

Jacksonville, Illinois: Urban Re-renewal



With financial support from the city, Jacksonville Main Street led the effort to remove the urban renewal-era canopies and rehab 24 buildings around the downtown square.



In 2008, a young couple in Jacksonville, Illinois, was looking to buy their first home so they could start a family. A friend at church told them to check out the Pink Palace, a beautiful 1905 house within walking distance of downtown. Wandering through the classic four-square-style house, the Bendorfs were fascinated to hear the Cinderella story beneath its refinished wood floors and freshly painted exterior.

Three years earlier, the Pink Palace—so named for its grimy pink walls—was a drug-addled apartment house in a crime-ridden neighborhood, foreclosed on by the Farmers State Bank and Trust Company. Though its value was at an all-time low of \$15,000, no one was willing to invest in the extensive renovation the house needed. The bank decided to ask Jacksonville Main Street (JMS) for help.

Looking beyond the Pink Palace's dilapidated façade, JMS saw great potential for a community project. The Pink Palace would spark the residential complement to the commercial revitalization Jacksonville Main Street had helmed for the past decade. JMS launched the "New Life Project," which brought unlikely bedfellows under one roof—students of the Lincoln Land Community College, inmates from Greene County Work Camp, local downtown business owners, and community development organizations. Their common goal: to transform the Pink Palace into a welcoming single-family home, while retaining its historic character.

The New Life Project was a true collaborative effort: in addition to larger-scale public and private grants, it was also funded by donations from the community. For example, a local masonry contractor trained volunteers in foundational brick repairs at no charge, saving the Project \$18,000 in bricklaying fees. Electrical material, flooring, kitchen cabinets, and even the porch roof were donated by local business owners impressed by the project's commitment to reviving the neighborhood.

The Bendorfs enthusiastically bought

the Pink Palace—now mostly painted fern green—for \$68,000, more money than JMS and the Farmers State Bank ever expected to get for the property. Today the Pink Palace success story continues to inspire civic pride in Jacksonville homeowners, initiating a trend of revitalization projects all over downtown and in the neighboring districts.

The Ugly Stepchild

The resourcefulness and determination displayed by the New Life Project testifies to why Jacksonville earned a Great American Main Street Award. JMS was founded in 1999 to undo damage done by urban renewal. In the late 1960s, a rerouted highway diverted traffic away from Jacksonville's bustling downtown. The city desperately accepted a HUD grant to turn the old town square into Central Park Plaza by 1974.

Far from delivering on promises of a quick fix, however, four new "quadrant" buildings that made up a poorly designed pedestrian mall in the town square closed off its north and south sides to traffic, eliminating 75 percent of downtown vehicular traffic. The city attached unattractive steel canopies to private storefronts, and installed dark covered walkways that quickly became the haunts of criminals.

The plan also demolished 63 historic buildings, decimating Jacksonville's built heritage. By the 1990s, the citizens of Jacksonville were just about ready to give up. As Kristan Hoffman of the Farmers State Bank put it, "our downtown had been pegged the ugly stepchild. No one wanted to talk about it, deal with it, or had any idea how to handle it."

Main Street success stories

rarely celebrate demolition, but in order to reclaim their downtown, JMS needed to restore it to what it had been. This time, they planned to turn the downtown district into what Jacksonville residents wanted it to be. To do so, JMS solicited community input through charettes for a revitalization master plan.

A \$100,000 Façade Improvement Grant from the city leveraged more than \$1 million of private funds to remove the urban renewal-era canopies and rehab 24 buildings around the plaza. Like the canopies, the urban renewal quadrants also had to go. These buildings had been sold to private developers when they were completed so the city had no control over their use. JMS finally raised the money to acquire one of the buildings and tore it down. This bold visual statement rallied community support. Today, all four quadrant buildings are gone, allowing the city to reopen South Main Street just this year, with North Main soon to follow. Traffic patterns around the square have been restored to their original state, and electrical and water main upgrades, landscaping, and sidewalk improvements have further enhanced the town square's charm.

Jacksonville's Downtown Turnaround project, which restored traffic and storefront parking, has helped spark 23 business expansions since the streets were reopened in August 2010.



