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Elgin Artspace seen as possible pattern for Springfield

There are 55 artists in residence at Elgin Artspace, as in they live and work in the 1908 former Sears building turned cultural center.

Backers of a similar concept for downtown Springfield visited the center on the Fox River in downtown Elgin this summer to see how a long-vacant eyesore could become a focus for the arts in the northern Illinois community of 110,000.

In the case of Elgin Artspace, it required \$15.3 million, including \$12.2 million in tax credits, to convert the former Sears department store. Donations, including land donated by the city of Elgin, covered the remainder.

[Downtown Neighborhood Association of Elgin](#) executive director Deirdre White offered another observation that might sound familiar to workers, shoppers and business owners in downtown Springfield.

“Perception is not reality,” White said. “If you hadn’t been down here in the last few years, you’d see it now and go, ‘Whoa.’ We’ve shown art can have a real economic impact.”

City and state tax credits for affordable housing were used to fund conversion of the building, White said, describing the result as a kind of business incubator for arts.

By paying below-market rent, White said, the goal is for the artists to eventually move on to stand-alone businesses. A few have done so since the building opened in 2012, she said.

Springfield visitors

A group from Springfield visited Elgin Artspace this summer in search of ideas that might work here. There has been off-and-on discussion of a downtown “art district” for years in the capital city, and more recently a group of arts and crafts shop owners created their own weekend artisan walks.

Lisa Clemmons Stott was part of the Elgin visit. She is co-chair of the volunteer Sustainable Design Assessment Team action committee charged with implementing recommendations made by SDAT consultants to bring new residents and vitality to the central business district.

Art and culture were major components of the recommendations released by the outside SDAT experts in 2012.

“They have a really great project (in Elgin),” Stott said, noting that the block around Artspace has filled in with shops, cafes and other small businesses. Much like Elgin, she said, downtown Springfield has ample space to choose from.

The challenge remains finding the right willing developer and funding.

“I’ve definitely seen it work in other cities,” Stott said. “We believe Springfield is ripe for this.”

The downtown area has the advantage of the Hoogland Center for the Arts, the Springfield Art Association and the Prairie Art Alliance to build on, according to supporters of the concept.

Stott said SDAT members have had discussions with potential developers.

Artisan Walk

In September, a group of more than a dozen downtown business owners started their own promotion of the arts on the second Saturday of each month. The final Shop Hop and Artisan Walk was held this weekend.

“There’s a lot of art downtown, and we thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be great if we had a guided tour?’ ” said Alicia Bibb, owner of Studio on 6th, 215 S. Sixth St., and one of the organizers of the events.

Plans are to take a break this winter and possibly resume the Shop Hop and Artisan Walk next spring. While the initiative is intended to highlight the creativity of local artists, Bibb said it also is intended to bring retail traffic downtown.

“We’re trying to build a downtown community,” Bibb said. “I’m a retailer, and our businesses needed something now.”

Downtown Springfield Inc. role

An uncertain future for Downtown Springfield Inc., which traditionally has served as the lead for downtown promotions, was partly behind the decision by shop owners to do their own shopping and art event.

The downtown group announced in late August that it needed to raise \$50,000 to make it through the end of the year after bad weather led to low turnout for



Jeannie Serra puts the finishing touches on one of her fall centerpiece arrangements Wednesday at Studio on 6th. Serra is one of the featured artists at the studio. Photos by Justin L. Fowler/The State Journal-Register

major outdoor events, resulting in significant financial losses.

The worst of the financial crisis has passed, executive director Victoria Ringer said. But she said the organization has only begun to restructure operations, including the type of events and promotions appropriate to DSI.

“We’re re-evaluating all of our events. Adding an art component is at the top of our list,” Ringer said. “We’re trying to diversify away from those big, weather-dependent festivals.”

Ringer also visited Elgin Artspace as part of the local group this summer.

She said downtown shop owners approached DSI about the artisan promotion this fall, adding that it might be the type of event the organization would take on in the future.

Kari Bedford Photography opened this summer in a former beauty salon space at 314 E. Monroe St. Bedford said she had been looking for downtown space after working from her home for years.

She also joined a group of shops in a block that has been a source of persistent vacancies.

“I’ve been looking for something downtown and something with character,” said Bedford, who was part of the shop and art promotion.

Most of her business is from existing customers and referrals, she said. But she also liked the idea of a storefront in proximity to other arts, crafts and cafes.

“It can’t hurt for people to see the studio and what’s in it,” Bedford said.

Elgin Artspace

A former Sears department store building in downtown Elgin is now home to Artspace, an artist-in-residence development that has become the focus of downtown renewal efforts in the northern Illinois community of 110,000.

Highlights of the project:

- * Development cost: \$15.2 million, including \$11 million in state and \$1.1 million in city affordable-housing tax credits; remainder covered by donations.
- * Construction began in 2011, and the building opened in 2012; 80,889 total square feet.
- * 55 artists in residence in upper-level loft apartments.
- * Art and design shops on the ground floor.
- * On the Web: Downtownelgin.com.

Source: Downtown Neighborhood Association of Elgin

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