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The Birth of an Arts Scene

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THE BIRTH OF AN ARTS SCENE

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ABSTRACT

Scenes, created and defined by particular social settings offer a central activity that help to focus community interaction, a sense of purpose and of being in the right place. This dissertation is about the grassroots development of an art scene in the most unlikely of places – Las Vegas, a city sociologists have often described as having an isolating character with an outward focus on tourism, a weak civic culture and social fragmentation, resulting in an individually-focused and socially isolated population.

Using the multiple techniques of ethnographic research, this work comes out of: (1) conversations with early visionaries, (2) participant observation and (3) a wide assortment of secondary data, both local and national. My ethnographic account of the development of the Las Vegas art scene highlights the efforts of early visionaries, internal conflicts over its design and implementation (gallery walk or festive block party) of the monthly city-wide First Friday event and activities within the Arts District, the impact of a corporate revitalization of the Entertainment District in the old downtown area (Downtown Project), and the sudden purchase of the non-profit First Friday trademark by the managing conglomerate connected to the Downtown Project.

This study has four key findings. First, I found support for the idea that the Las Vegas art scene can be interpreted as a response to the isolating, and individualizing character of Las Vegas. With a monthly gathering of massive crowds within the 18 blocks of the Arts District, also called the “18b,” First Friday has become a type of temporary community focused upon an organized focal experience for a wide variety of artistic styles through authenticating cultural and aesthetic activities and experiences. Second, the burgeoning arts culture of Las Vegas has formed a loosely organized social

world for participants to share meaning and interests and at times conflict, such as the polarization around a long standing internal conflict regarding the implementation of First Friday (arts walk vs. street festival). Third, the Las Vegas arts community is an important repository for social capital, especially if more social venues are developed where friends and acquaintances can meet, talk and relax (Oldenberg 2001). At the same time, while third places, such as The Arts Factory or The Funk House will be necessary to maintaining the 18b, it is unclear if the Arts District, in and of itself can ever become a ‘big third place’ (Borer 2008) like that of the Entertainment District in old downtown. As long as resources are directed primarily to the Downtown Project and the downtown area is marketed as a “to be seen” tourist destination, the 18b will not rise to the level of a city-wide destination. Fourth, the promotion of Las Vegas as a center for the arts is premised on the idea that the commodification of art has the power to engage and transform [cities]. However any “meaning” construed from the consumption of art must depend upon the life history and/or experience of the consumer, and while art has a strong influence on those who create art and for some who see it, art also marks hierarchies and social distancing. Art (gallery, public street murals etc.) alone, however, cannot change the economic climate when those without social capital have to live at a basic survival level.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

This study is about the early development of the local arts scene in Las Vegas, Nevada. Specifically, I describe the arts scene as a grassroots process of community building in a city often described as unfriendly to locals, lacking a communitarian spirit, and low on social capital. I argue that attempts by Las Vegas residents, artists and entrepreneurs to establish community connections organized around artistic expression is, in part, a response to feelings of alienation, social disconnection, and a desire for local cultural expression. I also explain the Las Vegas art scene as part of a larger downtown redevelopment plan shaped by local government, developers, and myriad players in the business community.

Drawing upon participant observation, in-depth interviews, and secondary data sources such as editorials, newspaper articles and websites and documents collected while visiting the Arts District and First Friday, I describe the competing visions for the downtown arts scene as well as the challenges faced by art scene entrepreneurs to establish a cultural foothold in a town dominated by the import economy of tourism and gaming on the world renowned casino corridor known as the “Las Vegas Strip.” I also describe the wide range of people, interests, and experiences that make up the complex community of art scene participants in an effort to understand precisely how scenes are organized and the ways that they are meaningful to the participants. By examining the process of scene creation, I hope to reveal insights about how people in impersonal urban contexts construct meaningful and enjoyable lives.

As Pfadenhauer (2005:6) notes, “...scene research is research on lifestyle and community-building ... and the communication of common interests by its members,

research on them requires a focus on interaction, meaning, identity, and social experience.” Locating this ethnography within a city known for spectacles of both sight and sound sheds some light on some Las Vegas particularities. Focusing on the narratives of participants grounds this ethnography and provides a way of unpacking the underpinnings of an art scene. Because scenes are human communities, this study provides a rich opportunity to assess the meaning of place and community in scene development. As participants make statements that reflect how a place is meaningful in particular ways, it is possible to describe and understand the search for an authentic community and also what human accomplishments are possible in a “spectacle city”.

I pursued these specific research questions:

- What factors explain the development of the downtown Las Vegas arts scene?
- Specifically, what social networks, cultural activities, and physical spaces played a role in scene development?
- To what degree can the Las Vegas arts scene be explained as a search for urban community?
- What meanings does the art scene hold for the participants?
- How has the scene changed over time and what factors caused those changes?

While numerous researchers have studied various scene settings, there is still a dearth of systematic studies describing the early development of social scenes. I do not intend this study as a definitive history of the art scene in Las Vegas. It is instead an

ethnographic sample, serving to explain how an art scene was created and evolved and how participants worked to make it a reality.

I take a phase approach to describing the Las Vegas arts scene. I begin with the earliest phases of the downtown arts scene. Between 1998 and 2002, a small network of artists and entrepreneurs imagined ways to regularly draw like-minded people to the downtown area for community building, artistic inspiration, and business opportunities. This early phase was fraught with social conflicts over competing visions for art and community and organizational struggles over resource contributions and where to center the hub of art activity.

Phase two covers the period between 2002 and 2006, during which several shifts occurred in the downtown arts scene. For one, the fledgling arts scene morphed into an official Arts District with the moniker, 18b. The new district status emerged from new revenue streams flowing from a city government pushing its vision of downtown revitalization. The district's hub began to center squarely on two closely linked yet competitive visionaries and their businesses. As the 18b district grew, the First Friday event began to draw thousands for a one-night festival that in name revolved around art and in practice demonstrated a pent up desire by attendees to connect with others who might share interests, styles, and attitudes, in a town inundated by the out-of-town tourist maelstrom. The festival nature of the First Friday event became a focus of contention among a range of arts district interests. As public and private investment flowed into downtown, the area's physical infrastructure was rapidly transformed. However, many key players in the arts district continued to wonder about the downtown

identity, the role of art in (re)vitalization, and the arts district's economic and cultural viability.

Phase three is characterized by shifts flowing from the Great Recession, which began in 2007. Downtown revitalization efforts slowed as the economic downturn ravaged city budgets. Arts District businesses struggled and some key players in the early 18b efforts closed their doors. But it wasn't just downtown art activities that felt the pinch. The Las Vegas Art Museum closed as well. Yet, the community spirit at the heart of the 18b persisted, albeit not without strains. Among other things, a new influx of private investment flowed into downtown, spearheaded by Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh and his Downtown Project group. Investments in an emerging second arts hub on East Fremont Street, which had struggled to draw entrepreneurial interest as 18b emerged, quickly began to bear fruit and thrive under the Downtown Project's investments. The character of those investments and their consequences, raise important questions about community, art, and the future of the downtown scene.

I have bookended my three analytic chapters described above with a literature review and methodological chapters on the front end, and a conclusion on the back end. To establish some context for the study, I now discuss the contours of Las Vegas' social and economic development and strains the development created. I then follow with a chapter that discusses the scholarly literature on scenes, social spaces and places, networks, and community.

Las Vegas, Art, and the Question of Community

In many ways this project is about the inner structure and social "engine" of a scene, specifically the downtown Las Vegas art scene and thus about values and

fragments of a larger panorama or worldview in which participants confirm their values against the outside world. The current art scene in Las Vegas did not just appear, but was the result of many attempts by artists and people interested in art to establish a cultural community in the city. With a high degree of social alienation, caused by factors that I examined in this study, and very little infrastructure for art, that task was difficult. That said, the city's penchant for celebrating the novel and a willingness to entertain new ideas, offered opportunities for arts district leaders.

In this dissertation, I try to show that attempts by artists, the cultural community, and entrepreneurs to establish community connections organized around artistic expression is, in part, a response to feelings of alienation, social disconnection, and a desire for local cultural expression. Hence the driver or engine for community connections comes from a form of social disconnection.

Below, I briefly describe Las Vegas' exceedingly rapid economic and population growth that brought hundreds of thousands of new residents to the area during the last three decades. This study is also focused on the impact of the relatively low degree of social capital and community that exists in Las Vegas partly as a result of the rapid influx of residents to this relatively young city (Dassopoulos, Batson, Futrell, and Brents, 2012). I then discuss early grassroots visions focused on creating an arts community in downtown Las Vegas to bring together a range of artists, performers, and patrons to set the stage for the 18b Arts District.

Explosive Growth of the Spectacle City

The Las Vegas metropolitan area led the nation in population growth during the 1990s at 66.2%, almost doubling the rate of population growth of second ranked Arizona

(CensusScope, 2000). Population growth in the Las Vegas metropolitan region continued apace in the 2000s with roughly half a million people arriving between 2000 and 2007. Population growth has slowed with the declining economy and yet people continue to move to Las Vegas. An urban area that hosted slightly more than 852,000 people in 1990 is now home to more than 2 million residents.

While growth in the Las Vegas area has been steady, population increased with the rise of the gaming industry. As early as the mid-1950's The Strip, with the El Rancho Vegas, the Desert Inn, Dunes, Sahara and the Riviera, drew gambling tourists. The Riviera built the first high-rise hotel in 1955 (Moehring 2000:78). The Stardust, which opened July 2, 1958, had a golf course built in the 1960s, along with a country club, the largest pool and sign in the world, a grand prix race track and a topless Lido production. "Its Café Continental Stage was technically the best equipped in town with six hydraulic lifts able to move props, musicians, and performers thirty feet below or ten feet above stage, making the theatre an excellent venue for large production shows" (Moehring 2000:83). As the hotels competed with each other, the spectacles became more unique and extravagant.

In the 1960's growth began to accelerate at a remarkable pace. Jay Sarno developed Caesars Palace on the strip (Moehring 2000:116-117), which was different from the other hotels in Las Vegas. His lavish hotel/casino was a Greco Roman themed property that cost \$19 million dollars to build, a record amount at the time. "Caesars Palace was an immediate sensation with its crescent-shaped 14-story tower of sumptuous rooms...The eighteen huge fountains bordering the front entrance's 135-foot driveway, the imported Italian cypresses, the Florentine-statuary, the extravagantly priced dinners in

the Bacchanal Room, all contributed to an absurd pretension beloved by jet-setters and social climbers alike” (Moehring 2000:117). The competition for ever more spectacular hotels had begun. Soon after, the International Hotel was the first hotel to have a wide variety of ethnic cuisines and restaurants and then the MGM Grand was built.

From the 1970s on “in the thirty-five years thereafter the valley underwent the kind of explosive growth that few American cities have ever experienced” (Moehring and Green 2005:205). From 1970 to 2000, population went from 270, 000 to 1.3 million and from the 1990s and on into the 21st century Las Vegas was the fastest growing metropolitan area in the United States (Moehring and Green 2005:205). In 2011, the metropolitan area of Clark County had a population of 1,967,722, an 0.8% increase over that of July 2010. State Demographer Jeff Hardcastle predicts that Clark County will grow by roughly 1.2% to 1.4% over the next ten years to a population of 2.2 million by 2021 (Hardcastle 2012).

During these phenomenal growth phases, the spectacles in the “spectacle city” multiplied. The MGM Grand was built in 1973, and its theme was based on the movie Grand Hotel. It was now the “largest hotel in the free world... with its 2,100 luxurious rooms, five restaurants, two showrooms, and jai alai court”, which “rivalled the glamour of Caesars Palace across the street” (Moehring 2000:122).

While the resorts of the 70’s were spectacular for the time, the megaresort era began in the 1980’s as Steve Wynn began building bigger and even more spectacular destination resorts of extraordinarily large size with large scale attractions and high-end amenities. “When the Mirage opened in 1989, a new standard was set, by which every future resort would be judged. Its flaming volcano, white tiger exhibit, and bottle-nosed

dolphins (which arrived from the Atlantic in 1990) attracted so many visitors that in just one year the resort replaced Hoover Dam as the state's leading tourist attraction" (Moehring and Green 2005:210).

Bigger and bigger resorts, with ever more spectacular exhibits and attractions followed. "The Excalibur (1990), the second MGM Grand (1993), and places like New York-New York (1997), the Luxor (1993), Venetian (1999), and Paris (1999), whose "Disneyfied" and "event" architecture were major draws in themselves, made the Strip more popular than ever" (Moehring and Green 2005:210). That Las Vegas has also been a city of changing images is clear. For example, while there was an effort to develop a family friendly image in the late 90s and early 2000s, some casinos like Circus Circus cater to families, the concept was not successful. According to Stephen Brown, the director of the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) at UNLV, about a third of the people coming to Las Vegas, in 2012, out of a total of 38 million, come from Southern California, which has many family entertainment destinations, such as Disneyland (Brown 2012).

Most people don't bring children to Las Vegas. Sixty -nine percent of the people who came to Las Vegas in 2010 were adults and only 7 percent brought someone under 21 (Sylvester 2012). According to Brown there were two business models in the 1990s and 2000s, one for the luxury resorts and one for families. The family model didn't work. In 2004 the 'What Happens in Vegas' ad campaign sent Las Vegas back almost exclusively to the old model of an adult playground. As University of Nevada sociologist Barbara Brents (2012) points out:

'What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas' is one of the most successful campaigns in advertising history, fostering the impression that a weekend

here is still a walk on the wild side—but in a safe, acceptable kind of way. The city thrives on the righteousness of its critics: moral resistance feeds the market for hedonistic freedom, and it helps keep our economy alive.

Even during the economic downturn that started in 2008, CityCenter megaresort was built and became the new largest megaresort in Las Vegas. At a cost of around \$8.5 billion, the CityCenter resort is not only the biggest megaresort in Las Vegas, but it was also the most expensive to build. It is designed to be a walkable city-within-a-city with 6,300 rooms, a large casino, 42 restaurants and bars, several spas and a 500,000 square foot shopping center (Robison 2009).

The resorts of Las Vegas were designed for a global taste for riches, eroticism, and power (Harries 1990) and while there is little doubt that the megaresorts are impressive and beyond anything that could have been imagined in 1970, visitors (and local residents) are fickle, as the last resort becomes the yardstick against the next extravaganza. One issue with creating spectacular commercial urban environments is that the spectacle environment has to constantly become more extravagant (Ritzer 2005). We see the trend clearly in Las Vegas' constant and continual upgrading of hotels and gaming properties with unique themes and experiences to attract new visitors.

Las Vegas is clearly one of the world's great spectacle cities. It has been packaged for consumption since its early beginnings with Senator William Clark's efforts to establish the town as a stop for travelers. As Las Vegas grew and annual gaming revenues increased, many began to consider Las Vegas as an adult pleasure oasis, also known as "Sin City".

In *Las Vegas, the Social Production of an All-American City*, Gottdiener, Collins and Dickens (1999) carefully describe how Las Vegas became a fantasy town. Because

electricity was cheap after Hoover Dam was constructed, businesses used neon signs to advertise downtown casinos and attract car visitors on Los Angeles highway, which later became Las Vegas Boulevard or the Strip. Like other U.S. cities, Las Vegas moved away from a manufacturing economy and became more interested in attracting private capital to make up for the loss of revenue (Harvey 1990:92). As these cities competed to attract capital with cooperation between the government and the private sector, they changed from manufacturing sectors to service and consumption oriented industry to expand capital accumulation (Lowes 2002, Zukin 1991). During this transition, what Harvey refers to as the “post industrial” city emerged as a spectacular urban space with market areas, malls, theme restaurants and cafes, various forms of entertainment, gaming properties, sport facilities, theaters and infrastructure for tourists, such as hotels and convention centers (Gottdiener 2001; Hannigan 1998), to counteract negative urban experiences (Judd 1999).

These resources were constructed to attract corporations and appeal to consumers and investment. They were built as relatively small, enclosed, affluent areas in downtowns to appeal to the affluent visitor and ward off the threatening natives (Fainstein and Gladstone 1999; Eisinger 2000)

Finally, the development of a street life has been an interesting outcome of the Strip culture. As casino themes became more and more elaborate and over time as the resorts on the Strip increased in number and proximity, these fantasy environments moved out into the street. Gottdiener, Collins and Dickens (1999) note that the pedestrian culture, now part of the experience of Las Vegas, both on the Strip and downtown does

“increasingly resemble other older and more traditional urban centers in the East and Midwest that thrive on an active street life” (Gottdiener et al. 1999:88).

Las Vegas has also been compared to Disneyland, as the ultimate exercise in human control and the penultimate dream world where everything is in its place and there is a place for everything. Bright (1987) describes Disneyland as a place where costumes, merchandise, architecture and landscaping, blend together in one harmonious, although naturally impossible, whole. However, it feels perfectly natural and you almost believe that you are somewhere else (Connellan 1996).

Gottdiener et al. (1999:69) claims that with help from Hollywood, the city has “...established its image in the American consciousness, as Las Vegas associations – brilliant neon displays, leggy showgirls, roulette wheels, high-stakes poker games, and the flash of cash – have become seminal signs in the basic vocabulary of our popular culture.” The adult theme park fantasy lures tourists for gaming and entertainment enterprises. The gambling fantasy has to do with working and middle class people living like rich people for a short time with the hope that they can “get lucky” and strike it rich permanently. To be rich and free with access to unlimited power and money is a fantasy that is hard to resist for many people. “In a society where the attainment of money, power, and sexual gratification are so closely intertwined, gambling is a high-risk activity that holds a strong attraction for millions of people” (Gottdiener et al. 1999:89).

For some visitors the fantasy is about escaping and Las Vegas is a perfect place to experience a short-lived withdrawal from one’s community and acquaintances. The well-known statement that “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” may very well create the setting for an average person to become a “player for a day,” temporarily live in an

environment with amenities and comforts from the “lives of the rich and famous,” and temporarily take on another identity as someone who does risqué things without worry that hometown friends and family will find out (Kane and Tucker 2004).

The profile of visitors and their activities has been changing in recent years. According to the Las Vegas Visitor Profile, an annual report detailing visitor trends, in 2014, the prototypical visitor to Las Vegas was “likely to be married (80%, up from 77% in 2011, 75% in 2012, and 79% in 2013), earning \$40,000 or more (85%, up significantly from 81% in 2010), and employed (64%, down from past years, 66% in 2011, 69% in 2012, and 67% in 2013). The average age was 42.5 (also down from past years).” “Visitors spent an average of \$281.88 for food and drink (up significantly from 2010 - 2013) and \$68.83 for local transportation (up significantly from 2012 and 2013). An average of \$149.77 was spent for shopping in 2012 and 2014, less than in 2010, 2011, 2013, and \$47.56 on shows (up from 2012 and 2013).” Some gaming behaviors also changed from previous years. “Seventy-one percent (71%) of 2014 visitors said they gambled while in Las Vegas, the same as last year, but down significantly from 80% in 2010, 77% in 2011, and 72% in 2012.” Gamblers spent an average of 2.6 hours per day gambling, the same as 2012, although down significantly from 2.9 hours each in 2010, 2011 and 2013. The average gaming budget in 2014 was the same as last year (\$530.11) and up significantly from 2010-2012. Twenty-five percent (25%) of visitors said they would be *more* likely to visit Las Vegas even with more places to gamble outside Las Vegas, the same as 2013 and 2013, but down significantly from 35% in 2010, and 39% in 2011” (Profile 2014).

Rapid Growth and Social Strains

Urban residents, planners, and policy-makers face a constant and vexing puzzle that centers on the issue of what makes a community a desirable place to live? The question is particularly important in Las Vegas because quality of life studies reveal fragile community connections, little interaction between neighbors, a corresponding sense of individual isolation, and low attachment to their community.

In 2008, Gallup and the John S and James L Knight Foundation initiated the Knight Soul of the Community project, a study designed to determine the most desirable community characteristics. Gallup researchers interviewed nearly 43,000 people in 26 communities across the U.S. about the qualities that attach people to places. Researchers asked about subjects ranging from commuter experiences, community leadership, and community safety to neighborhood walkability. Gallup researchers found three key aspects of community that made the respondents love their communities.

Aesthetics are vital. Researchers found that overall beauty of the physical setting is essential for a lovable city. Like many inner city areas around the nation, the Las Vegas downtown shows signs of neglect and disrepair. Also, like many downtown areas, the attempts to revitalize have focused, in part, on beautification.

Of course, the socializing aspects of the urban experience are also important for a strong community. Social offerings are the component that matters most to residents of a community. Urbanites crave a vibrant nightlife or parks and recreational activities where people can meet with friends for leisure activities. In strong communities, these opportunities should exist for every age and income level. While Las Vegas is rarely

described as inherently beautiful, there are many social offerings, although many of these are oriented toward adults and tourists, with locals and minors given much less attention.

Openness and tolerance are also critical factors for a vibrant and inclusive community. The key question is whether or not diverse groups of people can function in the community easily, efficiently, and without discrimination or other constraints. For instance, is the community open to different races, religions, children, immigrants, homosexual, lesbian, and transgendered persons? Las Vegas, to an extent, is a positive place for openness and currently is a city that is tolerant for many types of people, with a small but vibrant gay community, a growing Asian community and many senior citizen retirement areas (Florida 2012).

Richard Florida's 2012 Tolerance Index characterizes the Las Vegas-Paradise region as the 15th most tolerant area in the country. The index rates metropolitan areas using three variables; a) the share of foreign-born residents or immigrants; b) the concentration of gays and lesbians; and c) the level of racial and ethnic segregation. As a continuing trend the number of same-sex households in Las Vegas doubled between 2000 and 2010 (Associated Press, 2011). In 2009 Nevada also passed a series of laws to add more protections to transgender people and also to prohibit any discrimination based on sexual orientation in the areas of housing and employment.

Looking at quality of life issues, Futrell et al. (2010a) examined Las Vegas Valley resident's feelings of attachment to their communities. They found that less than 37% of the respondents reported a strong attachment to their communities compared to an average US response rate of nearly 70%. The report also highlights a number of other responses related to weak social bonds such as a negative view of the future. Like the

Knight Soul of the Community project, respondents mentioned the need for quality parks to support social interactions and contribute to community beauty.

The study also examined neighborhood bonds and found that participants “interact primarily with individuals they see regularly, those immediately proximate to them in their neighborhood” (City of Las Vegas “Your City Your Way” Initiative, Focus Group Findings, 2010b:15). Other than these close neighbors who help with plant watering, watching each other’s houses when they are away or if they get sick, the rest of the people in their neighborhoods are strangers to them. Many have tenuous connections to most of their neighbors.

Participants also talked about keeping their distance from others, because people perceive Las Vegas as a transient community with many people moving to Las Vegas for a short while and not establishing roots or being part of the community. The consequences of such a negative perception may be lowered expectations and a self-fulfilling prophecy to some extent. The value of involvement in the development of social capital has been extensively studied and cannot be underestimated (Putnam 2000). Some neighborhoods *better enable* social ties and community connections than others. In a study focused on urbanization, Lleyden (2003) found higher levels of social capital in walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods compared to life in car-dependent suburban subdivisions.

In *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam argues that the decline of social capital, civic engagement and social connectedness in the last two to three decades can be partly attributed to (1) a car-dependent life style since more time alone in a car reduces the time for civic engagements, (2) urban sprawl associated with social segregation and less

community participation and (3) reduced community “boundedness” resulting in community fragmentation and reduced opportunities for social involvement.

According to Freeman (2001:74), “the proportion of residents who drive to and from work is significantly and negatively related to the number of neighborhood social ties a respondent has.” He goes on to say that an increase of just 1% in the number of individuals who must drive to work is related to a 71% decrease of neighborhood ties. In this study, close social ties is less related to density than to auto-dependent neighborhoods where individuals have fewer “face-to-face” ties with neighbors. Las Vegas is a car-dependent commuter city.

Nevada also lacks some of the important infrastructure necessary for social capital. According to the 2009 Nevada Health Scorecard, Nevada ranks among the lowest states for factors related to child welfare including teenage birth rate, immunized children, children who received preventative medical or dental care and children who received treatment for emotional or developmental issues. Nevada is also 49th in the number of uninsured children and is 37th in the rate of age-adjusted mortality and 41st in the number of years lost due to premature death. Taken together, the lack of social capital in Las Vegas, according to Harwood and Freeman (2004), translates to a feeling of isolation among residents, and if scene development is an outcome of the search for community, then it is very possible that the drivers for the development of an art scene may also be the search for community within this very unique city.

Researchers now estimate that Las Vegas has one of the nation’s highest rates of homelessness, well over the national average (Homelessness in America 2014). The report also noted that the nation’s uninsured population increased by four percent or

1,642,158 people, going from 47,151,404 in 2009 to 48,793,562 in 2010, and Nevada's percentage of uninsured increased by 5.7% many of which live near city centers. As of December 2013, Nevada has the 2nd highest rate of the uninsured in the nation at 22 percent, Texas is at 24 percent. (leg.state.nv.us). Glaeser, Kahn and Rappaport (2008) point out that "the poor are over-represented in the central cities of every one of America's metropolitan areas." They go on to note that public transportation plays a large role in drawing those with low incomes to city centers. Las Vegas is no exception to this observation, and while suburban services are spread out making transport to residential areas scarce, the downtown area is well served (RTC 2014). Interestingly, the city public transport system offers two levels of service. More expensive premium transportation options (i.e., shorter waits) are available in tourist areas, such as the Strip. At the same time, other routes often run on 30, 45, or even 60 minute schedules. Nevertheless, access to public transportation in cities remains a driving force for the urbanization of poverty. Should low-income families and small businesses be displaced by the upper- or middle-income segments there may be little option for the poor in downtown areas.

It is hard to avoid gambling in Las Vegas. "There are 14,000 video poker and slot machines that chime day and night in Clark County, which includes Las Vegas and its suburbs in more than 1,400 restaurants and bars and retailers of all types, from big-chain groceries and drug stores to 7-Elevens and Kmart. That is not counting the 1,150 machines in McCarran International Airport. They are seemingly everywhere" (Skolnik 2011:33). Skolnik estimates that there are 115,000 compulsive or problem gamblers in Nevada, with most around or in Las Vegas.

Gamblers in Las Vegas also go to casinos that cater to residents known commonly as locals' casinos (Gottdiener et al. 1999). These casinos aggressively go after the local market. Local casinos use various methods to get Nevada residents into the casinos. They cater to locals by offering games not usually found on the Strip. These include bingo and looser blackjack tables and slot machines with higher payouts. They also have cheap food from fast-food restaurants and 'comps', special rewards for regular players, but that pay better than comparable programs on the Strip (Skolnick 2011).

In certain ways locals are treated much like the tourists, of interest to casinos for the money they can make from them. Casinos give local residents discounts to draw them into the casinos. For instance, "Paycheck Poker" is one way to draw them into the casinos. For a try at a special machine a local can cash their paycheck in the casino and then find themselves in a casino with cash. Pawn shops and payday loan companies are all over the city in large numbers. Supermarkets, convenience stores, and many restaurants, have video poker machine areas. Addictive personalities are drawn to gaming towns and Las Vegas offers numerous opportunities to keep a gambling interest (Aasvad 2003). There is a strong social impact to addictions of all types as compulsive habits influence relationships, health, education, work, employment and crime (Smith 1995).

Economic Ups and Downs

Decreasing home values in 2012 (-40%; Schiller Index 2012) have impacted the economy and decreased support that may have been made available to the arts in a more robust economy. In 2011, the average cost of a home was \$94,000 compared to \$233,000 in 2006, before the 2008 economic decline, as of December 2013, the average cost of a Las Vegas home was \$129,930, an indication of rising home process. By Jan 2015, the

average cost of a Las Vegas home increased to \$190,700. Overall, reports from the S&P/Case-Shiller (2013) indicates that the strongest gains were seen in the Southwest and the West; San Francisco home prices rose 24.5% followed by Las Vegas (+23.3%) and Phoenix (+20.6%).

The economic downturn also had an impact on employment in general. Previously, while most Las Vegas residents worked in service, sales or construction most did not make big salaries, but they did work. The distribution of occupations however changed during the downturn, primarily because of the loss of construction jobs. From Nov 2009 to Nov 2011, the city lost 26,100 construction jobs (59%). Leading to an unemployment rate of nearly 14% in the fourth quarter of 2011 (DETR 2011). Job growth, however has continued to slowly improve as reflected in unemployment rates of 12.6% in 2011, 11.8% in 2012 and 8.5% in 2014 (Brown 2012, Labor Statistics 2014), and as of January 2014, the unemployment rate for the Las Vegas-Paradise, NV Metropolitan Statistical Area was 8.9%, still much higher than the national rate of 6.7%, and among the highest in the US among large metropolitan areas with a census of one million or more (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014); as of January 2014, 39.7% of the state's population had been out of work 27 weeks or longer (PEW-Unemployment 2014). A proportion of the city's population, therefore, even if they were interested, may not have had the money to purchase art. At the same time, this situation may change in the future. According to a 2014 PEW report, Nevada now ranks sixth in the nation with the highest rate of nonagricultural job growth (PEW-Top Ten 2014).

