



Your complimentary use period has ended.
Thank you for using PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)



NEWS

[send to printer](#)

February 27-March 5, 2003

Also this issue:

CITYSPACE

[Heinz Catch-up](#)
-Daniel Brook

Ogontz Part II



Electric avenue: New shops and businesses along Ogontz Avenue have had a positive ripple effect throughout the West Oak Lane neighborhood. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

The avenue's rebirth stabilizes a neighborhood.

by Sue Sierra

"You have to see the bathroom!"

It's not every day that a store owner touts his restroom as a selling feature. But Art Noir, a vibrantly colored gallery and frame shop in West Oak Lane, is not a common store. The walls glow with mandarin orange, rich purple, vibrant lemony green. It's half frame shop and half gallery, featuring originals and reproductions with a focus on work by African Americans. And yes, the bathroom is beautiful -- exquisitely decorated by co-owners Kelly Walker and Sean Simmons. "I wanted to show what anyone can do without spending a lot of money," Walker explains.

From the outside, Art Noir is equally attractive, with stars and sculpture in the windows and royal purple awnings. The gallery's presence attracted an enticing African-influenced clothing store and a flower arrangement shop to open a few doors down. There's a furniture store, a dollar store, a Chinese restaurant. The overall feel of Ogontz Plaza, the shopping center housing Art Noir, is relaxed, funky, sociable -- an eclectic, artsy, Afrocentric shopping strip emphasizing home decor.

Twenty years ago, Ogontz Plaza was "a disaster," says John Ungar, who runs economic development and housing programs for the Ogontz Avenue Revitalization Corporation (OARC). OARC bought Ogontz Plaza in the early '80s, when it was dilapidated, teeming with trash and 90-percent vacant. OARC still keeps a poster-sized photo of the old plaza in its offices: inspiration and confirmation of how far they've come.

OARC's goal is to revitalize not only Ogontz Plaza, but all of Ogontz Avenue, and its strategy focuses on local enterprises such as Art Noir. Two-thirds of the stores in the plaza are startup businesses. OARC provides support with space design, and writes leases that are friendly to new businesses. At first, Ungar says, OARC followed the conventional wisdom and searched for a national chain store to "anchor" Ogontz Plaza. But it was hard to attract quality national chains, and OARC began to believe that local entrepreneurs would better support its goal of a pedestrian-friendly "urban Main Street." The lack of chain stores is a refreshing difference. Instead, the plaza's largest tenant is the only dollar store in Philadelphia owned by an African-American woman. To draw foot traffic, OARC lured PennDOT to open a photo ID shop in the plaza (and even got them to agree to a bright blue, nonstandard awning to keep with the artsy look). PennDOT and a state liquor "shoppe" are draws to the shopping center, and once visitors come, they seem to stick around to explore the other businesses.

The improvements at Ogontz Plaza have had ripple effects on other blocks. China House in Ogontz Plaza -- newly opened and brightly lit, with neon edging on the windows -- has prompted the owner of the Chinese place up the street to clean up his storefront. When OARC put out new planters at the plaza, the 7200 block wanted them, too.

Overall, upper Ogontz Avenue has a relaxed and homey feel. One block is commercial; the next has houses on one side, stores on the other. There's a flower shop, a laundromat, the impressively gothic Mt. Calvary Apostolic Church. The next block is residential, with rowhouses on the east side and twins on the west. It doesn't feel like a jumble, but



Your complimentary
use period has ended.
Thank you for using
PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to
Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)

ish plastic lighting of chain fast-food restaurants is absent; instead,

e, one of Philly's classic stable African-American neighborhoods. "A
lace," Ungar explains. "We want to attract people to the neighborhood,
young couples, folks who like the artsy feel." Through creating this Afrocentric Main Street, OARC hopes to bring young
families to West Oak Lane, which has lost population in the last decade and is, like most of the city, struggling to deal
with vacant buildings. OARC's work on Ogontz is only part of its comprehensive plan for the neighborhood, which
includes housing, helping seniors on home improvements, a charter school and other commercial buildings.

When I confess to Ungar that I've usually passed through his neighborhood at 50 per, he smiles and tells me that OARC
is working with the Streets Department. Soon Ogontz will be narrowed to one lane each way, with curb bump-outs and
new streetlights. My guess is that when drivers slow down, they'll notice the enticing colors on the storefronts, and that
Simmons and Walker will soon have flocks of new customers.

And when you visit what Walker calls "downtown uptown," do check out the bathroom -- it's worth seeing.

*Sue Sierra is policy coordinator for the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations and a member
of the Design Advocacy Group.*



-- Respond to this article in our Forums -- [click](#) to jump there