Asheville, North Carolina is increasingly lauded for its mountain views, restaurants, craft beer, and art scene. It seems like Asheville is always on a “best” list — most recently, it was touted as the number one best place to visit in the US in 2017 by Lonely Planet. But just what factors explain this downtown renaissance and revitalization Asheville is currently experiencing? And who shapes downtown Asheville, and what can we learn about urban governance and downtown revitalization from their success? A previous blog post explored the former question, and this 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.” Today, Asheville’s downtown is anchored by a mix of public and private developments. “Creative” businesses have been successfully leveraged towards an arts and crafts-centered revitalization. Small businesses, downtown residents, real estate investors, historic preservationists, and city officials have realized the economic value of the region’s roots in “a strong vernacular culture of indigenous crafts, from mountain music to traditional handicrafts to moonshine distilleries.” The public sector, private industry, and resulting downtown coalition mobilized around these roots and Asheville’s social-entrepreneurial spirit to push for development policies that addressed their shared interests. The most successful business owners, and investors, in downtown Asheville have blended business, creative, and philanthropic sectors, explain Strom and Kerstein. This blending, in turn, has successfully created a market-driven, yet idealistic, governance and development approach; Asheville is able to draw from its more revolutionary goals without reorganizing itself into wholly progressive institutions. Development leadership does not work against the constraints of a profit-driven market system but, rather, utilizes market mechanism to achieve its goals.

The promotion of arts, culture, and preservation is regarded by development leadership as an asset rather than a hindrance; noneconomic advancements are valued alongside economic advancements. Asheville leadership has evolved from more traditional development models (e.g., corporations and anchor institutions) to more “homegrown” initiatives (e.g., artisanal production and consumption). Where chain restaurants or big-box stores might have a place in other downtowns, Asheville has rejected this status quo in favor of organic, preservation-based development that recognizes a new-normal in heritage and foodie tourism. However, this deviation from the norm leaves room for debate over who exactly shaped the “New Age Mecca” and “San Francisco of the East.” If corporations, anchor institutions, and public development are not the key movers behind downtown’s revitalization, who drives Asheville’s redevelopment coalition and the successful creation of a vibrant, distinctive downtown?

The social entrepreneurial spirit of Asheville has played a large part in its development governance. The physical manifestation of this governance can be seen through its numerous infill projects, lack of “mega-blocks,” and absence of familiar chains filling the downtown spaces. The lack of urban corporate leadership can also be seen in the diverse representatives serving on the Downtown Commission. Strom and Kerstein examined Downtown Commission membership from 2004 to 2015 and noted their miscellaneous backgrounds, including real estate developers, architects,
working artists, and small business owners. Clearly, the commission has historically favored “superior design and a high-quality built environment” over attracting corporate franchises.

However, there are some drawbacks to Asheville’s homegrown redevelopment. Asheville has been labeled a BYOJ (bring your own job) economy for its limited success in attracting “higher paying employment and high value-added industries.” Although Asheville has been largely successful in bolstering its tourism industry, it has yet to attract industry outside of its tourism market. This has led to many residents feeling unsatisfied with the economic opportunity provided in the area. Conversely, the emphasis on tourism has made the region attractive to non-residents, increasing real estate prices and making housing less affordable; the Asheville City Council recently created a Housing Trust Fund to support affordable housing development. Additionally, the variety of players involved in Asheville’s redevelopment, including those with nontraditional backgrounds, means the lack of consolidated leadership, unified voice, and collective vision for the downtown.

Whatever its faults, as explored by Strom and Kerstein, Asheville is an ideal place to analyze the politics of the “new downtown,” as defined by its inclusion of cross-sector interests, local investment, non-traditional governance, strategic planning, and heritage-oriented goals. Asheville’s social-entrepreneurial coalition has capitalized on the natural backdrop, inviting residential neighborhoods, and established tourism industry to forge a cohesive, vibrant, and revitalized downtown. However, time will tell whether Asheville can catalyze this momentum towards the longer-term pressures of housing affordability, economic resiliency, and upward mobility of its residents.

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