



JEFFRY KONCZAL

Arts collectives, city investments and a palpable buzz finally may give the long-suffering west-side neighborhood another chance.

by Kendra Hovey

Franklinton's moment



Two faces of Franklinton on West Rich Street: The old (a building that used to house a factory) and the new (a mural created during Urban Scrawl).

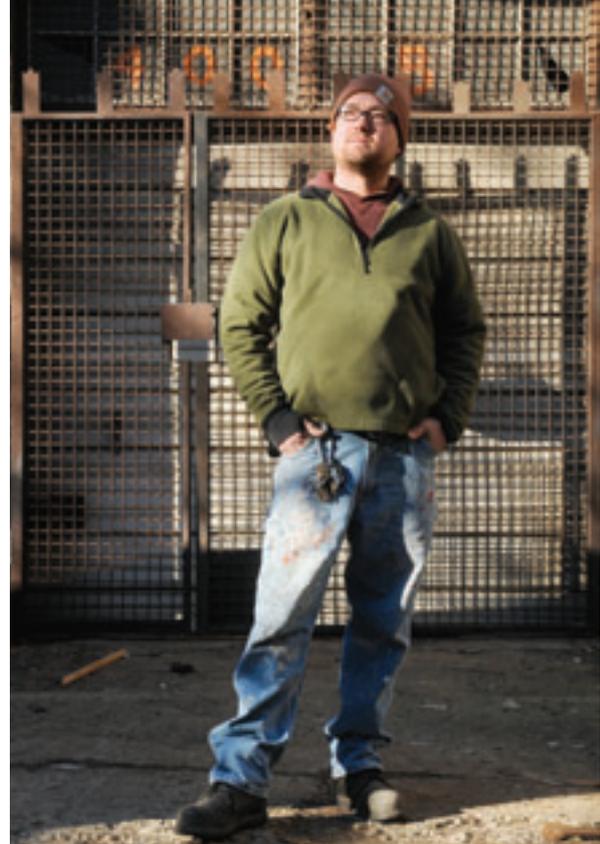
SHOSHANAH INWOOD lives in a downtown neighborhood. On a nice day, she and her preschooler can hop on their bicycles and head to COSI or the Columbus Commons. Yet, her community is not typically associated with downtown, let alone pleasant family bike rides. Shoshanah Inwood lives in Franklinton.

But perceptions may soon change. They may be changing already. “They are talking about us even at Polaris,” reports a bemused Inwood. While shopping for a suit recently at that far north mall, her husband mentioned their neighborhood and got an unexpected response: “Franklinton. That’s a cool place to live, huh?”

If “cool” is beating out “rough,” “poor” and even “*where?*” when it comes to Franklinton, it could be because of art events such as the live mural painting festival Urban Scrawl. Or word might have come from one of the young professionals moving in and spearheading various eco-minded, community-building projects, such as Franklinton Cycleworks and Franklinton Gardens. Or from one of the 50 or so creatives renting studio space at 400 West Rich, such as painter Sara Adrian, who reserved a space sight unseen while painting for Urban Scrawl last summer, or Chris James, who made the oversized hockey glove that hangs at Nationwide Arena, or Jurate Phillips, a German Village artist who drives three minutes to Franklinton and paints into the wee hours.

Maybe people have started to catch wind of the rumor that Wonderland, the theoretical art and entrepreneurial space, might become a reality in a Franklinton warehouse. (It is one of two potential sites, confirms Wonderland; the other is the Warehouse District, just east of downtown.) Or that restaurateur Liz Lessner has been scoping out the area around West Broad Street. (A concept called the Franklinton Tap Room is looking positive for this year, shares Lessner.) Or all this buzz could be Mayor Mike Coleman’s doing. After all, he was the one who used “cool” in connection to Franklinton in last year’s State of the City speech. He also praised a number of Franklinton leaders, announced a \$900,000 investment in the area’s revitalization effort and laid out his vision for a creative neighborhood on the eastern side of Franklinton. “This new creative live-work district will be a healthy, sustainable community,” Coleman orated. “It will be a cool, funky and, most of all, an affordable place to be.”

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Since last July, the city has been working on a plan for this cool, funky, affordable future, bringing to the table residents, artists, business owners and other “stakeholders,” even hiring East Coast consultants from the firm Goody Clancy to help. The idea is to hit that revitalization sweet spot—attract development, but protect against gentrification. The yearlong planning process is expected to wrap up this summer. Should it meet approval, the result will be zoning and use laws appropriate for—to pull from recent strategy sessions—a walkable, bikeable, sustainable, artistic, lively, diverse, safe, gritty and, of course, cool, funky and affordable creative community with improved transit, good civic infrastructure and respect for area history and traditions.

