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The Arts Endowment Goes Pedestrian

Can the artistic community, armed with miniscule grants, succeed where multibillion-dollar bureaucracies have so often failed in bringing new life and pride to cities, neighborhoods and towns across America? At best the idea sounds wide-eyed, at worst like 'putting the inmates in charge of the asylum.' But scarcely noticed by the general public, the National Endowment for the Arts, best known for its larger program of aid to theaters and museums, has been doing just that for the last 10 years.

The Arts Endowment's modest community-grant program—recently christened "Liveable Cities"—practices "small is beautiful" with a vengeance. Since 1969, only $7 million has been dispensed—less than such federal behemoths as the Department of Housing and Urban Development often hand out in a single morning.

Yet community leaders from such scattered cities as Galveston and Jersey City, Savannah and Pittsburgh, Milwaukee and Boston, offer rave reviews for the endowment's miniscule, which average a mere $25,000, require a 50 percent local match and can be used only for planning, not actual capital construction. The projects funded by the endowment cover such local arts agencies, neighborhood and historic preservation groups, foundations and universities and individual designers.

The money, local leaders say, comes at crucial early stages of projects, isn't layered with complicated forms and bureaucratic red tape and is accompanied by a personal relationship and commitment from the endowment's staff. It's often the seed money that gets major projects rolling.

Liveable Cities grant, less returning Arts Endowment Chairman Nancy Hanks, are designed to encourage citizens to think about the ways they can enhance the special identity of their cities and towns, preserve the best of the past, create jobs and recreation opportunities and "make their towns not necessarily bigger, but better.

Some grant moneys have been wasted through poor execution or hosting of local governments and business communities to unconventional ideas. But many have proven phenomenally successful.

In Galveston, whose Victorian business section, The Strand, was proclaimed the "Wall Street of the Southwest" before Houston took the lead some 60 years ago, the county arts council decided that the visual and performing arts could not survive without the creation of a new economic and cultural climate.

The arts council formed a union with business, minority and preservation groups and applied for an $8,000 grant to study the feasibility of using and renovating The Strand, a 19th-century commercial architecture, for diversified cultural, residential, retail and wholesale use—"neither a staid tourist set nor a museum.

The result: foundations invested more than $200,000 to purchase historic but endangered old buildings, the banking community established a $1 million credit line, including $7.5 million has been invested in housing, shops and stores. The Strand. Additional endowment grants helped develop an action plan for further development. Now The Strand, which used to be nearly deserted by day and feared by night, pulsates with people and new development.

The historic preservation group Savannah Landmarks is using an Arts Endowment grant to plan and obtain HUD financing for rehabilitation of an entire Victorian area in a 162-acre community where 50 percent of the residents are low income. The objective: to oust the slum landlords who've let the houses deteriorate and restore the buildings without displacing the poor tenants.

Endowment grants have been used to let neighborhood residents "plan for themselves" and achieve "preservation without displacement." Not only have the projects been amazingly successful but the planning itself has drawn city councilmen, teachers, doctors, lawyers, downtown business owners and even slum landlords to the table of the 40-member group.

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Mr. Peirce writes a syndicated column on city and state issues.

Edmun D. Bacon, Philadelphia-famed architect-planner, notes that the endowment is "free of fourments and impediments to clear thinking that encumber a great institution like HUD. It will be the Liveable City program that will generate the future policies of HUD." "The liveable city," Bacon says, "is a city that you can walk in and from which you can open up and refurbished bordering on neighborhood landmarks bring them a new setting and status.

And that, in turn, says Robert M. Nulty—himself the prime mover of the endowment's city-livable cities—one can provide a catalyst for the steps in city and neighborhood renewal. It's not the master plan; it's first something you can start on today.