



RETHINKING THE ARTS DISTRICT

13 insiders comment on our cultural 'standstill' and forecast the fate of '18b' | by Phil Hagen

Even if it were superhumanly possible to get our handpicked experts in one place at one time, we weren't sure that a roundtable session was the best idea. With *12 Angry Men* as prime evidence, we decided not to put our 13 Passionate People in a room to discuss everybody's favorite fang-bearing Downtown issue: the state of the Arts District.

Is it a life or death issue? Maybe for the 18-block defendant. For the rest of us, it's a quality of life issue. It's a leading indication of how our species is evolving, how our city planning is going, how our culture is forming and if we can all agree to a unified vision and then smartly, economically and creatively see it through. These, in sum, are questions about us.

We came up with our list of insiders based on their diverse connections to the Arts District—from government dignitary to rebel artist, from gallery owner to nightclub developer, from die-hard supporter to departed pragmatist. We interviewed them separately, soliciting their honest views about where this scene is headed.

We did so on the heels of First Friday's fifth anniversary, but also in the wake of city approval of the REI stadium project, which could carve into the "18b" and—no matter how iffy REI seems—has caused everybody to sit back and rethink, *OK, what's going on here with our Arts District?*

Sounds like a good place to start the discussion.

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ripper jordan

Michele Quinn: It's in a state of crisis. It's either about to keep its foothold and grow into a vibrant network and community Downtown, or has the potential to reach its demise with the [REI] redevelopment plans in the works.

Cindy Funkhouser: We've lost some of our momentum ... because all of the properties have been tied up

and nothing is happening with them. We are kind of at a standstill.

Hugh Fogel: It started off as a wonderful grassroots idea. Now it's fragmented and factional.

Todd VonBastiaans: I am confused by what the Arts District is, because I don't see a combined effort. I don't see an Arts District; I see a sign that says "Arts District" with an arrow.

Wes Myles: It's bohemia right now—a few straggling artists who are trying to hang on. You can count them all on one hand. If I had to use an analogy—since I was there in the birth canal—I'd say that the Arts District is a toddler who just figured out how to walk. I think we have that part down now. We're no longer crawling.

Steve Spann: [Laughing] It's a little amoeba flailing around helplessly on the ground. It's obviously in its infancy. Arts districts are driven by customers; people actually purchasing art. That's only happening on a part-time basis, so we have a part-time arts district. But there is hope and there is excitement.

Jim Stanford: No matter what else can be said about it, this arts district is genuine and organic, having been born from the sweat of a dedicated few. Although it is small, spotty and a

bit of a ramshackle, it is something that this city should be very proud of.

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Dick Geyer: The Arts District became an established entity within the city because First Friday was able to attract thousands of people per month.

Funkhouser: First Friday is progressing. There's been a lot of positive change with the enlargement of the board; there's been a lot of new input. It's still one of the main motivators for people to come Downtown.

“The Arts District has to combine with the Strip. To really have something real it has to plug into that somehow.”

Stanford: First Friday, as successful as it has been, is not enough to nurture the Arts District. One night each month does not an arts district make.

Mathew Brady: Once a month will never cut it. I am still amazed by how many people, even those who have been here for years, have still never heard of First Friday. We need to continually market the area and the events.

Oscar Goodman: I'd like to think that as time goes on the Arts District will take on vibrancy 365 days a year, and I think we have the elements in place to believe that can be accomplished. You have commitment from people who are actually there all the time [he mentions Myles, Funkhouser and Jack Solomon of the S2 Art Group], and the backing of the city, which has been very supportive of just about everything taking place over there. Our arts commission works with them, giving them substantial sums of money to subsidize First Friday.

Stanford: The mayor needs to refocus. Before he finishes one thing he always starts another. No sooner does the Arts District get

out of its diapers, the mayor turns his attention away from the Arts District and turns his ear to developing a music district on Fremont Street.

Fogel: The city appears to be supporting anything and everything down there, rather than engaging in intelligent decision-making. The stadium project isn't helping anything geographically or otherwise. Unfortunately, the [Arts District] has lost momentum. Las Vegas is greased on money, and the Arts District has been derailed by other interests—internally and externally.

Quinn: I would like to see more commitment by the city to protect the neighborhood.

