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Can an Idea Store with an added component of Outdoor Education be located in the Lents Community?

The Lent's Town Center, situated around Southeast 92 Street and Foster Boulevard, is difficult to distinguish from the strip of buildings that intermittently line the wide street that connects I-205 and inner-southeast Portland. The Town Center is economically crippled by a lack of industry, jobs, and an extremely low population density; there are few buyers for commercial goods and services, reinforcing storefront vacancy and a sense of desolation on the street. Basic signifiers of a healthy community are missing from the Lent's Town Center; there is no grocery store, Movie Theater, hardware store, daycare center, or coffee shop.

The struggling neighborhood center necessitates a catalyst to effect change. In order to stimulate revitalization of this historic neighborhood, I propose a mixed-use development integrally tied to mass-transportation. By anchoring the block with a contemporary reinterpretation of a public library, the project will acknowledge and address residents' low academic achievement and lack of workforce skills. The North American Public Library is a consistent marker of democratic access to information and will serve as a beacon of knowledge for the local community. The services of the Library will enable residents to join in the prosperity that development brings, while assimilating new higher income residents into the existing community. The development will increase awareness of green spaces and place a strong emphasis on outdoor education and enjoyment, central to the Portland lifestyle.

The population of the Lents Urban Renewal Area is steadily increasing. The number of households comprised of singles and small families is increasing at the same time as the percentage of large families. The number of moderate size households is decreasing as a proportion of the total population. In addition, the diversity of residents is increasing within the Lent's Urban Renewal Area. Compared to diversity within the Portland Metropolitan region, residents of Lents are more likely to be foreign-born; 23% of Lents residents are foreign-born, compared to 13% of Portland Residents. The primary countries of origin for foreign-born residents are: Mexico, Ukraine, Vietnam, Russia, Philippines, Romania, China, and Germany. In addition, "83% of Hispanic or Latino residents moved into their homes between 1995 and March of 2000." During the same period of time, the number of Asians increased by 72%, African-Americans by 84%, and Native Americans by 71%. (Spencer, 4)

Predominantly, Lents residents are employed in working-class jobs and have not earned advanced degrees. Residents' occupations primarily revolve around service and manufacturing industries. 16% of Lents Residents work in manufacturing trades (compare to 13% of Portland residents), 14% in retail (11% Portland), 11% in construction (5% Portland), 11% in healthcare and social assistance (12% Portland), and 9% in accommodation and food services (7% Portland). (Spencer, 6) The nature of one's work is directly tied to educational achievement. The employment options available to the Lents population are

significantly diminished due to their overall lack of formal education. "In 2000, only 15% of the Lents adult population had a post high school degree, less than half the percentage for the Portland adult population." 26% of Lents residents have less than a High School diploma, compared to 14% of Portland residents; 35% of Lents residents are High School graduates (22% Portland), 24% took some college courses (25% Portland), 5% have an associates degree (6% Portland), 7% have Bachelor's degrees (21% Portland), 2% have Masters degrees (7% Portland), 1% have professional school degrees (3% Portland). (Spencer, 8)

The mission of the existing Multnomah County Library Service is to provide opportunities for the public to read, learn, and connect. Viewed at the county level, residents exhibit strong support and use of the library system. In the 2004-2005 year, residents checked out an average of 28 items per person, contributing to the number one national ranking for annual circulation of books. (Multnomah County Library website) A self-described responsibility of the library service is, "supporting an informed electorate, critical for the functioning of a democracy." (MCL Strategic Plan, 1) In pursuit of this lofty goal, the library service continually re-evaluates its service strategies. The Strategic Plan for 2006-2010 recognizes the success of the existing system and sets out defined goals for the future. One goal of the library system includes investigating and suggesting innovative library services, programs, and technological advancements. Furthermore, the document encourages interaction with neighborhood organizations, maintenance and development of libraries as community destination spaces, and creation of inviting environments for after-school activities for teens and other young people. Despite the high use of the overall library system, Lents residents remain undereducated and in great need of resources. In order to aid residents, the public library service must act on its stated goals and respond to the unique needs of the Lents Community.