At the same time, the greater metropolitan area of Las Vegas lost population due to economic decline. Data from the Visitors Authority (2014) indicates that, while more

than 100,000 people migrated to Clark County between 2005 and 2006, Clark County lost more than 10,000 residents between July 2007 and July 2008. In 2009 and 2010, the population increased somewhat (1.0% and 1.5%), following by a precipitous decline of 3.4% in 2011, roughly 69,000 people (LV Visitors Authority 2014). Some analysts say they had anticipated even more people leaving to seek employment elsewhere (Guerrero, 2010). Nevertheless, people started to come back into Clark County after a 3.4% decrease in 2011. In 2012, the population of Clark County increased by 2.1% (42,025 people), in 2013 by 2.7% (53,600 people). In 2014, the rate of increase declined to 1.9% (39,985 people).

While declining home values in 2009 greatly reduced the cost of living in the “Entertainment Capital of the World,” the 2013 composite cost of living indicates that Nevada is considered to be a medium cost area comparable to such areas as Portland-Vancouver-Beaverton, OR-WA metropolitan area or to Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington (PEW-living costs 2014).

Alienation

For some, city living is equated to alienation and the decline of community (Park; Burgess and McKenzie 1925; Kasnitz 1995). Additionally, as cities develop and the population grows, it becomes difficult to know your neighbors, as social relationships weaken and anonymity increases (Wirth 1938). According to Kasnitz (1995) residents develop a negative and blasé attitude as a coping mechanism in response to the alienating aspects of city living. And, with more and more people moving to Las Vegas and the lack of sufficient housing in the downtown area, the metropolitan area has shifted to suburbanization, which can further erode residents’ sense of community

Early observations in my study suggested that the attempt to organize an art scene in downtown Las Vegas was, at least in its initial stages, precisely a grassroots push to form a social space to enhance an otherwise alienating urban life through authenticating cultural and aesthetic activities and experiences. I will argue that social scenes, like art scenes, are organized around activities that provide meaningful experiences that are otherwise felt in only brief and transitory ways in participants' lives, or are completely absent.

Scene creation can be an act of resistance, but has seldom been explicitly studied in this way. By linking current ideas of resistance and the development of a scene, I hope to better clarify both why and how scenes are created and how scenes may operate as spaces of social freedom and expression that counteract the alienation and isolation that people feel in contemporary urban life.

How might a "scene" develop in a city without well-defined communities, and as a consequence, low social capital? Cohen and Fields' (1999) investigation of social capital in Silicon Valley provide useful comparison points for considering this question. Cohen and Fields call Silicon Valley "a world of strangers" (Cohen and Fields 1998:3). Much like Las Vegas, Silicon Valley's recent rapid and continuing growth and transient population provide little foundation for deep and enduring social connections to be built, although the alienating and isolating character of life does create a desire for these experiences. Silicon Valley's high tech industry draws workers from outside the area who move from company to company and also travel back and forth between different states and countries. Like Silicon Valley, Las Vegas is spatially isolated with sprawling urban forms.

But, according to Cohen and Fields (1998), Silicon Valley does not demonstrate the connection between social capital and economic prosperity that Putnam and others describe. Silicon Valley residents are highly educated and sought after workers, which is the source of their prosperity. In Las Vegas, an area reportedly low in social capital and where advanced education is not needed for many jobs, economic prosperity and social health are more tenuous. That said, low measures of trust and reciprocity among inhabitants is similar in both Silicon Valley and Las Vegas. Putnam (2000) describes dense networks of civic engagement that Silicon Valley has found difficult to establish. This, along with no long established business culture or institutions related to it, represented something of a blank canvas that developers shaped into an innovative, growing economy and community.

One important difference between Silicon Valley and Las Vegas has to do with the amount of human capital that the workers bring with them. In Silicon Valley, many high-tech workers are recruited for their educational status and special skills and because of this are given high salaries and decent living conditions. In contrast, many move to Las Vegas precisely for the low-skill requirements of many jobs produced in the casino industry and associated service sector. However, competition for employment is high in Las Vegas, and opportunities for social networking and community building are minimal as employment has a relationship to building of human capital.

Social Change, Art, and Communities

Scholars have identified many social change efforts to reshape society that occur outside of “normal politics.” Giddens (1991) calls this “life politics,” which refers to action that confronts aspects of power that constrain people’s potential for self-

expression, self-actualization, and a quality of life that they desire. Life politics is a form of resistance against the alienating and isolating tendencies of contemporary society.

These are struggles among people seeking to overcome the alienating, conformity pressures of mass society by developing counter identities and cooperative forms of social life that provide meaningful experiences with a degree of autonomy and self determination. The issues these struggles address and the form they take are varied. Scholars have identified them in small minimally organized grassroots actions all the way up to large-scale social movements organized around concerns such as gender, ethnicity, the environment and other social categories.

Las Vegas has been shaped primarily by the creation of spectacle and tourism for economic growth, with little attention to social needs/quality of life issues for citizens. In this sense the arts scene is, at least in part, a response to a hollow social experience for residents and was developed to fill a void left by extremely fast, other-oriented growth that targets tourists while leaving underdeveloped amenities to enhance local quality of life. Satisfying communities are composed of human networks where people produce various forms of human and cultural capital that give meaning to their lives. While the growth of an arts scene in Las Vegas presents an intriguing view of urban social change, comparisons with other cities can also provide a larger world context and a more balanced view to better contextualize and understand if and how Las Vegas will be able to address the place of local culture in a city of consumption.

Other cities have successfully negotiated the complicated puzzle of building and sustaining art scenes. For instance, Austin, Texas is well-known for its vibrant music scene. Wicker Park's arts and culture scene draws Chicagoans to a "neo-bohemian"

district filled with pubs, shops, and art galleries. Portland, Oregon evinces a strong commitment to art and community in neighborhoods across the city. Each of these urban areas boasts highly-educated populations, strong economies, and ethnic diversity.

These cities have also undergone revitalization efforts aimed at strengthening communities through business activities and cultural exchange. Austin's music scene has blossomed into an economic driver, as well as a city identifier. Now, the city's South by Southwest festival is world-renowned and helps to draw locals and tourists to its music and arts scene throughout the year. Known as a cultured city for its music, arts, libraries, and museums, Chicago also boasts the Wicker Park district, home to a mix of small businesses, boutiques, galleries and chic restaurants. Wicker Park has become a destination site for both visitors and residents alike for culture and entertainment, partially due to a mix of both bohemian and European groups that attracts an offbeat, counterculture crowd and drives an economy based on "hipness."

Portland's art scene inspired some of the early efforts to develop the arts scene in Las Vegas. Portland has numerous cultural options such as the Oregon Ballet Theatre, Oregon Symphony, Portland Opera and the HP Lovecraft Film Festival. The city also boasts a strong music scene. Portland's version of a monthly art walk, "First Thursday," offers residents numerous art previewing exhibitions in at least ten areas of the city, with the most well known area called the Pearl district.

Portland's Pearl District has followed the pattern described in Sharon Zukin's *Loft Living* (1989), where blighted communities seek to increase property values by recruiting and retaining artists to fill commercial needs to occupy and reside in the industrial buildings that are converted into a type of "loft complex cachet" that appeals to

up and coming city dwelling suburbanites. Gentrification then follows which, ironically, may push the artists who established the area's "coolness," out of the area. Portland's Pearl District is no exception. Developers arrived, threw out or co-opted the artists who lived cheaply and worked in the grimy lofts, displaced anyone who could not stand up to them, renamed the area along the lines of something that entices people to settle in suburbia – Rolling Hills for example, or in this case, Pearl District – bought low with government sponsored tax incentives and then sold high. City planners typically see gentrification as a positive form of revitalization (Freeman 2006). But, while gentrification may be good for some, it can have costs for those displaced.

In each city, grassroots cultural movements have been central to the development of their art scenes. Creative expression in the form of music and visual arts provide a focused activity that draws people together. Over time, these activities coalesced into prime economic drivers and key parts of each city's identity. These examples offer a sense of the social and economic patterns of scene development. In the next chapter, I discuss the theoretical approach I used to guide my study on art scene development in Las Vegas.

CHAPTER 2 - THEORETICAL APPROACH

My sociological approach to understanding urban transformation combines a focus on the role of social networks, cultural sensibilities, and community building with some emphasis on economy, investment, and the built environment. I conceptualize the developments in the Las Vegas downtown arts district as a process of scene creation. Below I begin by discussing the scene concept with an eye to how it has been used in the area of urban community. I then discuss the related topics of post-traditional communities and third place research. I end with a brief discussion of networks, before moving to research methods detailed in Chapter 3.

The Idea of a “Scene”

The idea of “scene” as a sociological concept is undertheorized and understudied. Scholars have used the term to describe several types of social contexts, but they typically have not taken on the task of theorizing and analytically mapping what scenes comprise. Two early studies that do use the idea of scene are *Hustler’s, Beats, and Others* (2006) by Ned Polsky and *Hippies of the Haight* (1972) by Sherri Cavan. For both authors, scene is used to describe environments, but, not yet as a tool to define and conceptualize what they are, why they develop, and how they are experienced (Futrell et al. 2006). Only a few researchers have more fully explored the analytic utility of the scene concept (Irwin 1977; Straw 1991; Shank 1994; Bennett 2004; Futrell et al. 2006).

“Scene” was first used by journalists in the 1940s as a term to describe the bohemian and marginal lifestyles of people involved in the jazz world. According to Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson’s *Introducing Music Scenes* (2004), this journalistic approach not only described music, dress, and style in a scene, but was also a cultural

resource for fans of particular musical genres, allowing them to develop collective expressions of “underground” or “alternative” identity that distinguished how they were culturally different from the mainstream. At the same time, urban scenes are distinguished by location and a particular type of cultural production that gives them unity, for example, a specific musical style or cultural activity like presenting new art. Beyond this we know relatively little about how they develop, the nature of the boundaries that circumscribe them, and the experiences people have in them.

Early Sociological Research on Scenes

In 1972, Sherri Cavan used the term scene interchangeably with subculture to describe the world of hippies in San Francisco. She described three properties of subcultural groups—(1) They are located in a particular historical place; (2) They have a commonly shared belief system; and (3) They are identifiable by their practices. As a subculture or scene she has them “living out their everyday life in the ecological confines of the Haight-Ashbury District and making sense of their own lives, and the lives of others in the District, in terms of the Hippie creed” (Cavan 1972: 40).

John Irwin (1977) more fully conceptualized the scene concept when he tried to make sense of communities he saw being created around voluntary activities, such as surfing or different types of music. He observed that people participated in these groups together in a variety of ways (for example, as a participant or a consumer), the groups were located in primarily modern urban circumstances, and the participants’ combined shared meanings and interests with a desire to be a part of a social activity, although involvement styles could vary greatly for each participant.

As Irwin unpacked the concept of scene, he specified it as an identifiable “non-instrumental lifestyle system” made up of voluntary participants who share a set of meanings, understandings, and interests (Irwin 1973:133). Bennett (1999) commented that for Irwin, scenes are not so circumscribed by normative boundaries to explicitly exclude many people, as is implied in the concept subculture. Participation is relatively open and fluid allowing people to gear into the activities of a scene in numerous ways and with varying degrees of action and commitment. Irwin extends the definition of the term in his discussion of “newer expressive and leisure social worlds which are more complex and much more important than mere forms of entertainment in supplying the city and urban world in general with its new primary meanings” (Irwin 1977:23).

People participate in scenes “for direct rather than future gratification” their involvement is voluntary, and scenes “are available to the public” (Irwin 1977:23). In addition, the theatrical metaphor of the word “scene” reflects an emergent urban psychological orientation—that of a person as ‘actor’” (Irwin 1977:23-24). Irwin therefore defines all “scenes” as “activity systems”. That is, they have some central activity or group of activities to focus interaction, identity, and purpose. In short, scenes are primarily urban phenomena that develop as urbanites seek solace from isolating, alienating city life by forming loosely organized social worlds around some expressive leisure activity.

For Irwin, urbanites develop scenes because the modern city is primarily an economic growth machine where people come for work and find little more. He sees work in the modern city as solely an instrumental activity that enables workers to pursue expressive and leisure activities. Within this collective context, people come together to

create meaningful, authenticating collectivities organized around non-work activities.

“Action” is what Irwin calls these meaningful authenticating experiences that people are looking for in scenes and it has distinct qualities. Foremost, action is a regularized, ongoing patterned activity that involves commingling for friendship and interactional stimulation recurring in particular spaces and specific times. Accessing these regularized activities is what is referred to as “making the scene.”

There is physical or sensual stimulation often associated with some sort of risk related to the unique, ever-changing, non-routine, experiences that occur in scenes. This may occur in feeling the social risk of asking someone to dance or date, along with the sensations associated with new interactions (e.g., the closeness and arousal felt with a dance partner or in meeting new, interesting acquaintances). Likewise, the adrenaline-fueled emotional excitement associated with being on a surfboard on top of a wave and the reputational possibilities of succeeding or failing in the scene’s valued activity is an enticement because it establishes (and sustains) a self based on qualities and experiences that lie outside everyday urban routines.

The scenes Irwin identifies are based on lifestyles. As people become disconnected (or disaffected by) social organizations and institutions (e.g., work and school), they begin to group around people to create scenes, or participate in already extant scenes. They may even take on the scene participation as a full-time lifestyle. The central actors in scenes are those who are most invested and participate most frequently in its main activities. But all participants, regardless of their degree of involvement are important to a scene’s vitality.

Irwin also describes some scenes as “Grand Scenes”, such as the hippie and surfing scenes that developed into cultural phenomena with widespread societal impact. The hippie scene developed from societal alienation related to opposition to the Vietnam War. Surfing first became popular in Hawaii then spread to California. During World War II, older surfers were either in the military or in war related industries. This left surfing to younger surfers who were outsiders in their school systems. “The war produced a discontinuity in their socialization into the surfing world” (Irwin 1973:134). Young surfers were joined by returning veterans after the war, “who were not ready to pick up civilian life, which, after the intensity of war, seemed dull and meaningless” (Irwin 1973:134).

Surfing then became a national and international phenomenon after it was taken up by Californians when the movie *Gidget*, about a young teenage girl surfer, along with new surfing magazines, spread images and ideals of the surfing scene to a much larger population. At the same time, scenes are fluid, people become involved, join the group and then can either drop out, stay peripherally involved, or become more deeply embedded. In a 1973 article, Irwin described the American surfing movement in more detail. He noted the early culture of wave riding and “beach hoboism” (P. 137) and later pseudo-surfers (P. 155), who wore the surfing costume, tennis shoes, white tee shirts, Pendleton shirts and long peroxided hair, but who, many times did not surf, but used these symbols at their schools for status. Using examples like these Irwin traced the rise and decline of surfing from 1945 to 1964. He also discussed the impact of popularization and how new members could splinter, dilute or distort authenticity.

Irwin saw four distinct phases through which both scenes advanced suggesting that a developmental or phase analysis may be useful to understand the nature of and changes in social scenes. The first phase is formation, when the initial idea of the scene exists, but is limited to a very small group of participants exploring the style and activities that later become central to the scene experience.

Irwin describes the second phase, expansion, as the phase when the scene idea spread rapidly by direct contact, word of mouth, and media coverage. The third phase, corruption, occurs when a saturation period is reached and there is resistance to the styles and activities central to the scene. Due to mass involvement and overcrowding, scene veterans become resentful of the newcomers, questioning their authenticity and the authenticity of the overall scene experience. As a consequence, a fourth phase of stagnation occurs when the ideas and activities of the scene, at the very best, are either in the mind of a small number of enthusiasts or become the occasional habit of many.

Post-Irwin Scene Studies

Following Irwin's seminal work on "scenes", Donna Gaines (1994), sought to further define a scene's constituent elements. She focuses on aspects of a scene related to exclusivity and cultural knowledge. According to Gaines (1994), the scene is the place to be where only certain people who share understandings related to that scene are seen as "in the know". These people know the specific meaning systems, and behavior, language and dress codes that allow them to be a part of the inner circle of the scene. For Gaines(1994), a scene is circumscribed by time, place, space, attitude, and style of cultural production. The scene is formed within these bounds and is composed of, for example, art or music, a shared fashion sensibility, and a particular mood or community

spirit. Gaines called the most insular scenes subcults, and put the 1950s gangs, the 1960s hippies, and the hip-hop lifestyle in the 1980s, in this category.

Sociologists took the idea of a scene especially in relation to music and began “to more precisely map its conceptual meaning and empirical aspects” (Futrell et al. 2006:278). Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) use of the term social field, relating to the field of cultural practices, is also a useful device for further defining the scene concept. For Bourdieu, all human actions happen in social fields, in which individuals and institutions, acquire capital to distinguish themselves. The social field of the scene involves a small group of participants, who are in the inner circle of the scene, and fully live the scene lifestyle. These people—the tastemakers—act as scene experts, have symbolic power and determine what is and isn’t acceptable in the scene social field.

To better elaborate and specify the scene concept, subcultures and scenes need to be defined as distinctive entities. The term subculture has become a catchall term for any social subgroup that is organized around a non-mainstream cultural activity. The term has lost much of its validity, because it is used in so many different ways, to characterize so many different social forms. In some studies, subculture and scene have simply been used interchangeably. For instance, in the social movements’ field, subculture has been used to refer to anything from entire movements to a sub-group within a movement, which is then a subculture of a subculture and makes little sense (Futrell et al. 2006).

This sort of usage has led to quite a bit of conceptual confusion (Bennett 1999; Clarke 1990). Subculture therefore is not interchangeable with scene. Subculture assumes that the participants all share the same subcultural standards in much the same

ways and, consequently, participate in the group for the same reasons, meanings, and ideals (Gelder and Thornton 1997). Scenes are more complex than that and membership does not require the same degree of normative agreement among participants. As collective behavior theorists (e.g., Turner and Killian 1957; Brown and Goldin 1975; Lang and Lang 1961) have long noted, in analyzing any social group one must start from the assumption that all participants do not possess the same cultural standards in the same ways. Instead, in most cases there are many participants who have many distinctive reasons for participating.

As David Chaney explains (1996), some of the core members of the scene live almost solely in the scene life, but most participants do not. The scene lifestyle is something that most participants only take on some of the time. The scene is not typically embraced as a sole or permanent identity and is less coherent and homogenous than subcultures are traditionally thought to be. People flow in and out the scene participating with differing degrees of frequency and involvement. All the participants, no matter their degree of involvement make up the scene. Scenes, then, are occasions organized around an activity (or set of activities) that provide a focal point for a variety of people to come together, interact regularly with varying degrees of commitment, create a culture, and construct a sense of collective identity.

Scene Types and Dimensions

Reflecting on music and the scene concept, Will Straw (1991) has discussed the “logics” of particular music terrains and the cultural practices that occur in them. Straw, defines a musical scene as that cultural space where a variety of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other but with a range of different genres, bands, patrons,

and gathering sites within a locale. These genres cross-fertilize one another as band members interact, patrons attend multiple events over time, and gathering sites host across the genres.

As these music-based activities recur over time the patterns of interaction and the cultural norms and products that develop coalesce into a scene with a trajectory of development. The “scene” becomes a ritualistic set of recurring occasions organized around music activities, taking on a “sui generis” character as it grows and is sustained by collective participation. Participants express a sense of purpose through the building of musical alliances and the drawing of musical boundaries through networks of interaction between “participants” in the scene. An example would be musicians, patrons, and locales in the Austin, Texas music scene that inspire and influence each other (Shank 1994).

Peterson and Bennett (2004) further extend the scene concept to include three types of scenes—local, translocal, and virtual—designated by the type and breadth of social networks upon which they draw and the technology that mediates them. A local scene is gathered around a specific geographic area and its networks do not generally extend much beyond this. A particular locale, such as Austin, may host several different local scenes (Shank 1994). These local scenes exhibit the “particularized local sensibilities” (Bennett and Peterson 2004:7) of where they are organized. Local scenes draw from and “construct particular narratives of the local” (Bennett and Peterson 2004:7) that help define local identity and other local cultural forms such as dialect, dress, media (e.g., scene-zines), and local knowledge of shared narratives about existential questions of everyday life. For instance, the Austin music scene has both

punk and cowboy musical styles, among others, each of which present and sustain different stylistic versions of what it is to be an Austin music patron, and even a Texan.

In each scene, participants may encourage particular political affiliations, sartorial codes, language, and other cultural understandings. As Bennett and Peterson summarize, a local music scene is “a focused social activity that takes place in a delimited space and over a specific span of time in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans realize their common musical taste and cultural signs, often appropriated from other places, but recombined and developed in ways that come to represent the local scene”(2004:8). As they acknowledge, music is just one “focused social activity” that provide occasions around which local scenes and their lifestyle elements develop. Art, which is my focus, is certainly another.

Translocal scenes refer to an array of scattered local scenes that regularly communicate with each other around a distinctive type of music or lifestyle even though they may be distantly separated geographically. In music scenes, this communication happens through the exchange of recordings, fans, bands, fanzines, and over the Internet. “While face to face interaction may form one aspect of the scene-building process—for example in clubs and other local urban spaces—Holly Kruse (1993) [points out that]”translocal properties” (Bennett and Peterson 2004:9) are important for cultural development of local scenes as the “flow of affinities” across space enhances the sense of belonging to a particular crowd and set of cultural activities.

Global messages, for example, can become catalysts for local scenes and vice versa. Beatlemania is an example of this phenomenon. Fans around the world became familiar with the look, attitude, and sound of the band, and at the same time,

reinterpreted these characteristics to fit their specific cultural experience (Gebesmair and Smudits 2001). Hip-hop culture has also exhibited similar capacities for generating local music scenes that draw from and fertilize broader translocal hip-hop scenes (Mitchell 1996; Bjurstrom 1997; Condry 1999; Bennett 2000).

The rise of virtual scenes is a recent phenomenon in which people, who are separated geographically, create the sense of a scene through the Internet. Like translocal scenes, participants who are involved span a wide range of locales but, according to Bennett and Peterson (2004:10), they come together via a single scene-making conversation on the Internet. Whereas a local scene is kept in motion by a series of gigs, club nights, fairs, and similar events where participants converge, communicate and reinforce their sense of belonging to a particular scene, the virtual scene solely involves direct net-mediated person-to-person communication (Bennett and Peterson 2004:11). A single artist, such as John Prine or Kate Bush, or a specific genre such as alt-country music, may become the basis for a chat room, a listserv, or other virtual networking scene (Lee and Peterson 2004).

While Bennett and Peterson (2004) present local, translocal, and virtual scenes as apparently singular, autonomous types, the reality is that these scene dimensions overlap significantly. In short, most scenes have local, translocal, and virtual dimensions. For example, the downtown Las Vegas art scene, the focus of this study, has a variety of artists and gallery owners who in many combinations share a similar perception of life in a gambling town, hence a local scene. At the same time some of these same people also share information often by phone or Internet with similar artists outside of Las Vegas creating elements of a virtual scene.

Many of these artists also have online galleries that are viewed by other interested people all over the world who share a single perception of what contemporary art should be. It is also possible for a type of translocal scene to develop, particularly when outsiders, such as in the case of a tourist town, like Las Vegas, energize local fans. Thus, any study that purports to study scenes and their development will need to attend to each of these dimensions and how they shape the style, culture, identity, and experiences of scene participants.

What also seems clear is that many scenes are often closely tied in some way to entertainment and tourism industries. Many of the articles in Bennett and Peterson's book *Music Scenes* (2004) discuss such dimensions as they operate in Chicago's Blues Scene, London's Salsa Scene, Karaoke in the U.S., and scene characteristics of large-scale music festivals. John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze* (1990) also offers some insight into how the tourist industry has helped keep music scenes alive through a combination of attending to tourist expectations regarding points of interest relating to a particular scene along with help from the media, and local promoters who actively market the scene to outsiders.

One implication of marketing for this study relates to the fact that all of Las Vegas is being represented as a fantasy world to escape the everyday mundane world, as such, the Arts District may eventually be marketed as a tourist site to be seen much like the local chocolate and cranberry factories with their constant stream of tourist buses. The Arts District may, in that case, survive as "local color" much like the Haight-Ashbury district, which is still a popular tourist site in San Francisco, more than forty years after the "Summer of Love" hippie invasion of 1967. At the same time, the arts

scene may endure primarily because it provides a sense of collective identity, communitarian sensibility, and local grassroots focus that offers meaning in an alienating urban environment.

Street Life and Scene

In many ways, this study is about the street life associated with scene development and the cultural meanings driving scene development. One of the more interesting studies of street life and scenes is about the bohemian lifestyle in Wicker Park, Chicago described by Richard Lloyd in his book, *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City*. Wicker Park is an area that has emerged from an artists' haven to become what is now best described as an area that is hip or "cooler than cool". Lloyd uses the term Neo-bohemia as a descriptor for Wicker Park's population of Generation Xers, those people born after the Baby Boom generation. He describes the role that Generation Xers played in building the culture and economy of the area.

Lloyd is particularly focused on the relationships that exist between the bohemian culture and the economy of globalization and outsourcing. Lloyd characterizes the neo-bohemian philosophy as one with a resistance to corporate labor and the raising up of the aesthetic and the sensual and also wanting to be part of the scene (Lloyd 2010). For Lloyd, the generation Xers, artist-bohemians, have created a commodity through hip bars, cafes, and restaurants. Lloyd's scene is also in constant flux as people flow in and out based on debates among participants about who belongs in the scene and who does not.

Richard Lloyds' insights add to our understanding of the relationship between artistic scenes, revitalization of neighborhoods and local policies. According to Lloyd, today's "creatives" do not define themselves by employment; instead, they appear to be

seeking tolerant lifestyle options, social opportunity and authenticity, as well as a sense of identity. At the same time, the United States is experiencing a new wave of modernization, where the American idea of family and society has moved away from a traditional, family-oriented society, toward unconventional living styles that question traditional marriage, standards of sexual behavior, patriotism and authority (Webb 2011).

One dimension of my present study is focused on alienation as a driving force for art scene development. The idea of alienation and resistance as a driving force for change is not new and is somewhat reminiscent of *The Conquest of Cool* by Thomas Frank (1997), in which he described the 1960s American counterculture as determined to move away from capitalism. He argued that the counterculture responded to the idea of the “organizational men” of the 1950s that was marketed to white middle-class families living in the suburbs. According to Frank, the 1960’s counterculture was seeking a society based on relevance and diversity.

Of course, today’s world is not that of the 1960’s. Today’s shared interest groups appear to “organize into loose networks that form more loose networks” assembled into autonomous countercultures (McKay 1996:11). Creasap (2012) describes a scene, as a “process [and] product of urban protests, such as squatting, rituals, such as protest and music, and the activities of everyday life (2012:182)” much of which is similar to how I will describe the early years of the Las Vegas art scene.

Some scholars have considered the idea of resistance tied to scene processes. Featherstone (2008) refers to scenes as “geographies of resistance” in reference to the effort of groups to change local environments. Pickerill and Chatterton (2006), reference “autonomous geographies” – spaces where there is a desire to constitute non-capitalist,

collective forms of politics, identity and citizenship”. This would be consistent with the work of Willems-Braun (1994), who suggested that festival-type environments offer the potential to challenge social conventions, social order and authority, to alter cultural norms. Glass (2012) also notes the importance of events. In her study of Punk scenes, she comments that:

[Punk styles] have a very different function during collective events than in isolation. While the lone punk style or slogan is often a provocative symbol of alienation or resistance, such symbols become markers of togetherness when combined. (P. 705)

The development of a street scene, especially one with artistic roots that attracts visitors could be a component of the city’s “quick fix” solution to city image problems, or a place-marketing strategy and *raison d’être* behind redevelopment efforts, instead of a vehicle for expressing the relationship between identity and place. While political activities within cities will influence street scenes, today’s young professional is empowered by them. David Harvey (2003: 941) speaks of “rights” where “the active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart’s desire, and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image” is more important than ever.

Scenes as Post-Traditional Communities

European subcultural studies of “youth scenes” have used the term “scene” more frequently since the mid 1990s in research describing youth-oriented cultures (starting with Dieter Baacke in 1987). However, these uses also remain undertheorized (Pfadenhauer 2005). According to Pfadenhauer, European attempts to develop the scene concept have focused on processes of identification, stylistic differentiation, and experiential qualities of scene participation found in expressions of affiliation with and disassociation from the myriad variety of cultural attributes and accoutrements available

to contemporary urban youth. Researchers “zoom in on music styles, clothing styles, consumption styles, communication styles, interaction styles, etc. They trace arrangements and reconstruct underlying meanings with the goal of depicting the scene territory ... as comprehensively [and classifying] as possible individual scenes” (Pfadenhauer 2005:8).