Today’s Franklinton is a working class neighborhood, about 80 percent white. Though overall rates recently have dipped, crime, particularly petty theft and prostitution, are a problem, as are vacant and neglected properties—a fatal fire in one of these killed three people, including a child, in December. Median home value (\$54,327) and median yearly income (\$16,118) are less than half the city average, yet these numbers belie the area’s many solid-earning, longtime residents and homeowners.

About 87 percent of Franklinton residents live on the west side of the neighborhood. The creative district is envisioned specifically for the eastern part—

Rt. 315 to near COSI—and, for now, signs of its future are limited to the artists who come and go from 400 West Rich and the painted murals from Urban Scrawl that add color to the muted industrial hue of long-shuttered factories, old warehouses, some still-humming businesses and small pockets of housing. And there’s also Chris Sherman, the artist who made east Franklinton his very own personal creative live-work district nearly a decade ago. In need of space and cheaper digs for both his art and his contracting business, he bought and rehabbed a warehouse “when they were lending money,” as he says, “to anybody.”

At the time, he knew nothing about California developer Lance Robbins, who discovered the area while visiting his daughter at Antioch College near Dayton and began buying properties with a potential creative development in mind. Sherman now is the manager and contractor for much of Robbins’s six acres, including the old sanitation factory at 400 West Rich. Only one-third of the building is renovated. (As for the other two-thirds, Sherman says, “Just don’t walk through that hole in the floor and you’ll be fine.”) The first few studios were a test. Now 55 artists work in the space. Twelve more studios, renting at \$150 to \$200 a month, are in the works, as well as new rehearsal spaces. Six bands are on the wait list. “We can’t make them fast enough,” says Sherman.

An artist friend of his now rents a house nearby, but in general, others have been



Chris Sherman, opposite page, at 400 West Rich, the arts space he manages (an unused room of which is seen above). Franklinton civic activist Ashley Laughlin (above, right) and a scene from a recent Urban Scrawl event.



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slow to follow in Sherman’s footsteps as residents. Oil painter Heather Wirth says she’s ready. 400 West Rich’s first tenant and now leasing agent, Wirth shares that while “it didn’t happen overnight,” she now feels comfortable in east Franklinton and is “anxious to purchase.”

On the other side of Rt. 315, a much quieter revitalization is going on. After renting in Clintonville, Inwood and her husband, both researchers at Ohio State, bought a Franklinton home in 2008. Their first child was born the day the house closed and the second three years later. They were drawn to the area’s affordability, but also its neighborly feel. “People were out,” explains Inwood, “people were in the library, on their porches, kids were playing ball on the medians. It’s not like the suburbs where you never see anybody.” She’d heard about the high crime, but looked at the statistics and was not scared off. “A lot of it isn’t violent,” she says, “plus I grew up in Brooklyn.” Inwood joined a neighborhood effort to beautify the area’s stately medians and her husband now is president of the homeowners association. “It’s a great community building place,” she says.

When Matt Egner moved to Franklinton, he brought with him two

businesses—Egner Construction and Franklinton Rentals—and makes it a priority to hire locally. His home is lovely, but on his long, wide street with probably the most impressive grass median in all of the city, there are vacant houses and ones occupied but in obvious need of care. He’s aware of the problems with theft and knows better than to leave out building supplies. Still, his only major complaint is the lack of restaurants.

Despite being warned off the west side as a college freshman, Patrick Kaufman, his wife and three children have been living in Franklinton quite happily since 2007. He is the director of Franklinton Gardens, a nonprofit that grows food on six area plots, sells the yield—with no grocery store, “produce is hard to find here,” he says—and also offers gardening space, tools and education to residents. One of Kaufman’s first gardens was plowed over by an ATV—“we should have put up a small fence,” he says. But lately, he feels known and accepted by the wider community. Kaufman chose Franklinton because other like-minded friends already were here and he felt it was a place he could live by his values, described as “a deep concern for social justice, simple, sustainable living and

a just and healthy food system.”

Ashley Laughlin, 25, is part of an “intentional community” of about 15 that moved into Franklinton a little over two years ago to “be a good neighbor,” she says. For her, this comes down to paying attention and helping out: “There’s little reliable transportation here. People depend on bikes; they’re ratty, there’s no resource to fix them, so some our of members started Franklinton Cycleworks, a bike co-op offering tools and education.” Her community also started a Girl Scout troop and will invite area homeless into their houses for “showers, food or just company.” Lately, they are talking about what they might do “so no one else dies in a house fire,” referring to the one in December, and to help stop “human trafficking” (her use of the term in place of prostitution is intentional). Though Laughlin is comfortable with the description “spiritually based,” her community has no organized religious or other affiliation and at the moment no name. “We just can’t agree on one,” she says.

