Art – A Rural Community’s Newest Crop
Arnaudville, Louisiana

Over six years, Arnaudville, population 1,480, remade itself from a small, forgotten community into a rural hub of cultural activity. Led by an artist, a handful of townspeople re-imagined the town’s impediments as assets.

By adopting a decentralized, regional approach and tapping into existing talent, they’ve unearthed a wellspring of community pride. Visitors from all over the world and residents of the region play music at weekly acoustic fiddle jams, speak French at monthly conversation tables, and see bonfires floating down the bayou on flat-bottom boats during the Fire and Water Festival.

A vacant auto store turned artist cooperative, Arnaudville’s Town Market Rural Arts Center houses the Deux Bayous Gallery, painter George Marks’ studio, NuNu’s Café and its Frederick Stage, and the Frederick l’Ecole des Arts (Frederick School). Centered on creative living, the non-profit Frederick School invites the region’s residents to share their talents in the culinary, literary, performing, and visual arts, and environmental sustainability. Through an Art in Context program, activity spills past school walls into satellite stages, classrooms, and galleries across the region. Neighboring towns of Grand Coteau, Breaux Bridge, and Sunset host literary festivals and Cajun jams.

As recently as 2005, these activities and platforms did not exist, despite plenty of local talent. When artist George Marks returned to care for his ailing father, he found that old storefronts had been torn down, the bakery had closed, and the former meat market was now a drug house. A successful painter with gallery representation, Marks considered moving to New York, but decided to stay, transforming the old auto store into Town Market.

With friends, Marks wondered whether the factors blamed for Arnaudville’s decline could be converted into assets. Off the I-10 and I-49 beaten paths, big box stores and strip malls had bypassed Arnaudville. Straddling St. Landry and St. Martin Parishes, it was a step-child of both. By building on arts, distinctive culture, and tourism, the friends imagined that the Parishes might finally embrace them while preserving their freedom from superstore retail.

Although the Arnaudville experiment started as a grassroots “act first, apologize later” movement, Marks and fellow
organizers worked from sound political instincts and crafted savvy strategies. They reached out to artists who might relocate to the area but would celebrate, not change, Arnaudville’s unique rural culture reflecting Cajun, French, German, Spanish, and Native American influences. A relocating fiddler, for instance, re-opened a former drug-house as a fiddle shop.

Anticipating local skepticism, the team initially promoted its concept to cities and visitors from afar. The tourism offices for St. Landry and St. Martin Parishes became early advocates. Visitors do come: the French Consulate in New Orleans uses the Frederick School as a rural venue for presenters from French-speaking countries around the world. But organizers relied on early support from sources closer to home for crucial momentum. Through profit sharing, local private businesses hosting Frederick School satellite classes and events have a vested interest in the strategy’s success. As townspeople saw more people pumping gas, buying groceries, and eating at restaurants, the Mayor, Town Council, and Chamber of Commerce became supporters. Quoting Mt. Auburn and Associates’ study on the Louisiana cultural economy, Marks convinced town aldermen to sell the town’s old water processing center, out of commission for 20 years, to an out-of-town sculptor for his live/work studio.

The Arnaudville creative placemakers attracted resources from state and philanthropic sectors as well. In 2008, Mayor Kathy Richard and the Council sought and won a Louisiana cultural district designation from the state’s Cultural Economy Initiative. District status grants the town sales tax exemptions for original art purchases and eligibility for state historic tax credits. From staff at the Acadiana Center for the Arts—the regional arts council—Frederick School organizers learned grants could fund their programs, helping free them from bootstrapping operations when and if Marks sold a painting. They subsequently won grants from Consulat Général de France à La Nouvelle-Orléans, South Arts, and the Louisiana Cultural Economy Foundation, a private foundation resulting from the Cultural Economy Initiative.

With a powerful vision and persistence, an artist and his allies have demonstrated how cultural development can benefit their region. Property values have climbed, bucking national trends. Some 40-70 people, from schoolchildren to grandparents, come from as far as Canada, Haiti, and Africa to gather monthly at NuNu’s, break bread, and speak French. Whereas local communities previously felt cut off from one another, they now embrace a spirit of regionalism. Marks reflects, “Everything we do is an amalgamation of all of these different folks. We provide a platform for what people do best.” Future plans include converting the old jailhouse into a “bed, bread, and water” guesthouse, expanding artist housing, increasing Frederick School offerings on environmental sustainability, and exploring synergies between art and environmental stewardship. Creative leadership awakened Arnaudville to its own assets.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Artist initiator envisions a small, rural town with Cajun, French, German, Spanish, and Native American roots remade as an arts magnet.
- Drawing on local assets, regional partnerships with local businesses and county tourism office advocacy, town leaders’ skepticism slowly overcome.
- City leaders and artists win Cultural District designation from the state of Louisiana’s Cultural Economy Initiative, bringing tax breaks and historical preservation tax credits.
- In-migrating artists, rising property values, and greater local patronage and visitors from afar afield stimulate the local economy.