Theoretically, European scene research emphasizes the subjective experience of community building, identity, and resistance. According to Pfadenhauer (2005:4) scenes are “characterized as a type of post-traditional community and social integration that is built around symbolically, aesthetically, and thematically located “territories” in social space. The affiliation to scenes is not determined by ascriptive personal attributes but by stylistic aspects of behaviour, communication, consumption, ways of thinking, etc. Scenes are interactive spaces of experience [organized around common interests of its members [who are] made of networks of networks (i.e., circles of friends, of cliques, or posses) within which different groups maintain specific connections.”

Social networks are at the heart of the conceptual focus of scene research. Recent theorizing on the importance of social capital for creating the conditions for the cooperation, coordination, solidarity, and cohesion that is declining in modern urban life is useful for considering scenes and what they do for their members (Bourdieu 1985b). Bourdieu’s conception of a social field is a system of social positions in which individuals and institutions, and others, acquire capital to distinguish themselves. Bourdieu (1985a) sees social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition.” These resources

can be material or symbolic. What is crucial is that people need these and gain them by connecting and working with others.

Robert Putnam (2000), Alejandro Portes (1998) and others elaborate this by emphasizing the qualities of trust, reciprocity, solidarity, and collective identity that are the roots of community. These qualities develop precisely from connections that occur between people. Scenes are occasions where people make and sustain such links and this is one place where communitarian ethics are built in the isolating, alienating, contemporary world.

Finally, understanding scenes through the lens of social capital highlights the importance of social networks that give a sense of collective identity, place, and space that enhances the development of community. The networks themselves do not have to be permanent to have important communitarian effects that weigh against the isolating and alienating aspects of contemporary life. In his study of temporary Bluegrass festival scenes, Robert Owen Gardner (2004) found that intimate communities with open and equal social relations that stressed simple living enabled people to feel and participate in the types of networks that were missing in the everyday lives of festival participants.

Third Place

While scenes can be examined by way of social and cultural contexts, they can also be considered under a much larger functional framework based on society as a system. For example, Lloyd's (2012) work on Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood, traces the growth of a hip neighborhood from a once coarse area that attracted artists and other creative types, mostly due to cheap rents and city access. In his book, *Wicker Park* is used as a backdrop to uncover a type of neighborhood and its structural past history.

He focuses on a changing international economy that has reshaped Chicago into a global city.

Wicker Park also exemplifies the archetypal sociological concept of a “third place” as essential in community building as described in Ray Oldenburg’s (1999) book, *The Great Good Place*. Here, Oldenburg argues that third places are essential for civic engagement, and to create a sense of place. Oldenburg’s third place is “a setting beyond home and work” (the “first” and “second” places respectively) in which people relax in good company and do so on a regular basis. In other words, place becomes a player – not the only “player”, but part of the social fabric. A location however, does not in and of itself, make a third place.

Oldenburg describes third places as being accessible, often by walking, having inexpensive food and drink, known and used by locals as a welcoming place to congregate, talk with old pals and make new friends. A third place may be a spot to visit before and after work, or to stop in for the “Luncheon Special every Thursday. Some drop by whenever it’s convenient. It is their version of the once popular television series Cheers” (Oldenburg 2001:2), “where everyone knows your name.” Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons and other hangouts are third places that we have all experienced. These are places that decrease the separation between people and build a sense of community.

The third place concept also encompasses the scene experience. The scene is the dynamic of what third places describe. Community comes through identification with those third places. Scenes develop as third places.

Extending this idea, Michael Ian Borer (2008) describes a big third place in the form of Boston's Fenway Park. Borer detailed the concept of "big third places" as akin to something like an art scene, organizing principle for social grouping, community building, cohesion, civic activity necessary for quality of life in modern urban settings, but which contain a key paradox – the individual is surrounded by thousands of people, yet knows and feels connected to very few. Borer also describes what he calls "shared human landmarks." An example of a shared human landmark might be "any person who acts as a medium for social cohesion between others in public within a defined and distinct local area" (Borer 2008:71).

Keeping in mind the concept of the third place with scenes and returning to the development of the scene concept, Irwin, writing about the 1960s and 70s, identified surfing, music and hippie culture as examples. These expressive leisure social worlds are more complex and important to the participants than as just types of entertainment or hobbies. They can supply the urban dweller with new primary group affiliations and meaningful social experiences that mitigate the alienating tendencies of the city. Social scenes can bring about wider societal changes as well.

According to Irwin (1977), the beat and hippie scenes established new cultural mores and stylistic innovations, many of which have become embedded in popular culture over time. But, broad socio-cultural change is not an explicit primary goal of social scenes. They are bottom-up cultural efforts to combat the loneliness and disaffection of urban life.

Labeling the Scene

“Scenes” are outcomes of a search for community in isolating and alienating urban contexts (Irwin 1977). Scenes are a kind of voluntary association that is oriented around the development of group identity through symbolic, stylistic, or leisure pursuits (Irwin 1977). There are membership qualities to scenes in the sense of Gaines’ (1994) description of elements of exclusion and inclusion related to “hipness” or shared understandings about the sort of stylistic conventions that are specific to the scene experience.

Scenes therefore are comprised of many different communities, alliances, and styles that are understood and experienced by scene members as parts of a larger whole (Shank 1994). We can also distinguish dimensions of a scene by physical and virtual qualities. They may be identifiable locales and spaces (physical and/or virtual) of the scene that offer points of access for participants, and spaces for image construction for scene creators (Bennett and Peterson 2004).

I studied the emerging scene tied to the Las Vegas Arts District to extend our conceptual understanding of scenes. Activities in the downtown Las Vegas Arts District provide an excellent and unique opportunity to further our understanding of what scenes are and, especially, how they develop and what people experience in them. While the few commentaries on scenes that exist address well-established contexts, this study is unique since I am able to assess the outgrowth from a grassroots effort before the institutionalization that comes from local government bodies and developers. This provides opportunities to understand how these differing influences shape a scene’s development.

My argument is that the downtown Arts District was originally initiated as a grassroots, bottom-up attempt by some residents to establish a social space thematically and economically organized around art and associated aesthetic activities and experiences. The Arts District emerged from and sustains networks of affinity to combat the isolating, alienating tendencies of the Las Vegas urban experience. I take a “phase approach,” to trace the development of the downtown Las Vegas Arts District using the conceptual lens of scene research to assess its development over time in terms of phases of change from its formation period through its present-day incarnation.

Networks: Outsider-Insider Status

Scenes require sustained social networks that communicate and construct the parameters of community central to social scenes. Research indicates that social networks have a protective quality on the strength and health of communities and its individuals (Putnam 2000).¹ Network interactions increase the opportunities for individuals to engage in shared activities and thus foster a collective sense of community (Putman 2000; Brooks 2005). Research in the area of collective action strongly suggests that trust is a basic part of creating activities that work toward the public good (Sargeant and Lee 2004). While much of the work on trust is focused on individual connections (Tortoriello, Reagans and McEvily 2012). O’Leary et al. (2002) has extended the idea of individuals as the center of trust to groups and organizations.

Networks foster insider-outsider boundaries. Of particular interest is work focused upon the importance of the human experience of space (Seamon 2008). In an intriguing

¹Conversely, there is also evidence that increased social capital (community networks) can also have a negative impact on communities. For example Sutherland et al., suggest that deviant peers encourage deviant behaviors (1978).

article, Seamon uses a John Sayles film – *The Sunshine State* to discuss the importance of place, insideness, outsideness, and placelessness. With its large ensemble cast, the many characters in this film have a wide range of responses to shifting neighborhoods, changing communities and corporate development in a fictitious Florida coastal resort. Using the various characters, Seamon describes a type of existential insideness “in which people are normally unaware of the importance of place in sustaining their everyday world” (Seamon 2008:4). He also describes characters who represent a situation where “insideness devolves into outsideness, and ... outsideness evolves into insideness” (Seamon 2008:4). Ultimately, Seamon makes the point that most people define themselves by a “very small world” and that in many ways, place appears to be specific and local, whereas placelessness, a type of non-place quality, corresponds to certain mass produced environments of the 21st century.

The networks of place also include bonding among homogenous groups as well as building bridges to diverse groups (Putnam, 2000). For Putnam “social networks provide the channels through which we recruit one another for good deeds, and social networks foster norms of reciprocity that encourage attention to others’ welfare” (Putnam 2000:117). In fact, individuals with diverse social networks might be expected to be more open to differences and more likely to seek and support common goals in a form of organized group activism. It is the network connections between people and groups that promote community, and it is the institutions and focused organizations that involve people in the community and foster the sense of trust and belonging.

Conclusion

Scenes are complex phenomena. Not quite social movements or subcultures, they are nonetheless forms of collective action by which people organize around ideas of

community and identity to construct ongoing meaningful relationships. Scenes have focusing activities and spaces around which participants congregate. These focusing activities may have an economic dimension, such as art and associated activities, and thus be profitable to cultural entrepreneurs; but, scenes are more than economic relationships, they are processes of meaning-making. I explain that the Las Vegas downtown art scene involves attempts to create spaces and experiences that offer participants a bit of a haven in the heartless world of a tourist economy that eats away at local community.

Next, I will discuss my methodological approach to understanding scene development.

CHAPTER 3 - RESEARCH METHODS

For this study, I used a qualitative methodological approach involving participant-observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. I operated as a participant observer at the major downtown Arts District First Friday events and other focused art district activities to account for the interactions among artists, cultural entrepreneurs, patrons, and participants in the arts scene. I also observed interactions among the artists, patrons, and business owners during non-First Friday festival times by frequenting the arts district sites during regular workdays. Using semi-structured and unstructured interviews during many of these visits, I elicited insights into the meanings, activities, and character of the downtown art scene from artists, non-artist participants, government officials, and others who were involved in the development of the downtown art scene.

My participant-observation follows principles described by Jorgenson (1989). I studied people in their natural setting with a special interest in the perspective of setting insiders, specifically how they interact and understand their social world. By being an observer and participant at First Friday festivals and at various openings and events and by becoming immersed in the experience, I came to understand how identification with the art scene decreased participant's feelings of alienation in the Las Vegas community and created positive community ties.

According to Jorgenson (1989:15-16), collecting data in people's ordinary life settings and situations is important because "that is where the researcher begins with the process of defining and refining issues and problems for study [and that is] where the researcher participates." Using facts gathered in real life settings provides the basis for

an open-ended, flexible, opportunistic logical process of inquiry that is constantly redefined when problems in understanding occur. I studied the development of the art scene with some depth as opposed to, for example, just gathering data on a large cross-section of the art scene population. By taking on a participant role that connected me with scene members in a meaningful way, I formed an understanding of what it felt like to be involved in the art scene.

Interview Format and Data Gathering.

I incorporated several levels of observation to study activities at the First Friday site. I was a participant observer. I also took photographs and kept detailed notes on my observations. I am an artist myself and that perspective helped me as a researcher to also become, at times, a direct participant of sorts and more deeply understand what scene artists experienced.

I also used two categories of interviews in this study: unstructured or unstandardized and semi-structured or focused interviews (Herman-Kinney and Verschaeve 2003). The unstructured or unstandardized interview approach does not assume to know what questions to ask in advance. I generated questions as the interviews developed. I used this type of interview in conjunction with participant observation. As Fontana and Frey (2005) observe, this form of interviewing while doing participant observation is a source of critical data in a field setting.

My semi-structured interviews involved asking some predetermined questions (Appendix 1) in a specific order, but also with the freedom to go beyond the set list of questions. I used the questions as a starting point for further inquiry. I prepared supplementary questions that I asked if the interviewee responded positively to the

initial question. I reworded questions that only got a minimal response and asked them again. In this way I customized the interview to the specific respondent (Herman-Kinney and Verschaeve 2003).

To identify and locate participants, I used snowball sampling, which involves recruiting participants from other participants with the sample size increasing in a snowballing way as more and more people participate. For this study, the snowball strategy provided access to an entire hidden visionary population that might have been difficult to access, including lesser known artists and galleries. For example, the interviews led me to a temporary gallery set up in an old radiator factory during the 18th Arts District's First Friday event.

I also used a purposive sampling technique. I purposefully sought out specific high-profile arts scene participants. Twenty-one people agreed to take part in the one to two hour semi-structured interview process. The interviewees represented a reasonable cross-section of major participants and the visionaries that first conceived of an arts scene in Las Vegas. These participants included four gallery owners, eight artists, two curators, three self-described district entrepreneurs, and four cultural administrators employed in various areas of city government.

Semi-structured interviewing also enabled me to identify and explore new ideas that I did not originally anticipate. I also asked open-ended questions about both current and future major issues in the Arts District, and then asked what major issues were important in the Arts District and what were the most important issues shaping the future of the district.

I used prompts to help focus interviewees such as mentioning groups in the art scene, for example, the Whirligig group. I also explored alliances between government and artists, key figures and business owners in the district. I used this same pattern to explore groundswell movements in the community and characteristics of people involved in the Arts District.

I explored media involvement in the development of the Arts District focusing on how, why and what were the effects on scene development. I examined meanings about, for example, what the Arts District means to the interviewees and how meanings changed over time. I also asked how people related meanings to the larger tourist-driven spectacle casino culture that dominates Las Vegas and asked questions about how the spatial structure and economic issues shaped the 18b district and participants' experiences.

I collected documents from galleries and on the streets during First Friday, along with city government documents related to First Friday and the development of the downtown art district. UweFlick (2006) describes these types of documents as unsolicited, because they have not been requested, but exist as an artifact that typically occurs in particular formats. These unsolicited documents in the case of government agencies are running records that are produced to document episodic administrative processes. Advertisements and posters handed out at First Friday and in the galleries are also episodic. These documents handed out on the street can be from a variety of sources ranging from messages from individuals to larger groups exposing or selling a particular idea or product. Some of these documents describe the various art shows that are being presented along with the purpose of the art to the artist. Others like the official First

Friday handouts describe First Friday from the perspective of the organizers and map the experience for attendees.

The street documents helped bring validity to other data sources and are a useful photograph of the moment that I use to describe the research setting. Secondary data, like the First Friday official programs, may also say something about the way that the scene participants experience their world. At the same time, secondary data can also be personal and unrepresentative of the art scene, for example handouts that advertise shows in other venues, or reflect the views of a specific group of people who are not a part of First Friday, but are using the gathering of likeminded people to further their own agenda (i.e., handouts for art shows on the Las Vegas Strip). Conversely, written records may be the only historical record of an event that is provided and there may be no way to determine credibility or representativeness.

I categorized these documents initially as personal or official documents and again as private or state texts. I examined the documents for authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning and then used them to triangulate among my observational and interview data. I compared responses to primary information collected from interviews and observational studies. To cross-check the response reliability I asked informants similar questions in different ways. This approach also provided some insight into whether or not informants' perspectives were unique or more broadly held among 18b arts scene participants. As another viewpoint on the development of the art scene, they also added depth and another perspective to the themes that developed as the study proceeded.

Limitations

This is an ethnography focused on the complexities of group dynamics within the group's natural environment. While the purpose is to aim for objectivity, there are some disadvantages to qualitative ethnographies. For example, ethnographies are limited by not only the views of the participants, but also by the potential for researcher bias and the fact that not all interviewees can be guaranteed to be credible.

For this study and of particular concern here, is that while interviews were intensive, they were relatively short (1-2 hours) and lacked time for the researcher and interviewee to establish a longer-term relationship and build trust. By the very nature of the interview process, there is the tendency to focus on individual results and miss the associations to the larger environment.

My role as interviewer was very evident to my informants during the study since I explained the purpose of the interviews to the person being interviewed. To account for behavioral bias during the interviews I made a concerted effort to be aware of my thoughts, prior interactions, artistic preferences, political views, and hope for the 18b Arts District's success. My efforts to triangulate among the data I gathered through observation, interviews, and document analysis) helped me to amplify the validity and reliability of what I analyzed (Denzin 1978).

CHAPTER 4 - THE VISION and the VISIONARIES of a NEW ARTS SCENE, 1996-2004

In the mid 1990s, a small network of artists and entrepreneurs imagined ways to draw artists, patrons, and other Las Vegans together into an arts community that could be a locus of economic development and cultural exchange. But, they faced several obstacles. Downtown stood as the low rent Las Vegas option to the spectacle Strip experience, and downtown businesses struggled to draw both tourists and locals to spend time and money in the area. In a period of fantastical economic development and population growth throughout the Las Vegas Valley, downtown Las Vegas was an afterthought to many. At the same time, both new and old residents moved into rapidly growing suburban areas, such as the Summerlin master planned community on the city's western edge, and businesses followed.

The result was a downtown Las Vegas dominated by the Fremont Street casinos, which were surrounded by a hodge-podge mixture of law offices, government buildings, bail-bond stores, pornography outlets, pawnshops, and low-cost service retailers. During weekday business hours, the downtown bustled with lawyers and clients surrounding the Clark County Courthouse, along with homeless travelers searching for their next meal. The notorious "Naked City" area, a formerly respectable residential district on downtown's southern edge, once populated by Strip performers, including the showgirls who, reportedly, sunbathed nude on the apartment rooftops had devolved into a haven for drugs and prostitution. The Huntridge Theatre, a historically renowned former local hub for cinema, theatre, and concert performances, stood in disrepair on downtown's eastern edge. Cultural expression and community sentiment were not the typical markers of the

Las Vegas downtown experience. As with any attempt at socio-economic and cultural change, bringing together an arts community and establishing an arts business district would be an uphill struggle fraught with organizational obstacles and social conflicts over competing visions for the scene.

Below, I begin by describing several leading visionaries who were a part of the early downtown art scene. I then discuss how their efforts coalesced into the First Friday art festival, which quickly became the focal occasion used to define the downtown art scene. I end this chapter at the two-year anniversary of the First Friday event. My description highlights show a few stubborn and creative visionaries led the way to thousands of people showing up to walk the sidewalks and participate in an art scene that many argued could not possibly germinate in a city like Las Vegas.

Wes Myles and the Arts Factory

Wes Myles (formerly Wes Isbutt), a Los Angeles businessman, photographer and community organizer was among the earliest visionaries involved in what would become the Las Vegas art scene. In 1996, Myles purchased a large warehouse building on Charleston Boulevard and Main Street, where he had previously rented studio space. This leap of faith represented an early attempt to create a

new art presence in the downtown area. Myles designed the building, which he named The Arts Factory, to bring local commercial artists in the fine arts, painting, sculpture, photography, graphic design, jewelry and architecture all together in one location. Myles

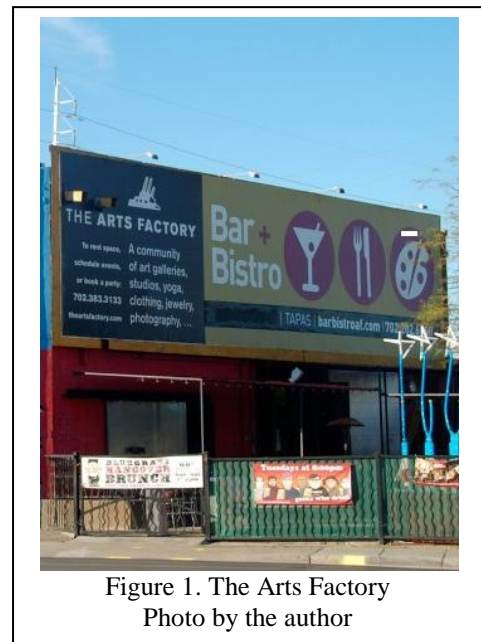


Figure 1. The Arts Factory
Photo by the author

envisioned The Arts Factory as a downtown anchor for an area of artist complexes and lofts like those in San Francisco and New York (interview, Myles, 4/20/2009).

Located in a 50-year old renovated warehouse, The Arts Factory gave Myles two levels to house galleries, stores, and eventually a restaurant and even an architecture firm. The building also has numerous nooks and crannies in hallways and stairwells where artists could show their work. Over the years, Myles would turn The Arts Factory into a place that supported numerous cultural events including local high school student art exhibitions, music, poetry, and theatrical performances, and the G.A.M.E. festival, which I describe below, as a precursor to the 18b arts district's First Friday festival. The proximity of artists, gallery owners, and retail shops under one roof would come to make The Arts Factory vitally important to the early development of the Arts District.

To draw art to the space, Myles offered free rent to artists and those in the art business (interview, Myles, 4/20/2009). Myles also involved the Contemporary Arts Collective, which later became known as the Contemporary Art Center or CAC. UNLV art professor Mary Warner, along with her colleagues and students, established the CAC in 1989. While the campus supported the Donna Beam Gallery, a small gallery for student and faculty shows, Warner recognized that a campus location did not draw the general public. She then sought a group to create a more accessible space for students' art so that students could experience "real life" practice by exhibiting their works in a true gallery setting. She set up the Temporary Contemporary gallery, in a former flower shop next to UNLV on Maryland Parkway (interview, Artist and Cultural Administrator, 4/7/2009). But, when Myles offered a space in the Arts Factory, the CAC made their move downtown.

Myles, who some now call the “Father of Downtown Vegas Art” (Peterson 2008) was influenced by his time in Los Angeles where he was exposed to a comprehensive arts culture. For instance, Myles observed Tommy Mitchem, an East Coast fashion photographer who moved to the West Coast and brought some of the fashion industry with him in the 1950’s, giving lavish Hollywood parties where he brought agents and models together. The parties provided Myles a vision for developing an artistic community in Las Vegas. Myles alluded to the powerful bridging capacity of these events:

When I was in school I was shown an example by an instructor by the name of Tommy Mitchem, who brought fashion photography from the East Coast to the West Coast in the 50’s. All the big stuff was done on the East Coast, maybe Chicago. Nothing was coming to L.A. He brought the industry here in the early 50’s. He told us in class, “It’s all about the relationships. People have to come to you and see what you do.” So he would throw these lavish Hollywood parties and invite the models and the agents and everyone who wanted to come. So when I moved to Las Vegas, I did the same thing. I had this incredible studio and this great energy and I invited all of my friends. (interview, Myles, 4/20/2009)

Myles envisioned the Arts Factory as both a business and a social anchor (Clopton and Finch 2011) for artists to share information and establish their identity. This vision also reflected his experiences in the Los Angeles arts scene:

In Los Angeles, in the Hildegard Center, I had an instructor by the name of Dan Wolf, who formed a place called the Pasadena Reproduction Studio. He rented studios small and large, but he had 30 office spaces for rent and he had a photo lab. So you could go up there and rent your own office and when you got a job you could rent a studio and rent your stuff. It was a company store kind of thing, but what happened in those offices is you got all of this synergy built. You got all of these photographers and they got illustrators and agencies and every kind of group and I saw this example. I moved to Las Vegas, because I was a small fish in a big pond in Los Angeles. I got this big old space...and we would hold these Halloween parties. They were legendary. It grew beyond the studio and we realized we had to expand to the street, so we had to hold the street festival.. (interview, Myles, 4/20/2009)

Myles used the Mitchem parties he had experienced as a model for his personal parties that eventually morphed into the Gateway Arts and Music Experience or G.A.M.E festival. Myles organized and ran the G.A.M.E festivals between 1998 and 2001. The first festival ran for three days in September 1998 and Myles also drew some support from the Cultural Affairs section of Las Vegas city government who co-organized the events. G.A.M.E. drew between 80 and 100 food vendors and local artists, along with a farmers market, presented by Wild Oats, an organic market chain, a beer garden and live music. A \$5 admission charge partially went to help the Contemporary Arts Collective. Larry Coryell, a famous jazz guitarist, opened the first festival. One of the original G.A.M.E participants described the event as one with “three thousand people where ‘everyone’ was blown away” (interview, Arts District Entrepreneur 2, 4/20/2009). Myles describes his events as a time when “all the photographers and all the models and their buddies would show up. We would invite three-hundred people and a thousand would show. After year two we stopped sending out invitations. We had local bands. We had all kinds of people. People would call us and say, ‘I have to come to your party!’ We made the front page of the New York Times” (interview, Myles, 4/20/2009).

The G.A.M.E festival evolved through personal relationships, starting with Myles’ friendship with Maureen Barrett, an influential art patron involved with the Nevada Institute of Contemporary Art (NICA; later renamed the Nevada Institute of Community Art). Myles did photographic work on their catalog in exchange for help from her advertising agency, who would in return find him photography jobs. Barrett was friends with another wealthy and influential art patron, Barbara Molaski, a friend of Jan Jones,

who at that time was the City of Las Vegas Mayor. According to Myles, this string of friendships was a major factor leading to city support for the festival at that time.

But, the festivals were expensive. The first festival cost Myles alone \$60,000 and he had to borrow money to pay off vendors. The second year he lost \$20,000. By the third year Myles could no longer afford to run the festival, and the City of Las Vegas assumed control through the Office of Cultural Affairs (interview, Myles, 4/20/2009), and in 2001, the G.A.M.E festival was compressed into a one-day event in October, sponsored by the city's Cultural Arts Division. Despite the high cost for Myles, the Gateway festivals were worth it because they answered "an outcry from the public for a cultural center" (Race 1998).

The parties turned "street festival" grew out of the desire among the people in Las Vegas' art networks to gather, carouse, and inspire one another. The Arts Factory provided a space where this could happen often and in large numbers. There is a great deal to be gained in the type of synergistic relationships that form in spaces such as the Arts Factory. As Bain (2005) observes:

Membership in...informal social networks is not inconsequential to the construction of an artistic identity and the creation of artwork; rather it becomes a valuable means of combating the isolation of the studio and exchanging information on employment, grants, sources of materials and important new work emerging in the field.

The Arts Factory offered a large, multifaceted space that provided a place for many people to experience the artistic synergy that different perspectives and ways of thinking about art encourage. Interactions in the space generated many social connections. As I will describe, the Arts Factory became an anchor for the downtown arts district and the

popular First Friday event. It served as a central scene that sustained a network of artists and began to connect them with potential buyers.

Myles' big vision for the arts was much larger than a yearly festival. He not only imagined cultural events, he also envisioned a new urbanization phase for downtown. This vision included shared living and working spaces for artists that would offer a synergistic community living experience. He had observed something similar among Los Angeles artists associated with Tommy Mitchem's Pasadena Reproduction Studio where he had experienced the synergy that developed among the photographers, illustrators and agencies that occupied adjacent living and workspaces. Myles hoped to help catalyze the same synergy in downtown Las Vegas.

Julie Brewer and the Enigma Garden Café

Wes Myles' Arts Factory joined Enigma Café as one of downtown's few spaces where local creative people gathered regularly. Julie Brewer opened the Enigma Garden

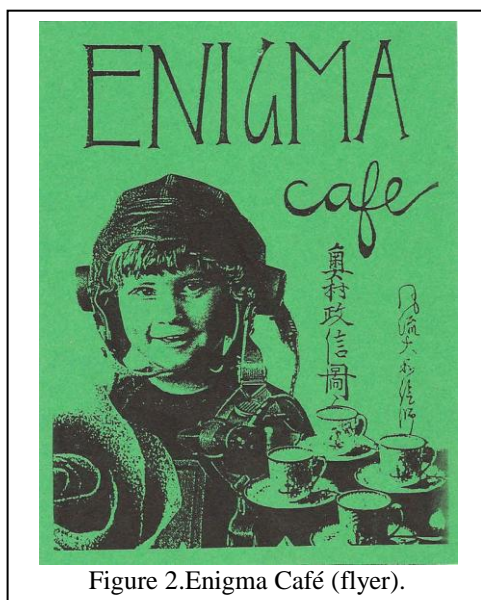


Figure 2. Enigma Café (flyer).

Café in 1993 in a three-house complex on 4th street.

The Enigma boasted a garden, gallery and performance space and quickly became a popular gathering space for Las Vegas poets, musicians, writers and artists. Local cultural commentator, Brian Paco Alvarez (2011) observed that “this little cafe [left] an indelible mark on the psyche of Las Vegas' fledgling cultural arts scene.” He

characterized the space and experiences in the Café

as “a paradigm shift [of] an amazing little corner of art, culture, music, and poetry”

(Alvarez 2011). Alvarez also notes the deeply etched cultural mark that the Enigma left on the downtown scene. “Though Cafe Enigma no longer exists it is hard to find anyone who has been part of ‘the scene’ [who does] not remember this amazing and important space” (Alvarez 2011) as an early anchor of what would become part of the Arts District.

In *The Great Good Place*, author Ray Oldenburg (1999) emphasizes the value of neighborhood gathering places in enhancing the lives of people in community development. Similarly, Robert Putnam (2000) explains that our “modern existence creates a social vacuum; coffee shops come into the scene to provide a sense of community.” Verma (2013:162) also observes that:

When the home gets devoid of people, coffee houses thrive on creating a false sense of home where you can sit, relax, talk and order things to satisfy your basic physiological needs....Coffee houses are new networking sites where like-minded people converge with the prospect of forging relationships with varying degree[s] of commitment and duration.

The Enigma was a “great good place” to many. The Café felt both bohemian and European. The Enigma’s contribution to developing a Las Vegas art scene was lodged in the effort of its owner to attract diverse audiences with art, music and food in a space with a garden, gallery and performance areas. During the day, the Enigma attracted a broad spectrum of humanity, from students, to families, businessmen, lawyers, poets, musicians, painters, and retirees. At night, the café’s scene changed slightly as locals mixed with some tourists stopping in to hear live music by local & touring bands.