This does not mean that the Arts District should be a financial burden, but as we have seen in many other U.S. cities, the government can be more proactive, such as offering tax incentives for new businesses, preservation of buildings and cooperative development of the area.

Funkhouser: The Arts District should be getting more assistance from the city—lighting, banners, promotion.

Stanford: If our city's leaders were more committed to the district's success, they would do more to encourage its “artification”—beautification and development as an expression of an artist-oriented point of view. ... Put the Arts Commission to good use, hiring artists and architects to come up with an Artification Plan. You know, giant dipping birds could form the gateway. The streets could be marked with giant dice clocks. You can fill in here with your own imagination.

Libby Lumpkin: If the city wants it to happen, they have to offer incentives, make it easy to be there. If you have “gallery” in the name of a business, you're subject to trying regulations, such as bathrooms, that few galleries offer in other cities.

Funkhouser: You can't even call a gallery a gallery because, according to the Building Department, it's categorized as a gathering place, like a church or bowling alley, and therefore is held to stricter building codes—most of which young gallerists or artists can't afford to adhere to.

Stanford: While the Cultural Affairs Division

is working hard to nurture the arts, behind the scenes the compliance side of city government is out storm-trooping local art groups, bashing volunteers and discouraging local arts leaders, with threats and bullying tactics. Reel them in, Mayor.

Goodman: The city is constantly addressing their needs with different kinds of legislation to make it easier for them to have buildings that are compatible with their needs. We ease up building codes to the point where, unless safety issues are involved, they get just about everything they desire.

Brady: The city is certainly trying, but the biggest problem is that there is no master plan or vision. You seem to have a few different groups all trying to do their own little projects. If you look at Downtown as a whole, you have patches of great areas but nothing that really ties them all together.

Stanford: The city should dedicate itself to laying out a unified vision for the Arts District. Without that vision, the district shall remain what it is: a ramshackle with enough blight to scare away thousands of cash-carrying visitors.

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Geyer: We are on the brink of a real breakthrough in its development. One of those things will be the impending construction of the Urban Lounge [as part of the Tinoco's expansion at the Arts Factory]. Then there's the possibility that the REI development will proceed and will fulfill its promises to coordinate with and financially support the Arts District. Finally, there's the proposed Agam Sculpture Park on Boulder Avenue. In the middle of November, the city will vote to approve the closing of Boulder, which will kick-start the construction of the park.

Spann: The Arts District should be everything that Las Vegas is: something constantly being blown up and torn down and rebuilt—literally and figuratively. Nothing is static in Las Vegas. Our Arts District shouldn't be, either. It should be as vibrant and dynamic as the city itself.

Lumpkin: I see it as a place where there's real potential for discovery, and that interests a lot of different kinds of people, particularly collectors who like to find something that nobody has found before.

Jay Nailor: The Arts District should be a safe place where artists and galleries alike can be proud to participate and which fosters

The Insiders

Cindy Funkhouser Owner of the Funk House (1228 Casino Center) and president of Whirlygig Inc., which founded and runs First Friday.

Wes Myles Founder and owner of The Arts Factory (103 E. Charleston Blvd.), whose cultural entrepreneurship will soon be expanded to the north. He's also vice president of the 18b Neighborhood Association.

Michele Quinn Art dealer, consultant and former operator of G-C Arts Gallery, which recently closed on Main Street.

Jay Nailor Along with his wife, MiShell, owns the M Modern Gallery in Palm Springs. They recently folded their Vegas branch in The Arts Factory and are contemplating a new gallery on the Strip.

Hugh Fogel Design expert, Downtown resident and owner of the cutting-edge modern furnishings store Unicahome.

Jim Stanford Longtime local artist, Las Vegas Art Museum supporter and Arts District pioneer.

Anne Kellogg Arts advocate, Whirlygig board member, 18b Neighborhood Association board member and owner of Las Vegas Paper Doll (231 W. Charleston Blvd.)

Libby Lumpkin Executive director of the Las Vegas Art Museum, which will move from the West Sahara Library to the All-America SportsPark building on Sunset Road in 2009.

Oscar Goodman Three-term mayor of Las Vegas and champion of Downtown redevelopment.