Main Street Collaborations

JMS understands that it isn't enough just to restore the old, and that a forward-looking attitude is necessary to bring Jacksonville's business district into the new economy. JMS pushed for Jacksonville to be designated a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District and revived a subsidiary for-profit community development organization, the Jacksonville Enterprise Zone Development Corporation (JEZDC). Among the many economic initiatives they have spearheaded is JEZDC's low-interest loan program, which helps small businesses make essential structural improvements when banks are unwilling to get involved.

Another component of the revitalization effort is attracting businesses back downtown, and JMS's Economic Restructuring Committee does this very well. Its Upper Story Tours and Spacewalks that showcase Jacksonville's potential to would-be entrepreneurs have led directly to at least two building sales and four business openings.

Main Street Manager Judy Tighe credits Upper Story Tours, one of their earliest programs, with changing negative perceptions of downtown by showing people its potential. Juxtaposing rundown upper-story lofts with the few that had already been refurbished by brave property owners, the tours gave potential investors a before-and-after view of these spaces.

"It gave them ideas, gave them food for thought," says Tighe. "A lot of people who came through changed their attitudes, and told me 'hey, I could do this too!'"

Today, these efforts have resulted in a phenomenal infusion of \$17 million in private reinvestment and \$7 million in public improvements with a net gain of 57 new or expanded businesses and 131 new jobs, while the vacancy rate has dropped from 27 to 6 percent.

Key to the many successes of JMS is the strong lattice of partnerships the organization has forged with the city and its neighbors. The state government, mayor, city council, city maintenance department, chamber of commerce, Jacksonville Regional Economic Development Corporation, Jacksonville Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, and local businesses all have representatives on its 22-member board. In turn, these organizations offer JMS representation on their boards.

These partnerships have bolstered support for the Main Street program and provided expert advice where needed. Jacksonville's Historic Preservation Commission, for example, advises JMS on preservation advocacy and education initiatives, ensuring that the historic character of the commercial district is maintained even in the midst of economic development. Furthermore, as it has done from the very beginning, JMS regularly asks for community feedback to ensure

that the program is acting in accordance with what people need and want.

This collaborative spirit is also reflected in JMS's financially sound practice of cultivating a diversified revenue stream. One-third of its budget is covered by a city resolution that provides an annual line item; another third comes from sponsorships, events, and project grants; while the rest comes from donations and fund raisers. As with the Pink Palace, contributions like advertising and in-kind support from local businesses and the community play a large part in keeping the revitalization effort running.

The Downtown Turnaround

In May 2011, the city of Jacksonville threw a massive Downtown Turnaround Celebration in the "new-old" town square, with a festive parade featuring the World-Famous Budweiser Clydesdales cantering down the newly reopened South Main Street. With food and wine vendors, live music, and children's pavilions, there was something for everyone. The Big Eli #16, a 650-foot touring Ferris wheel which was built in 1936 by Jacksonville's own Eli Bridge Company for the Utah State Fair, was moved back home for this special weekend. Having appeared as a scenic element in *Transformers 3: Dark of the Moon*, this celebrity amusement park attraction received a warm welcome in its hometown.

The organizers of the celebration explored the limits of imagination in concocting fun and unusual activities to present downtown as a new, vibrant district. The Imagine Foundation, a local nonprofit community arts organization, put up a Fine Arts Tent in the square with works by 14 artists hailing from Illinois, Missouri, and Colorado. To involve the community further, the foundation got



© Jacksonville Main Street

Left: Working with state preservation officers, Morgan County leaders contributed to the revitalization of downtown Jacksonville with over \$1 million in courthouse façade restorations that replaced the slate roof and repaired stonework, returning the building to its original glory.



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Left: Development of Gallery Hops, local museums, theater expansions, and art fairs helped draw more attention to local businesses and are largely responsible for transforming downtown's image into a hub of creativity.



Valley Junction, West Des Moines, Iowa: A-May-Zing Revival



artists to decorate newspaper racks in their own signature styles, and then urged locals to vote—and even bid—for their favorites.

This event followed up on the community-building success JMS had with the Wall Dog Murals project in 2006, where 60 sign painters from across America, and even two from abroad, created 10 downtown murals reflecting aspects of local history and beautifying once-blighted walls. Jacksonville continues to expand its arts and entertainment scene, with a new Arts Center planned for a downtown location and proposed expansions to existing theaters and museums.