Enigma’s founder, Julie Brewer was once described by a long time local artist as a person that “invited people into her garden. Once they were in her garden they looked around and said hello to each other. Her very, very bright character was one of the few sparks that started the Arts District” (Peterson 2007a). Dayvid Figler, an attorney,

poet, and regular at Enigma said “she just absolutely loved bringing people together. She threw her heart into making a gathering space where the forces in the art world first met” (Peterson 2007a). Greg Crosby, a poet who ran the poetry readings in Enigma, said that for Brewer “it wasn't just 'I'm going to open a café.’” Enigma was a work of art. It was a true creation. She wanted it to be a place where things could happen and an artistic and cultural community could convene” (Peterson 2007a).

The Enigma Garden Café’s cultural theming provided a distinctiveness and an “adjacent attraction”(Crawford 1992) important to the local art scene’s development. Julie Brewer saw the idea of an Arts District as an extension of the Enigma coffeehouse, with its festive combination of food, visual art and local entertainment. Brewer’s vision was to combine the visual and performing arts in an environment that took patrons away, for a time, from the stressful city life. She described her vision for the Enigma Garden Café and the Arts District:

As founder my goals were to provide a comfortable refuge from city stress, and a unique venue for the visual and performing arts. With the help of many people, my goals have been realized, and Enigma continues to evolve each day. Since the establishment of the cafe, the neighborhood has radically improved, and is now evolving into the Gateway District, the first arts and entertainment quarter for the people who "actually live" in Las Vegas. (Enigma Garden Café, Mission Statement)

In 1996, Brewer joined with local iconoclast Len Adams Dorris, a local gardening talk show host on radio station KNPR, and the founder of one of the city's first coffeehouses. As a team, they pushed the idea of a cultural scene in downtown Las Vegas some six years before the Arts District and its First Friday was formed, Dorris saw the future of the downtown area. He noted that:

Our biggest barrier to having a cultural scene was, there was no place for it," he says. "It was scattered, and no business could benefit from the other.

You go to other cities that have arts districts and they're centered in a physical location. We've never had a physical location [and] it's up to us to make it happen. (Renzi 1996)

Dorris believed that the downtown area would eventually become the city's art and cultural center; in fact, he named the area the Gateway District as the “gateway to downtown and the Gateway Motel, a longstanding shanty on the corner of Charleston and Las Vegas Boulevard” (Renzi 1996). Wes Myles drew on the “Gateway District” idea to name the Gateway Arts and Music Experience or G.A.M.E festival that he organized in 1998. Brewer and Dorris hoped to insure the Enigma's future by purchasing the property and renovating its three historic buildings and garden courtyard. In the restaurant’s menu, Brewer described their commitment to establishing a local hangout, which could serve as a cultural buffer to an otherwise hard-edged city experience for many downtown locals.

As Brewer put it:

Las Vegas is a vibrant but often difficult city to live in, and finding the humanity behind all the glitz is hard. As partners, Len and I are proud of the art, music, and relationships the Enigma has helped to flourish. We remain dedicated to making a safe, beautiful and inspiring space, with the best food and drink we can serve, and we thank you for helping to make it happen. (Mission Statement - The Enigma Garden Cafe)

The Enigma Café closed in 2000. The Café was unable to survive the changing economy and demographics of the area (Smith 2010). Brewer and Dorris faced an area with an increasing crime rate due to “street-level drug dealers and street walkers, gang members and petty thieves” (Editorial 1998). In context, they simply couldn’t manage to sustain the space and the experiences they desired. Yet, in its short seven year history, the Cafe and it’s proprietors established an important beachhead for local art and culture in the hardscrabble downtown area that drew many creative types to its neighborhoods by offering a space to gather and form community connections that so many of them seemed

to desire. Brewer and Dorris' Enigma Cafe was part of the early cultural vanguard downtown, perhaps a few years ahead of their time in realizing the importance of a cultural gathering place for locals.

UNLV's Contributions to the Early Arts Scene

Universities typically play major roles in the cultural life of cities. While the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) has a presence in the city and provided some stimulation for the growth of an arts district, the university's overall direct contributions to the emerging arts district have been modest.

UNLV first contributed to the growth of the arts district by way of the Nevada Institute of Contemporary Art (NICA). Started in 1986 by Steven Molaski and Roger Thomas, local art collectors and Tom Holder, a UNLV art professor with a \$25,000 grant from the then UNLV President Robert Maxson, NICA featured art by local graduate students in addition to nationally known artists. Initially, the institute was located on the UNLV campus, but in an attempt to draw more visibility and revenue it eventually moved off campus into The Arts Factory. NICA enjoyed a few years of increased notoriety and exposure at The Arts Factory, but closed in 2000 due to a lack of funds (Las Vegas Sun editorial 2000). Some blamed the inability of NICA to maintain funding on a tepid Las Vegas arts market. As Michael Shulman, a NICA board member cynically observed:

Las Vegas is a fantastic city, except it's got to be the most culturally apathetic city in North America. The people of affluence are perfectly capable of traveling to other cities for that culture. Vegas appeals to the lowest common culture-denominator. (Las Vegas Sun editorial 2000)

As previously mentioned, Mary Warner, a UNLV art professor, had established an off-campus student gallery in 1989 called the Temporary Contemporary Gallery. Her

goal was to give students more real world experience showing their art. After a short stint near campus, she also moved her students downtown when Myles offered a space in the Arts Factory. This move fit well with those who felt that UNLV and the downtown arts networks should be connected in some way. Yet, despite Warner's efforts, there is little evidence of strong faculty or student involvement in the early downtown scene. A local artist captures this sentiment:

Some hoped that the Arts District as an entity would be an extension of the campus. I never saw much synergy between UNLV and the Arts District. (interview, Artist and Cultural Administrator, 4/7/2009)

One university artist voiced a typical explanation for the university's weak downtown art involvement:

I wasn't heavily vested in [the idea of an artist scene] primarily due to other duties and trying to keep my career alive, which, again, went someplace other than Las Vegas. (interview, Artist 7, 5/4/2009)

The six mile distance from the UNLV campus to the downtown area, and the fact that the UNLV art program had a life of its own in the university system, and the perception that Las Vegas residents were apathetic about an "arts culture" combined to limit much direct involvement by professors and students in early downtown arts activities. It also took the City of Las Vegas some time to invest in an arts vision. But on the heels of the Gateway Festivals and a new planning vision, city support began to emerge.

The City of Las Vegas

In the summer of 2000, the City of Las Vegas released the Las Vegas Downtown Centennial Plan, which detailed ten unique districts defined by architectural character, land-use and the streetscape with distinct edges and themes (Appendix 2). The plan

included an arts district, located in an 18 block downtown area immediately south of the downtown center (Appendix 3). This was the area to be later designated as the 18b Las Vegas Arts District². While there is little documentation that specifically details how the locations for each of the ten districts were determined, it is easy to speculate why the 18b might have been attractive to those who created the Downtown Centennial Plan. A careful reading of the Vegas 2020 Master Plan indicates that the planners were seeking to create "anchors" for community development as well as informal meeting places. The Arts Factory and a vintage storefront called The Funk House were already established as primary "fixtures" as the area was redeveloped.

The City's Cultural Affairs Office was a major player in the City's move to embrace an arts-focused area as a key to downtown redevelopment. Nancy Deaner, a long time arts administrator, teacher, and artist and a strong local supporter of the arts, served as the manager of the Office of Cultural Affairs. The Office of Cultural Affairs mission was to "...provide performing and visual arts planning and services to the Las Vegas Community and city departments so they can have access to, be informed about, and participate in the arts" (artslasvegas.org). A board appointed by the Mayor and City Council manages the Commission. The Office oversees the Las Vegas Arts Commission, established in 1987 as the city's public art agency. The Office supported several city programs such as the historic Fifth Street School revitalization to house an assortment of local arts and architectural organizations including the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Fine Arts Program and the Downtown Design Center for the School of Architecture.

²Today, the Arts District has extended beyond the original 18 blocks toward Fremont Street. Among the other city districts would be an Office Core; Downtown Gateway; Downtown South; Parkway Center; Central Casino Core; Northern Strip Gateway; East Village; Fremont East District, and Symphony Park (Ten- District Map, appendix 2).

They also supported several local cultural programs such as Charleston Heights, Rainbow Company Youth Theatre and the Las Vegas Arts Commission. In addition, Cultural Affairs also funds art projects through the city's one percent for the arts program as well as the commissioning of all artwork located on city property. Artists and arts district patrons have typically seen the Office of Cultural Affairs as a positive force within city government for local art and a strong supporter of art scene development, when they have the resources to contribute.

Within this environment the leaders in the Cultural Affairs Office began to formalize connections with established downtown arts advocates, such as Wes Myles, Jack Solomon and Cindy Funkhouser.

Jack Solomon and the High-Brow Vision

As an early visionary, Jack Solomon was a significant force in developing the Las Vegas Arts District Neighborhood. During his years as a corporate lawyer in Chicago, he specialized in art and entertainment law representing actors, such as Margaret O'Brien, George Raft and Gloria Swanson. At the same time, he was the founding director of Piper's Alley Corporation, charged with the development of a Victorian-themed shopping center as part of a redevelopment effort in Chicago's Old Town neighborhood.

In 1964, he founded the Circle Fine Art Corporation bringing together a network of 38 galleries, specializing in limited-edition fine art graphics. He also authored monographs on artists and often served as an expert witness in litigation involving art and the business of art. He and his wife, Carolyn, later founded the S2 Art Group, Ltd. and the Jack Gallery, a high-end gallery focused on lithographs by many well-known artists.

Their interests ranged from the Art Deco of Erté, to Norman Rockwell, the op-art of Victor Vassarely and the kinetic work of Yaacov Agam.

In 2001, Solomon moved The S2 Art Group and Jack Gallery from Chicago to Las Vegas. Las Vegas' Neighborhood Services Department provided \$100,000 to assist with the move and provided support to artists associated with the Solomon galleries (Sahagun 2001). For example, the Las Vegas Arts District neighborhood association



Figure 3. Entrance, Sculpture Park.
Photo by the author

appropriated \$30,000 (redevelopment funds) to employ international artist, Yaacov Agam to prepare a model of an interactive, kinetic sculpture for the Boulder Plaza Sculpture Park (Las Vegas City Redevelopment 2003).

Ultimately the project was never finished due to a lack of funds to finance the sculpture's actual construction.

Solomon described his decision to move his business as a combination of a personal interest in a life change and a savvy business decision:

I've been in the art business...in two years it'll be 50 years. The taxes went up[and] real estate taxes went up a third. We were wooed by different cities. We looked in various cities. The mayor had friends here who had purchased art from me, so we ended up with a very profitable gallery at the Paris [hotel and casino on the Las Vegas Strip]. The city [also] gave us a \$100,000 grant. It didn't cost the city; it was some sort of federal deal they had to attract new businesses. (interview, Solomon, 5/01/2009)

At the time, the S2 group, the Gateway Arts Association, and the Gateway Arts District Neighborhood Association (later to be the 18b Las Vegas Arts District Neighborhood Association) were considered to be the founding institutions for what

some hoped would become a vibrant arts district (Sahagun 2001). Jack Solomon became an early President of the Las Vegas Arts District Neighborhood Association.

Solomon's move to Las Vegas appears to be part of what has become a common 21st-century city planning strategy focused on the idea that an arts scene attracts creative professionals, thereby stimulating creative invention and ultimately is a thrust for city redevelopment, though there is some debate about whether or not this strategy actually works (Shaw 2013). Solomon initially planned "to build a total art village here for artists to live and work" (interview, Solomon, 5/01/2009). He assumed there would be a strong relationship between artists and Las Vegas audiences, but over time he became increasingly cynical. He noted:

The local support of the citizens wasn't there, the people who should, and in other cities would, be helping to build the arts district, see it as competition (interview, Solomon, 5/01/2009).

At the same time, Solomon came to believe that differences with another active member of the arts scene, Cindy Funkhouser, and city officials would move the arts district away from the vision of highbrow art galleries with art walks filled with well-heeled patrons that he found compelling in so many other cities. Solomon notes that:

There was a split basically in concept. Cindy Funkhouser became active in that and her vision was [the arts district] should be a big party and our vision was different. It should be like it is in many cities. [Art district events] should be sort of an art gallery hop that people could come every first Friday and look. As it turned out, when Friday art walks were advertised, kids inundated the place. The city put on rock music. The kids, many of them underage, came and tried to get free booze and many buyers of art stayed away. ... And there are certain people in the city who were stupid, in my opinion, chose her [Cindy Funkhouser] to give money to and to support, and that's what happened. (interview, Solomon, 5/01/2009)

Solomon eventually closed his printing gallery during the art walk events as a protest to what he saw as an overly-raucous atmosphere. He also resigned in protest from his

position as president of the Las Vegas Arts District Association. It seemed clear to him that the come-one-come-all festival nature of the Arts District would likely not change. His vision of an elite patron art walk would have to be subsumed under a broader art for the common folks ethos.

Cindy Funkhouser, the Funk House, and First Friday

Cindy Funkhouser moved to Las Vegas in 1988. A former Four Queens bartender, she opened The Funk House (in 2000) located on Casino Center Boulevard and Colorado

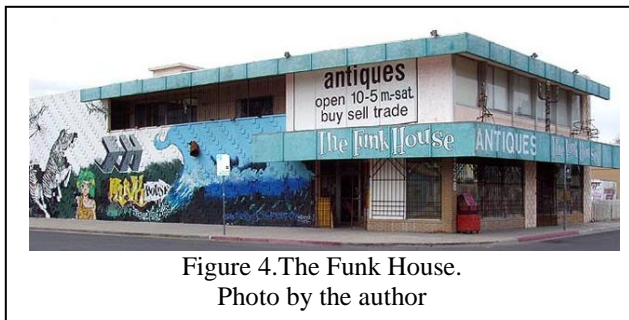


Figure 4. The Funk House.
Photo by the author

just two blocks south of The Arts Factory (Peterson 2003). The building offered a large first floor storefront with a second floor apartment space. Funkhouser moved

into the second floor apartment and opened The Funk House below. The Funk House operated as a store that showcased vintage furnishings, home accessories, neon signs, glass, ceramics, paintings, rugs, furniture, art lamps, and vintage neon signs. Funkhouser did not operate The Funk House as a gallery per se, but did continually offer commission-free showing spaces to local artists.

In 2002, Funkhouser visited Portland, Oregon, where she attended the Portland Art Walk, a monthly cultural event designed to bring the public into local galleries. There she saw what she considered a potential model for a monthly event that could help spark a downtown arts community in Las Vegas. She was especially impressed by the street-fair flavor of the Portland event, which included not only artists, but musicians and others. When I asked Funkhouser about that visit, she explained that she thought that Las Vegas needed a casual, festival atmosphere:

My son was living in Portland and I went up there to visit him. I went to a First Thursday; they've been doing 23 years maybe? And I just didn't see any reason why it wouldn't work in Las Vegas. We have the same amount of people. Granted we don't have exactly the same cultural level. ... they do it everywhere in town and now they do Third Thursday and Last Thursday ... because they thought the First Thursday got a little 'hoity-toit'y, ... so there's been all kinds of branching off there, ... it was a little bit different, but I didn't see why it wouldn't work here. (interview, Funkhouser, 4/20/2009)

After Funkhouser returned from Portland, she, along with friends Julie Brewer, of the Enigma Café, and Naomi Arin, a local gallery owner and attorney, formed Whirlygig Inc. as a nonprofit with an eleven-member board. In October 2002, Whirlygig began the mission of producing the First Friday art walk. The Whirlygig board recruited Danielle Rodenkirche, the Las Vegas cultural coordinator for the world-renowned Cirque du Soleil to help the effort. In October 2002, they created the monthly art celebration, First Friday, to showcase art in downtown Las Vegas. The First Friday event was a critical element in the emergence of the city's art scene.

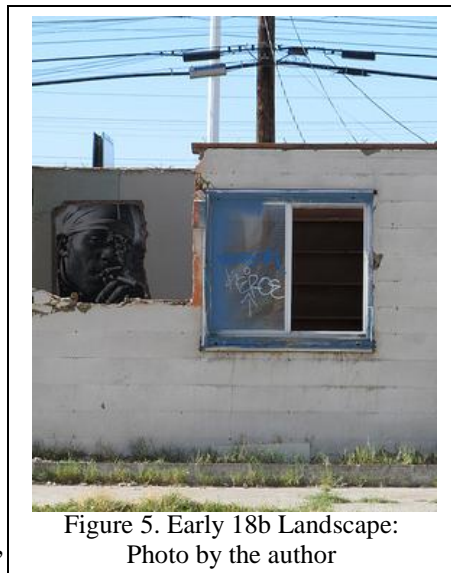
First Fridays, 2002 - 2003

The inaugural 2002 First Friday experience was a unique venture. With limited publicity and an under-publicized location, the October event was small, cold and wet and there were few streetlights to illuminate the sidewalks. I drove to the area and I had to park a few blocks away on a dark street in front of decrepit buildings. I quickly walked to The Arts Factory and joined maybe a hundred people milling in and around the large building. The Funk House was not mentioned in the advertisement I had seen, so I did not know it even existed just a block away. The crowd was mostly locals who were already a part of local art networks. I attended and wondered if this could grow and become a "happening place" that would define the area's future. I hoped there would be other

people like me, who had moved from other cities and who missed the dynamic interchange that a local art scene can support. I moved to Las Vegas from Seattle, a city with an established art community where I had been going to First Thursday since 1984 and was craving the art festival experience, when I saw a notice in one of the local weekly papers advertising First Friday. In 2002 in Las Vegas it was not easy to find interesting art, local or otherwise, so I drove 13 miles from the Green Valley suburb in Henderson, Nevada, hoping I had finally found at least the start of an art experience that I longed for.

In a physical sense, the 18b area was little more than a few antique stores, marked by a few posters hung in their windows, between a few small businesses with temporary art shows, surrounded by low cost furniture stores, auto shops, and bail bond shops.

Tracking forward over the next twelve years, both literally and metaphorically, the area shifted dramatically away from that early landscape, from what were gritty alternative spaces with an old industrial feel, empty lots and closed storefronts, to a few new bars, vintage shops, restaurants, and, of course, galleries. Primarily located in two settings, The Arts Factory and The Funk House Antique Shop,



First Friday 2002 was much smaller and simpler than what it would eventually become with its massive crowds, multifaceted street festival, and open galleries.

Jennifer Henry (owner of the now closed capital h gallery, inside The Arts Factory) reminisced about her visit to The Arts Factory at the inaugural First Friday event.

Although the event was sparsely attended, she and her husband Brian were inspired to find a space and offer their art to the community. As Henry describes her experience with First Friday, she notes that:

It was the very first ‘First Friday’. Brian and I attended. We arrived before the sun had set at The Arts Factory and wandered around the galleries for about an hour anonymously, amongst a small group of strangers. I don’t remember the specifics of what we saw or did, but as we drove away, I remember agreeing that we should rent the shoebox-sized gallery space we’d encountered, awkwardly positioned at the turn of a very narrow hallway, and do something we’d never done before: show our art. I think it’s fair to say that first First Friday has had an immeasurable impact on our life, now and forever. (Jennifer Henry 2012)

I discovered The Funk House at the following month’s First Friday event in November 2002. Someone had painted red footsteps on the sidewalk between The Arts Factory and The Funk House and I followed them. It seemed clear that the two venues were anchor spots for the event. In addition to The Arts Factory and The Funk House, the event was sponsored by the Iowa Café, known for hosting alternative pop bands, as well as Jillians and The Ice House, two popular dance clubs located in the immediate vicinity. These businesses drew young party-focused people to the area. The Ice House, built on the location of the former city ice house with a frozen section of ice running down the center of its semicircular bar, became a popular site for after-party events with DJ John Doe as the main attraction.

I remember the early experience with its empty streets and the dicey industrial setting. As I walked toward The Funk House on the second First Friday I heard a man who appeared to be homeless, begin to yell “Why are you assholes all looking at me? Y’all better just keep your looks to your own self!” As I walked past two middle age women, who also seemed to feel out of place and looking for art, we glanced at each

other finding some comfort in our mutual worry. I also recall seeing a young man in a super hero costume accompanied by a young woman in a tube top with paisley painted skin . I then watched a fellow playing bucket drums in front of The Funk House. A few attendees tossed change or crumpled bills into the man’s coffee can. Some young, high school age kids seemed to be looking in vain for a party.

Whirlygig, Inc. paid for a full page advertisement in a local weekly paper, the Mercury (2002: 23), that presented the December, 2002 First Friday event as a “local art scene,” and free monthly celebration of art and culture”. The advertisement listed nine venues starting with the Arts Factory and The Funk House, as well as the Iowa Café, Jillians, and the Ice House, an antique store, and two thrift stores. No other art galleries existed except those inside The Arts Factory and the temporary Funk House gallery. By July, 2003 First Friday was on the front page of the Mercury (Figure 6).

Based on my observations of the early First Friday events, few young people, who constituted the bulk of the attendees, spent much time in the gallery spaces. Instead they clustered outside the Arts Factory and The Funk House and along the sidewalks and streets between them. They seemed

drawn more by the crowd than by the idea of art appreciation, much less the idea of purchasing art. For the 18b district to grow, many more artists and potential patrons would need to be similarly inspired.

Artists, Galleries, and Patrons



Figure 6. The Mercury
Now City Life, July 31, 2003

By First Friday's second year anniversary, the event had grown from its initial two locations. The Arts Factory was connected to The Funk House by the red footsteps painted months earlier to show the way between the two anchor spots and attendance grew to upwards of 3,000 curious Las Vegans (First Friday Prime 2004). By October of 2004, The Arts Factory housed a number of galleries including the Sunrise, Michael Wardle, Five Finger Miscount, DiCandilo, Cube, Trifecta, capital h, Face up, and Zollar Galleries, in addition to working studio spaces for well established artists, such as Dale Mathis and Mike Griesgraber.

Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman officially opened the second anniversary of First Friday with a speech from the sound stage near The Funk House (First Friday Primer 2004). The Pacific Arts Collective from San Francisco followed him with a multidisciplinary arts performance using music, poets, a DJ and dancers. As First Friday grew, the number of events and artists exceeded the spaces available at The Arts Factory so events and artists had to find spaces for their events in the area. The Aloha Laundromat is an example of an unexpected place in which groups found a home for their events in the neighborhood (Alvarez 2004).

The excitement and expectations for year two were palpable among local artists. Many of the artists had developed more elaborate approaches to showing their art and drawing in patrons to an art experience. For instance, Dray Wilmore used his open studio and gallery as an exhibit and to host a party for the underground art calendar, 702 Sub-Culture Las Vegas. The exhibit consisted of the work of Shannon Dorn and Gerald Todd, both photographers, who presented "extraordinary nudes in a most alluring and unpredictable setting". The advertisement for that show went on to read that "all featured

models [were also] on hand to meet and sign calendars” (Art Crimes Blog, graffiti.org 2005).

By October 2004, several free-standing galleries, including S2 Arts, Art Z Studio and Gallery, Dray’s Place, Gallery MTZ, Dust Gallery, and Godt-Cleary, had opened in the area. Godt-Cleary Projects was an already established art gallery at Mandalay Bay Resort. The owners opened the offshoot in the Arts District, known as Godt-Cleary Projects, to have a presence in the Arts District and bring people to the gallery once a month at First Friday to “build...awareness and [a] core audience” (Stein 2004) by having hundreds of people see the art and grow to like it. Godt-Cleary specialized in “mid-career to established, blue chip artists” (Stein 2004). The gallery’s opening show was *Billboards and Photographs* by the actor, Dennis Hopper. The 18b also housed a number of antique and vintage clothing retailers including Gypsy Caravan, The Attic, The Funk House, Yana’s Junk, Red Rooster, and Valentino’s Zootsuit, as well as Durette studios, a shop that made handcrafted kaleidoscopes. First Friday attendees could purchase food at a number of long time downtown restaurants, including Chicago Joe’s, Dino’s, The Icehouse, Florida Café, Iowa Café, Casa Don Juan and Tinoco’s Bistro. The city closed traffic on Colorado Boulevard so that local eateries could set up food stands for barbeque, Euro cuisine, Italian food, with beer and wine and even, on occasion, martinis served by bartenders dressed formally in white jackets and ties. An after-party culture began to develop, primarily at Dino’s Bar and The Ice House Lounge, Snick’s Place and the Aloha Laundromat. First-Friday goers could find local art, mini-film festivals, and live acts performing in the laundry, along with all-night DJs in Snick’s and the Ice House. Admission to Dinos and the Aloha was free and they admitted all ages.

VegasArtists.com, a now defunct on-line artist cooperative, described their sponsored after-party at Snicks as:

A REAL FIRST FRIDAY AFTER PARTY! No cover, all ages. A group of Aliens are hosting a party called "Spaced Invaders." Aliens enter free...All those not dressed as an Alien are subject to being probed....and it is being held just around the corner from The Funk House on the corner of 3rd and Imperial at Snick's Place bar and the Aloha Laundromat next door! This is within walking distance of The Funk House so leave your car parked, and come join us for more fun! ... This is becoming a monthly event to follow up on the already awesome First Friday activities. We thought, "Why should we all go home at 10 pm?" So we've started this. (Blog, Tribes 2004)

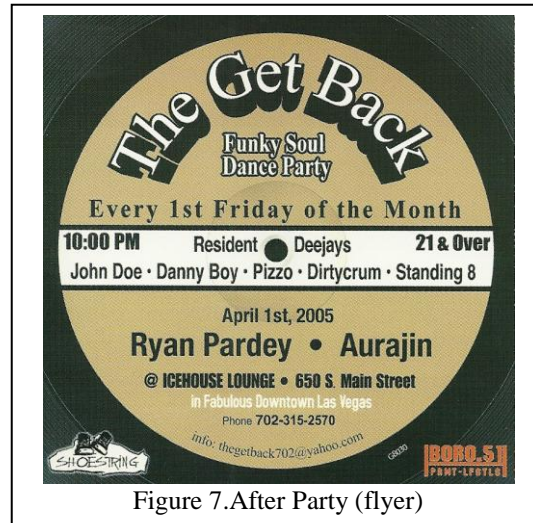


Figure 7.After Party (flyer)

Because there were few formal rules in place, it felt like most anything was fair game in the festival atmosphere. Indeed, First Friday looked much like a large street party. The crowd was mixed, ranging from partying high schoolers to a few monied art patrons who browsed amongst sidewalk break dancers, fire breathers, tango dancers, and fortune tellers. The “party scene” was becoming increasingly unpopular with some 18b participants because, According to one business owner, “the crowd it draws would much rather swill free wine and listen to live rock music than browse for Todd Goldman lithographs” (interview, Arts District Entrepreneur 4, 4/7/2009).

Several 18b merchants clashed over the vision for art in the Arts District. Some sought a "high-brow" form of art to characterize the district. Highbrow art carries a connotation of high culture synonymous with elite “intelligentsia”, and downplays art that is produced by those outside learned, acclaimed circles. Differences also emerged

among 18b business owners over the scope of the arts to be emphasized in the district. Several 18b entrepreneurs and gallery owners imagined the district to have potential as a haven for influential art built around nationally known artists, not a venue reserved for local art. The clash between the “grow-your-own culture” vision versus the “national artists ideal” became a bitter argument in the 18b network over selecting an artist for a city sculpture garden. As one 18b business owner explained:

Some of the people on the board say let's just get a local artist. We have an opportunity to get a world-class artist who's just had our project in a book published by The Louvre ... and they want to stick a (local) piece in the sculpture park. (interview, Arts District Entrepreneur 3, 4/7/2009)

S2 Arts owner, Jack Solomon, was one of the first to speak out against the “lowbrow” street festival character persisting in the 18b district. Representing the highbrow national artists ideal, Solomon felt that the 18b area should be primarily reserved for established artists to show their work to art patrons. He argued that the 18b district

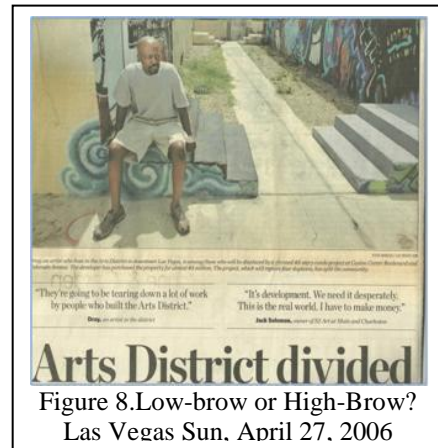


Figure 8. Low-brow or High-Brow?
Las Vegas Sun, April 27, 2006

should house established galleries, live-work spaces, cafes, and nightspots, not support an all-inclusive festival. On the other hand, Funkhouser represented the grow-your-own-culture vision, with a more organic view of the district as a place for local artists to live and show their work. In fact, most 18b artists and venders believed that it was important to expose young people to the arts. Gallery owners in The Arts Factory hoped that young people would come and look at the art, in spite of the fact that this group would be unlikely to purchase anything. They felt that “tomorrow’s collectors [will be] every bit as important as today’s” (interview, Gallery Owner 3, 5/3/2009).

