Asheville, North Carolina – “New Age Mecca,” “San Francisco of the East,” “Land of the Sky,” “New Freak Capital,” and “America’s Happiest City.” These are just some of the nicknames that Asheville enjoys, due to its more recent prominence in the social, economic, and political domains of North Carolina and larger southeast region. It is difficult to ignore this meteoric rise to fame, particularly for those who enjoy majestic mountain views, craft beer, vegetarian eats, and homegrown arts and crafts. But just what factors explain this downtown renaissance and revitalization Asheville is current experiencing? Who shapes downtown Asheville, and what can we learn about urban governance and downtown revitalization from their success? This blog post will explore the former question, and a subsequent blog post will examine the latter.

Elizabeth Strom and Robert Kerstein explore Asheville’s revitalization in the 2017 edition of Urban Affairs Review. In their article, titled “The Homegrown Downtown: Redevelopment in Asheville, North Carolina,” Strom and Kerstein attempt to pinpoint just what exactly went right in the “successful transformation of Asheville’s downtown from desolate to vibrant.” With emphasis placed on the post-1980 period, this article illustrates how successful redevelopment coalitions have shaped the downtown, and how these “social-entrepreneurial” coalitions could be replicated in downtowns similarly rooted in an architecturally-significant historic built environment and an economy reliant on independent business. Strom and Kerstein argue that Asheville’s “social-entrepreneurial” activity in the business, creative, and philanthropic sectors offers insights into the larger concepts of downtown revitalization, urban governance, and city development policy.

Asheville’s downtown, as well as the broader community, is at a critical juncture. Its current standing on every “top ten” list – best beer city, best small city, coolest, quirkiest, most hipster friendly – is almost unfathomable when considering that it was previously recognized as “rundown and shabby” in a Tennessee Valley Authority study. As acknowledged by Strom and Kerstein, this stature is largely due to the success of Asheville’s social-entrepreneurial coalition in “integrating a vibrant downtown that complements the natural environment, attractive residential neighborhoods, and long-standing tourist destinations.” However, this integration will ultimately lead to a “balancing act” of competing visions of the downtown Asheville’s future, and how to achieve these visions.

Over the past three decades, Asheville’s downtown revitalization has been guided by a diverse range of public interests, including small businesses, downtown residents, real estate investors, historic preservationists, and city officials. The uniqueness of Asheville’s revitalization lies in its utilization of a social-entrepreneurial coalition in marrying these interests towards solutions that are both “market-driven and idealistic, and that [draw] from progressive goals without a grounding in truly progressive institutions.” While some development leadership would question the constraints of a profit-driven market system, Asheville’s leadership embraced these market mechanisms to achieve its revitalization goals (both economic and noneconomic advances). These market mechanisms are best exemplified by the underpinning of historic preservation towards the promotion of arts and culture downtown.
Without the marrying of these unique resources with the financial opportunities they provide, downtown Asheville may have never become the “New Age Mecca” or “San Francisco of the East.” The “homegrown Asheville” identity was commodified to attract both residents and tourists, with artisanal production becoming essential to local economic and social identity. Spatially, this homegrown identity is demonstrated in Asheville’s “many infill and development projects, no ‘mega-blocks,’ elevated levels of local ownership, and with few recognizable national chains filling the downtown spaces.”

But just how was this homegrown identity achieved? Stay tuned for the next blog post, which will further explore Asheville’s social-entrepreneurial coalition and urban governance model.

Kaley Huston is a Master’s candidate in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Department of City and Regional Planning specializing in Land Use and Environmental Planning and a Community Revitalization Fellow with the Development Finance Initiative. She is also pursuing a Natural Hazards Resilience Certificate in partnership with the Coastal Resilience Center of Excellence at UNC.