

## New Life for Old Ruins: Tactical Urbanism as Economic Development Strategy

by Dane Forlines on January 21, 2015



*The Roxy Theater, circa 1939*

For decades, the Roxy Theater in the McFerrin Park neighborhood of East Nashville was the centerpiece of a thriving neighborhood commercial district that included a post office, department store, pharmacy, grocery store, clothing store, and barber shop. The shops were housed in handsome brick buildings featuring neon signage and nameplates carved with the original storeowner's name. Large windows lined the sidewalk and showcased the latest products. The theater, originally built as the Imperial

Theater in 1914, quickly became the choice destination for first run classics and first kisses in the balcony.

But for more than twenty years, the only thing playing in the Roxy has been a tragic drama of a decaying building suffering from demolition by neglect. All other establishments in the district have gone the way of the shuttered theater, with mature trees replacing shoppers inside abandoned storefronts.

But since the mid-2000s, the surrounding area has been undergoing a resurgence, riding the wave of redevelopment started more than 10 years ago in the nearby East Nashville neighborhoods surrounding a trendy mixed-use district known as Five Points. The Roxy and its adjacent storefronts are now rubbing shoulders with brand new quarter-million-dollar infill houses. The nationally celebrated Holland House, Mas Tacos, and Pharmacy restaurants are a stone's throw away. And mixed-use developments by local developers Urban Housing Solutions and Vernon Winfrey, Oprah's father, are right around the corner. However, redevelopment proved elusive to the Roxy, complicated by eccentric miserly property owners and a chronic attitude that there was little demand for retail space in a neighborhood plagued for too long by high crime, unemployment, poverty, and economic disinvestment.

Understanding these challenges and realizing the potential for the Roxy to play the lead role in a neighborhood renaissance, I joined with local residents to begin brainstorming about how to promote the reinvigoration of the Roxy Theater and surrounding historic buildings. As I spoke with older residents, people shared stories of how their lives had been shaped by taking their first love to a Saturday matinee at the Roxy, or an ice cream soda at the pharmacy. I learned how the department store and the five-and-dime had been Santa's source of Christmas gifts for most of northeast Nashville. Younger residents would run a list of ideas about the types of businesses they would like to see go in. Most everyone, young or old, expressed frustration with watching this once vital commercial area crumble away. People cared, but felt helpless and hopeless that anything would change any time soon. We needed an ambitious plan – one that would give people a hands-on opportunity to participate in a transformation.



*Dixie Five and Dime, circa 1958*

While studying urban planning at the University of Memphis, I had seen the hands-on approach of tactical urbanism work very well for defunct commercial districts in struggling neighborhoods in Memphis. It seemed like a similarly bold and participatory approach would be effective in changing the Roxy's fate. So in June 2013, a group of concerned citizens gathered for a workshop designed to introduce tactical urbanism and get people talking about what techniques would be effective at the Roxy.

Workshop participants responded positively to the tactical urbanism approach and discussed different ways it could be applied in Nashville. By the end of the workshop, the movement had been christened *Save the Roxy* and the district was dubbed the Roxy District.

Anxious to get something started, Save the Roxy began to show outdoor movies on the lawn next to the theater. More than 500 people attended the movies during the summers of 2013 and 2014. Save the Roxy also posted temporary historical markers around the district, featuring period photos and extant accounts from former Roxy patrons. Temporary art installations, such as a full scale projection of the original Roxy marquee, a replica of the 1950s sign and marquee using paper, vinyl, and lighting, and a mural by famed artist Herb Williams educated Nashvillians about the historical and cultural importance of the Roxy District.



*Marquee replica, Sept 2013*



*Roxy Revival street scene*

Save the Roxy's efforts culminated on November 9, 2013 with the Roxy Revival festival. For one day, the entire Roxy District was transformed into a vibrant shopping and entertainment destination. For the first time in over 20 years, abandoned commercial buildings were activated with pop-up artisan shops and restaurants. Barren public spaces were energized with street trees, benches, lighting, and landscaping. In partnership with the successful music festival *East Nashville Underground*, the Roxy Theater itself was programmed with live music and film. The temporary reactivation of the area was convincing enough as a viable urban redevelopment as to spawn unsanctioned participation from visitors. Street performers took stage on the sidewalks, posters advertising other events were plastered on light poles and buildings, and local businesses passed out coupons to pedestrians.

Our goal was to demonstrate the vision for what the neighborhood wanted to see the Roxy District become. We also wanted to show businesses that people were excited to visit the Roxy District for shopping and entertainment. Nearly 30 vendors participated including food trucks, designer boutiques, and a coffee shop. By the end of the day, 1,500 people had visited the Roxy District and seen its cultural and economic potential.

More importantly, during the Roxy Revival more than a dozen entrepreneurs and business owners approached the participating property owners about leasing space. After decades of deterioration and neglect, six different commercial spaces in the District have experienced some level of remodeling within a year following the Roxy Revival. New businesses are opening, including a second restaurant from an operator whose first establishment was named as one of the top 3 new restaurants in the country by Bon Appetite magazine in 2013.



*Pop-up coffee shop at the Roxy Revival*

An old-timer who grew up in the neighborhood in the '40s and '50s recently remarked about the Roxy district, "I was saddened to see the old neighborhood all closed down. Where there used to be busy shops and a wonderful meeting place for friends and neighbors is all gone. A life full of fond memories lies in the ruins of what used to be."



*Restoration of the Morris Jacobs Building*

The Roxy Revival was about revisiting those memories and showing that the Roxy District could be a place where the next generation's memories are formed. Fortunately, that old-timer was able to make it to the Roxy Revival. He saw what can happen when people sacrificially work together towards a shared vision. For him and for everyone else, the Roxy Revival engendered hope that new life could be brought to these old ruins.