Part of the dispute over the highbrow national artists' ideal versus the lowbrow grow-your-own-culture perspective is that any art scene needs patrons to purchase the art itself. But 18b seemed to draw those interested less in buying art than participating in the art-themed festival atmosphere. When asked, "What kinds of people turn out for First Friday?" Funkhouser replied:

We have everything from people who bring their kids every month, up to people in their 80s from the burbs. ... One night I saw a whole family drawing chalk art out front, and they were joined by a 75-year-old man in a suit... This is not going to be one of those snobby things, because that just doesn't work for me. (First Friday Primer 2004)

Funkhouser went on to describe the early art venues as

... individuals, and a few larger galleries that have several artists... The Godt-Cleary is opening, and they're a pretty important major gallery. We've got Dust Gallery, which has a variety of artists. The Contemporary Arts Collective has a variety of artists. Most of the others are individual artists. (First Friday Primer 2004).

Funkhouser also commented on an oft-discussed topic pertaining to the quality of the art.

Art displayed in established arts districts is often "juried," which involves a selection process that determines the type and quality of art to be shown. But the breadth and quality of the art shown during 18b's first few years was not all that limited.

When asked if anyone could show their art, [Funkhouser] responded that "eventually, it may be juried because of the amount of people that want to show their stuff, but not yet. They [artists] do have to come down and commit to it. And we do stick with art, we don't want crafts. And it's not a flea market. It's art" (First Friday Primer 2004).

While there have been many positive alliances and social networks in the development of the Las Vegas arts district, the conflicts both among artists in the art scene and between the art scene organizers and private developers shaped the early stages

of the 18b district. The conflict revealed differing visions for the 18b and the First Friday event ranging from the “grow-your-own culture” lowbrow festival vision versus the “highbrow national artists ideal”. Since at least 1999, artists, business owners, and city officials had debated exactly what a Las Vegas arts scene should emphasize. One primary theme in those debates was concern about the downtown area lacking a distinctive feel or identity. They felt that an identity was important for the success of retail and service businesses and that an art scene could provide that much-needed way for people to identify with downtown Las Vegas as a place to spend time and money, and to call their own. Urban researchers have confirmed the positive effects of cultural and social capital that art scenes can have on commerce and community (e.g., Pryor and Gossbart 2005³). These debates would continue into subsequent phases of the art scene’s development.

18b Infrastructure

Developing an identity was not the only complication facing the 18b. The Arts District could only grow if it had spaces to grow into. Arts districts in cities like Boston, Chicago and Portland all had a core of older buildings that could be renovated to provide studio spaces and living lofts as described in Sharon Zukin’s book, *Loft Living* (1989), where she detailed how derelict spaces brought artists together and provided an impetus for the development of a cultural core and commercial redevelopment. While there are some older buildings available to artists, Las Vegas has also purposely refurbished

³In a long-term field investigation of American Main Streets, Pryor and Gossbart (2005) examined the structure and festive nature of an active marketplace. They noted that important streets in cities “support specific social functions, provide civic forums, and facilitate pedestrian mobility and social interaction”. They go on to say that these areas “may become tourist attractions due to their architecture, location, unique product offerings, and civic, social, and cultural events” (Pryor and Gossbart 2005:807).

downtown areas with updated utilities, extended land use regulations, and added aesthetic improvements. The city clearly recognized that cultural districts have special needs if they are to stimulate economic development, foster civic pride and become focal points for generating businesses, attracting tourists, and stimulating cultural development.

However, for many businesses seeking to set up shop in the 18b, the city bureaucracy and regulations were daunting. Government bureaucracies tend to be organized around critical needs such as public health, safety, education, and community planning. But, it is not uncommon for city zoning to involve numerous offices with discrete sub-organizations, each with a separate bureaucracy and a lack of communication among them. In fact an extraordinary number of steps are required to process documents through the City of Las Vegas' development review process before customers have the right to use property assets. A 2009 report on the organizational culture and processes of the City of Las Vegas' development review process found that:

...the review of a plan, processing of a permit, or handling of an inspection meets with considerable success when isolated to the authority and responsibility of a distinct department. . But as each one of the departments and outside agencies responsible for development review enters the process, the likelihood of delay, misinformation, conflict and confusion increase significantly. (Kirchhoff Report, Analysis, 2009)

While all urban buildings have to adhere to codes and regulations for safety, some cities have streamlined processes and provided waivers of zoning fees for business activities in art districts. For example, the Williamsburg, Virginia Arts District has created a fairly simple process for customers to apply for business incentives such as tax rebates and waivers of permit and zoning fees (www.williamsburgva.gov). Peculiar, Missouri, a small, Midwestern town, located near Kansas City, Missouri, provides a business packet to assist arts district businesses, with specific instructions for rebates.

In Las Vegas, owner/builder permits are processed through a building department acceptance process that includes drawing plans, knowledge of zoning and conformation to codes and restrictions. The older the building, the more expensive it is to repurpose for new activities. For example, building codes require smoke control systems; codes specifically require the injection of air as an exhaust mechanism to limit the impact of smoke and fire. Meeting such code requirements can be very costly for owners. As one arts district property owner put it:

You wouldn't believe what they wanted me to go through. If I did it all the way that they wanted it would have cost me \$5,000 in architectural drawings and someone to come out and make sure the concrete can hold an awning. (interview, Arts District Entrepreneur 1, 4/20/2009)

Generally, commentary from 18b residents indicated that some saw the city policies as rigid intractable obstacles to development. For example, a local artist explained,

I met with them, some of the building guys [from the City of Las Vegas' development review office]... they always stick to the thing, but they swear, it's the national code, everybody follows it and you know, anybody who has been in New York or L.A. knows that is just not true ... it was suggested that I wait until a particular person retired. (interview, Artist and Cultural Administrator, 4/7/2009)

Some 18b property owners suggest that city offices are merely uninformed about the needs of an artistic community:

The local people in planning and public works haven't traveled the world and they haven't seen what's possible ... they mean well. They just have to open those blinders and see if there's a way to do it. (interview, Arts District Entrepreneur 2, 4/20/2009)

Many cities address these types of problems directly by developing policies for support and allocation of spaces with the objective of optimizing property use to improve overall support to arts and cultural sectors of the city. For the 18b, infrastructure is not only physical, but also includes activities that facilitate co-location of groups with the same

interests to benefit the sharing of resources, access to audiences and creative collaboration between tenant organizations.

Conclusion

Despite limited resources, conflicting visions for downtown development, and over bureaucratized regulatory processes, First Friday, by 2004, became an important city event. Each First Friday festival received significant press coverage in the Las Vegas media. Brian Paco Alvarez described the continual progress of the First Friday movement in *Enculturate Las Vegas: Vegas Centennial and May's First Friday* on his blog (lvartsandculture.blogspot.com). Vanessa Silberman a local arts reporter published an article entitled *New Arts District Extends Vegas Cultural Renaissance* in *City Beat* (2003:142). The July 31, 2003 cover story in the Las Vegas Mercury was entitled: Thank God it's First Friday (Kiraly 2003). Clearly, the potential for the 18b to become a defining juncture combining art and place was apparent to many.

Artists, businesses, and the city also continued to debate the cultural form that the 18b district and the First Friday event should take, along with possible various roles for private and public entities. The discussions seemed to divide roughly between ideas supporting a street festival, a location centered block party, and a focused high-end gallery walk, or some combination of the three. Discussions also raised questions about whether or not the heart of the event should include lowbrow craft or be restricted to highbrow fine art. These were all critical points because the outcome would set the stage for 18b's future.

In chapter 5, I describe the next phase of Las Vegas arts scene development from late-2004 to 2009. By late 2004, First Friday would see street artist booths, an increase in

live music, abstract paintings inspired by meditation practice and wood carving tributes to Sammy Davis Jr. Mayor Goodman would be a regular visitor. The high-end Godt-Cleary gallery showcased Robert Rauschenberg and others. Extended collections of both high-brow and low-brow art would be shown as well as an eclectic collection of offerings, such as the *Cult of Potato*, a presentation from the International Potato Arts Collective. The local public radio station, KNPR, would celebrate 25 years in public radio by sponsoring artists active in the local arts scene. The Cube Gallery would sponsor a show focused on “Vintage Vegas”, and SEAT (Social Experimentation and Absurd Theater) offered *Crackwhore: The Musical*. However, while this period would be culturally rich, the 2007-08 economic downturn would impact First Friday directly and set it on a new trajectory.

CHAPTER 5 – ART, COMMUNITY and the FATE of DOWNTOWN

In Chapter 4, I described the grassroots arts activity that emerged from like-minded artistic and business oriented people seeking to establish a foothold for an art scene in downtown Las Vegas. Their efforts coalesced in the First Friday arts walk, a marquee event for the arts scene that grew through word-of-mouth and through media coverage. Anchored by The Arts Factory and The Funk House antique store, the First Friday festival continued to attract several thousand people to the 18b District to mill about, socialize, and patronize local businesses on the first Friday of each month.

In this chapter, I follow the development of the Las Vegas Arts Scene from 2005, during the last two years of the Las Vegas economic boom, through the Great Recession to 2014. I explain how 18b and the First Friday festival matured under the direction of Whirlygig and the 18b entrepreneurs, and the conflicts that continued over different visions for the arts scene. I also discuss the purchase of the First Friday trademark by Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos Shoes in 2011, followed by Hsieh's Downtown Project, a redevelopment plan that has shaped the 18b arts scene, the newer East Fremont Entertainment District, and also the downtown Las Vegas area as a "locals" destination.

First Friday's Maturation

By 2005, visitors to First Friday found a multitude of artist tents, live music, dancing, fortune tellers and a 'let down your hair' Las Vegas party. The Arts Factory continued as an anchor site, with its numerous gallery and studio spaces, including Cricket Studio & Face Up Gallery, Cube Gallery, Five Finger Miscount W/ Iceberg Slick, Trifecta Gallery, S2art, the Mike Wardle Gallery, and the Social Experimentation and Absurd Theater (SEAT). Tinoco's Bistro also set up shop in the Arts Factory, offering

fine Italian cuisine to the crowds. Down the block on Casino Center Boulevard toward The Funk House visitors could find a surf music band pounding out a beat next to more than 20 tents displaying arts and crafts. Since the First Friday event began in 2002, an array of galleries, bars, and refurbished buildings dotted the 18b district. Now, the Dust Gallery and G-C Arts (formerly Godt-Cleary) opened on Main Street. The Holsum Bread Factory was renovated and renamed Holsum Lofts, which offered a studio complex for artists and businesses. Individual artists also moved into small houses across from The Funk House, which served as gallery spaces, work spaces, and residences. Commerce Street Studios opened with more than ten artists renting studios. The Art Bar opened on Main Street, offering both a place to drink and carouse, and also gallery space for artists to display their work. Artistic Ironworks also moved in on Commerce Street, an anchor industry with multiple businesses that combined artistry and industry.

An increased level of activity seemed to take hold in the 18b as growing networks of artists and businesses established new spaces throughout the district. In a retrospective on the Arts District in the Las Vegas Weekly, reporter Kristen Peterson described a 2005 gathering at the Godt-Cleary, where local professionals, artists and gallery owners met with well-heeled art collectors, such as local designer Roger Thomas, casino executive Glenn Schaeffer, MGM CEO Jim Murren, Las Vegas Art Museum board president Patrick Duffy, and art collector Wally Goodman. Peterson wrote that:

The word of the evening seems to be “milestone.” These guys are big-time, and here they are talking art in a blue-chip gallery with an inventory of Rauschenbergs, Ruschas and Rosenquists. Members from Guggenheim Hermitage’s Young Collectors Council are there, as are local artists, and though there is worthwhile criticism about the lack of foot traffic in the neighborhood, “milestone” isn’t a stretch. It has been just five years since the city designated this 18-block area the Arts District. (Peterson 2011f).

While the local media offered glowing reports about the expansion of local arts and culture, they also noted concerns regarding development of the area, such as the specter of gentrification that might price out artists and fledgling galleries, or simply plow over them.

A condo movement is wildly afoot. Everyone is calling it the Manhattanization of Las Vegas, and business owners in the Arts District are giddy thinking of the foot traffic it would bring to the area. But some of the neighborhood artists are worried. It's an April evening in 2006, and they've gathered here at the cottages across from the Funk House to discuss concerns about gentrification and the potential loss of the area's character. Artist Dray, the first to bring his studio to the run-down duplexes, has painted a mural on his cottage entitled "The Birth of an Arts Scene," depicting a naked woman holding a flower.

But a developer, Mythic Management, has bought the property the artists are living on for \$3 million, intending to build a 43-story condo tower there. About 70 people have piled into G-C Arts (formerly Godt-Cleary) on a June evening, as Scott Adams of the city's business development office discusses ways the planned lofts and condo towers—10 approved projects in the Arts District—could rejuvenate the area. A few blocks away cranes mark the skyline where SoHo and Newport lofts are going up. Two months later Dray destroys his mural after he and other tenants receive eviction notices. Outraged, he paints over all three of his murals. (Peterson 2011f)



Figure 9. 'The Birth of an Art Scene'
Dray (Andre Wilmore), artist. Feb. 2005.
Photo by the author



Figure 10. Former site of 'The Birth of an Art Scene' Feb. 2006.
Photo by the author

Dray's anger and disappointment over the actions of developers and the city was well documented in the local press. At the time, his very public protest prompted an

outpouring of public dissent regarding his destruction of the revered “The Birth of an Arts Scene” mural. Dray’s mural had become a landmark icon representing the founding of an arts scene in Las Vegas. The mural had been frequently photographed and publicized in national magazines. In an August 2006 article entitled “The Death of an Arts Scene,” Dray commented that he had expected the “eight apartments in the four cottages to someday be leased to artists” (Peterson 2006b). He explained, “I just felt like I didn't want to give them my art, especially given what's happened.”

As developers expressed interest in the area, Los Angeles real estate investor, David Mozes, started working on a mixed-use venue just behind the Arts Factory. Mozes said that the venue “will include galleries, office space and entertainment, and he’s not the only one eyeing the area. Jack Solomon unveiled



Figure 11. Artist Response to 18b Condominium Project, 2006
Photo by the author

plans for a similar project (on the west side of the Arts Factory) that would include housing. He’s calling it Vegas Moderne” (Peterson 2011f).

Later, Michigan-based Real Estate Interests Group (REI) offered a plan for three casinos, condos, 550,000 square feet of retail space as well as a 22,000-seat arena on 73 acres of the downtown area partially located in the Arts District. As local property owners started to indicate a willingness to sell, artists and gallery owners became increasingly concerned about increases in property costs and living expenses.

Artistic Differences

In this increasingly unpredictable environment, the simmering lowbrow verses highbrow culture conflict heated up with performance artist and gallery owner Iceberg

Slick at the center. Slick was best known in the arts community for the graffiti-type works he commissions from local artists, including a spectacular Medusa head by Ruckus One and a two-story mural of a floating man by MEAR One a former LA graffiti artist. For Slick, Dray and many others, graffiti is an art form that has a rightful place within the Arts District, a view that was not shared by everyone.

Jerry Misko, artist and co-owner of Dust Gallery, described Iceberg Slick as “stylistically urban.” He observed that “Slick and the artists he brings in aren't always going to make everyone happy, but he [Slick] strives to make his exhibitions quality endeavors with solid artists” (Hodge 2006a). Artist Caesar Garcia remarked that for “arts districts in other cities, you know you're in an arts district because of the paintings and murals. We're in an

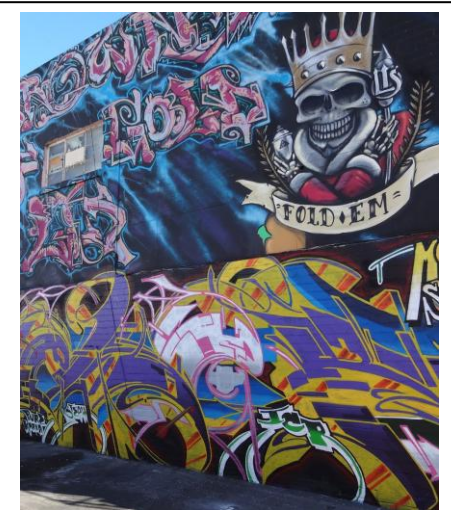


Figure 12. Graffiti-style Mural.
Bryce Chisholmt, artist
Photo by the author

industrial area that has never been safe. If you want to paint a [graffiti-style] mural on the wall, people get mad" (Hodge 2006a). Slick explained that: “They don't like the murals on the outside of the building. Nobody's going to tell you that, but I hear the rumors and the backtalk. As far as I'm concerned, we're the only building [The Arts Factory] in the Arts District that looks artistic” (Hodge 2006a). While graffiti styles are often out of the mainstream, Slick also had the strong support of Arts Factory owner, Wes Myles (Peterson 2008d). But as Slick gained local attention the arts scene increasingly disillusioned him. In an angry outburst during a local National Public Radio interview Myles defended Slick.

He said:

Iceberg has a huge vision and dream. He helps kids and does a lot of good stuff. He and I understand there's been an art movement out of the graffiti world in New York. Folks in the press want to use the word graffiti because it connotes low-lives [sic]. I told Iceberg not to let people put you in that position. You have to change the word. Call it urban art, if they're going to associate the word with something bad. As for how he's doing as a curator, Isbutt says Slick has been a quick study. He's learning how to collaborate with galleries in New York and Los Angeles. "All of the people who are considered the hip artists in Las Vegas, Iceberg has made it possible for them to show here. Amy Sol, who's on fire right now and wanted all over the country, Jerry Misko, Victor Whitmill, Scott Robinson. He's encouraged this. We're now doing projects with major, established galleries ... Slick just has a natural ability to talk to artists. They trust him, and they sell art. At the end of the day, that's the bottom line. (Hodge 2006a)

Yet, in 2006, Slick resigned from the First Friday committee because he felt he had no voice in the arts district, other board members did not appreciate his efforts, and he was "being held responsible for people he couldn't control and, in general, didn't know" (Hodge 2006b). As he explained in his resignation letter:

First Friday is just breaking ground and a new crew called 5ive Finger Miscount, unaccepted by the local art circles, begins doing underground shows complete with graffiti, deejays, and an abundance of young people who'd never dreamt of attending an art show. Out of fear and lack of understanding of this new movement, 5FM is not an active participant of the First Friday thing and is forced to promote events in out-of-the-way venues with wall space. The press takes notice. Suddenly the crew is invited to the district to help bring a young and hipper crowd downtown. Our first venture is to muralize the Funk House with traditional graffiti. Not long after 5FM moves into the Arts Factory with fellow member and well-respected art god K.D. Matheson, whose involvement helps legitimize our movement in the more conservative circles, a younger and hipper crowd begins to attend First Friday.

I begin to focus on graffiti by muralizing the building live for the crowd who may have never seen this done. After all, most graffiti just shows up overnight. My production in April brings a tremendous crowd, as well as MTV, A&E and every Vegas news station. Every artist in the [Arts] Factory boasts record sales that night. Local vandals begin to approach me

as to how they might participate in something legal. Many are given a chance and their lives are changed as they see a new outlet for their future.

Also [Whirlygig] allowed a group called T.A.G (Targeting Area Graffiti) a group who threatens local graffiti artists by offering money to snitches to have a presence just outside the factory. Now I do not condone tagging, but I do believe that threatening them will only aggravate the situation. I suggest offering other artistic outlets for them like legal murals or canvas. The Factory has been the only place that treats them human and gives them hope, which is why tagging has been a minimal problem there. (Hodge 2006b)

As tension increased over the value of highbrow versus lowbrow art, Jack Solomon, owner of S2 Art emphasized that “Highbrow indicates a bias.” He explained to a local reporter that:

People who buy art aren't necessarily highbrow but want quality art. What's happened is that Cindy's [Funkhouser] vision has changed; it's different from ours. We want an art walk, not block parties ... Some of the galleries have decided not to participate in First Fridays. Next door, Wes [Myles] gets a huge repair bill for the trash that these young people leave. Graffiti often comes later that evening. There has to be a change. I lose money every First Friday, lots of money. A lot of old-timers think this area is unsafe. When you get right down to it, it's very easy to call me a big fat capitalist who's interested in money. That's just a million pounds of bullshit. If we want to develop artists, they have to be able to make a living. Graffiti is therapy art. We need to develop more galleries, and galleries have to make a living. I would never be one to criticize the type of art shown in a gallery, but I have to clean up graffiti on my buildings. This is supposed to be an art walk, not a block party for young thugs. (Stein 2006)

While the internal dispute over First Friday's character persisted, the festival continued to attract large numbers of locals. Local reporters began noting how the teens attending First Friday had become lightning rods for contention:

Anyone who has been to First Friday has seen them. Groups of teens wandering about, occasionally with bottles of beer or cups of wine in hand. They enter galleries, and sometimes they are interested enough in the works to examine them or ask questions. But more often, the art is inspiration for jokes rather than creative epiphany. As annoying as that is for the artists who open their studios to the public, Isbutt and Solomon

claim that incidents of vandalism and vehicle break-ins have risen with the number of youth present. (Stein 2006)

Jack Solomon of S2 Art Group has said “he has little use for First Friday because the crowd it draws (much of it young revelers) would rather swill free wine and bound in the street to live rock music than browse for Todd Goldman lithographs. Many gallery owners agree with Solomon” (Katsilometes 2007).

Karen Mobley, art director for the Spokane Arts Commission, reflected on the concern about the lack of art patrons who were interested and able to purchase gallery art. In an article in the Las Vegas Sun, she discussed comparisons between the art walks in Las Vegas, Spokane, and other U.S. cities in terms of quality, sales, age of the crowd, food and city support. For example, in the area of quality and sales, she comments that the quality of the art may vary significantly among art-focused events; Mobley observed that:

Spokane's Davenport District has an older art scene with more commercial galleries with varied art. It doesn't have temporary booths for artists to show work on First Fridays. Las Vegas has only a handful of commercial galleries open on First Fridays. Most are working studios. Tents and booths are installed for the event. Many artists are not established. Mobley says, "Where I live the art is edgier, but the culture is more genteel." (Peterson 2007e)

She went on to observe the overall buying climate where:

Buying art at First Friday in Spokane is part of the event. In Las Vegas several artists and gallery owners complain that they don't sell work on First Friday. Mobley noticed: "I didn't see anybody at First Friday buying anything except for hot dogs and beer. I think a lot of people were there because they wanted to drink beer and hang out with their friends, which is a fine and admirable thing. It's building people's sense of connection on the ground." But, she says, "To get good art, the community has to buy the art."

For Las Vegas, Mobley speculates that the lack of sales may be because of the age of the crowd, whereas “those attending First Friday in Spokane are more likely to be in their 30’s, 40’s and even 80’s” and while Las Vegas appears to draw a younger group; she observed many more attendees in their 20’s or early 30’s in Las Vegas. Interestingly, she mentioned that teenagers also attend Spokane’s First Friday as they do in Las Vegas. She also said that teachers in Spokane’s high schools and colleges “assign First Friday as a curriculum activity; students take notes and write reports on the event” (Peterson 2007g). For the 18b, the presence of the teenage contingent at First Friday has been widely and not always happily discussed by local participants. “Some say it lends to reckless street partying. Others argued that it [art walks] provides a cultural outlet in a city built for adults and that it instills interest in art at an early age” (Peterson 2007g).

Mobley also commented on the shortage of amenities in the 18b neighborhood. The area hosts “Casa Don Juan on Main Street, Tinoco's Bistro in the Arts Factory and the Grill at Charleston in Holsum Lofts. Chicago Joe's is on nearby Fourth Street and the popular Agave's taco stand. In comparison she noted that Spokane's Davenport District has more than 20 restaurants and cafes, and ‘that doesn't include bars.’” Mobley said she “felt a lack of synergy at Las Vegas' First Friday; I looked at stuff and I wanted to go eat dinner, but there aren't the facilities” (Peterson 2007g). For Mobley, downtown Las Vegas was gritty, industrial and lacking the infrastructure found in other First Friday type events.

Indeed, during a May 2007 First Friday, I accompanied a few others to make the chancy walk from the East Fremont district on the north side of downtown south to the 18b Arts District and the center of the First Friday festivities. Even though the walk took

only about 20 minutes, the area changed dramatically. As I headed down Las Vegas Boulevard, I initially felt that I could be in a downtown area anywhere with the high-rise office buildings and law firms that I passed. But then, I reached the cluster of wedding chapels and pawn shops at Las Vegas Boulevard and East Bonneville Avenue. Shortly after I passed a weekly motel, gas station and began to see a number of closed and shuttered storefronts. Although I did not have any trouble with panhandlers or the few local residents I encountered, I was uncomfortable. The long held view of “dangerous and decrepit downtown” was clearly part of my viewpoint as well.

Despite downtown’s ongoing rough-around-the-edges feel of the 18b, First Friday

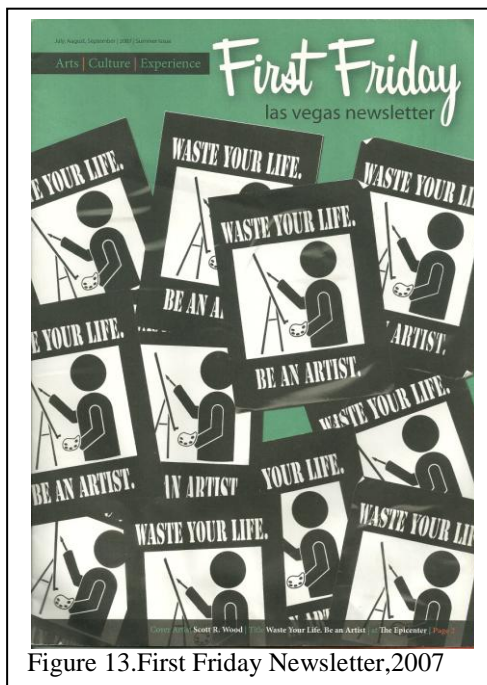


Figure 13. First Friday Newsletter, 2007

now attracted roughly 10,000 people, to gather around its 25 or so galleries. The 2007 version of First Friday was a full-scale festival with street performers, artists and culture aficionados and food trucks, as well as the obvious presence of security and the challenges of finding parking for the revelers. S2 Art Group owner, Jack Solomon, continued to rant that he had little use for First Friday because the crowd would rather party than view art (Katsilometes 2007). [Wes] Myles also

said that as the street fest had grown, sales from artists in the Factory seemed to have gone down.

Even with thousands going through the warren of galleries, Myles says that his tenants claim that they hardly ever sell any larger or professional pieces during First Friday. “Our crowd shifted, and it became more youth and party-oriented sales have declined,” Myles says. “I ask artists every

month how their sales were, and while they can sell \$25 prints, they can't sell any of their larger pieces". (Thompson 2007)

The debate over First Friday's direction ultimately ended up in the mayor's office. In 2007, Jack Solomon and other gallery owners met with then Mayor Oscar Goodman (Peterson 2007b). The disagreement over First Friday's direction had grown to the point where some felt that a mediator might be required to resolve what was rapidly becoming a North-South fight between gallery and festival participants. "On the north end, Myles had received a \$1.47 million grant from the state to turn [a portion of] Boulder Avenue into a sculpture garden and art walk. On the south end of the festival area, Whirlygig expanded the merriment almost to Charleston Avenue" (Thompson 2007).

Solomon, continued to voice his concern over the festival venue with stages, rock performances, crafts booths, and performance art making it a popular draw for rambunctious teenagers. He was also "upset by a contract awarded [by the city] to Whirlygig, a nonprofit organization that would allow it to operate First Friday. The contract was a result of a visit by Karen Craig, a paid festival consultant. Craig concluded in an August, 2007 report that the festival needs to be professionalized by using private funds and hiring a professional director for Whirlygig" (Peterson 2007b). However, for Solomon and the more highbrow art walk proponents, the Cindy Funkhouser-led Whirlygig was the problem, since the organization supported the festival atmosphere. Solomon in response started closing his gallery during First Friday events because of his opposition to "the way First Friday is being handled by Whirlygig" (Peterson 2007b). He was adamant that "we need to reposition what it (First Friday) stands for" (Peterson 2007b).

As the recession began in earnest in 2008, Whirlygig faced financial problems and the City of Las Vegas' Division of Cultural Affairs significantly reduced their budget



Figure 14.\$2 Donation.

for First Friday from \$356,843 a year to \$80,000 only for the peak months between March and May and from August to September. For the rest of the year financial responsibility fell solely to Whirlygig (Thompson 2008). Whirlygig responded to revenue problems by instituting a \$2 “suggested donation” to enter the tent and stage area on Casino Center between California and Colorado streets. Whirlygig put up fencing and cattle barricades near The Funk House,

both as a safety measure and to provide an official place to enter and collect the \$2 fee.