Todd VonBastiaans Whirlygig board member and owner of Atomic Todd gallery in the Commerce Street Studios (1531 Commerce), which may soon be making way for the REI project.

Mathew Brady A local developer who hopes to begin construction of three distinctive urban lounges at 4 E. Charleston Blvd. in the first quarter of 2008.

Steve Spann 18b Neighborhood Association member, artist and Downtown property owner.

Dick Geyer President of the 18b Neighborhood Association and member of the Downtown Steering Committee.

creativity. This can only be achieved if the rental prices in the area are reasonable to help alleviate pressure on young or newer artists to have to sell their work. Having to sell artwork to survive causes the type of works to change to be more in sync with what customers want rather than what the artist may envision.

Quinn: The future is to have a network of galleries, retail and restaurants that all benefit from each other and draw the community in as a whole—an area where people go to spend an afternoon, enjoying various cultural opportunities.

Stanford: Right now this place is a veritable Renaissance Tijuana. Large numbers of tourists have really never dared to venture down here between the *llanterias* [tire shops] and Johnny Tocco's Gym because of the way it looks, especially in contrast to the Strip.

Goodman: Right now we have the funky, the cool. We have Dust gallery, which is pretty high end. We're not going to have a Bellagio-type gallery right away.

Nailor: The area is coming around a bit from what we see; however, it still has a long way to go before people feel comfortable shopping there outside of First Friday and before retailers feel comfortable being open more often.

Lumpkin: It looks pretty bad down there. Safety is a concern. It doesn't have that high-end appeal. We will not have visitors that represent the cultural tourist until that happens. I think it's very important. We're a city of two million residents and 40 million visitors.

Spann: The Arts District has to combine with the Strip. To really have something real it has to plug into that somehow. Real artists. Real galleries. It's got to reach that tipping point.

Geyer: With many things in life, there's a tipping point. There's a point when the community and private developers recognize the opportunity. ... Once people realize that a million people are going to be down here, they will realize the importance.

Stanford: The most important element that is missing from the Arts District is art collectors. And I don't mean just locals, either. We need more visitors. If people don't buy enough artwork the galleries will eventually fold.

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Stanford: Many of the creative smart set who come to our city are looking for the Las

Vegas Cool of the '50s and '60s. They want Las Vegas Jetsons Motel Cool. Sort of a Blue Angel East Fremont motif, but clean and with lots of neon and Giant Jackalope rides.

Brady: The Arts District will become whatever the people living, working and playing in the area demand it to be. It always comes down to supply and demand.

Anne Kellogg: It should be a pedestrian-friendly place where people can open a gallery, a shoe store, a stationery store. It's not an art scene. It's been saddled with this responsibility of being the arts scene. An arts scene is not something you can make tangible by depicting boundaries within a neighborhood, but you can make it easier for certain businesses to open in a particular area. We've tried really hard to do that.

Lumpkin: In other cities the art districts grow up organically. In New York it was Soho and now it's Chelsea, so it's just completely jumped up and moved. Soho lost its vitality as an arts district because it had begun to attract general tourists and all these other types of clothing shops and restaurants designed to make money off of those tourists. Eventually this squeezed out all of the galleries. I think you actually have a small model of that Downtown. You have to regulate what types of businesses go in there.

Fogel: With the increase in property value, some of the proponents have become more interested as speculators with financial goals rather than motivating others and driving the project to fruition. Others have moved forward in trying to support local artists, with some minor success.

Brady: When I first moved to Vegas about 10 years ago, some of the first people I met had, and still have, a great passion for the Downtown scene. I made a commitment then that I would one day add to that. Whether this [his trio of urban lounges that will go in across from the Arts Factory] is a smart "investment" or not we will have to see. It's more of a personal commitment to the neighborhood.

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Myles: Before the city was really able to grasp how to renovate old buildings, land prices skyrocketed. Rents went from 80 cents per square foot to two to three bucks per square foot.

Funkhouser: Landlords are now only offering short-term leases, so people aren't feeling like they can come down and make changes. They can't afford it.

Nailor: Due to property speculation and an option on much of the land there by REI, the rental prices for space are simply too high for an arts district to flourish. ... It's a condition that will not be rectified anytime soon, if at all. ... The economics make little sense for a gallery to be in that area. Too many property owners have invested large amounts of money and will not be willing to take a financial hit for the betterment of the art community.