Each of these recent arrivals came into houses already renovated through the Franklinton Development Association (FDA). Founded by residents in 1993, FDA was volunteer-run until 2003, when it brought in urban planner Jim Sweeney as executive director. FDA rehabs are funded by grants and mostly bought by those of low and moderate income. But Mayor Coleman’s 2006 Home Again program,



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Artsy types and families, like that of Shoshanah Inwood (above), are slowly returning to the long-forgotten Franklinton neighborhood. Urban planner Jim Sweeney, opposite page, of the Franklinton Development Association.

which has no upper income limits on buyers, attracted young professionals such as Inwood, Egner and Kaufman.

Another one of FDA's tasks is to improve Franklinton's reputation, and nothing in its PR plan involves sugarcoating or even cheerleading. The idea simply is to bring people in "so they can see," says Sweeney, "that we are closer and not as scary as they think."

Sweeney and his staff of two work out of an office on West Broad Street, near Tommy's Diner and the Florentine. It's Franklinton's version of restaurant row, though nearby vacant businesses and unused lots are evidence of the area's long history of divestment. On the office wall, there's a framed map of Ohio with Franklinton on it, but no Columbus. While it's an important historical document, the more exciting maps are the three taped unceremoniously to a wall in the conference room. Block by neighborhood block, they chart the old and new, and what's ripe with potential. On the largest map, there's a swath of blue representing the Scioto River, which got the whole story going, then slowed the tale to a stop and may open a new chapter now that its temperament has been tamed.

Franklinton's story begins in 1797 when surveyor Lucas Sullivant founded the new settlement on the west bank of the Scioto. Like the Wyandots before him, he was drawn to the rich soil of the river bottoms and the confluence.

Within one year, the Scioto washed away much of Franklinton. Sullivant rebuilt farther west, still less than a mile from the river's edge.

In 1913, Franklinton was devastated by a flood so big the Scioto permanently doubled in size. But the one in 1959, though not nearly as deadly, did lasting damage, says longtime resident and area commissioner Bruce Warner, only 21 when he fled the rising waters. Two days later, he returned for his dog, traveling by boat above submerged cars. Once the waters receded, he and his wife moved back, but the flood had clogged the gas lines. Fed up with being cold, he says he started to dig, opened the gas line, siphoned the water and closed it. One month later, the gasman came knocking. "It's fixed," was all Warner said.

While Warner, now 72, stayed, many did not. America had become more mobile. "In 1913, people didn't have the option to leave," he says, "but in 1959, people left."

While in Sullivant's day influence might have flowed from the west bank to the east, that course reversed long ago. The decision to run Rt. 315 through Franklinton a few decades ago took out almost all of Sandusky Street, and with it the community's central thoroughfare, as well as Sullivant's historical house. In 1983, strict new government restrictions on flood plains meant no new builds in Franklinton unless elevated by 17 feet and no rehabs beyond 50 percent of the home's value. Also, in the 1980s, a homeless facility, the Open Shelter, moved

into Franklinton. Already tucked into a corner a few blocks south was Riverside-Bradley, the CMHA public housing complex, where, says Sweeney, "The most distressed families were sent." Nearby was a notoriously active drug corner. Then, bridges began closing for repair, cutting off access to downtown when, coincidentally, downtown was beginning to return to life.

If these challenges, one after another, seemed to conspire against Franklinton, they also, one after another, recently fell away. The floodwall was finished in 2003 and the building restrictions lifted. The homeless shelter closed in 2004, and Riverside-Bradley, declared "functionally obsolete" and inconsistent with present policy, was reduced to rubble last summer. The drug corner is quiet. In fact, FDA just bought the nearest building and will move its office there in the spring. The last piece to fall into place will be the Rich Street Bridge, expected to be crossable again this spring, connecting, as Sweeney points out, the "highest rents to the lowest." But if the river bottoms are fertile again—this time to developer dollars—and this is really Franklinton's moment of reemergence, it is partly because one piece snapped into place long ago: Carol Stewart found a way to get over her shyness.

After moving to Franklinton in 1964, Stewart, a mother of five, joined the PTA and was asked to read the minutes. Stewart was terribly shy. But then she read in *Guideposts* to look just above the heads of the audience. The strategy worked, well



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endearingly and “in a guerrilla marketing kind of way” on the area’s now scorned alias, the Bottoms—embracing its “scrappiness, almost underdog, tougher-than-the-rest identity.” Certainly, there’s no soft-pedaling in naming an event Urban Scrawl, and it shows a lot of mettle to host, as Franklinton has since 2007, a Tour of Homes, something assumed to be the exclusive province of wealthier neighborhoods. Likewise, with barely a handful of places to eat, without apology or explanation, Franklinton has a Restaurant Week.