Whirlygig's board members were concerned about the public's reaction to the new

“suggested fee” since the festival had been free since the start. Nancy Higgins,

Whirlygig's executive director said that “it's become a big event and I hope people will

support it.” Putting on the First Friday festival required \$11,000 to \$20,000 from

Whirlygig each month for barricades, security, stages, tents, lighting, sound, portable

toilets, the trolley service and cleanup. “I don't think people realize what it costs to put on

an event of this size.” Some believed the city was supporting First Friday and therefore

the venue should have been free (Peterson 2008a).

Wes Myles, Jack Solomon, and other 18b gallery owners considered strategies to

establish more art-focused events that might counter the festival experience they resisted

and draw more art patrons to the 18b. Their ideas included organizing performances by

the Nevada Ballet Theatre dancers, orchestral performances, or even live bluegrass music to reach new potential clientele (Peterson 2008d). At the same time, although some high-end artwork was being shown, gallery owners were not opening daily in the 18b because they saw so little walk-in traffic (Peterson 2008f). In response, downtown retailers and gallery owners gathered around the idea of “Premier Thursday” as part of an effort to organize local area businesses that would agree to open on Thursday through Saturday and extend evening hours. As Naomi Arin put it, “the goal is to bring tourists downtown. To do that we have to be ‘open’ so as to bring attention to the 18-block district on days that are not First Friday “(Powers 2009). From that point on, most 18b galleries began to open for First Thursdays to offer more low-key first looks at their art for patrons less interested in the raucous festival atmosphere of the First Friday activities.

Great Recession Effects

As the Great Recession took hold, struggles in the 18b increased. Whirlygig’s financial strains remained, First Friday attendance declined, and low art sales for most galleries led to some closures (Padgett 2009). According to Carol Meyer, city business licensing supervisor, “more than 30 of 170 citywide galleries and studios went out of business in 2008” (Powers 2009). The City of Las Vegas tried to improve the climate for business in the Arts District and Fremont East entertainment district, by reducing the \$20,000 business licensing fees for “tavern-limited” licenses for bars and clubs. Wes Myles responded by incorporating the “urban lounge” concept into the Arts Factory as a kind of cross between a bar and a nightclub tailored to the downtown arts crowd (Skolnick 2009b). Cindy Funkhouser, along with most 18b businesses supported the effort to lower or eliminate the licensing fees for urban lounges, because they would help

to “spur galleries to stay open later, and will prompt additional new businesses like cafes and coffee houses to move in” (Skolnick 2009b). But not all 18b observers were hopeful. As longtime Las Vegas art supporter and gallery owner, Naomi Arin said about the 18b, “it's never not been a baby arts district [and] it's never taken hold. It's never grown up” (Powers 2009), and the recession would continue to stunt its growth.

The 18b district was not the only arts-focused area to suffer. In 2009, the 59 year old privately funded Las Vegas Art Museum closed. The state’s oldest cultural institution, the museum had been plagued with limited support and community interest for years. In a Las Vegas Sun article, reporter Kristen Peterson wrote:

The abrupt closure sparked heartache and anger among longtime supporters. But the fact that there are only about 1,000 museum members and little attendance in a region of 2 million residents illustrates the disconnect between the Las Vegas Art Museum and the community. The Las Vegas Art Museum had never done well. Its later mission as a contemporary art institute attracted new board members and national attention, but failed to grow the museum in the community before the recession hit. “It’s not like we didn’t reach out,” board President Patrick Duffy says. “Everybody comes out of the woodwork now to say, ‘I can’t believe it,’ but where were their checkbooks?”. (Peterson 2009b)

William Fox, former “executive director of the Nevada Arts Council and author of *In the Desert of Desire: Las Vegas and the Culture of Spectacle* (2005) offers some perspective on the place of arts generally in the Las Vegas valley. He observes that, “Las Vegas newcomers still have a cultural allegiance to where they came from. Some give to the arts in other cities, their former cities, but not their new one” (Peterson 2008f).

The lack of patronage in a town flush with money frustrated even the most successful and experienced gallery owners. Naomi Arin, owner of Dust Gallery, known for high-end international shows, noted that “few people actually came to the exhibits.”

In an interview with CityLife (Keene 2009), Arin spoke about her nine-year Las Vegas experience:

Living in Vegas allowed me to invite artists (i.e., internationally known artist, Polly Apfelbaum) whom I wouldn't have been able to show if my gallery was in New York or Paris. In most other major cities, Apfelbaum already has a dealer. To show work of such a high level in a private, for-profit gallery, you have to offer an exceptionally different place and Vegas was that place for me.

Arin's high-end patrons included owners and CEOs of major Las Vegas casinos. She called them, "the tastemakers" and explained that her business boomed before the recession when "suddenly there was a flurry of buyers who wanted to emulate the Glenn Schaeffers (Mandalay Bay CEO) and Fertittas (Palace Station owners) of the world. And why not? And all of this is happening while the international market is going through the roof" (Keene 2009). But, these types of collectors did not give much attention to the local arts scene. For that reason, among others, Arin saw the 18b as under-planned and unfinished. She said:

There never should have been an "Arts District" to begin with. It was all done backward. It was called the district before there were any artists there, and inflated the pricing for everything. It was never planned well, apologies to [Mayor] Oscar [Goodman]. If you have a vision, then you have to pay for it, and Oscar never seemed to want to pay for it. No one was ever hired to develop the arts district. First Friday is not 40 hours a week, it is only four hours a month, and although I applaud the city's efforts in supporting the First Friday event, four hours does not an arts district make. We didn't have to reinvent the wheel. People have written books spelling out how to do this, using the arts as a successful vehicle for urban renewal all over the world. (Keene 2009)

The combination of the slow economy and frustrations with the artistic focus, led some key people in the arts scene to close up shop and leave Las Vegas for more arts-centered places. Naomi Arin, left Las Vegas to open a gallery in California because she saw no solution for the lack of initial planning and limited support from the City. Soon

after, Beate Kirmse, Executive Director of the Contemporary Arts Center, also resigned and moved to Los Angeles.

After almost 20 years in Las Vegas, Libby Lumpkin, director of the Las Vegas Art Museum and Dave Hickey, UNLV Professor, art critic and MacArthur “Genius Grant” recipient, left for academic positions in New Mexico. While Hickey and Lumpkin were not directly aligned with First Friday or the Arts District, they had a prominent place in the local arts community, in part because of their international status and the attention they brought to the city. Hickey was most well known for his art critiques and a 1997 book, *Air Guitar*, in which he “argued that the city's neon skyline and the giant rhinestone in its Liberace Museum have the same excitement as highbrow [art] fare” (Berzon 2010). In response to a showing by some of Hickey’s top students, Los Angeles Times critic Christopher Knight once wrote that the Las Vegas artists “represent the vibrant kernel of a serious art scene in a city few would expect to have one; Hickey said, it looked like the beginning of something big, but it wasn't” (Berzon 2010). In a 2010 Las Vegas Weekly article, Hickey looked back, and criticized the Las Vegas “cultural” scene.

Art really flourishes in places—large commercial cities—where people love the new, and Vegas is not as much like that as you’d think. We found our best supporters among people who can afford not to be afraid, and you know who they are—you can count them on two hands. And so there’s not as much a thriving middle class here as I had suspected. You really need a culture that has people who understand good art. Vegas has some, with these casino guys and ad guys who are kind of hip, but that first step down is a looong [sic] one. (Hagan 2010)

Nevertheless, the 18b Arts District had forged an identity that continued to draw thousands of people to the area for each month’s First Friday festival. However, continued conflict between artists and gallery owners over the direction of the district, combined with the economic downturn, declining city government support, and the exit

of key figures characterized a period of struggle. In early 2011, Whirlygig pursued the drastic solution of shutting down its part of the First Friday festival, throwing the arts scene into a new tailspin.

The Whirlygig Hiatus

As the city continued to withdraw financial support for First Friday, Whirlygig rapidly ran out of money as well. Whirlygig had already ended its controversial effort to charge admission to the parts of the festival. The two-dollar admission was too unpopular. As Cindy Funkhouser explained, while the fee “had originally been instituted to offset costs some people objected to charging for admission. ‘People didn't like it’They wanted the event but didn't want to support it” (Padgett 2009). Private sponsors, such as Cherry Development, Boyd Gaming, LaPour Partners and the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority who had once matched city contributions, responded to the recession by withdrawing their support. Without these sources of public and private support, Whirlygig decided to save resources and withdraw their participation during August and September 2011.

This action was reported in some news outlets as if the entire First Friday event was cancelled (Peterson 2011c). Whirligigs’ press release did not mention that other parts of the 18b would be fully participating in First Friday. As a result, Arts District businesses and artists not affiliated with Whirlygig were very upset with the idea that First Friday had been misrepresented as cancelled. Marty Walsh, owner of the well-respected Trifecta Gallery said that:

First Friday Whirlygig has become only 10 percent of what goes on in the Arts District. First Friday goes from Commerce near Wyoming all the way to Emergency Arts and everywhere in between. The decision to not

mention the larger participation lacked community-mindedness by Whirlygig”.(Peterson 2011c)

Wes Myles, owner of the Arts Factory, considered Whirlygig to be “self-serving,” while others argued that the decision merely reflected the continuous rift between participants in the Arts District” (Peterson 2011c).

Much of the hostility was directly aimed at The Funk House owner and Whirlygig cofounder Cindy Funkhouser. Katie Cewe, owner of the Gypsy Den, a vintage boutique, art and music venue in the Arts District publicly described a spiteful Cindy Funkhouser. She said that “Funkhouser [had] asked her to become a vendor with Whirlygig, but that would have required her to pay a fee and end her concerts at 10 p.m.”When she declined Funkhouser’s offer, Cewe claimed that Funkhouser called the police to complain about the noise from her gallery (Kingsley 2011b). As the 18b businesses went into damage control and debateswirled over who owns First Friday, old arguments about the purpose of the event once again split the community. For some, there was always the hope that First Friday would “get back to the laid-back bohemian art walk it once was” (Peterson



Figure 15.First Friday 2011

2011d). Some 18b participants aligned with Whirlygig and Funkhouser while others took the opportunity to again bring up old grievances and to accuse Funkhouser of trying to undermine the community by publicly canceling an event that had grown beyond the boundaries of the activities organized by Whirlygig (Kingsley 2011).

Wherever the blame should be laid, what

seemed clear was that Whirligigs’ efforts were not enough to sustain the First Friday

festival, creating uncertainty about the future of the entire First Friday experience. Rather than collegial relationships that could have fostered a communal climate and strong collective identity, Whirlygig now operated in a climate of increasingly distrustful, negative relationships that exacerbated worries about 18b's uncertain future. The arguments and misunderstandings along with economic pressure combined to undermine trust among scene participants. Trust is a pillar of any social scene. As Robert Putnam (2001), Alejandro Portes (1998) and others have long noted, strong social networks require trust on which to build feelings of reciprocity, solidarity, collective identity and, ultimately community. The success of projects such as First Friday requires a degree of trust among individuals and organizations (Glaeser; Laibson; Scheinkman and Soutter (1999). In late 2011, both trust and money were waning, First Friday was in trouble, and the 18b Art District's future was unclear.

Tony Hsieh to the Rescue?

While the announcement of a two month Whirlygig hiatus surprised many arts district regulars, an even greater shock came with the September 2011 announcement that Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos, the highly successful on-line retail corporation had purchased the First Friday trademark, which took a major part of the event's organization and vision out of Whirligigs' hands. Tony Hsieh and Zappos executives Fred Mossler, Steve Hill, developer Andrew Donner and Zappos marketing advisor Joey Vanas made an all-encompassing purchase, which included all of Whirligigs' assets, the First Friday trademark, and the mailing lists.

Zappo's purchase created new uncertainties as few understood what the Hsieh control of the First Friday trademark might mean for the 18b. Questions swirled about

whether or not he would try to move the center of the First Friday experience to the new East Fremont area or invest in the already established 18b. Would his private interests mold First Friday and the arts scene in ways that would shut out the founders and long time participants? And would he infuse new resources into the scene without damaging the cultural experience that already drew thousands each First Friday?

But who exactly is Tony Hsieh? Hsieh grew up in Marin County, California. At 24, he sold his first business venture—LinkExchange—to Microsoft for \$265 million. Then, with college friend, Alfred Lin, who in 2006 became the CEO/CFO of Zappos in 2006, he started Venture Frogs, a venture capital company that provided funds to “Ask Jeeves”, “Entango”, “NeoPlanet” and “Fusion.” Hsieh however, is best known for having moved Zappos from a small online shoe store to a behemoth operation with \$1 billion in annual sales.

At the time of the First Friday purchase, Tony Hsieh was known in Las Vegas as the Zappos CEO who had brought his company, with its 2000 employees, from the San Francisco Bay Area to the Henderson, Nevada suburbs in 2004 and then to downtown’s old Las Vegas City Hall in 2013. When asked about the decision to move Zappos to Nevada, Hsieh said that he and his Zappos colleagues were looking for a service-focused city that “could support our call center. We considered many cities that had lots of call centers, and ultimately decided that Henderson would make our existing employees the happiest. We also thought the 24/7 nature of (nearby Las Vegas) would be advantageous to us. We officially made the move a year later” (Johnson 2012). Hsieh is also known for his distinctive approach to human resources. In Zappos job ads, potential employees are asked to be:

Fun-loving...the heart and soul of our culture and central to how we do business. If you are “fun and a little weird” - and think the other 9 Core Values fit you too - please take a look at our openings, find the one or two that best fit your skills, experience and interest ... at the Zappos Family of Companies, over-sized egos are not welcome. Over-sized Eggos [as in the waffle], however, are most welcome and appreciated. (www.Zappos.com)

In personal conversations, public pronouncements, and in his writings, Hsieh continually reminds Zappos employees and the public of the importance of human capital and community, a business approach that has garnered national interest. Bill Taylor of the Harvard Business Review made the following observations of the Zappos culture:

This is a company that's bursting with personality ... when Zappos hires new employees; it provides a four-week training period that immerses them in the company's strategy, culture, and obsession with customers. People get paid their full salary during this period. After a week or so in this immersive experience, though, it's time for what Zappos calls "The Offer." The fast-growing company, which works hard to recruit people to join, says to its newest employees: "If you quit today, we will pay you for the amount of time you've worked, plus we will offer you a \$1,000 bonus." ... [now \$2,000]... Zappos actually bribes its new employees to quit! Why? Because if you're willing to take the company up on The Offer, you obviously don't have the sense of commitment they are looking for. ... Zappos wants to learn if there's a bad fit between what makes the organization tick and what makes individual employees tick--and it's willing to pay to learn sooner rather than late. (Taylor 2008)

In 2010 Hsieh published his book, *Delivering Happiness, A Path to Profits, Passion, and Purpose*, with advice on business and multi-million dollar deals and stories about his activities including a childhood venture as a worm farmer. Hsieh promoted the idea that by concentrating on the happiness of those around you “people will want to do good work, buy from you, refer your business to others and serve you in positive ways.” Fortune Magazine recognized Zappos in 2009– 2015 as one of the 100 best companies to work for.

Hsieh's approach has even moved outside the business world. His "blueprint for life" philosophy was used as a template in a course on life design by David Gould, of the Health and Human Physiology Department, at the University of Iowa. Gould, a documentary filmmaker and award-winning instructor who specializes in the cultural importance of leisure and play throughout life, modeled the course on Hsieh's book. He asked students to keep a log in which they create goals, describe the meaning of their lives, do a secret good deed and take on a long view of their lives. Hsieh was so impressed with Gould's approach, that he later recruited him to be a part of his Las Vegas team as the "Director of Innovation."

Hsieh's projects gained momentum; he continued to generate national interest in his unusual approach to business. In an interview with well-known entrepreneur Michael Dunlop, founder of Retire@21, Hsieh detailed his motivations as an entrepreneur where culture is the number one priority:

It's important to me to build a business where money isn't the primary motivator because in tough times, I've found that it isn't enough to see it all the way through. I believe success is created by following your passion and going through the journey of redefining what success means. I think there's something to learn from anyone no matter what their position or background, and that anyone can be inspiring somehow. I've been told that I have a diverse group of friends. I think that's helped me in the business world, even if they aren't all from the business world. (Dunlop 2011)

Hsieh's First Friday

Hsieh's ideas about being community-minded in business appeared to also extend to a focus on culture and passion to drive community reinvigoration in downtown Las Vegas. Hsieh put Joey Vanas in charge of First Friday organizing. Vanas mapped out a plan, consistent with Hsieh's creative vision to build community, to create a refuge from everyday life (Elfman 2011). According to Kristen Peterson:

When Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh approached Joey Vanas about teaming up to purchase the monthly First Friday event, Vanas' first question was, "Why?"...the reason we're doing First Friday is because I went to Burning Man this year for the first time...those guys have nailed community like nobody else We're trying to figure out how to rebuild a city. These guys build a city in a week every year. The only way you can do that is through cooperation, pride and ownership. (Peterson 2012a)

Some long time arts scene leaders were wary of what Hsieh's involvement would mean for the arts scene. Few people even imagined that he would be interested in the First Friday trademark before he bought it and though he talked a lot about community and creativity, he was also a businessman. However unconventional and "forward-thinking" his approaches, he was most singularly interested in profits. Many in the scene were also interested in profits for their businesses, but worried about compromising the grassroots feel of the scene; the sense that local artists and gallery owners built the scene organically as a refuge for people who create art and want to be surrounded by others who share that passion. Las Vegas Weekly art reporter, Kristen Peterson, captured both the excitement and worry among many in the 18b:

This is overnight. We went from 'Whirlygig is on hiatus and will be back in October' to 'Zappos is taking over.' I'm excited for change. Change is good, but change is also scary. I don't know any of these people and for me not to know any of these people is strange, because I know everybody," [local artist] Quaranto says. "I just hope that they include listening to people who have been involved in First Friday for years. We didn't work so hard so out-of-town artists can reap the benefits while we're brushed aside. That's probably not their intent, but I don't know that because I haven't had one discussion with them... Tony Hsieh is such a forward thinker. He's got a lot of ideas so it could be interesting," says Victoria Hart, gallery director at Brett Wesley gallery, which sits on the corner of Charleston and Casino Center Boulevard. "They have more bandwidth to communicate to a broader audience. The problem with some Downtown people who have been there so long is that they're not open to new ideas. Fresh blood would be really great. (Peterson 2011e)

But Wes Myles and others remained unconvinced. Myles described his feelings as a mix of nervousness and frustration:

I look at it and laugh. The very first thing they said when they took over [First Friday] was they wanted to link it to Fremont East. Well, I'm over here [in the 18b area]. So are all the people who got this [arts scene and First Friday] going. It's typical Las Vegas. If someone gets something going, they break it apart or copy it. They talked about art, art, art. But their art consultant is no longer with them. That lasted a nanosecond. They're looking for a return for the community? Whose community? The arts community? Are you trying to have a party or trying to have art? It's a different conversation. (Bornfeld and Carter 2012)

The Downtown Project

Hsieh's involvement in First Friday was part of a much larger vision for a downtown Las Vegas transformation. His ideas extended beyond the downtown's artistic endeavors. In 2012, He launched the Downtown Project with \$350 million of his personal funds to create a work/live and play neighborhood for his employees and others who sought to start businesses, establish homes, and build community. According to Leigh Gallagher (2012) of CNN Money:

Hsieh plans to spend \$100 million, which will go to the purchase of land and building acquisition. An additional \$100 million will go to residential development including the building of high-rise apartments. Fifty million dollars will go to tech startups Hsieh plans to recruit to the area with seed investments of \$100,000 or so apiece. Another \$50 million will go toward drawing local small businesses like bakeries, yoga studios, restaurants, coffee shops and other requisite creative-class amenities. And because Hsieh wants people to move here and that requires having decent education for their children, another \$50 million will go toward education and the building of --what else? -- a school system.

By October 2012, Hsieh had invested in several start-up companies with funds going to The SPIRIT project, focused on intervention strategies to at-risk youth and families, Ticket Cake, a ticketing website, and Digital Royalty, designed to use social media to brand corporations, professional athletes and sports teams and Local Motion, a

company that builds small electric vehicles. In an early version of the Las Vegas Tech Fund website (angel.co/vegastechfund/syndicate), Hsieh sought people who “Are Insanely Passionate, willing to solve awesome Problems, and Like to Dance in Celebration.”

Hsieh also talked about creating a walkable, neighborhood area of small businesses, such as the Downtown Container Park, created out of 30 reconstructed shipping containers and 41 modular cubes surrounding a large tree house-dominated playground. Just six miles away from the Strip, it is the polar opposite of the Strip. It is family friendly, walkable, feels safe, and has a wide variety of shopping as well as ground level gathering places. The area looks fashionable with a focus on tech, fashion, photography, art, and music as well as numerous places to eat, drink and relax. With a mixture of retailers and restaurants, Container Park has been successful in luring downtown residents and others to the Fremont East area.

In all of this change, Hsieh claims a highly consultative “anti-top down approach.” He says that “you can't dictate what the neighborhood is going to look like, [but] you can definitely help support and accelerate people's dreams and a vision [and] that is really our belief as to what drives our culture. It needs to be organic” (Spillman 2012a). Hsieh encouraged his employees and others to embrace downtown as a living, creative, community space. To this end, he leased 50 apartments in the Ogden, a luxury high-rise condo, some of which were offered to Zappos workers at subsidized rates, to establish a small foothold of his people in downtown.

Hsieh's Downtown Project attracted a lot of local and national attention. He was widely quoted on the web and referenced in business publications such as the Business

Insider, Profit Magazine, Washington Post, The New Yorker, New York Times, The Huffington Post and Fortune Magazine. The Starting Gate, a Miami Web publication focused on entrepreneurship styles, notes Hsieh's unusual view of synergies:

When Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh set about to lead a transformation of Las Vegas' downtown (yes, there is one of those in Vegas), he said he was guided by the 3Cs –collisions, community and colearning [sic]. In everything you do, he says, the question to ask is what is the ROC — Return on Community? “It's the local entrepreneurs and residents that are suggesting how the neighborhood should evolve. We're pretty anti-top down. Focus on getting people talking to each other and that is how innovation happens,” Hsieh says. (Dahlberg 2013)

The Downtown Project injected new money and interest in the East Fremont entertainment district, an area that city officials had long touted as a place that could be reminiscent of “old Las Vegas” alongside trendy clubs, not only with the hope that tourists would come, but also to draw in a cadre of local professionals who would want to live and play in the area. In the late 2000s, the city had invested in vintage-esque neon signs to mark the area. Visitors entering saw a glimmering neon rotating red stiletto-heeled shoe and an enormous neon martini with an olive and colorful swizzle stick. According to Steve Van Gorp, Las Vegas' redevelopment director, “the goal was to create a really memorable place that would stick in the national psyche; we really think folks will be down here at Fremont East wanting to have their photos taken, similar to the way they do with the ‘Welcome to Las Vegas’ sign” (Hansel 2007). At the time, however, many still considered Fremont East a dangerous zone. Mike Nolan, general manager of the El Cortez Hotel, situated in the midst of the proposed “entertainment district” hoped that the gap between “the Fremont Street Experience and El Cortez would close since it is difficult to get people to walk through a poorly lighted block past empty and closed shops” and often past panhandlers (Hansel 2007). As the Downtown Project focused on the

Fremont East area, the odds of creating a successful destination that city officials and many locals had imagined increased.

Indeed, Hsieh's unique efforts were welcomed by some local entrepreneurs who hoped The Downtown Project would spur the sort of development that would revitalize a downtown too long focused solely on the tourist experience. Michael and Jennifer Cornthwaite were especially interested in the Downtown Project because they had invested in the Fremont Street East corridor, a second arts hub to the 18b district, and at the heart of Tony Hsieh's investment. The couple established the Downtown Cocktail Room, The Beat coffee shop, retail space and the Emergency Arts gallery, the latter which they called a "creative collective" housed in an old medical building.



Figure 16. The Beat.
Photo by the author

While not originally tied to The Downtown Project, their vision for Emergency Arts was similarly focused on developing a sense of community, by bringing together writers, artists, clothing designers, musicians, filmmakers, graphic designers, performers, and retailers into their businesses. Reflecting on Hsieh's attitude, Michael Cornthwaite said, "one of the best things about Tony is that he doesn't live by or within the same limitations that you're used to dealing with. He has never—maybe never in his whole life—thought within the same constraints as the rest of us" (Chafkin 2012).

The El Cortez Hotel also benefitted from Hsieh's Downtown Project.

Located at the center of the Fremont East Entertainment District, the El Cortez was once the premier casino in the downtown area until themed Strip properties became

more attractive to tourists. Unlike many strip hotel/casino complexes, the exterior façade still shows a distinctive Spanish revival style, much as it did when it opened in 1941. The hotel was placed on the National Register of Historic places in 2013. During the late-2000s, the hotel began to remodel and amplify its brand to position itself as an important anchor for the East Fremont area. The El Cortez pays homage to “Old Vegas,” celebrating its retro vibe that aligns with East Fremont’s scene with its vintage neon signs and cultural venues. The hotel also connects with the 18b district by sponsoring an express shuttle for those wanting to move between East Fremont and 18b during First Fridays. El Cortez’s attempt to integrate into the East Fremont scene also included a partial subsidy for a “Second Saturday” street fair on Fremont East. Hsieh’s Downtown Project created numerous advantages to the El Cortez for their investment in the scene.

Hsieh also supported locals by investing in livable spaces in the downtown area. In addition to bars, coffee spots, restaurants, galleries, retail, spaces, and start ups, the Downtown Project focused on housing to create “serendipitous people collisions,” a concept that Hsieh sees as critical to innovation (Spillman 2013). By 2013, Hsieh was buying property in the downtown area to encourage Zappos employees to move downtown. As mentioned earlier, Hsieh, himself lives downtown in a high-rise condominium, The Ogden, near the Zappos headquarters, as do several Zappos and Downtown Project employees” (Groth 2012b). According to reporter and longtime downtown Las Vegas observer Joe Schoenmann, the “Downtown Project can’t avoid the housing question any longer and will develop residential property on its own or with partners. Sources say there is talk of such a move on the land near and around the Atomic [Liquor]” (Schoenmann 2014). Schoenmann observed that, if low cost and affordable

housing did become available the downtown area would flourish, a point that longtime local art scene participants had made from the beginning of the 18b.

Hsieh even went beyond the housing question, by seemingly trying to address education. He dedicated \$1.2 million to place newly graduated college students in the classroom for on-the-job training as part of the Teach for America (TFA) program. He also created a preschool at the corner of 9th Street and Bridger Avenue in downtown Las Vegas for children ages 6 weeks to 5 years for the “families living and working downtown, such as Zappos employees and downtown lawyers” (Takahashi 2013a). Some also speculated about the potential of “a posh private school” with an “annual tuition from \$13,000 to \$15,000, with scholarships and discounts available for Zappos and Downtown Project employees, downtown residents and families with siblings” (Takahashi 2013a).

The Downtown Las Vegas Arts and Culture Aesthetic

For more than a decade prior to Hsieh’s investments, City of Las Vegas officials had sought to use culture as an urban asset and tool to create a downtown identity that went beyond the Fremont Street casino corridor. Creating landmark buildings, parks, and residences is one way to stimulate this type of change. The city promoted the development of Symphony Park, a four-district development with civic, residential, park and medical components in a mixed-use downtown area located just west of Fremont Street and just northwest of the 18b Arts District. Symphony Park hosts the Smith Center, a \$485 million modern deco-style performing arts center, the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, one of the country’s largest Alzheimer programs in a building designed by world renowned architect Frank Gehry. The Center was funded by a

public/private partnership with part of the funding from taxes on rental car fees as well as a joint city, county and legislative allocation. The area also houses the World Market Center near Symphony Park. The Center is the largest showroom complex in the world focused upon the home and hospitality furnishings industry.

The activities attracted several residential developers such as Newland Communities, the largest private developer of planned residential and urban mixed-use communities in the United States. Newland has promoted a mix of high and mid-rise condominiums and town homes as well as, upper live/work units with retail stores at the street level. Forest City, known for “mixed-use projects that create a unique sense of place” has planned a 1.6 million square foot 1000 room gaming, hotel complex (forestcity.net). An urban health and senior living and skilled nursing complex are also being considered (Cotrarecap.com). The hope is that by using different developers a more "city-like" look and feel can be created than what might occur if a single developer created the whole area (Symphony Park Fact Sheet, 2014). Taken together, the hope was that a synergy would emerge between the 18b Arts District, the East Fremont District, and Symphony Park (Miles 2005).

