

Destination Bridgeport: Can the Park City be gentrified?

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BRIDGEPORT -- The writing on the walls of Murphy's Law, a 12-year-old downtown pub, seems to mock the neighborhood's half-century of woes. "Common sense is not so common," reads one. "All's well that ends ..." cracks another. By the door it says: "If something can go wrong, it will." Over at the bar, however, there's a new opinion brewing. "They even have Stella now," exclaims Paul Cerveror, 31, who's perched on a barstool. He drains his pint glass and shouts: "Yeah!"



The Belgian beer arrived here a few months back, which is about when the first of three high-end stores -- a Portuguese wine shop, an artsy clothing boutique and a forthcoming hair salon -- joined the Fairfield Avenue block known as Bijou Square. Also opening recently were 84 luxury apartments, which brought the total number of downtown dwelling units to 904, and a slew of other stores injecting life to the area.

Noting this, Cerveror, a Bridgeport native, declares that the era of downtown revival is at hand. "This neighborhood is home plate," he says. "It's all going to extend from here."

Cerveror's optimism reflects the new blood flowing through Bridgeport's heart. Among the area's recent arrivals, there's a sense that the historic neighborhood, long depressed, is ready for reinvention, that each new resident or store is bringing things one step closer to flourishing.

The newcomers, though, must also contend with old problems. The city has a lousy reputation, a perception that's backed up by scarce shopping crowds, sleepy nighttime streets, abandoned buildings and history of crime. The downtown also has limited amenities, which can leave pioneering residents feeling more like stranded colonists.

Yet the rejuvenation is gaining momentum, as it is in urban centers across America. Whether Bridgeport's center can fully rebound before the energy fizzles is still uncertain. For now, at least, many newcomers believe they're seizing a rare opportunity.

"You have this paintbrush to make the city what you want it to be," says Marcella Kovac, a 29-year-old graphic artist hailing from Danbury, who recently opened her first studio here. "It's kind of going through this renaissance. It feels so positive and I just want to keep the train going."



UPGRADING WHAT'S ON TAP

A visit to Kovac's office at the Arcade Mall -- which reopened last January a century after it first opened as an early prototype to the American shopping mall -- reveals how far this city has fallen, and the sort of business that just might revive it. The downstairs walls are lined with black-and-white photographs of vintage Bridgeport: American flags flapping as returning World War I troops parade down Main Street; street cars whisking laborers to factory jobs; chrome-laden cars cramming spotless streets.

Upstairs, Kovac is reclined on a sofa inside the "World Headquarters of Bananaland," her graphic arts studio, whose bright yellow walls and natural lighting reflect the fellowship forming downtown.

"It's unexplainable unless you're living here," she says. "Then you're just like, 'Whoa!' You feel like you're on 'Cheers' and everyone knows your name." Kovac arrived downtown after living in Bridgeport's Black Rock area. For a couple of years, she worked out of her Bijou Square apartment. Then, several months ago, she secured one of the Arcade's two dozen slots. The surrounding stores seem to buttress her paintbrush point: there's a European-styled pharmacy, a Colombian bistro, the classical music-playing Toppings Cupcakes and the newly formed Bridgeport Arts Council.

There are, however, challenges. Outside on Main Street, there's only one small sign advertising the inside stores. Recently, half of the Arcade's doors have been locked shut. The public restrooms require a key from a store owner. And during one recent afternoon half-hour, barely a dozen people entered the mall.

That's the main reason why Lulu's Cafe, on Lafayette Boulevard, closes most days at 4 p.m. On good days, the eatery can see 80 to 100 patrons, says owner John Passaniti. But when things are quiet, as they have been recently, fewer than 20 people might come -- despite the fact that Housatonic Community College is across the street, the federal courthouse is next door, and three dozen condominiums are directly upstairs.

The only people who entered the cafe on a recent morning were a Boar's Head delivery man, a mailman and this reporter. One small coffee was purchased and Passaniti, behind the coffee bar, dwelled on the downtown's troubles. "We need to create the atmosphere to keep the downtown workers here," he said, referring to what city officials say is a stock of 8,000 to 10,000 bankers, lawyers, jurors and other daytime visitors. "We need to keep these people in the downtown long enough to spend money."

His strategy, in part, requires waking up before sunrise several days a week and driving to lower Manhattan to buy fresh panini bread for sandwiches. "That loaf of bread costs me \$17," he said. Nodding to a nearby sofa that cost him \$5,000, he added, "You've got to offer something different."

A Shelton resident, Passaniti has two businesses serving the rest of Fairfield County that frequently foot his cafe's bills. And yet, he's so bullish on downtown Bridgeport -- and so convinced he's ahead of the curve on this -- that he's pouring money into two new projects: a lounge in the old People's Bank building on Main Street and a Cuban fusion restaurant at Bank and Broad streets.

"Bridgeport still has such a stigma," he said. "But I have a lot of faith in it."

HERE, AND ELSEWHERE

Across America, hollowed-out city centers are filling with new life, says Christopher Leingarten, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institute who studies urban renewal. He attributes this mostly to baby boomers looking to downsize from houses and younger generations swapping suburban roots for city living. The bursting of the housing bubble has only hastened the stampede, he says, which is ultimately good for business.

"For the future of metropolitan economies, it's essential to have a good downtown," Leingarten said. "Otherwise the creative class and creative businesses, and many times the financial companies, won't locate in your town. You won't even have a startup possibility if you don't offer what they want."

What they want, he said, is a walkable center teeming with cafes, restaurants, theaters and bars, with housing and offices occupying the upper floors. He's observed the societal shift play out over the past two decades, as the most expensive housing migrated from towns like Greenwich and Rye, N.Y., to parts of Manhattan. A similar trend has occurred in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.