Considering the conscious effort to draw on the neighborhood’s character, does all this talk of a creative community pull on some strong artistic tradition? “Not really,” says watercolorist Brenda St. Clair, a neighborhood resident for 52 years and newest member of the Franklinton Arts District (FAD), official host of Urban Scrawl. “There are artists here,” explains St. Clair, though before FAD, never organized. This arts community did not sprout organically; it’s a development plan.

Franklinton is still waiting for the boost, long overdue, from COSI, which moved there in 1999 with intentions to act as an economic catalyst. There is some worry, too, for the area’s most distressed population, those for whom “affordable” doesn’t even begin to help. But none of this, yet, has been used as a wedge. Nor have the heated feelings (not gone, but tabled) around the proposed racetrack at Cooper Stadium that is not technically in Franklinton, though the fallout—some say noise, some say jobs—will be. And even though news reports have detailed developer Lance Robbins’s legal troubles involving his California properties for repeatedly violating housing codes, most here have a wait-and-see approach—and he did kick in \$10,000 toward Goody Clancy’s fee. Certainly, Bruce Warner is not about to jump to any conclusions. Robbins, he points out, “is the first person to put a dime up for Franklinton.”

There’s also, in this overall friendly process, the occasional reminder that different people can be on different pages. Buzzwords such as “thought leaders” and “catalyst zone” sound particularly tinny in this neighborhood seemingly zoned for straight talk. And as one person gets animated about urban density, another raises his hand and politely offers: “But spread out and empty spaces is something I really like about Franklinton.”

It’s all a good reminder that whether it is artists paying 60 cents a square foot or new residents, people come here not just for what Franklinton will be, but for what it is, be that affordable, neighborly, spacious or, even, a bit off the grid—a place to create a path rather than follow one. They talk about stuff like “community” and “sustainability.” They talk about the kind of valued life they want to live.

Whether these young professionals are somehow representative of a new generation of rehabbers or just a bunch of people who happened to buy houses in the same neighborhood, it is too early to say. It also is too early to predict what they might bring to the community—what anyone will. But right now in east Franklinton, it is almost ghost town quiet. Sherman calls it bucolic. Few people walk these wide and empty streets, lined with old factories and warehouses, some a half-block long, their huge exteriors a wash of multiple shades and hues. They are the kinds of colors that only time and weather can mix, and that have a beauty it sometimes takes an artist’s eye to appreciate. ■

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enough that she went on to hold leadership positions in just about every neighborhood organization (plus a few citywide ones) and helped found a few—the Franklinton Historical Society, the Beautification Project and also the FDA, whose members, in the early days, were inside houses hanging wallboard. Alongside Stewart, with hammer and nail, was Warner. He got involved when he decided to check out a meeting of the historical society. “Carol Stewart grabbed me by the ear,” he says.

At 73, Stewart has worked a staggering number of hours, unpaid, for her community. Asked to explain this, she simply says, “When there seemed to be something I thought needed to be done and no one was doing it, I would do it.”

This brand of self-reliance, not unlike Warner’s DIY gas line fix, is a streak that seems to run through Franklinton. Other qualities that come up when residents talk about their neighborhood: close-knit, like a small town, a mix, upfront, what you see is what you get and not a lot of ego. Not a lot of minced words, either, even when a reporter is listening. Franklinton, if you will, is refreshingly frank.

Sweeney sees the neighborhood’s personality, and even its rough reputation, as assets, ones to exploit. He draws

But creative can be viewed in more ways than one. Stewart draws a parallel to manufacturing: “If you know the history, you know there were creative people in east Franklinton. Creative also means people who make things with their hands—there is an art to that.”

The city-hired consultants from Goody Clancy say the same thing, but in a PowerPoint presentation. While Lucas Sullivan planned this piece of land with compass and chains, Goody Clancy uses focus groups, mapping exercises, *charrettes*, principle statements, market analysis and multiple community workshops.

So far, there is little of the fear and resentment that often comes when a distressed neighborhood catches the eye of outside interests. Partly, this is because of space. Enough of it is empty in east Franklinton that displacement does not *have* to be an issue. Also, a lot of longtime residents are just plain good at this stuff. They have deep roots in the community, creating solid neighborhood organizations from which to act and advocate.

Though the process is amiable, there are concerns. For instance, that the east, in effect, will be folded into downtown or modeled after the Short North, or that benefits will stop at Rt. 315—after all,