

# minnesota BUSINESS

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## PERSPECTIVES

### GUEST COLUMN



Dilla, an Ethiopian restaurant



Beko Tufa, owner of Dilla restaurant

## Cultural districts as economic development tools

Minnesota offers a blue ocean strategy for economic development in low income neighborhoods that are rich in cultural assets — developing cultural destination places that in turn bring wealth and job creation for the residents of those neighborhoods.

The earliest model of cultural destination areas in low income neighborhoods were District Del Sol in St. Paul and the American Indian Cultural Corridor in the Franklin Avenue area of Minneapolis. The emergence of LRT on the horizon mobilized the community in the old Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul as current residents did not want to see a repetition of the destruction to the community that the construction of I-94 did to the African American community. Instead, the question was posed — could LRT serve to build the economic assets of the community? To this end, a concept called The World Cultural Heritage District was launched, with the vision to develop the area as a destination point for cultural heritage tourism.

Community leaders who were part of this conversation launched three concepts — Little Mekong, focusing on an Asian destination place; Rondo Historic and Cultural District, building on the earlier model of an African American cultural corridor; and Little Africa, a place to experience the culture of African

Developing areas rich in culture into cultural destination places can bring jobs to low income neighborhoods

BY BRUCE CORRIE, PHD

immigrants. Of these concepts, Little Mekong is the most developed and well known. The other concepts are still being developed and are receiving increasing attention.

The unique aspect of this strategy is that it builds on existing cultural assets and uses marketing and branding to create a destina-



tion place for visitors who want to experience something different. It also inspires the local community to come out and support these efforts, as they see their own culture being celebrated in visible ways. One gets a sense of this when one visits the Little Mekong Night Market or Little Africa Fest. Research of festival participants funded by the McKnight Foundation revealed that the Little Africa Fest drew people from 15 cities and 32 zip codes. It also helped market the local businesses to the larger community.

Research also shows that when these businesses grow they tend to employ people from their community and the entrepreneurs take on positive roles in the community. My research on the college student market for ethnic food conducted with students at Concordia University-St. Paul revealed untapped potential. Ethnic restaurants, especially those that served the ethnic market, usually offered an affordable option for college students.

Since a number of these neighborhoods are on major transit routes the potential to grow these cultural assets are huge. Some core elements are needed to progress this new economic development tool.

First, mainstream policy makers and funders need to understand the unique potential of this strategy. The experience with the World Cultural Heritage District was that it

took a long time for policy makers and funders to “get it,” and when they did they favored investing in larger mainstream organizations to implement the strategy rather than the World Cultural Heritage District that developed the strategy in the first place. Concordia University-St. Paul has consistently supported this concept in various ways and is a core supporter of Little Africa.

Second, public and private investment is needed to help build the cultural infrastructure in the form of facade improvements on buildings, as well as development of cultural concepts such as murals on buildings that help create a sense of place.

Third, the businesses need technical assistance to cater to mainstream customers who want a different experience but in a culturally and emotionally safe setting.

There is a unique experience happening in Minnesota and I am really thrilled to be part of the development of this strategy with colleagues such as Gene Gelgelu, Va-Megn Thoj, Nieeta Presley, and Lisa Tabor who are working so hard to make this happen.



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