Faced with similar economic and educational disparity in a diverse urban location, the Borough of Tower Hamlets, London initiated intensive research to understand how and why residents were (or were not) using their public libraries. In response to feedback on existing services, the borough reconceived the services and space of the public library to holistically address lifelong learning. The Idea Store was conceived as a reinterpretation of the traditional public library. The goal of this new civic institution is to, "widen as well as increase participation in all levels and types of learning and respond to the depth of community need for basic skills, vocational skills, and non-vocational education." (A Library and Lifelong Learning Development Strategy, 3) Idea Store services can be grouped under the concepts of learn, commune, and connect. Individuals may pursue formal education by enrolling in community college courses offered at Idea Store locations while residents retain individual access to significant physical and digital resources. Community relationships are strengthened with increased opportunity for social interaction and the neighborhood is united with the global community through digital access. Customers are encouraged to connect with the Idea Store brand by employing retail strategies aimed at satisfying the public and keeping them coming back.

The Idea Store concept is directly paired with local regeneration initiatives within the neighborhoods of Tower Hamlets. The large Whitechapel Idea Store sits within a government funded regeneration area. Proponents of the Idea

Store strategy explain, "the idea stores will play a key role in the regeneration of the areas in which they are based. It is increasingly recognized that libraries can act as a significant contributor to the vibrancy of local shopping areas, often performing the same role as 'anchor' stores. The idea strategy builds upon this economic potential and represents a deliberate policy of relocation which, as well as delivering greatly enhanced access to many more people, will also benefit the economies of the areas in which they are based." (A Library and Lifelong Learning Development Strategy, 22) Idea stores are strategically removed from primarily residential locations and located on main streets in order to increase the public awareness of the institution. Idea Stores compete for the public's attention, allowing residents to combine shopping with a trip to the library. Furthermore, Idea Store operating hours are structured to match retail hours, encouraging use until late in the evening. Idea Stores generate trips to main streets. Adjacent retailers benefit from increased pedestrian activity and predictable patterns of use.

The population of Tower Hamlets is more diverse than any other area of Greater London. A large percentage of the population is comprised of recent immigrants. Residents represent a multitude of ethnic backgrounds; according to the 2001 Census, the residents of Tower Hamlets are 51% white, 33% Bangladeshi, 3% Black African, and 3% Black Caribbean. (Borough of Tower Hamlets) Generally, the people of Tower Hamlets are considerably poorer and less educated than the Greater London population. "The percentage of the UK population, expressed at the ward level, in need of basic skills support is 24%. In Tower Hamlets, the average is 31%. In one Tower Hamlets ward the assessed level of need stood at 36% of the population (the highest level of basic skills need for a ward anywhere in the country)." (A Library and Lifelong Learning Development Strategy, 8) Geographically the area of the city is somewhat removed from central London, sited on the East Bank of the Thames River. While the area does not have a direct physical connection to Central London, sections of the borough have undergone intense revitalization and are adding good jobs to the market. Without significant education and job training the residents of Tower Hamlets are unable to join in the prosperity that accompanies urban revitalization. One intention of the Borough's Idea Store initiative is to enable residents to increase their employment options through adult education courses. Literature from the Borough elaborates that the Idea Store environment is designed to make learning accessible and attractive to users, avoiding the pitfalls of traditional adult education facilities. It is essential that the Idea Store environment is perceived as non-threatening to potential users. With increased education comes increased confidence in one's abilities and therefore a sense that one can improve one's living conditions.

The borough emphasizes that their educational goals for their residents are not restricted to increasing employability. The mission of the Idea Stores also includes encouraging the pursuit of knowledge for pure enjoyment. Learning for pleasure is, "particularly important to the Tower Hamlets communities because of their often high levels of social isolation and the stress that goes with it. These factors, in turn, affect the physical and mental health of the population. Both libraries and lifelong learning facilities play an important role in combating the effects of poverty. They encourage individuals to explore their own potential,

build self-esteem and confidence. They also provide opportunities for social interaction and are a vital lifeline for the socially excluded. In addition, libraries provide significant educational support to infants, schoolchildren, and students.” (A Library and Lifelong Learning Development Strategy, 23) Idea Stores are designed to excite residents about learning and aim to attract all members of the public.

