ARTS-LINKED RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

International Sonoran Desert Alliance
Ajo, Arizona
The Curley School

Ajo’s community revitalization story begins with the effort to save one vacant, quickly deteriorating historic building.
STRATEGY
Jump start a new economic niche by attracting productive artists to Ajo

Curley School Artisan Housing
• 30 spacious affordable live/work units
• Shared “dirty” work space – clay studio, wood shop
• Additional inexpensive studio space
• Gallery
• Performance venues
PARTNERS & FUNDING

• Pima County took the lead in obtaining government support in Arizona
• $9.6M project w/9 funding sources, incl:
  – LIHTC & HTC
  – HOME from County and State
  – HUD Rural Housing & Econ Dev
  – FHLB SF AHP
  – National Bank of AZ (only $200K mortgage)
  – Community donations ($150K)
IMMEDIATE IMPACTS

• 29 local workers were hired, many obtaining on-the-job training.
• 30 live/work artist units w/35 artists
• The project pays County real estate taxes
• The community gained hope – people started to believe revitalization is possible
AND . . .
the Ajo Chamber of Commerce asked ISDA
to explore purchasing and renovating the
deteriorating town plaza
STRATEGY
 Restore the vitality of Ajo’s historic town center and create the sense of community ownership

• Renovate the deteriorating buildings and make affordable new commercial space

• Improve the plaza park and bandstand and make all community uses FREE

• Restore and activate the plaza’s two indoor performance venues
RESULTS SO FAR

• Visitor Center records 365% increase in visitors during first year in the Ajo Plaza (March 2014)

• 12 new businesses in the Ajo Plaza

• 17 new jobs created in the Ajo Plaza
AJO PLAZA
Building & Park Restoration

- HHS Community Economic Dev—$765,000
- HUD N’hood Stabilization Program 1—$750,000
- NEA Our Town—$100,000
- CDBG—$130,000
- DOT Transportation Enhancement—$500,000
- NAD Bank CAIP—$200,000
- Freeport McMoRan Foundation—$155,000
FINALLY -- ADD TO THE MIX
AN INTERNATIONAL RETREAT CENTER

STRATEGY

• Use to attract groups of artists for shorter term stays – also ecotourists, other groups
• Use for sponsored artist residency programs
• Use to “bring market” to Ajo
• Use as an economic driver
RESULTS SO FAR

• Opened March 2015 with 16 sleeping rooms, 4 meeting rooms, and a commercial kitchen
• August 2015 adds 5 more sleeping rooms
• October 2015 adds a lounge and dorms

• Now hosting mission centered events plus serving community needs
• On its way to breaking even in 2016
Conference Center Funding for facility development and artist-in-residence programming

- ArtPlace -- $536,740
- Ford Foundation SDAS -- $1,500,000
- Freeport McMoRan Foundation -- $75,000
- USDA Community Facilities -- $80,000
- USDA RBEG -- $99,500
- HUD Rural Innovation Fund -- $300,000
- HUD CDBG -- $75,000
- NEA Our Town -- $100,000 (part to this site)
- NEA ArtWorks Folk & Traditional -- $25,000
Most important to ISDA

FROM THE START – AND THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

We have been using the arts to build community, to bring people together across generations and cultures
RESULTS

MEASURING CHANGE IN VIBRANCY

2003

• 4 annual festivals, only 2 in the Plaza

2014

• 7 annual festivals in the Plaza (400-700 ppl)
• 32 other new events in the Plaza (75-250 ppl)
THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. Involve everyone from the beginning
2. Build on existing energy and passion
3. Have a big vision and do lots of small projects
4. Partner whenever possible – go cross-sector
5. Do creative programming simultaneously with building renovation – don’t wait
6. Don’t get too hung up on the logical order of projects – run with the opportunities
7. Treasure authenticity
8. Know that real change takes a long time
COME VISIT AJO, AZ!

International Sonoran Desert Alliance