Improving Salt Lake City, one neighborhood at a time

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Jonathan Olivares and Lyndsay Day rent an apartment at Art Space Bridge Project in downtown Salt Lake City Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2014. Jeffrey D. Allred, Deseret News

Summary

Salt Lake City officials are trying to determine the best way to improve run-down sections of the city without unduly disrupting the lives of those who make their homes in these less-expensive areas.

"Cities are not static — development, redevelopment and in-fill are happening constantly to varying degrees all along the Wasatch Front," said Salt Lake City Redevelopment Agency director DJ Baxter. "In Salt Lake City, we have enough vacant land that it is often possible to infuse new development energy into an area without displacing the current residents," Baxter said.

Neighborhood blight and problems came to light in the Rio Grande neighborhood last year, site of a homeless shelter, prompting Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker to roll out "our Rio Grande solutions."

The area receives visits from cleaning crews to pick up refuse, has portable toilets, enhanced law enforcement and prosecution efforts to battle drug use, as well as services provided to those in need.

The area is one of seven Urban Renewal Areas identified for revitalization, with maps of each of these districts available at slrda.com.

With sprucing up comes the possibility of gentrification. At its worst, gentrification threatens to displace the poor or disadvantaged while the more affluent move in. But Salt Lake City is working with stakeholders and developers to revamp with vulnerable populations in mind.
mind.

The last time residents were displaced was in 2009, when people living in a short-term motel were moved to "comparable, much improved accommodations," Baxter said.

Studies featured by NPR and The Atlantic have shown that far from being negative, gentrification may be a good thing for communities.

Columbia University's Lance Freeman shows that gentrified neighborhoods were associated with less displacement than non-gentrified ones. A working paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research supports this, citing evidence that gentrified neighborhoods are appealing to middle-class minority populations.

The Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland showed that those who remained behind in a gentrified neighborhood between 2001 and 2009 had higher incomes, and were more likely to have a bachelor's degree and better credit scores than their counterparts in non-gentrified neighborhoods. This study was limited in its scope because it did not measure how long residents had lived in an area before the dates of the study.

The Road Home in Salt Lake City is in the middle of the city's Depot District development project. Among its goals for the area, the city redevelopment agency want to develop streets and public spaces in the area to promote housing, retail and commercial development; cultivate redevelopment agency property in the district; create a year-round market with the help of the Downtown Alliance and renovate historic buildings.

Road Home executive director Matt Minkevitch said they "consider ourselves an important player in the community and an entity that can help provide solutions to neighborhood issues and the plight of our fellow residents experiencing homelessness."

At first blush a homeless shelter may not seem like an ideal neighbor for developers, but city officials recognize that the Road Home performs a valuable service.

"I'm encouraged that we are involved in discourse that could potentially lead to the development of more permanent affordable housing with supportive services that could reduce homelessness," Minkevitch said.

Artspace, located across the street, sees the Road Home as "good neighbors" who are "filling a need," according to executive director Jessica Norie, who is "looking forward to gentrification."

"It's not the Road Home that’s the issue. It's the illegal activity that preys on and tries to blend in with the community," Norie said.

Artspace has long been involved in Salt Lake City's redevelopment. It revitalizes former industrial sites or abandoned buildings and build spaces that appeal to tenants who help transform the community.

The nonprofit created housing and commercial space near Pioneer Park in the early 1990s, and the housing, built with the poor and disabled in mind, included live-in
workspaces for the disabled.

According to Sheryl Gillilan, executive director of Art Access, a nonprofit tenant in the Artspace City Center, an increased police presence and city cleanup crew in the neighborhood have helped create a safe environment near their business.

Art Access is located across the street from the Road Home. The company provides art programs to many populations, including the homeless, poor and disabled. They also have a ceramicist who works with the children at the Road Home.

"I think our job is to make this community a more livable place," Gillilan said.

They are housed next door to the Bridge Projects in Artspace's City Center, with mixed residential and commercial spaces.

Jonathan Olivares and Lyndsay Day say they are lucky to have a corner apartment in Artspace's Bridge Projects.

Corner units have more windows, Olivares said, offering natural lighting to complement the industrial flooring and exposed air ducts in their urban chic apartment. The close proximity to work, public transportation and cultural events are added bonuses, he said.

The view from their living room takes in many of the aspects of west Salt Lake City, including the homeless shelter across the street. Although originally a concern for Day, living close to the shelter has not been a problem.

"(The shelter) is kind of a sober reminder," Olivares said.

Depending on the location, rental rates in an Artspace community are capped to serve those who are between 34 or 35 and 55 percent of the area median income or those up to 80 percent.

When the Bridge Project first began, some units were reserved for women coming out of incarceration who needed a safe space to take their kids, according to Stephen Goldsmith, former planning director for Salt Lake City. Nonprofits, artists, startups and small businesses often gravitate to Artspace facilities.

"We weren't worried about gentrification because we were controlling it," Goldsmith said.

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