In practice, the Idea Store concept has been a huge success. The Bow Idea Store, the first to open of seven planned stores, recorded three times more visits in the first year than the combined total for the two libraries it replaced. (Design Council Case Study) There has been a significant increase in book lending and adult education enrollment. On entering, visitors find attractive and organized interiors with a help desk, qualified staff, self-service kiosks, and high-tech information screens. Internet access terminals are available as well as CD and DVD borrowing. The rules of conduct at Idea Stores are more relaxed than a traditional library, patrons are welcome to visit the café and take their coffee and pastry with them back to the computer terminal. When asked about the services offered by Idea Stores, residents are quick to praise the high level of involvement in the communities that they serve. Idea Stores provide spaces to hold community events and for non-profit outreach efforts. Furthermore, Idea Stores play a key role in promoting cultural events; Tower Hamlets Idea Stores offer a wide variety of arts-oriented activities such as painting and ballet classes. The borough has created vibrant spaces for learning and community support and has sought to engage all segments of the community.

Part of the allure of Portland is the city’s rare combination of urbanity and proximity to natural areas. Within the city’s boundaries are extensive green spaces that afford the city-dweller the opportunity to interact with the natural environment on a regular basis. Residents of Portland often take advantage of the recreational opportunities inherent in green spaces. While Portland residents exhibit high use of green space, green space within and adjacent to the Lents’ Neighborhood is underutilized. Linking Lents, a Portland State University Urban Planning Workshop found that residents are largely unaware of major recreational opportunities within their community. There is an extensive system of open spaces in the Lents Urban Renewal Area; green spaces include the I-205 path, Springwater Corridor, Lents Park, Glenwood Park, Benedict Park, Boyles Park, Raymond Park, Bloomington Park, and Beggar’s Tick Wildlife Park. The Springwater Corridor, a bike and pedestrian path separated from the street grid, runs through Lents and has the potential to provide a recreational and transportation resource linking Lents to adjacent communities, recreational opportunities, and the Willamette River. The PSU study found that many residents did not know the location of the corridor or how to access the trail. 90% of the teens surveyed at a Boys & Girls Club event indicated that they did not know where the trail was located. The study clearly indicated that the majority of residents, regardless of age, do not use the trail.

The reason for the discrepancy between the volume of existing resources and the lack of community awareness and use of resources is caused by physical disconnection from the Lents Town Center. There is no indication of nearby green space on Lents’ main streets. Access to open spaces from neighborhood streets is cryptic and uncelebrated, leading to minimal use. Non-use of existing

green spaces may have larger implications for residents beyond wasting resources. According to the PSU study, 56% of Lents residents participate in moderate exercise weekly compared to 80% of residents in the Portland region. (Bonner, 24) The authors suggest a direct relationship between income, recreational activity, and incidence of obesity. "In general, individuals with lower socio-academic status are at greatest risk for becoming overweight or obese. According to Oregon DHS statistics, 70% of those who live in Oregon households making under \$25,000 are overweight. In Lents, 32% of the households earn less than \$25,000 a year, thus placing Lents residents at a greater risk for becoming overweight or obese due to the lower socio-economic status of its community members." (Bonner, 24) The suggestion that disuse of open space may have a direct and tangible impact on residents' health is noteworthy. For the Lents Community it is essential that civic institutions encourage enjoyment and knowledge of the natural environment. Rooted in the values of the Northwest and the Portland region, the Lents Idea Store will actively engage the community with the natural environment.

Historically, the intersection of SE 92nd Street and Foster Avenue was the focus of commercial activity in the Lents Town Center. The spaces around this intersection are uniquely positioned to spur the regeneration of a bustling town center, providing a draw for residents in Outer Southeast Portland. The mission and design of the Lents Idea Store, with an added component of outdoor education, will be a significant departure from the typical Portland branch library. While this new library will build upon the goals of the Multnomah County Library System, the service will be tailored to address the unique needs of the Lents Community. Residents will benefit through increased opportunities for lifelong learning in a non-intimidating environment, improved access to technology, community support, and improved connection to green resources.

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