

# Turning the Corner

## Arts Related Redevelopment Revives N. Central

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by Matt Edens

“When things really started moving forward downtown, I got quoted in some article about the city hopefully preserving a ‘pocket of decay,’” says artist Preston Farabow. “I said that sort of tongue in cheek,” he says, “but there’s some truth to it.”

Farabow knows from experience. An artist/blacksmith specializing in metal sculpture and custom furniture, he’s spent a decade bouncing around downtown Knoxville’s frayed fringes. “Our first studio was down in the basement of the McClung warehouses and then we were over in the underbelly,” says Farabow, referring to the no man’s land beneath I-40/275’s infamous “Malfunction Junction.” “Previous to this,” says Farabow, “I was in the basement of the Southeastern Glass building.” But when that structure, at the corner of Broadway and Jackson, sold to a condo developer looking to capitalize on downtown’s booming residential market, Farabow was forced to find a new “pocket of decay.”

“I used to come back in here during the early nineties when I was in school and look at all these buildings and think, wow, this is just perfect studio space,” says Farabow, standing a block off N. Central on Jennings Avenue. The street, tucked behind Broadway and dead ending into Old Gray cemetery, has its share of decay. Paint peels from old cinderblock commercial buildings. The sidewalks are spider webbed with cracks. A junk car or two and even an old Quonset hut slowly rust behind the buildings on Broadway. Down the block, overlooking the cemetery, stand a handful of houses. One or two are condemned. Another, although for sale, lacks part of its roof.

But there are also signs of revitalization amidst these run down surroundings. Ironically, despite his words about preserving a “pocket of decay,” the building with the fresh paint is Farabow’s. “It was The Consolidated Coach Company’s depot, where they did repairs on buses,” says Farabow of the structure, built in 1924. Roughly two years ago, Farabow and woodworker John McGilvray joined together, bought the building and opened Ironwood Studios. A collaborative arts space that houses both their businesses, Farabow also hopes Ironwood is a foreshadowing of the area’s future. “When I first bought the building,” recalls Farabow, “I went home that night and I dreamt of this fertile environment for artists to move in, where there were studio spaces, a couple restaurants, places to hang out.”

“We’re becoming kind of the alternative to the alternative,” says Ed Corts who, along with his brother Marty, owns the Corner Lounge. A long time landmark along N. Central, under Corts’ management, The Corner has become a mainstay of the local music scene – a scene that is starting to spread along Central. “When I close my eyes sometimes, I envision it almost Austin-like,” says Kim Webber, who books music acts for North Central’s Time Warp Tea Room. “It’s a great room. It’s a real jewel box of a place to put people,” says Webber of the Time Warp’s kitschy combination of Victorian fixtures and vintage motorcycle collectables. “It’s not the

stereotype biker bar,” says Dan Moriarty, the Time Warp’s owner and chief motorcycle enthusiast. In fact, it’s not even a bar at all. Other than the throbbing hum of a V-twin engine out in the parking lot, caffeine is the only buzz the Time Warp offers. “We’ll have the occasional grumper who says we ought to have beer,” says Webber. “But there’s beer in the neighborhood. If you want to have it, you can find it.”

Beer, and beer joints, has a long history in “Happy Holler,” as the blocks of North Central surrounding The Time Warp are commonly known. Convenient to the Coster Shops and the textile mills to the west along Baxter, this stretch of Central was once home to taverns that often got rowdy come quittin’ time. “All the action was down here – stabbings, shootings, whatever you wanted,” says Moriarty, who grew up a few blocks away in 4th and Gill. “Paul Harvey even mentioned it once on the radio,” he says, mimicking Harvey’s deadpan delivery: “another murder at the Friendly Tavern in Happy Holler.”

The mills are all closed now, many demolished. So are most of the taverns. But, thanks to Central’s proximity to several agencies providing services to the homeless and indigent, the rough reputation remains. “This part of town, there’s so much negativity about it,” says Sara Griscom, the owner of Gypsy Hands Healing Arts Center. But, when Griscom opened her business in 2001, she felt the old flatiron shaped building at the corner of Central and Broadway was a perfect match for the center’s eclectic mix of offerings: everything from Shiatsu massage to belly dancing classes. “I was attracted by the neighborhoods surrounding it: 4th and Gill, Old North Knoxville, The Old City,” says Griscom. “I love this corner and I love its potential and you can see, if there is investment in this area, what it could be.”

