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Cincinnati's Gateway Quarter and Streetcar

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One of the most remarkable urban stories I have come across in the past several years is the [Gateway Quarter](#) in Cincinnati. Located in the Over-the-Rhine district just north of downtown Cincinnati, the Gateway Quarter is a development effort with public, private and non-profit involvement to renovate buildings that make up the largest concentration of Italianate architecture in the United States. To top it off, the Gateway Quarter may get a streetcar line in the next couple years.

I visited Over-the-Rhine recently on a writing assignment, and have to admit, the development already complete is stunning. The buildings are beautiful, and the fact that so many of them, dating to the 19th Century, are still intact, is lucky.

There are plenty of cooks in the kitchen for the Gateway Quarter effort and regeneration of Over-the-Rhine district. They include local infill developers such as [The Model Group](#), [Northpointe Group/B2B Equities](#), [Urban Sites](#) and the non-profit Over-the-Rhine Community Housing, not to mention McCormack Baron Salazar, which will start a project this year. But the key player truly is the [Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation \(3CDC\)](#), a non-profit catalytic development corporation.

3CDC was formed in 2003 in an effort led by the private sector to improve the efficiency of development efforts in Cincinnati. They act as master planner and developer as well as the lender for the Gateway Quarter. For starters, 3CDC went in early and bought as many vacant properties and liquor licenses as they could, work that continues today. As well, they provide loans to developers who would have trouble finding conventional lending for, what by anybody's estimate, is a risky development.

3CDC is funded by the Cincinnati Equity Fund, a venture capital fund with the backing of local corporations, and the Cincinnati New Markets Fund, which uses funds from the New Markets Tax Credit program created by congress. Already \$70 million has been invested, and an additional \$35 million was awarded by the NMTC program in October 2008.

Also innovative is the collaboration of the local developers, which are pooling their resources to market the entire

district as a cohesive whole, rather than compete to try and sell various buildings as small as three units in competition with each other. There is strength in numbers, particularly in an area with zero precedent for hip lofts!

The results so far are amazing, although there is much to do. The core of the Gateway Quarter is a four square block area that contains the lovely renovation of dozens of historic buildings. It is home to 100 condominiums in a neighborhood that as a whole had four homeowners in the last Census. The streets boast more than a dozen new businesses, replacing tatty crime-ridden bars and vacant storefronts. Today you'd be surprised to know that the corner of 12th and Vine went from 500-plus police calls a few years ago to zero two years later.

As smart as the improvements to the Gateway Quarter are, even today, walking a couple blocks north of 12th and Vine is intimidating. Ask Bobby Maly, a developer with The Model Group, about his first visit to Over-the-Rhine, five years ago, and he'll tell you just driving down the street drug dealers came out in to the street to approach his car. Back then, if you were white and driving an SUV, you went to Over-the-Rhine for only one thing...drugs. Today, you can shop for a couch for your living room and stop at a wine bar.

Perhaps that is the lesson of the right kind of urban regeneration that is happening. So many cities, my beloved Minneapolis included, have simply wiped troubled neighborhoods off the map. Cincinnati is taking the "urban elbow grease" path - one walkable urban block at a time.

Things are still messy there, but 3CDC and its partners are keeping their eye on the ball. When I spoke to Steve Leeper, President and CEO of 3CDC, he told me the thing that intrigued him the most about Over-the-Rhine is the buildings and fabric...the bones...are still there and could act as its greatest asset. They know that a largely intact district of Italianate architecture immediately adjacent to a central business district is priceless, and they are working closely with police to reduce crime and with developers to save buildings and rebrand the area in a way that is attractive to the marketplace. Perhaps most importantly, they have the backing of the local business community, which was willing to invest in the area, and thus invest in the overall health of Cincinnati.

And now, the mayor is strongly supporting the construction of a streetcar line from downtown through Over-the-Rhine to the University of Cincinnati. [Click here for a blog about Mayor Mallory's speech](#). Unfortunately, the Coalition Opposed to Additional Spending and Taxes (COAST) has joined forces with the local NAACP chapter on a ballot initiative to kill the streetcar plan. You can join Mayor Mallory and a growing grassroots coalition in favor of the streetcar [here at Cincinnatians for Progress](#).

You want proof? I think the track record speaks for itself. Nearly 100 units have sold in a crashing housing market since March 2007, and the new businesses where bring life to the sidewalks in a way that would make Jane Jacobs (and Joe Urban) proud. With additional units and buildings opening in outlying blocks this year, the Gateway Quarter will increase its footprint to that magical new urbanism threshold of at least three walkable mixed-use blocks.

The story of the Gateway District is one of grit, determination, unusual partnerships, and leadership. It deserves our attention and support, and should be looked to for inspiration as we continue to tackle distressed portions of our cities around the country.

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