

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Outdoor art sparks celebration in Wilkinsburg streets

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Blighted properties gave way to fresh paint and a new look in Wilkinsburg last week.

Residents and artists celebrated as the 700 block of Whitney Avenue in Wilkinsburg was reintroduced as the Whitney Avenue Art Gallery, a temporary, outdoor art exhibit of 10 boarded-up houses turned into eye candy. A street party celebrated the gallery's opening, drawing more than 150 people Saturday.

"Initially, the gallery was conceived as a very simple project," said Lazae LaSpina, a Wilkinsburg artist and the gallery's project manager. "When I saw the painted boards on the windows of Garden Theater on the North Side, I thought since Wilkinsburg has so many vacant properties, it would be a good idea to do something similar."

The homes' first-floor windows were boarded up with plywood painted with brightly colored scenes ranging from peace signs to a tropical beach. LaSpina said she used the plywood because it provided both a blank canvas and a means of securing the windows.

All the houses are privately owned, but Wilkinsburg's manager told LaSpina the borough has the authority to board up any vacant property. After she began planning the effort, she decided to open it to community members, quickly finding artists to lead both adult and youth art workshops.

"I wanted the community to have more say and help in deciding what would be painted," LaSpina said.

She challenged the artists leading the workshops to interpret the theme "Houses in Waiting," which refers to the houses as waiting to be bought up. Ernest Bey of Wilkinsburg's MAD DADS, a group that mentors teens, led the youth workshops, while Kate Joranson, an exhibiting artist at the Mattress Factory, led the adults.

"Art always has the effect of inspiring good feelings," said Bey, who directed five teen boys twice weekly. "When the boys first started out, it was obvious they were not artists and they were not very into the idea. By the end of our project, those that were reluctant to paint were battling over who got to do what."

LaSpina said many residents were suspicious when she began the project in May 2009.

"When you're coming into a neighborhood to change something, you have to be sensitive to people not understanding what you're doing," LaSpina said. "It was very rewarding for me to see the people from last summer go from not knowing what I was doing, to a huge party with everyone in the street and celebrating."

Whitney Avenue resident Carly Maceil, 30, said she and three other residents began landscaping the lots where the homes sit shortly after the start of the project and even enlisted the help of Soergel's in Wexford to donate flowers and plants for the yards.

"People have told me they haven't been able to use the sidewalk on Whitney for three to five years because it's so overgrown," Maceil said. "Now, they bring their friends to show them the difference."

Though the celebrations lasted only for a day, Bey said he is positive the goodwill the gallery generated can be sustained.

"The art adds to that whole idea of adopting an area and making it beautiful while getting the young people involved in their neighborhood," Bey said. "We created good relationships doing the art project."

Maceil said the effort has already accomplished its goal of inspiring people to buy up the abandon houses. A friend recently purchased a house next door to hers.

"When we started landscaping, it wasn't a very community-involved street, but by the end of the project, everyone just took the initiative to help out on their own," Maceil said. "When you see people taking care of things, it makes people want to start taking care of things themselves.

"It sparks something in them."

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