The City of Las Vegas also extended its foray into supporting arts in downtown as it paved the way for Hsieh’s Downtown Project-sponsored festivals located in the East Fremont entertainment district: “The Flames of Change” and the “Life is Beautiful” events. On the 10th anniversary of First Friday, Joey Vanas, Hsieh’s managing partner of First Friday led the “First Vegas Burn! The Flames of Change”. The title of the event was patterned after the well-known “Burning Man” event, a week-long celebration that runs during the last week in August until Labor Day in the Black Rock Desert in Northern

Nevada (Spillman 2012a). The City of Las Vegas and the Society for Experimental Arts and Learning (SEAL), an organization that values and sponsors community building events, built a 20-foot tall Las Vegas showgirl to represent Las Vegas at Burning Man. They created a second Lucky Lady Lucy sculpture as part of a partnership between the Burning Man organization and First Friday organizers for “The Flames of Change” festival.

The “Flames of Change” event occurred during the March 2012 First Friday, near the East Fremont district. Several thousand people attended the event, which Merritt Pelkey, the designer of the effigy hoped would “help people forge a deeper connection not only with the monthly music and arts festival downtown but also with each other” (Spillman 2012c). The purpose was to give new meaning to the downtown area through a shared ritual activity. An article in the local press captured the flavor of the affair:

They removed Lucky Lady Lucy's lighted boa and skimpy sparkly clothing as the crowds chanted, "Burn it! Burn it! Burn it!" Friday night during a lengthy ceremonial process that culminated when Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh, surprising everyone, emerged from the side of the gravel lot and used a torch to light the fuse that would snake across the ground and ignite the "Flames of Change" (Peterson 2012b).

The effigy burning, preceded by a celebration of fire spinners, costumes and tribal imagery, was called a “celebration of radical self-expression” (Peterson, 2012b). After the burning, a group of dancers, singers, musicians and Las Vegas showgirls performed “The Burning Opera: How to Survive the Apocalypse”, and then, from behind the crowd and atop a 100,000-watt sound system on Third Street (and attached to a lit spaceship raised above) came three words: "DJ Philthy Phil." From there the Dancetronauts took over, shooting flames from the top of their sound system as electronic music rumbled through the crowd” (Peterson 2012b). After the opening events, the celebration moved to

the Plaza Hotel at the end of Fremont Street and continued all night. Joey Vanas, manager of First Friday, explained the significance of the burn as a time when "everybody really came together and did exactly what they were supposed to do. Total cooperation. And that's what it's all about—working together" (Peterson 2012a).

A much-ballyhooed food, art and music festival called "Life is Beautiful" followed in 2013. The two-day event spread out over 15 city blocks and featured a variety of rock acts, hip-hop, and electronic music. It was developed through a partnership between the City of Las Vegas, the Downtown Project, and the Aurelian Marketing Group, Another Planet Entertainment and MAKTUB Marketing supported by a cadre of 300 community volunteers to run the event. When it expanded to three days in 2014, the festival drew an estimated 90,000 people (Bracelin 2014).

In addition to well-known headliners, local artists were also offered the opportunity to audition for the festival by applying to perform in one of a series of pre-festival downtown music events featuring local and regional bands. Craig Nyman, head of music for festival curators, Aurelian Marketing Group, noted that this would be the "opportunity to find and showcase local talent." He went on to say that "at the end of the day, our festival is taking place in the heart of Las Vegas, and it is our goal to inspire the entire community by staging top-notch entertainment, no matter where it's from" and to "further the Vegas music scene and to show how much talent we do have in our city" (lifeisbeautiful.com). Festival organizer, Rehan Choudhry saw the festival as an opportunity to bring locals into the downtown to learn more about the area; Choudhry went on to describe his concept for the festival and the city:

What we are trying to do at Life Is Beautiful is to bring that kind of integrity that goes into creating new art and being a source of new

inspiration and new content that Vegas can then become known for. So what we did was create a city festival focused around four pillars: music, food, art, and learning. We built it into 15 city blocks of downtown Las Vegas in a completely unexpected way, in a production manner that has never been really seen before in the festival space. It gives the city a sense of pride that when people come into Vegas, they are seeing something for the first time in our city as opposed to a bigger version of the same nightclub that you know of in L.A. or New York or Chicago. (Wood 2015)

In addition to the festival itself, several other events occurred before and after the occasion. A workshop extolled Festival Generation Week, hosted in part by the First Friday Foundation. It was produced by Catalyst Creative, a small business funded by the Downtown Project. The purpose of the workshop was to bring together individuals from the music business to share expertise and collaborate on future festivals; they considered a number of community oriented topics such as:

- How can we program these events to maximize the lasting impact on participants and the local community?
- Where are the opportunities for global conversations and real social change to be made through these events?

Using festivals to create an experience is one way to create community, brand cities and create distinction. Cobb (2015) argues that “place is created through the repetition of traditional rituals that both physically and symbolically transform space into what participants call ‘home.’” Fine and van den Scott (2011) discuss the potential of festivals to “strengthen social ties and instill the city with life through intense engagement with the city.” Indeed, Johansson and Kociatkiewicz (1991) note that staged festivals can be considered as a “device to promote a coherent, healthy picture of the city.” The festival venue has the potential to help cities re-imagine urban space and urban identity.

That said, Johansson and Kociatkiewicz (1991) also see a dark side to festival venues for those seeking a real and genuine experience because the “soul of the city is...often framed and presented in a soundbite manner in promotion campaigns to communicate genuineness” where “unwanted elements (including people) are removed, streets are closed off, buildings are refurbished (or perhaps torn down), alternative spaces are opened up and extra-ordinary performances are staged in [sanitized] places usually reserved for more mundane activities” (Johansson and Kociatkiewicz 1991). Others have also suggested that repeating urban events can become so formulaic that they don’t have any association with place (Evans 2001). Perhaps the most accurate conclusion is that while festival venues and the activities they support can support some degree community building and the arts, there are many constraints that can also thwart these goals.

Whose Community?

Tony Hsieh’s move to downtown raised expectations among locals that the heart of the city could support the arts and a thriving community. His investments, from the new Zappos headquarters, to retail, restaurants and bars, performance spaces, and even some residential units, invigorated the East Fremont area in ways that city officials and people in the arts scene had dreamed about for some time. By 2012, downtown Las Vegas hosted two arts and culture hubs – 18b and the Fremont East area – as well as the nearby Smith Center to the west. With Hsieh’s money and interest infusing the First Friday event and linking 18b and Fremont East, new gallery spaces opened and many locals hoped for a bright future.

Other locals, particularly the low-income population who lived in the downtown’s low rent weekly motels and apartment complexes, along with some long-time businesses,

were not as supportive of the transformations. Reports began to surface that the Downtown Project development did not seem to include the needs of the existing low-income population already located in the area. After the Downtown Project purchased the building housing the Fremont Family Market and Deli, a shop responsive to the needs of the poorer residents, they declined to renew their lease, though the owners had been there for 15 years and had recently completed a \$50,000 upgrade to draw middle class Zappos employees. They were given four months to leave and the property was leased to the Downtown Project. A local barbershop, often a meeting place for working class people in the neighborhood may also not be around very much longer. It does not cater to a trendy crowd and the owner says he has seen a beauty salon, smoke shop and the market all forced to leave. According to Tim Wilkinson, the owner of the shop, they have “two years remaining on their lease, but they know that when Downtown Project developers wanted a barber in the Container Park they imported the retro-style, hipster barbershop Bolt from Los Angeles instead of looking up the street” (Spillman 2013).

The long held narrative about Las Vegas’ downtown area has been that the district was dying under problems of crime, a vagrant population, vacant buildings and that it needs “saving”. Among some groups, there is a feeling that Hsieh’s “cadre of well financed, infallible, millennials should not only be welcomed”, but their interests should be put above others (Koomeda 2014). The Downtown Project’s focus seemed to be principally about bringing new businesses. Although there has been lots of talk about residential development there has been relatively little to speak of. For Zappos employees there is:

...temporary lodging in “crash pads” [in] The Ogden, where Hsieh lives, and at Gold Spike, which Hsieh bought in 2013, and the “Gold Spike”s

former hotel tower is now a combination of residential and crash pads” (Snel 2014). While Gold Spike rooms are in the \$500 range, The Ogden and Juhl are considered out of the price range for many Zappos workers, including some who earn \$12 per hour. (Snel 2014)

Some people are worried about gentrification. Gentrification has been associated with lack of respect for existing residents and a refusal to support minority and “non-hipster” businesses (Lee 2014). This raises questions regarding redevelopment in the downtown area. In other words, does the Downtown Project have a plan to secure those whose lives are supposed to be improved? Will there be an assessment to identify development projects that may be harmful to the community? It seems that there should be an effort to develop strategies to bring new resources while allowing enough community control of development that current residents and appropriate commercial, industrial and community service amenities can stay.

Michael Borer, a sociology professor at UNLV, and an expert on urban culture, expressed the sentiment that a downtown area is not a “blank slate” and “it’s too easy for outsiders eager to colonize an urban area to overlook an existing culture that has high numbers of people struggling with low incomes, physical and mental disabilities and unemployment” (Borer in Spillman 2014), an observation that was also made by urban scholar Richard Florida. In fact, Florida has suggested that the Las Vegas Downtown Project should have a robust community process to help build consensus with the surrounding community. “You can have serendipity,” he said. “But when you’re building a community, you also need a strategy” (Pratt 2012). Borer argues that it is better to incorporate the authentic organic community that already exists instead of seeing downtown as a place to colonize. “If the Downtown Project is supposed to be about

putting down roots that might actually be a positive culture (counter to) the dominant narrative of Las Vegas, that remains to be seen”. (Borer in Spillman 2014)

Notions of community ties downtown have long been a big part of narratives among city officials, 18b Arts District leaders and patrons, the Downtown Project, and Tony Hsieh. Creating a “return on community” was a central part of the Downtown Project’s original mission. Although, what exactly the “return” meant was never clear, the general idea seemed to be that setting a stage where creative people could come together would catalyze social networks, new businesses, and unique collaborations among people to spur all sorts of creative problem-solving.

But in 2014, Hsieh made the decision to replace the phrase “Return on Community” with “Return on Collisions” in the Downtown Project’s mission statement. For Hsieh, the term “collisions” refers to “serendipitous encounters between people” which when combined with “diversity in perspective, knowledge, and experience, results in an increase in idea flow and collaboration, which ultimately drive innovation” (downtownproject.com). Hsieh has said that he “thinks about all of downtown Vegas as a “collision bowl,” where the value of a given resident derives from his or her potential “collisionable (sic) community hours” (Badger 2013). Hsieh explains the change in wording and emphasis as a natural part of the learning process with a bloodletting new project. He said:

One of our biggest learning’s [sic] was that the word “community” means a lot of different things to different people, especially when you are talking about physical buildings and neighborhoods, and there are different expectations that are associated with that word compared to the same word when used in an online or technology context. We originally used the phrase “Return on Community” (ROC) to describe our strategy, but we found that it created unrealistic expectations and also caused us to be perceived as a charity in some cases. As a result, we started using the

term “Return on Collisions”, which is both more concrete and more measurable. We believe that by managing for increasing Collisions + Co-Learning + Connectedness (when combined with Diversity + Density), we will improve the innovation and productivity of downtown Las Vegas over the long term, even if it’s occasionally at the cost of short-term profits or cash flow. (downtownproject.com)

Hsieh also explained limitations within the Downtown Project. In an article entitled “Hsieh says [the] Downtown Project [is] not a charity, can’t solve every community problem,” he commented that:

People would be upset if donating or investing in them did not happen to fit in with our priorities and business goals, and they would refer back to our use of the word "Community." ...a lot of people that seem to expect us to address and solve every single problem that exists in a city (for example, homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health)... we have to sometimes remind people that we're not the government, and in fact we look to experts in government with experience to tackle problems such as homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health. (Schoenmann 2014)

For Arts Factory owner Wes Myles and others, the new wording represents a clear shift toward an explicit business model by Hsieh and the Downtown Project. Myles interpreted the change from “community” to “collisions” as a message that “we have to make money.” Joshua Ellis, Pulitzer-nominated journalist, former Las Vegas City Life columnist, and Las Vegas observer, believes that the Hsieh plan is a classic “‘bait-and-switch’ - first selling the city on a project aimed at community, and then switching its focus to business” (Komenda 2014). Soon after these reports, Hsieh announced that the Downtown Project was eliminating 30 positions as part of streamlining operations, a decision that was met with a range of responses from angry outrage to claims that Hsieh was backing away from the Downtown Project.

In response, David Gould, Hsieh’s “Director of Innovation,” resigned from the Downtown Project. Gould had come to Las Vegas because he originally felt that Hsieh

“was engaged in a fascinating ‘social experiment’ that offered a unique opportunity to not only make a meaningful difference in Downtown Las Vegas, but also to enrich the lives of people living in cities around the world, and was led by a generous spirit” (Gould 2014). Gould’s resignation letter details his view of the internal workings of the Downtown Project, a project that he would describe as missing leadership and rife with greediness and self-indulgence. In an open letter to Tony Hsieh, Gould comments that:

Business is business” will be the defense from those you have charged with delivering the sad news. But we have not experienced a string of tough breaks or bad luck. Rather, this is a collage of decadence, greed, and missing leadership. While some squandered the opportunity to “dent the universe”, others never cared about doing so in the first place. There were heroes among us, however, and it is for them that my soul weeps. My heart also goes out to those whose jobs are spared. While that might seem a bit ridiculous, they will surely expend energy trying to understand the secret of why they were kept and others let go. In the end, the only thing they will know for sure is that their leaders lied to them in order to hurt their friends. While reason might conclude that I should wait to either identify a new job, or collect my severance pay, I am compelled to tender my resignation instead. Compensation was never my primary concern. Doing meaningful work, however, is. (Gould 2014)

The vehemence surrounding Hsieh and the Downtown project layoff was apparent as the local press reported the layoffs as “bloodletting” (Las Vegas Sun editorial 2014) and as a result of the [Downtown] Project “bleeding money” (Biddle 2014). Observers voiced criticisms over real estate investments, the development of a private school, restaurants, an ambitious transportation project, and the purchase of what some may think of as frivolous and expensive items such as several Burning Man sculptures intended to decorate the area (Buhr 2014).

John L. Smith, a well-known columnist with the Las Vegas Review Journal, wrote that the “Hsieh cult” was now “forced to face reality” (Smith 2014). Smith aimed

his message at “Las Vegas jaded by decades of hot air by an endless string of ‘visionaries.’” He observed that:

News of the layoff of 30 employees from Hsieh’s much ballyhooed Downtown Project development group set media tongues clicking and hands wringing at the possibility that the celebrated Zappos.com CEO was suffering from blurred business vision. Hsieh, who has marketed his “Delivering Happiness” corporate worldview into celebrity status and has been widely portrayed in the press as a guru of goodness out to save a care-worn downtown Las Vegas from utter decay, was compelled to acknowledge the cutback of 10 percent of the Downtown Project’s staff in an attempt to improve efficiency ... [the news] came as a big disappointment to some of Hsieh’s true believers, who bought into his rhetoric like kids waiting in line to sit on Santa’s lap. They should have known better. The Downtown Project has been flying with a philosophy of creating “collisions,” which I suppose means generating business traffic and a sense of place. In other words, there hasn’t been a discernible master plan. As groovy as that sounds in theory, in fact the area needs the equivalent of anchor tenants capable of attracting enough of those, ahem, collisions, to actually turn a profit.

Some locals viewed Hsieh not as the “downtown Las Vegas’ savior,” but instead the downtown “conqueror.”

Some downtown business operators and residents feel like Hsieh and his followers are pushing them aside. That group includes low-income workers and blue-collar business owners who pioneered downtown years before Hsieh’s transformation began ... a lot of Vegas scene makers are just happy to have chic watering holes where, unlike the big Strip places, they’re fawned upon and feel important ... meanwhile, all the people who were using their fingers to barely hang on to the world — the transients and near-transients, the addicts, the scum — are being pushed yet further afield. (Komenda 2014)

Others voiced concerns about how easy it was to break relationships with Hsieh and the Zappos employees. For example, one Fremont Street business owner said that he “believed he had a good relationship with Hsieh,” and then noted that “things suddenly changed. [Then,] Zappos employees and Downtown Project soldiers stopped frequenting his establishment.” The owner believes he somehow fell out of favor, possibly because he

didn't reach out to Hsieh enough, and now "he's careful with whom he discusses his concerns, and he definitely doesn't challenge Hsieh publicly" (Komenda 2014).

Under a bombardment of both supportive and critical media coverage, interest in the Downtown Project ballooned to larger-than-life proportions. In early 2014, reporter Sara Corbett followed Tony Hsieh around downtown to try to understand what he was attempting to do. She observed that:

Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos, owns a party house, and what could be termed a party insect—a 40-foot-long praying mantis that shoots fire from its antennas and a well-stocked party bus. The bus, part of a fleet of party buses, that Corbett and about "60 other people ... involved with the Downtown Project or people who just happened to be in the neighborhood, used to get from the party house to the festival. The bus was decorated with 1970s concert posters on the ceiling and a fully stocked bar that anyone could use". (Corbett 2014)

As Corbett points out, "neither Hsieh nor many of the people he'd hired had any experience in urban renewal or community development or the notorious grinding slowness of making change in a big city". (Corbett 2014).

Emily Badger (2013), staff writer and reporter covering urban policy for the Washington Post, offers yet another perspective on Tony Hsieh. While she sees his "Downtown Project as one of the most intriguing urban development stories in the U.S, she also questions the departure away from the approach taken by traditional developers who talk bottom lines and occupancy rates whereas Hsieh preached out-there ideas about 'return on community' and 'collisions' between the 'people and ideas.'" She comments that most tech entrepreneurs are not urban planners. According to Re/code, an online tech blog, Hsieh talked "about the culture at his company like an urban planner" and then just "chose a city" (Bowles 2014).

Conclusion

First with the hard work of individuals such as Wes Myles, Jack Solomon, Cindy Funkhouser, Julie Brewer and Naomi Arin, followed by First Friday's advent, and then Tony Hsieh's money and vision, downtown Las Vegas has a scene. From the 18b Arts District to Symphony Park to the East Fremont Street entertainment corridor, the downtown's cultural life has undergone a striking transformation. Local artists and business owners, city officials, and others pushed for an active arts community, but the 18b Arts District has struggled to develop an identity as a full-time cultural destination. Locals long perceived the 18b as blight with dirt lots, shopping carts, dark alleys, and crime. The area must overcome these long-standing perceptions in order to attract crowds at times other than First Friday, especially patrons willing to spend money in the 18b's galleries, restaurants, bars, and other businesses. Using the arts as an economic driver to revitalize downtown districts and build community is neither a new strategy nor a passing fad (Stevenson 2004). But, as the noted urbanist Richard Florida observes, public-private partnerships that catalyze "the social structure of creativity" to bring workers and consumers to urban areas should provide:

A supportive social milieu that is open to all forms of creativity – artistic and cultural as well as technological and economic. This milieu provides the underlying eco-system or habitat in which the multidimensional forms of creativity take root and flourish. By supporting lifestyle and cultural institutions like a cutting-edge music scene or vibrant artistic community, for instance, it helps to attract and stimulate those who create in business and technology. (Florida, 2002)

One often mentioned example of a successful "culture-led regeneration" is the redevelopment of the "Quayside," once known as a run-down industrial area in Northeast England (Miles 2005), where city planners were seeking to revitalize the area in a manner

similar to the level of planned revitalization of the 18b and East Fremont Street.

Sociologist Steven Miles describes Quayside as a revitalization effort focused around both old and new buildings designed to anchor the area:

Originally conceived as an art factory, a place for artists from all over the world to work, the BALTIC has no permanent collection and boasts five generous spaces for contemporary exhibitions. Opened to the public in December 2004, The Sage Gateshead is not envisaged purely as a music venue. It is also a home for the Northern Sinfonia and Folkworks as well as a Music Education Centre. The reinvention of Gateshead Quay, which also includes residential developments and two international hotels, is linked to the Newcastle side of the Tyne by the Millennium Bridge, the world's first tilting bridge which was opened in September 2001 and won the RIBA Stirling Prize for architecture in 2002. In combination, these developments have given new life to Newcastle Gateshead Quayside, providing the region with a renewed public focal point. (Miles 2005)

One standing question about the 18b has been whether or not business owners, the city, and patrons will ever build enough of a synergy to sustain a strong development trajectory for the Arts District. Miles (2005) notes that policy-makers and local people alike, align themselves to imagined communities and in this case to an imagined post-industrial future. In this sense, similar to the Quayside, the 18b offers the possibility of an optimistic future in an otherwise pessimistic time. Part of the optimism engendered in the Quayside project is rooted in the foundations provided by the area's industrial past [as well as new] landmark buildings that undoubtedly contribute to the pride and confidence of people in the region; an essential element to any programme [sic] of urban regeneration" (Miles 2005: 923). Today the Quayside is a successful environment for arts, music and culture, as well as new housing, and is a top attraction in the area. The district models what 18b, Symphony Park and East Fremont hope to become.

CHAPTER 6 -CONCLUSION

The main focus of this research has been to understand the creation of the Las Vegas art scene from its earliest moments in the late 1990s, to its formal constitution as the 18b Arts District, through its peak phases organized around First Friday and then the support of The Downtown Project. I have sought to understand the meanings people associate with the Las Vegas art scene and the role it has played in downtown Las Vegas development. I used ethnographic observation, in depth interviews, and secondary sources to understand individual experiences of key arts scene players in concert with their place in observable “social circles” and networks that comprise the scene (Irwin 1977). I also offer perspective on the broader art scene “community” to understand how participants are unified or divided by different ways of thinking and acting (Pfadenhauer 2005).

I focused on two primary themes. First, I wanted to locate the origin and track the developmental trajectory of what would become an art scene in Las Vegas. I also sought to understand how this scene development intersected with participant’s search for social connections organized around art in Las Vegas. To guide my effort, I divided each theme into specific research questions:

Scene Development

- What factors explain the development of the downtown Las Vegas art scene?
- How have social networks, cultural activities and infrastructure and physical spaces defined the development of the scene?

- How has the scene changed over time and what factors caused those changes?

Art and Community

- What meanings does the art scene hold for the participants?
- To what degree can the Las Vegas art scene be explained as a search for urban community?

I spoke to the early art scene visionaries and closely observed monthly gallery openings. I also ambled through the crowds, observed street vendors, art galleries, restaurants and retail spaces in the 18b and downtown areas. I traced its development into a deliberate corporate-driven attempt to support an effort to reinvigorate the downtown district in Las Vegas. My study is somewhat ‘prospective’ in that the Las Vegas art scene was very much in its infancy at the start of the project and the people involved were living through, responding to, and often directly shaping the changes.

A small group of visionaries catalyzed the Las Vegas art scene in the mid 1990s when they imagined ways to draw artists, patrons, and other Las Vegans together into an arts community that could be a locus of economic development and cultural exchange. But, they faced several obstacles. Downtown stood as the low rent Las Vegas option to the spectacle Strip experience, and downtown businesses struggled to draw both tourists and locals to spend time and money in the area. In the late 1990s, Wes Myles, Julie Brewer and others developed the G.A.M.E. festival as a precursor to the 18b and the First Friday event. Attendance at the early festivals demonstrated a clear desire among many local Las Vegans for an arts-based community. In 2002, Cindy Funkhouser, inspired by her experiences in the Portland, Oregon arts scene, organized the inaugural First Friday,

an event that would ultimately become synonymous with the Las Vegas Arts District. This opening First Friday, billed first as an “art walk, was poorly organized, marketed, and attended. Only a handful of art galleries even existed at the time. And yet the experience inspired several artists and art-minded locals to invest time and money into the experience. Over the next two years, First Friday rapidly expanded. In October 2004, several thousand people attended the event, the number of art galleries grew, and the City of Las Vegas pitched in with organizational and financial support.

As the First Friday event took off, participants expressed different views about its design and implementation. Some felt that First Friday should be focused primarily on gallery art, while others felt that the experience should resemble a more open arts festival, to draw young and diverse crowds rather than exclusively art patrons. This conflict over highbrow versus lowbrow distinctions simmered among 18b gallery owners for several years, defining the differing attitudes between the north end Arts Factory and S2 Arts contingent and the south end Funk House/Whirlygig group. As the debate continued, so did First Friday, and it drew several thousand people to the 18b prior to the Great Recession.

The recession marked a turning point for First Friday, the 18b and Whirlygig. Feeling the effects of rapid growth, which required new expenditures for security, stages, tents, restrooms, and cleanup, combined with the City of Las Vegas reducing their financial contributions for First Friday, Whirlygig sought new ways to manage costs. Their attempts to secure donation entry fees from First Friday goers were only minimally successful. Few among the thousands who attended were willing to give money for an experience they had come to expect for free. For the highbrow art advocates, this

unwillingness to part with money during First Friday was indicative of a larger problem with the festival atmosphere that Whirlygig supported. Too few of the art walk's attendees came for the art and even fewer were willing to buy. As the financial strains deepened for Whirlygig and art buying remained sluggish, many galleries closed, and several key players in the art community left town.

By Fall 2011, the Whirlygig board pulled out of First Friday, signaling a moment of angst among the 18b businesses. Faced with insurmountable financial troubles, Whirlygig founder, Cindy Funkhouser, declared that the September 2011 First Friday was cancelled. The pronouncement was overstated, since only the street festival activities on the south end of the 18b were on hold. The rest of the district went on with the event. Tensions flared over Funkhouser's seemingly narrow view of what First Friday meant and who participated in the Arts District. Just because she pulled out, this did not mean that others would follow. Indeed, her withdrawal rallied many of the galleries around the idea that First Friday might transition from a festival-centric experience to something more akin to an art patron-centric experience. Or at least things might change for the better.

Indeed, change came in the guise of Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh, who purchased the First Friday trademark from Whirlygig and began to absorb the Arts District groundswell into a larger multifaceted effort to shape both the 18b and the East Fremont entertainment district to the north. Hsieh's influence expanded First Friday's festival components to include a "Burning Man" vibe. His main goal seemed to be aimed at extending across downtown some version of a business plan predicated on spaces to enhance serendipitous meetings among creative professionals that he saw as essential to innovation. Bars, clubs,

restaurants, art galleries, and retail shops fit The Downtown Project vision. Hsieh's group talked repeatedly about creating "returns on community", which many people interpreted as a vision for a livable, safe, cohesive, and comfortable downtown. City officials encouraged Hsieh's investments and made other investments in arts and entertainment, such as the Smith Center, Symphony Park, and the Life is Beautiful Festival.

But Hsieh and his group's primary investment spaces centered on East Fremont Street, while many in the 18b district felt that the original arts district seemed to mainly interest the group as an every-first-Friday-of-the-month party spot. By 2013, many locals felt their honeymoon with Hsieh was coming to an end. The Downtown Project publicly withdrew their claims about creating returns on community and reset their public narrative to emphasize the bottom line of their business investments. Criticisms emerged from some inside the downtown project and from longtime arts district players that Hsieh, after receiving favors from the city for his investments, was now shifting the narrative away from investments in community to solely business investments that might gentrify a small area around the East Fremont Entertainment area, but not well support the sort of change that would help grow the arts scene, especially in the 18b Arts District.

Arts Scene and Community in Las Vegas

The collective effort to establish an art scene in downtown Las Vegas emerged from the interests of relatively like-minded "creatives" who sought social connections in an enervating, isolating, and alienating urban environment focused more on sustaining the tourist-driven casino economy than on cohesive local communities. As Wes Myles' early success with his G.A.M.E. festivals in the late 1990s demonstrated, many of the creative class in Las Vegas sought social connections with others in a setting where they

could artistically express themselves. The 18b and First Friday events, which drew hundreds and later thousands, established a space where people compelled by ideas about artistic expression and a locals scene gathered to stem the isolation and alienation they felt in Sin City.

In essence, the art scene is an effort to find community. The term “community” is complicated and contested (Christenson 1979; Williams 1996; Putnam 2000; Florida 2002; Pfadenhauer 2005; Sturtevant 2006; Robins 2011; Rolfe 2003). Some social theorists speak to the value of social networks and civic engagement to build cohesion and social capital (Putnam 2000; Forrest and Kearns 2001). In his seminal piece, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (2000) highlights trends toward social isolation resulting from the societal strains found in modern urban areas. For Putman, the viability and effectiveness of social institutions is very much predicated on community ties and social cohesiveness that defines social capital (also Coleman 1988).

Following Putnam, I think of community as a source of and repository for social capital. Low or high social capital is an indicator of society’s welfare based on indicators related to communal isolation (low social capital) or alternately communal connectedness (high social capital), many of which have been studied in Southern Nevada. Coleman (1998) asserts that “a property shared by most forms of social capital that differentiates it from other forms of capital is its public good aspect.” A positive public good aspect of an art scene might be in how it can increase cultural capital, stimulate the economy, and enhance lifestyles (Landry and Bianchini 1995; Adams and Goldbard 2002; Barraket and Kaiser 2007; Matarasso 1997; Guetzkow 1996).

