It took awhile to get it going again,” she says, “but over the last few years we’ve really hit our stride. It draws people in from all over. In 2019, we had over 2,100 visitors.”

Cox says Paradise Garden’s annual operating budget is \$240,000 a year. Income is generated through three fundraisers, including Finster Fest and patron parties in Atlanta and Summerville, as well as admission fees, tours, summer camps, adult art classes, a music concert series, art exhibits and the gift shop. Paradise Garden uses businesses, services and contractors in Chattooga County, stimulating the local economy year-round.

The Paradise Garden Foundation turned a duplex building on the property into two Airbnbs, and final touches are being put on a third one that will serve as both event space and lodging options for those in the area. The Airbnbs bring in additional operating income for Paradise Garden and when not in use, serve as a creative artist residency for artists, writers and musicians.

To Tina Cox, an artist and a personal friend of Howard Finster’s, serving as executive director at Paradise Garden to preserve his art and his legacy is an honor.

“I view it more as a privilege, not a job,” she says.



Photos provided by the Paradise Garden Foundation



Photo provided by Columbus State University

Pasaquan

“I built this place to have somethin’ to identify with, ‘cause there’s nothin’ I see in this society that I identify with or desire to emulate. Here I can be in my own world, with my temples and designs and the spirit of God.”

That’s how St. EOM describes Pasaquan, the property that was left to him in 1956 when his mother died. He left Buena Vista – a tiny town about 35 miles southeast of Columbus – when he ran away to New York City at age 14.

When he returned home, he began transforming the farmhouse and the surrounding acreage into a place that paid homage to “Pasaquoyanism,” a culture that came to him through visions. He created a magical place filled with temples, pagodas, walls and totems that were covered in brightly colored paint. When he wasn’t building, he was reading fortunes in the front room of his house to help pay the bills.

“He created Pasaquoyans from his vision and believed they were gender fluid beings from the future,” says Mike McFalls, director of Pasaquan and professor of art at Columbus State University. “His ideas of spirituality and philosophy influenced his work. Though he only had an eighth grade education, he was a genius in his own right. He was extremely curious of culture.”

In 1986 the work of St. EOM came to an end when he passed away and his property was bequeathed to the Marion County Historical Society. In 2013, the Historical Society passed it on to the Pasaquan Preservation Society (PPS). Fred Fussell, the head of PPS, wrote to the Kohler Foundation – an organization “committed to the preservation of art environments and important collections” – for consideration for one of their grants. He was denied.

For the next 10 years, Fussell and PPS cobbled together a series of grants to keep the property going – installing a fence and a new roof as well as a security system and a climate control system. They put on a few events that brought in visitors.

“We did what we could to keep the place from completely falling apart,” says Fussell, “But we didn’t have the expertise or the money to do any more than that.”

In 2013, Fussell once again applied to the Kohler Foundation and this time was accepted. The foundation, based in Wisconsin, undertook a multi-million dollar two-year renovation, restoring the property and all of the artwork to its original form.

“People became excited about the re-opening of Pasaquan and the possibility of tourism and the potential of what it could do for Buena Vista.”

- Debby Ford, President of the Marion County Chamber of Commerce

Kohler brought in a team of experts in preservation and restoration. They also hired students from Columbus State University to help with the project.

One of those students was Charles Fowler, an art major whose primary job was to meticulously match the paint to its original color. “Every structure was repainted,” he says. “However, if there was a piece St. EOM had not finished, it stayed that way.”

Under the grant agreement, PPS was required to turn the property over to the Kohler Foundation, which would find a new entity to maintain and take care of the property. Columbus State University agreed to take it over when the project was complete.

“We had to agree to let it go, and everything would become Kohler’s property,” says Fussell. “We felt good about that.”

Pasaquan is now under the control of the Columbus State Foundation, which is responsible for the operating budget. As director, McFalls is in charge of budget development, programming and curatorial work. Funds are raised annually through events, contributions from Pasaquan visitors, direct fundraising appeals and grant requests.

Pasaquan reopened on October 22, 2016, and McFalls says they average about 3,100 visitors per year. They don’t formally charge admission, but ask for a “suggested donation” of \$10. Fowler, who now lives on the property and runs the day-to-day operations, says donations average out to be about \$5 a person.

Like Paradise Garden, the resurrection of Pasaquan has had a positive effect on the community that sits outside its gates.

“People became excited about the re-opening of Pasaquan and the possibility of tourism and the potential of what it could do for Buena Vista,” says Debby Ford, president of the Marion County Chamber of Commerce.

As a result of increased tourism and other factors, she says 24 new businesses have opened since the announcement of Kohler Foundation’s commitment to Pasaquan’s restoration. These include Five Points Berries Winery, the Front Porch Coffee Club, the Swamp Fox Distilling Company, People’s Bank of Georgia, The Performance Academy and several other shops and businesses. Four buildings have also been restored around the square. Ford has applied for and received several Georgia Department of Economic Development Tourism Product Development grants, among other grants, to help carry out various efforts. They are currently waiting to hear on one that would fund a new streetscape project.

“Having something that people are interested in seeing – like an arts based environment – is the engine that helps pull the train for tourism and economic growth,” she says.



Photos provided by Georgia Municipal Association



Photos provided by Georgia Municipal Association

And McFalls hopes to keep bringing people to Pasaquan and Buena Vista with programming. Columbus State runs a Resident Artist Program that assists artists in the creation of new works inspired by Pasaquan and St. EOM. One artist even created “Eddie’s Stone Song” a Pasaquoyan Opera, which premiered over two evenings and brought in over 470 guests. In 2019, the first “Pasafest” – a music and art festival – was held at Pasaquan. McFalls reports that 750 people were on site that day. He hopes it will become a yearly event.

Like Cox, McFalls is happy to be doing his part to preserve the legacy of one of Georgia’s well-known visionaries.

“Pasaquan gives you an inside look into how St. EOM lived and worked,” he says. “He took basic materials and transformed them in art. He was a true visionary.”



Photo provided by Columbus State University

“ Pasaquan gives you an inside look into how St. EOM lived and worked. He took basic materials and transformed them in art. He was a true visionary. ”

– Mike McFalls, director of Pasaquan and professor of art at Columbus State University



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