More than 5,000 people attended the rededication party for the town square. Seeing how popular it was among townsfolk and tourists alike, JMS is seeking to turn the Downtown Turnaround Celebration into its signature annual festival. This year's event was also a huge success, featuring an Eli Bridge Company Scrambler ride, beer and wine tents, and Spiderman.

As long-time resident Donald Widdows says, “the Main Street project allows me to relive part of my childhood and show my grandchildren a little of what I enjoyed as a child.” To give the Bendorfs of the Pink Palace and other young families the opportunity to show their own children a piece of Jacksonville's downtown history, the city is continuing to reinvent itself, even as it basks in the rewards of Main Street revitalization.

Jacksonville by the Numbers

Main Street began: **1999**

Population: **19,466**

Net new jobs: **131**

Net new businesses: **57**

Building rehabs: **65**

New buildings: **1**

Vacancy rate when

Main Street began: **27%**

Vacancy rate now: **6%**

Housing units: **13**

Public investment: **\$7,600,000**

Private investment: **\$17,600,000**

Turning north from Railroad Avenue onto Fifth Street in West Des Moines, Iowa, you know that you've entered the historic Valley Junction district when the landmark Gateway Arch heaves into view. Built out of steel girders to resemble a railroad trestle bridge, the Arch evokes West Des Moines's early years as a busy railroad hub. Today, Valley Junction is just as busy as when it was buzzing with the switching facilities and repair shops of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad in the 1890s.

As self-described son of Valley Junction, Vincent Valdez puts it, “Valley Junction is many things—a historic community, an arts community, a business district, an entertainment district, and a place that is progressive and welcoming to so many.” With newly renovated and expanded streetscapes, spruced-up historic buildings, and more than 150 independent businesses, Valley Junction is truly a place where “great things come together.”

It wasn't easy to get to where it is today. Ever since it was incorporated in 1893, Valley Junction has struggled with numerous threats to its existence as a community. During the Great Depression, the relocation of the Rock Island Railroad left Valley Junction a ghost town. In the mid-1970s, the opening of the Valley West Mall drew shoppers and retailers away from downtown, and Valley Junction gained the rough-and-tough infamy of a railroad town. Then, in 1993, just as Valley Junction got all dolled up for its centennial celebration, the Raccoon River flooded its banks and poured into the city. Not a single building escaped damage. Businesses had to cope with up to six feet of water, broken doors and windows, warped floors—and, for a time, dampened spirits.

But Valley Junction did not simply survive these challenges—it thrived on them. Each crisis united the community further, under the common goal of revitalizing the district. Guided by the Historic Valley Junction Foundation (HVJF), which was accepted into Main Street Iowa in 1987, local property owners and merchants persevered in building up West Des Moines's one and only downtown. Today, like the multimillion

dollar levee built in the wake of the Great Flood of 1993, the Main Street Four-Point Approach® is a bulwark against blight in Valley Junction.

Celebrating Community

From a district with only three annual promotional events, Valley Junction now hosts more than 65 event days that bring in scores of residents and visitors each year. The district prides itself on being safe and family-friendly, with festivals that cater to people from all walks of life—a far cry from its rough-and-tough days as a railroad town, when the only stores on Fifth Street were dive bars and liquor stores. Among Valley Junction's offerings are a weekly farmers market and concert series, Gallery Nights that showcase brand-new art, a Cinco de Mayo festival that celebrates the town's large Latino community, and, of course, A-May-Zing Days, West Des Moines's signature month-long celebration of the city's heritage. There is truly something for everyone.

These events bring shoppers who become so enamored with Valley Junction's charm that they come back again and again. More than 50 percent of HVJF's annual \$500,000 budget comes directly from special events revenue, not to mention the many intangible, long-term benefits that come from a vibrant roster of events. The Tallgrass Grocery Co-op, for example, a cooperative retail store with more than 800 member-owners, decided to set up shop in Valley Junction in 2011 because of the success of its weekly farmers market.

“The farmers market provides an opportunity to reach out to local growers already delivering produce to the open market,” say owners Linda and Carlyn. “It also [has] a captive audience of consumers who support locally owned businesses.” With its efforts to educate consumers on the health benefits of local, in-season foods, Tallgrass adds greatly to the quality of life in the community.

The strong partnerships that come out of these events are also invaluable, weaving HVJF and Valley Junction even tighter into the social life of West Des Moines. HVJF's Executive Director Jim Miller regularly