Getting past those negative perceptions and encouraging investment are the goals of the city’s recently adopted Downtown North/I-275 Corridor Redevelopment Plan. An outgrowth of the Fifth and Broadway Task Force, formed to address concerns stemming from the nearby homeless shelters, the homeless issue provided the catalyst for the task force, but it doesn’t dominate the redevelopment plan. “We started with the notion of, look, we all know it’s there, but let’s not cede the ground to just that one use,” says Bill Lyons, the city’s Director of Policy Development. Instead, the redevelopment plan looks to strengthen the uses pioneered by people like Farabow, McGilvray and Griscom. “With the proximity to downtown, and the fact that the building stock often lends itself to arts-related space,” says Lyons, “we thought the area was a perfect fit for those sorts of uses.” Lyons also feels that, with businesses like Ironwood and Gypsy Hands already in place, the plan’s chance of success is that much stronger. “If the combustion isn’t close to taking off, it isn’t going to work,” says Lyons. “But I think that the city can give things a nudge.”

Another nudge comes from the rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods to the north. “The marketability of North Central is huge now because of the status of the neighborhoods: 4th and Gill and Old North Knoxville,” says Cortis. “We’ve got all the rooftops to support retail over here, and the demographics have been increasing for awhile,” says architect/developer Daniel Schuh whose company, Knoxville Preservation and Development, has bought, restored and resold numerous houses in Old North Knoxville. He’s recently crossed over into commercial redevelopment and is currently renovating several buildings in Happy Holler, just across from The Time Warp. “As a resident of the area, I’d love to see the artist community develop,” says

Schuh, who lives a few blocks north on Oklahoma. Amy Broyles, who lives on Scott Avenue and has recently organized a regular “Teen Night” on Mondays at The Time Warp,” is likewise hopeful. “I hope we can pull some neat businesses in,” says Broyles, “and also encourage some of the people already in the neighborhood to maybe start a business down there.”

Old North Knoxville residents Scott Carpenter and Peg Hambright have already risen to the challenge and are currently renovating a building next to The Corner Lounge. Touring the gutted shell of the 1940’s structure, Carpenter spreads his arms wide as he crosses the building’s terrazzo-floored foyer. “This area is hopefully going to be Magpies someday in 2008,” he says, referring to the bakery Hambright currently operates in The Old City. More space upstairs will be leased as offices, while Carpenter hopes to convert the large workshop space in the rear into artist studios. Like Lyons, he feels Central lends itself to creative uses. “The affordability is a factor,” says Carpenter, “along with the fact that most of the space is sort of raw industrial, warehouse space that’s really wide open.”

Creativity, particularly with regards to zoning, is also a key component of the redevelopment plan. While façade grants are available through the Empowerment Zone, and Tax Increment Financing is also an option, “the redevelopment is really largely going to be a function of the land use change,” says Lyons. A form-based zoning code, similar to that created for the South Waterfront, is already in the works. “The form based-zoning,” according to Schuh, “is going to open up properties for development that weren’t developable before.” The code will also encourage mixed use, allowing residential on upper floors similar to what’s been done downtown. “Mixed use will bring a lot of vitality to the area. I can see people living on Central someday,” says Broyles.

Jeffery Nash certainly hopes to see people living on Central someday. The downtown condo developer is currently tackling a rundown apartment building on Central, halfway between Happy Holler and The Corner Lounge. He sees the project, dubbed North Central Village, as a natural continuation of his downtown work. “Because of the growth of retail and restaurants that’s taking place, there’s a lot more employees down here, particularly late night employees and that’s one reason why the areas around downtown are becoming popular,” says Nash. Price is also a factor. “The minute you move north, east or south of the main city, there’s a discernable drop off in price,” says Nash, who projects his condos on Central will cost a third less than comparable space downtown.

Downtown, moreover, isn’t the only hot housing market spilling over on Central. “If you’d predicted houses would be selling for \$300,000 in Old North Knoxville four years ago, people would have said you were nuts,” says architect Charlie Richmond. Like Schuh, he’s restored several houses in the neighborhood. But now, working with like-minded investor Virginia Douglas, he has started renovating houses across Central, on W. Baxter. “On our side of the street, there are nine houses in a row and we have seven of them,” says Richmond, “and I expect the remaining two will sell to someone looking to do the same as us.” Griscom, too, feels confident about the area’s future. “It’s so much fun to watch people come in and get excited and invest.” Even if those investments may, someday, send artists like Preston Farabow in search of a fresh “pocket of decay.” “Fifty years from now,” says Farabow, chuckling, “we’ll be on Tazewell Pike.”