Las Vegas may face unique challenges with respect to building social capital and community due to the 2009 economic decline, its tourist-dominated economy, and the transient nature of the city's population. As a longtime Las Vegas resident, I have frequently been told that Las Vegas does not have sociable neighborhoods, a form of social isolation that researchers have also noted. Neal and Collas (2000) describe social isolation as a "form of personal stress embedded in the social organization of the modern world" and that with "increased isolation and atomization, much of our daily interactions are with those who are strangers to us and with whom we lack any ongoing social relationships" (2000:114). Sociologists have also treated the concept of isolation as not only a literal description of individuals, but also refer to the idea that social isolation can also occur between neighborhoods (Krivo, Peterson, Browning and Calder 2013).

Scholars studying Las Vegas over the last decade have noted the metropolitan area's isolating character (Gottdiener, Collins and Dickens 1999; Harwood and Freeman 2004; Shalin 2004; Futrell et al. 2010; Dickens 2012). In 1999, Gottdiener et al. commented on the presence "of highly differentiated communities within the Las Vegas region", a result of several planned residential communities that have been actively marketed as being culturally distant from Las Vegas, so much so that residents identify themselves as living in "Green Valley" (south side) or in Summerlin (north side) or some other insular residential development where little approximating a grassroots scene exists (1999:162). They also note that the outcome is a type of social fragmentation found in many other modern American cities. The encapsulated communities of Las Vegas, many with self-contained commercial districts do seem to provide some people with a sense of social cohesion in terms of neighborhood sociability, but life in Las Vegas is also

characterized by an outward-looking tourist trade, fragmented governmental structures, and weak civic culture (Gottdiener et al.1999:257).

In a study focused upon human capital in Las Vegas, Harwood and Freeman (2004) note that local residents seek stable communities and environments where they trust and connect with others but find that making deep social connections to be very difficult. As part of the concluding essay from a 2004 Justice and Democracy forum on the Leading Social Indicators in Nevada, University of Nevada, Las Vegas professor, Craig Walton (2006:14), detailed a number of social indicators that suggest “it is not just the poor and the working poor [that live isolated lives], but also the middle and upper income classes, who live more isolated and private lives here than their economic counterparts in states with cultures blessed with higher social capital.”He concludes that “a place like Las Vegas in particular...that sells itself as a ‘destination resort,’ peddles self-indulgence for a fee, and promises a ‘moral holiday’ with no moral consequences to reckon with cannot govern itself, take care of its children, provide a humanly workable habitat for its working men and women, or build and sustain the needed institutions unless it moves past that image and begins to put down the roots of a more stable community for all those who live [in Las Vegas]” (Walton 2006: 22). Walton acknowledges that, “Nevada’s people still want to live real lives with something beyond the impermanence, chaos, distrust, lack of solid fulfillment and frightening uncertainty of a place with its social capital in the tank” (2006: 23).

More recently, Futrell et al. (2010a) surveyed Las Vegas residents in a valley-wide survey aimed at understanding local neighborhood satisfaction, with questions focused on several aspects of the local community experience. The Las Vegas

Metropolitan Area Social Survey (LVMASS) respondents judged their quality of life as fairly good (58%) or better (19%). Interestingly, if helping others is a good measure of mutual aid, then survey participants seem to be a good example of neighbors being a source of social support. The authors, however also reported that less than 37% of Las Vegas valley residents felt a strong sense of belonging to the city and only 33.2% of respondents indicated a strong sense of belonging to their neighborhoods. The authors also observe that quality of life drops the closer residents are to the Urban Core (17.5%), compared to those living within the urban fringe (40.7%) or in retirement neighborhoods (51.9%). “Las Vegas Valley residents are more pessimistic about their quality of life over the next decade. Only 37% of respondents think that their quality of life will get better in the next ten years. Another 21% expect their quality of life to stay the same. Forty-percent believe their quality of life will get worse” (Futrell et al. 2010a: 41).

How people feel about their communities and the degree to which they are connected to one another are important factors for understanding urban social climate.

Richard Harwood (2014:13) reports that:

Many communities are dogged by an ingrained *negative* narrative. I remember working in Las Vegas, NV where the narrative at the time was, “I’m for me, and you’re for me.” Pursuing a second chance at the American Dream meant people were incessantly focused inward on their own lives, and many leaders and organizations followed a similar path to protect their own turf and success. This narrative made it nearly impossible to bring people and groups together to address common challenges unless, of course a crisis was at hand; but once the crisis subsided, business as usual returned.

Taken together, the overwhelming message from a decade of work on social capital is that many Las Vegans are individually-focused and socially isolated.

I interpret the Las Vegas art scene as a locals' effort to respond to the alienating, isolating, and individualizing character of their experiences in Sin City. Scenes offer a central activity that help to focus participants' attention, interaction, and sense of purpose. The Las Vegas arts scene's central activity—artistic production and appreciation—occurs within a relatively well-defined set of downtown spaces where clusters of producers, artists, and observers gather. The 18b district and monthly First Friday festival offer artistic creativity, expressed in a variety of styles, as an organized focal experience that brings thousands out once a month, albeit much fewer on other days. The Las Vegas arts scene presents a type of temporary community as it has consistently drawn massive festival crowds each month since 2003, while standing more as a symbolic location between the monthly festival gatherings. In short, there has never been much of a day-to-day street scene in the 18b at times other than First Friday. And, with the rise of the East Fremont District as an alternative to the 18b, developing a day-to-day scene may remain a challenge.

Sustaining the 18b may rely on a few key third places (Oldenberg 2001), where locals do gather regularly. A primary third place in the 18b is the Arts Factory, Wes Myles' long time anchor establishment. Much of the development in the 18b has centered around the Arts Factory and the block radius around the Arts Factory. The building has housed some of the most well-known and long-lasting galleries, restaurants, and other businesses. The Funk House also remains as a consistent symbol of the scene and draws antique and art buyers outside of First Fridays. Most recently, a craft brewery, cocktail bar, and coffee shop have opened less than a quarter-block from the Arts Factory and by all accounts are drawing crowds every evening. But the bigger question is whether or not

the 18b can become what Borer (2008) calls a “big third space,” or what I and others call a scene, where large numbers of people consistently gather and build a sense of community.

Large numbers of people are gathering regularly in the East Fremont entertainment district. Fueled by Tony Hsieh’s \$350 million largesse via the Downtown Project, East Fremont is seeing the sort of development that many envisioned for the 18b. Hsieh has organized land acquisition, funded small businesses and brought tech startups into the area. The Downtown Project now owns a multitude of properties aimed at bringing work and play together through the development of an infrastructure that supports living and working downtown. The mixes of restaurants, retail spaces, galleries, learning spaces, and public art have transformed Fremont East into a “fun place” with a vibrant daily scene and a bustling nightlife. Previously associated with panhandling, crime, drugs, and prostitution, perceptions of the area are now that it is a fun, safe space that draws a young, hip, entrepreneurial clientele. These perceptions are bolstered by publicity gained through regular attention from local, national, and international media that has, for the most part, lauded the area’s changes.

Hsieh has been focused on the idea of uniting urban planning and culture. Charles Landry’s book, *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*, originated the idea of connecting cultural creativity and city planning. As Landry (2008:7) put it: “Cultural resources are the raw materials of the city and its value base; its assets replacing coal, steel or gold. Creativity is the method of exploiting these resources and helping them grow.” But, the creative city is not only about innovative thinking, it is also about having the infrastructure to implement and support novel ideas.

In 2002, Richard Florida coined the terms the “creative class” and “creative capital” to argue that economic prosperity and development is higher in cities with a greater proportion of creative people who can offer potential sources of imagination which can be accessed and used to solve difficult urban problems and to enhance economic development. This notion has been the basis for broad-spectrum 21st century urban planning. Investing in the “creative city” can mean urban renewal and lifestyle change that often brings in wealthier residents and/or businesses with the resulting displacement of the original low-income resident population. Edward Glaeser’s (2011) book, *The Triumph of the City*, a favorite of Hsieh’s, champions the idea of dense urban living and puts forward the view that viable cities are characterized by a high level of human capital and become prosperous “because they are becoming more economically productive (relative to less skilled cities)” (Glaeser and Saiz 2003). A creative and skilled population can provide inspiration for innovative work in other fields with positive outcomes and an economic prosperity that can extend to whole cities (Glaeser 2011).

However, other studies suggest there is little to no correlation between the activities of the creative class and economic growth and development. Hoyman and Faricy (2009:329) studied 276 metropolitan areas to test human and social capital models of economic growth against Richard Florida’s “creative class” theory. They found that:

The creative class failed consistently across multiple statistical tests to explain either job growth, growth in wages, or absolute levels of wages. Additionally, the individual characteristics of [Florida’s] creative class—talent, technology, and tolerance—were negatively correlated with all our economic measurements.

While it is difficult to know if the so-called “creative class” is driving change or is just drawn to areas with jobs and strong economic potential, these authors “warn policy

makers against the use of ‘creative’ strategies for urban economic development.” In a study designed to evaluate the impact of human capital on economic prosperity, Berry and Glaeser (2005:11) found that “areas with higher levels of human capital attracted more skilled people ‘resulting in ‘segregation by skill’ possibly due to a labor demand created by local entrepreneurs who start firms in their own cities and the tendency of the skilled to move to skilled areas.”

Largely absent from these discussions are the economic and social realities of gentrification and the fate of lower-income residents residing in the area who could very well be forced out should living costs increase. Roughly 44,213 people live in and around the 5.69 sq miles of the downtown Las Vegas zip code (89101). A “new” downtown will need educated employees, but the percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree or higher is significantly below the state average as is the number of college students living in the area. Less than seven percent hold a bachelors degree or higher. Fewer than two percent have graduate or professional degrees. And, roughly 20% have no high school diploma. The major areas of current employment in the Las Vegas Valley are in the sales and service industries (entertainment, recreation, accommodation and food service (45%) or construction and/or maintenance (11%) followed by management and/or professional occupations (17.8%) and production, transportation, and material moving occupations (6.1%). As of 2013, the median household income of the area was \$22,401 much lower than the state average at \$52,800 or the US average at \$56,046 (Demographic Profile Data, US Census) and 37.5% of the residents within this zip code were considered below the poverty line in 2013 (up 3.5% from 2011), compared with 15% for the whole state. Most downtown residents (80%) live in rental units (city-

data.com). To support the infrastructure that is currently being constructed, the demographics of the downtown area will have to change. Indeed, there has been much publicity about “connectedness” leading to creativity, innovation and ultimately economic upward mobility that sounds a lot like Florida’s call for creative class workers.

While some admire the Downtown Project, others have questioned the real impact of what appears to be a quick fix to pressing community problems, as well as the project’s sustainability. Hsieh was able to invest an enormous amount of money in a downtown area beset with low urban property prices, a result of overbuilding during the last housing bubble. Hsieh has even been compared to Bugsy Siegel “in his singular vision and grand plan to build a community out of nothing” (Hu 2015). Downtown resident and author of the book *Millennials 101*, Matt Heller says, “It’s impressive. There’s a lot of change happening and it happens almost daily,” and while he remains impressed by the change, he also wonders what happens after Hsieh’s cash infusions, as he notes that, “we have to keep it growing every day. So the question is, at what cost? And I’m not sure when someone will say, ‘You know what? We can’t afford to water this grass anymore. There isn’t any income’” (Hu 2015). These concerns give pause, especially since Hsieh has openly said that he is “giving the project two more years to break even” (Hu 2015).

These realities as well as the capricious taste of today’s consumer add to economic instability and increase the pressure on businesses. While early conversations concerning the Downtown Project focused on the production of culture, it seems that the greater concern is whether or not the rate of growth pushed by Hsieh will outpace local quality of life measures (available employment and cost of living). Now, less than four

years after the initiation of the project, the focus appears to have moved into the realm of art and culture as one of several created commodities used to engineer a “hip” downtown, although it does not seem that just creating amenities will help attract workers unless there are jobs in the first place.

For a while, the language regarding the Downtown Project and East Fremont district touted community as an end goal. In “scene” language, Hsieh and DTP offered a vision that emphasized growing cohesive social networks, alliances, and styles where new cultural (and business) innovations might develop. Hsieh sought to create interactive spaces where people could better identify with one another and with the Fremont East space where they interacted. But, at root, Hsieh’s DTP is primarily a business model, albeit a unique one, that situates profitability as the main goal. As locals increasingly bought into the community vision, DTP backed away from the idea, ultimately removing the notion from the Downtown Project mission statement. Hsieh and colleagues explained that they did not want to send the message that the Downtown Project is aimed at seeking solutions to urban problems such as social exclusion, personal well-being or revitalization of the public space economy, a point that the press presented as more or less “the renunciation of an ideal, or at least a responsibility” (Marshall 2014).

What many locals may have imagined is that Hsieh and DTP would extend and amplify the downtown scene initiated in the 18b Arts District. Though more than a mile apart, the 18b and the Fremont East areas seemed to have embraced a similar ethos – develop a locals’ scene based on arts and entertainment that would anchor resident’s experiences in something beyond the tourist oriented, spectacle city of the Las Vegas Strip and the persistent transience of the tourist-gaming economy. Where the 18b

emerged slowly from grassroots efforts of a few key arts supporters, the Fremont East area burst forth rapidly, in top-down fashion, led by a wealthy, charismatic entrepreneur with big ideas about building and renovating downtown space where a scene could take root.

There are several distinctions to note between the two areas. Both face challenges sustaining a vibrant scene in the spectacle city. The Fremont East area draws lively crowds daily, but never the huge throngs that attend the First Friday festival. The area claimed to seek “community” through their efforts, then dropped the idea when its leaders figured out that community meant a lot of things to a lot of people and most meanings did not equate it with bottom-line profits that appear to be at the heart of Hsieh’s goals. The 18b has built some degree of cohesion among the long-term gallery, restaurant, and retail business owners and their patrons, though profitability among the businesses is uneven. City officials have acted as boosters for the DTP and the East Fremont revitalization, while offering variable, and often quite limited, support to the 18b. Tourists recognize Fremont East and they flock to the Entertainment District, while the 18b struggles to draw them and their money to its galleries and other businesses.

The First Friday festival provides a venue for social engagement and community development. Arcodia and Whitford (2006) note that the staging of a festival provides a way for the community to celebrate and an “impending community celebration serves to further increase the development of social capital via the generation of community spirit and a general sense of goodwill” (2006). If attendance and upbeat press is any measure of sentiment and positive feelings for community (Christenson 1979), then at least from the point of view of social connectedness, First Friday offers something very positive to local

Las Vegas. On the other hand, it is unclear whether or not the 18b will ever emerge as a destination for those able to transform culture into entrepreneurial enterprises that will help sustain an art scene over time.

Limitations

As a young, growing, global city, Las Vegas offers myriad opportunities for sociological research. I had the opportunity to study the evolution of a grassroots art scene that has been celebrated in the local and national press. The scene's persistence is stunning given the overwhelming influence of the Strip and tourism on just about every part of this city. Like any research project, mine has limitations. First, my case study approach limits my ability to offer generalizable findings. My selection of interviewees focusing on entrepreneurs, artists, and gallery owners also limits my perspective on this very complex phenomenon. My interviews tapped into only a small, albeit important, subgroup of the scene. A more comprehensive sampling of scene participants would likely reveal diverse attitudes toward art and the scene, insights into the festival-versus-art-walk debate, and a better sense of the factors that drive the thousands of attendees to participate in the First Friday event. I would have liked to have interviewed younger members of the scene, such as the teenagers and very young adults who attend First Friday in droves. Their perspective could shed light on what it is like to grow up in the spectacle city of Las Vegas and what seems so compelling to them about the Arts District and First Friday. My sense is that there's relatively little research on Las Vegas teens' experiences, although there seems to be a sense that the young suffer from too few constructive social outlets in Sin City. Further research could approach the scene with an

eye toward understanding the role of young attendees in the arts scene. I also had to pull out from direct and consistent participant observation earlier than planned.

Scene development is ongoing. Due to a necessity I had to move away from Las Vegas in 2010, and I was not able to engage in participant observation of the scene as often as I had planned. Consequently, my observational data is not as rich as I had hoped, especially during the emergence of the Fremont East area. Had I had more time and resources, I would also have attempted to conduct a robust survey of First Friday participants to gain a sense of the demographic range of the attendees, their perceptions on a range of matters such as First Friday, the arts district, reasons for attending, social connectedness, residential satisfaction, and quality of life, among others. Future research investigation might include an exploration of the relationships among direct stakeholders (gallery owners, artists, and vendors), participants (the public) and corporate organizers, as well as a focus on broader Las Vegas residents' perceptions of the downtown scene. The ultimate challenge is in finding ever better ways to contextualize people and their social scenes among the places and institutions of increasingly complex and dense urban environments such as Las Vegas.

APPENDIX 1 - INTERVIEW GUIDE

I'd like to ask you about your involvement in the downtown Las Vegas Arts District

Could you discuss **when you became involved and how**

then, **characterize your activity:**

(i.e., what have you done, when, and any changes over time)

Interview org – First >> present characterization of the situation,
Next >> future prospects

and then, briefly >> some aspects of the past.

At present >> **What are the major issues and who are the major participants** shaping the Arts District.

What are **major issues** that are **most important** in **shaping the future** of the Arts District.

Indicate several major events or actions >> you feel particularly important in shaping the Arts District.

-How have these changed over time?

- If changed...how, when, why and what effects?

Probes

Groups involved in the Art Scene(CAC, Whirligig)

-Alliances between (1) government and artists , (2) business owners

-Key figures

Groundswell movement in the development of the Arts District

Funkhouser and others who want the scene to be a site of **community involvement**

Focused around First Friday as a cultural event for the city>>>>>

Have community members been involved the Arts District?

Is this an area of contention among Arts District creators?

Prompts

- **How do you feel the Arts District was established?**
- **Who were the key people involved in the early development of the Arts District?**
- **Are community members presently involved in decision-making?**

Major events in the formation of the Arts District

What groups were involved in forming the Arts District?

Have these groups **changed** over time and if so **how have they changed?**

Prompts

- Artists (professional and amateur)
- Business people in the district
- Local government involvement
- Developers

Characteristics of people involved in the formation of the Arts District

- age range
- educational level
- occupation
- ethnicity
- socio-economic status

Media

Has the **media been important in the development** of the Arts District?

How, Why, and What has been its effect on development?

Have the media **consistently supported** the development of the Arts District?

Has media coverage **changed over time**?

Which media (print, blogs, etc.) **have been most effective**?

Categories of People/Participants

How would you **characterize the variety** of people that are involved in either First Friday or the downtown Arts scene?

Are they **distinct** groups?

What **activities** make them distinct?

Where do they **congregate**?

Do they congregate by **age/gender or a specific style**?

Prompts

- tourists
- “scene kids”
- artists (visual, dance, audio, others)
- city government representatives
- suburban art collectors

Meanings

Why are you **involved** in the Arts District/scene?

Has that involvement **changed** over time?

What does the Arts District/scene **mean to you**?

Has that **changed** over time?

How do you think the Arts District/scene **relates to past Las Vegas and to the casino culture**?

Has that **changed** over time?

What are some **threats** to the continued development of the Arts District/scene?

Why do you see **other people participating** in the Arts District/scene?

Are there **other places in Las Vegas** where participants can have the same experiences as those found in the Arts District?

What would you **feel like** if Las Vegas didn't have an Arts District?

Structure

What is the 18B district?

When you think of the Arts District do you think **of specific areas or do you think of the entire area?**

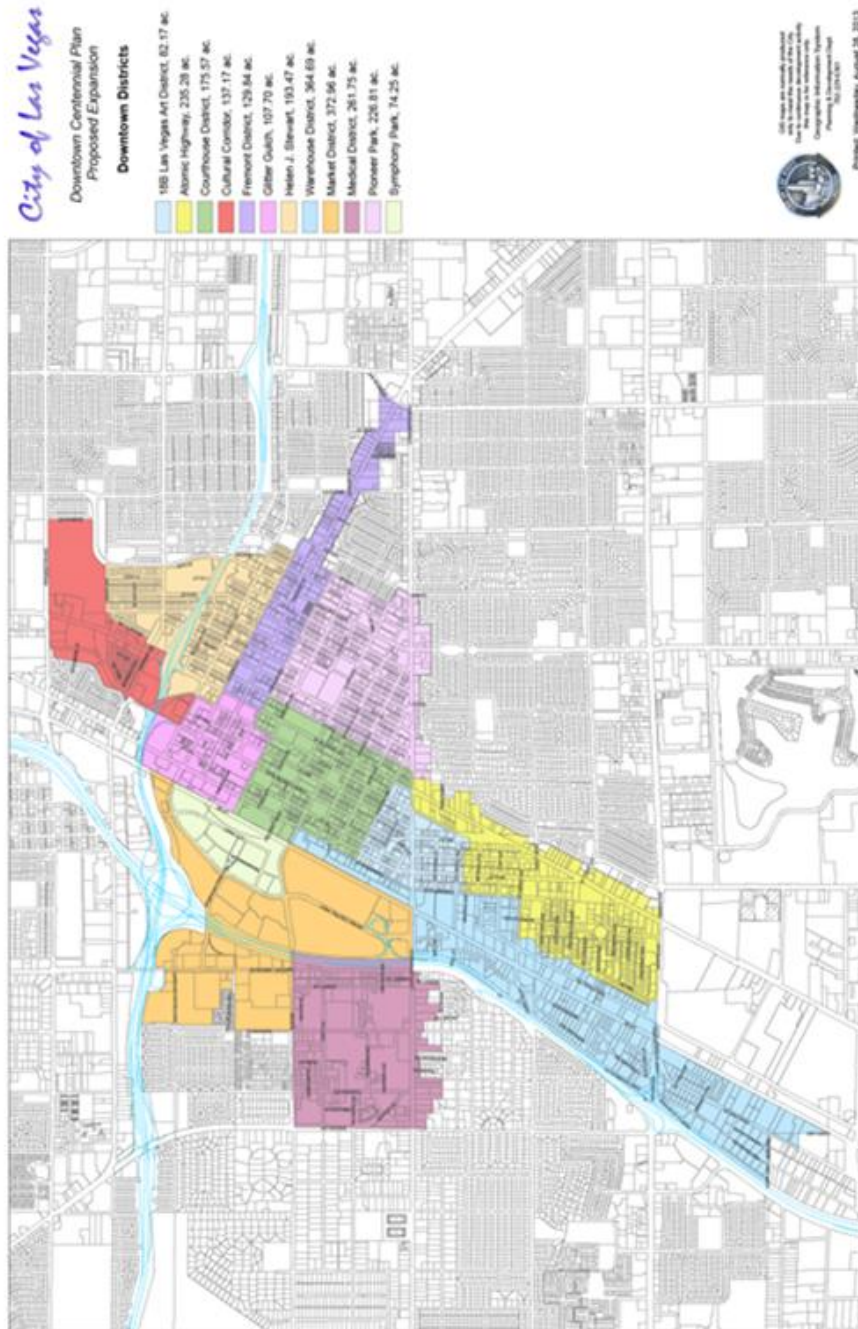
Where are the **most interesting areas** in the Arts District?

Why are these areas the most interesting?

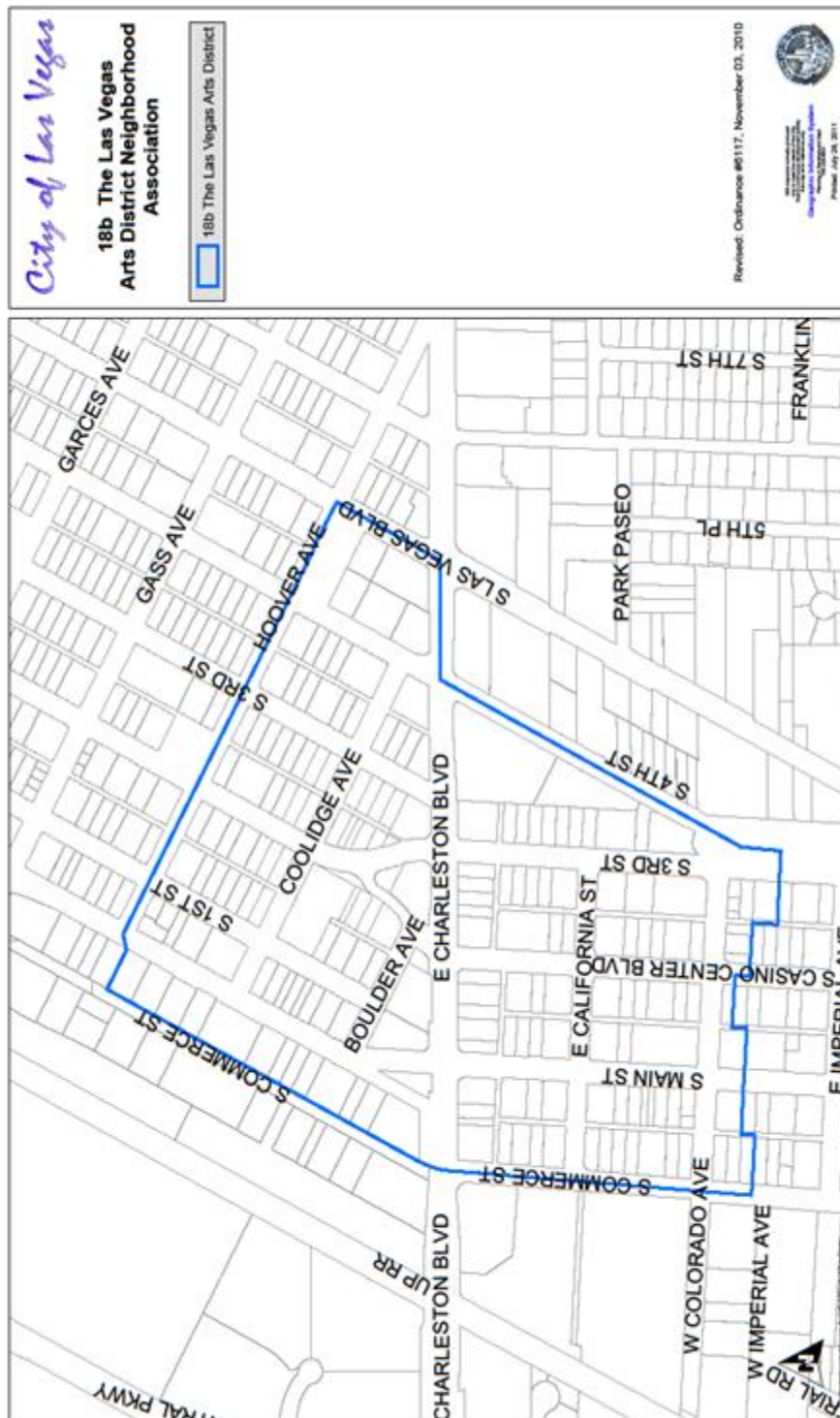
Do **certain kinds of people** gather in **specific parts of the Arts District?**

Who are these people and **why do they specify** these areas?

APPENDIX 2 - DOWNTOWN CENTENNIAL PLAN BOUNDARIES & NEIGHBORHOODS (2000)



APPENDIX 3–18B ARTS DISTRICT; CENTENNIAL PLAN BOUNDARIES



Source: <http://lasvegasnevada.gov>. Retrieved October 1, 2015

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

Post-Graduate 2000-present	Student, Ph.D. Program, Department of Sociology University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Post-Graduate 1998-2000	(Extension Student) University of Nevada, Las Vegas Courses in art to enhance teaching and therapeutic skills
Graduate 1978-1980	Master of Social Welfare (MSW) University of California, Los Angeles <i>Thesis Title:</i> Recent Life Stress among Men and Woman Seeking Treatment in an Outpatient Community Mental Health Center
Undergraduate, 1964-1972	Bachelor of Arts (History), California State University, Long Beach Standard Secondary Teaching Credential

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

9/96 to 6/98	Counselor/Teacher Ingraham High School, Seattle Public Schools, Seattle, WA
9/95 to 8/96	Teacher Ingraham High School, Seattle Public Schools, Seattle, WA
9/94 to 6/95	Teacher, Alternative School #1, Seattle Public Schools, Seattle, WA.
7/92 to 7/94	Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) Discovery Professional Counseling Associates, Las Vegas, NV.
10/91 to 7/93	Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) Lehrhoff and Associates Inc., Las Vegas, NV.
4/83 to 9/91	Counselor and Teacher Alternative School #1, Seattle Public Schools, Seattle, WA.
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Coastal Community Mental Health Center
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- 8/80 to 11/80 Children's Services Worker
Department of Public Services, Long Beach, CA.
- 9/79 to 6/80 Psychiatric Social Worker (intern)
San Pedro Mental Health Service, San Pedro, CA.
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Compton Neighborhood Services Center, Compton CA.
- 8/77 to 6/78 Teacher (Substitute and Long Term)
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- 2/76 to 6/76 Instructor
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PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

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LICENSES

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- School Counselor Certificate #254709R (Washington)
- Teaching Certificate #454709R (Washington)
- Teaching Certificate #402588 (California)
- Licensed Clinical Social Worker #01384C (Nevada)