"It's the market responding to pent-up demand for walkable urban life," he said. "And the beauty of Bridgeport is that it's affordable right now. Especially since you have something going for you that's considered gold: water access and water views."

On paper, at least, city officials agree. The city's 2010 master plan for downtown development outlines a transportation hub for trains, highways and ferries, with a rich mix of eclectic shops, cafes and restaurants dispersed amid thousands of apartments and lofts.

And there has been progress. A decade ago, the downtown had more than 50 "unused or underutilized" buildings, said Bridgeport Planning Director Donald Eversley. Now, there are fewer than 25. Also, the roughly 1,200 downtown residents now are roughly twice the number living here 10 years ago. Back then, the residents were almost exclusively elderly. Now, they're increasingly young and educated.

Eversley believes the downtown might someday sustain 3,000 to 5,000 apartment units, which is up to five times the current stock. More residents, he reasons, will spur more restaurants and businesses to serve them, which could lure some of the area's workforce to linger after hours.

But such a cycle is no foregone conclusion. In his research, Leingarten is trying to find a formula that answers how large a particular downtown must grow to reach an elusive "tipping point" of progress. He describes it as a "mystical moment" which is hard to quantify. "It's sort of like pornography," he says. "You know it when you see it."

MARKET TRAPS, RAT TRAPS

Standing on the Main Street sidewalk north of Fairfield Avenue, that mystical moment appears far off. A new photography studio is stranded amid a row of retrofitted, but vacant, commercial slots. Across the street teeter three blocks of rundown buildings, with boarded-up windows, smashed-out windows, graffiti-covered walls and shuttered doors.

"Giant rat traps," said Aaron Sarfati, the owner of the men's clothing store Contempo Fashion. "More than an eyesore. Some of these buildings have been empty for more than 25 years." Sarfati considers the current market the worst he's experienced in nearly three decades. "People have just stopped coming down altogether," he said. Were it not for online shopping, which overtook his in-store retail half a decade ago, Contempo Fashion would have folded long ago.

In fact, the city owns a few of those decrepit buildings across the street -- and plans to put them out to bid this spring, said Edward Lavernoch, Bridgeport's deputy director for planning and economic development. Such a step toward redevelopment is one of many that Bridgeport will need to take. The city owns 24 downtown buildings; 18 of them are vacant.

For Dane Amorando, a 30-year-old online cartoonist, the pace of the redevelopment has been disappointing. After six years living in Read's Art Space -- the 61-unit artists' apartment complex that opened in 2005 -- he's moving next month to Ohio. He describes the decision with a nod to author Mark Twain. "If I knew the world was coming to an end, I would go to Cincinnati," he states. "Everything happens there 10 years later."

The fact that he's fleeing Bridgeport for that city suggests that much is missing here. Amorando bemoans the downtown's lack of movie theater, laundry and, worst of all, grocery store. Lacking a car himself, he has to ride the bus to go food shopping or convince his older brother to drive down from Waterbury.

(Eversley, the city planning director, says that GDC Properties, which owns the Arcade Mall, has been in talks with several potential grocers. To be viable, he said, such a store would have to appeal to residents as well as workers, which wouldn't be easy.)

Making matters worse, Amorando's employer, Rainy Faye Bookstore, which is located right beneath his apartment, has nearly halved its hours recently due to a lack of customers. "Today, I've sold one book -- and some teas," he said one afternoon. During the holidays, he'll sometimes sell six or seven books in a single day. "But normally, nothing more massive than that."

In fact, Amorando has witnessed much progress downtown. "When we first moved here, McDonald's closed at 5," he said. When the fast-food joint extended its hours to 9, he knew that business owners were taking note of his and others' presence.

He senses, though, that the early enthusiasm his neighbors shared about reinventing Bridgeport is waning. "At first it was like, 'Hey, we're young artists, we're going to change the city,'" he said. "Now it's: 'Hey, look, we have a successful art show in downtown Bridgeport.'"

SPACE TO GROW

Help recently arrived at Bijou Square, the Fairfield Avenue block that best typifies the eclectic mix of stores and apartments that city planners crave. Anchoring the block is the pizzeria Two Boots, an offshoot to the Manhattan restaurant that opened in the East Village in 1987, a time and place known for its edgy arts scene and air of danger. The Bridgeport version offers cheap fare and features live music on most nights. It recently celebrated its third anniversary.

A Portuguese wine shop joined the block late last year, along with 84 upstairs apartments, over half of which are already filled. Coming soon is a hair salon, a dry-cleaners -- the first one downtown in years -- and possibly a cheese shop.

The latest arrival is Space, an art-and-apparel boutique that's already selling works from local artists. "I'm like their Sixth Avenue and 26th Street flea market," said store owner Robert Rackear, referring to the block-long bazaar in Manhattan, which is where he spent much of his adult life.

Rackear, in fact, was raised in Miami, which he sees as a prototype for Bridgeport. "I watched South Beach change as a kid, and I know what it takes," he says. Then he points to a bed for sale, the headboard of which is half a piano, and adds: "It takes a starving artists community to come in and make the metropolitan community want to come."

That equation resembles the one drawn up by Phillip Kuchma, the Bijou Square developer, who invited Space and Two Boots to occupy the block. Kuchma believes he's proven his formula can work in Bridgeport -- and says he's far from finished. From his second-story conference room on a recent afternoon, he opens his window blinds and gazes to City Hall Annex, which sits on the far side of several parking lots.

"Instead of parking lots, I see buildings," he says. "Four-, five-, six-, eight-story buildings. In another five years, you'll see buildings."

The pioneering residents and business owners of today, however, may not be around to reap the benefits.

"An emerging city like ours, you should expect lots of turnover," he says. "Turnover and churn are not something people should think reflects a lack of progress or success."