Fogel: As the area thrives, it will continue

“The Arts District needs to find a new area, as the land speculation for this area will always stifle the potential.”

to increase in rent, thereby driving the primary artist occupants out. How will the area maintain the proper mix? Currently it is up to the landlords to take a chance on new tenants. It is up to the city to support and drive new business operations there.

VonBastiaans: The proposed redevelopment project stunted any development. What a colossal embarrassment for the city. It has stunted growth for the next two years. I actually want to see it go through now.

Goodman: I think that's nonsense. ... [REI is] talking about building an arena and having three casinos down there. To me that brings people into the area. I've seen what happens in other cities. With the Staples Center in LA, they said that was the wrong spot. But people walk around Staples now. In Denver, you walk around Lo-Do in order to get to the ballpark. I think art galleries and the arts will flourish with [the REI project], assuming it will come to fruition.

Stanford: Don't get in the way of Mayor Goodman's dream for a Downtown stadium or he will stomp through your arts district like Godzilla. The mayor is more impressed by investment money than he is by culture.

Kellogg: The REI project has become a perfect excuse for people who maybe wanted to leave, but it doesn't scare me. I think it's exciting. Redevelopment is not a bad word. Let's just say that I am cautiously optimistic.

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Spann: I hate to say it, but finding another location for the Arts District is a reality. If REI comes through and that project does happen, some people are suggesting that the Arts District might need to go somewhere else.

Nailor: The Arts District needs to find a new area, as the land speculation for this area will always stifle the potential—no matter how hard the artists, people and galleries there try and make it work. Hopefully, I am proved wrong on this thinking, and the area flourishes.

Lumpkin: Frequently you're very surprised to see where an arts district happens. It could be that when we [the Las Vegas Art Museum] move over to Sunset that something happens around us. It often does around museums, but not always. It's one of those very unpredictable things. Frankly, it could happen anywhere that a high-end gallery decides to go in. I believe that high-end galleries will start coming in, but my best guess is that they'll go into the hotels, which is, as you know, not a district.

Fogel: The Arts District needs to be either a high-end gallery district or a place for art and small businesses to flourish. I do not believe it can be both initially. Judging from the closure of G-C Arts, I believe the latter is the proper and more stable goal. I would like to see places that can be supported by nearby tenants and clients in the county/federal buildings during the day: a good breakfast spot, a small grocery store, a small shop with great magazines and good coffee—things Vegas needs that we are hard-pressed to find.

There needs to be a codependence in the area, not the cutthroat competition that we have seen.

Brady: If you look at most urban centers, what makes an area like the Arts District successful is population density. We need people living in the area to support everything. It will always be tough to make the area a destination until the people in the immediate area embrace it and create an environment that people from the surrounding area want to come be a part of.

Goodman: With all of the residential coming into play—Streamline, Newport, Allure, Juhl, Soho—it will make the Arts District part of an urban environment that can't help but succeed. ... It takes critical mass. It takes people who will be living, working and playing down there and want to walk in the area. That's the key.

VonBastiaans: There needs to be continued commercial and residential development, but Vegas is used to instant gratification, and that's not how you build a community—it's how you build a subdivision.

Myles: Unfortunately we live in an age of instant gratification. Everyone wants it *now, now, now*. So you get all of these people with pipe dreams. People like REI who think, “If you build it, they will come.” That lesson has already been taught Downtown [Neonopolis]. The [alternative] is to embrace more organic growth. Unfortunately we are past that point.

Kellogg: I have high hopes for the Arts District. But unless we work together, nothing is going to happen. It's going to be lifeless and dull, and it's going to fade like the paint on an old building.

Geyer: It must be noted that the coordination between 18b, the City of Las Vegas and business owners—unique to almost any other city in America—is so strong that we really believe that we can shape the destiny of Downtown to meet, even exceed, our dreams.

VonBastiaans: I am committed to a culturally progressive city and bringing things to this city. There is culture here, and I don't ever want to hear that there isn't again. This is a city where, with very minimal resources, you can actually do some pretty cool things. There's a hunger for something else to do. ❧