

## On the road: Tennessee

## Arts district carves a niche in Memphis' revitalized downtown

*More than 40 shops and galleries are part of the colorful mosaic that energizes the South Main area.*

By SALLY WALKER DAVIES  
Special to the Post-Dispatch

The short, compact man with paint-splattered pants and a knit cap approaches from the back of the Art Village Gallery. The smile on Ephraim Urevbu's face registers at least a thousand watts of warmth and good humor on a cold, gray day in Memphis' South Main Arts District.

Just a few blocks west of the Mississippi River, conversation with Urevbu flows as swiftly as the current on the great waterway. His energy is palpable and contagious as he talks about his role in the rebirth of one of this city's oldest neighborhoods.

"From Beale Street down here, everything was boarded up," Urevbu says in a soft Nigerian accent, gesturing toward Beale, about six blocks north from his gallery. "About 1993, 1994, I found this incredible building — you could see the sky from where we're sitting."

Despite gaps in the roof, despite no electricity or running water, and despite a deserted neighborhood that at the time could best be described as gloomy, Urevbu (pronounced with a silent "b") was inspired by a vision of what could be. He moved his gallery from Beale into the neglected space, and with a broad smile he recounts the reaction of the building's owners: "They thought I was nuts."

Until recently, energy was not a word one would normally associate with downtown Memphis. Now, energy crackles throughout the city center. The FedEx Forum, the new home for the National Basketball Association's Grizzlies, is almost complete. Restaurants and clubs overflow with patrons on the weekends — and not just on Beale Street. New lofts and spacious homes along the riverfront are bringing residents back downtown for the first time in decades. And the South Main Arts District is at the center of the resurgence.

South Main bustled with activity through the '50s, but as travel by train declined, so did the area. A few businesses held on, including the city's oldest restaurant, the Arcade, and a hotel that rented rooms by the hour, the Lorraine. The assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the Lorraine's

balcony seemed to be the death knell for the area, but it was just one more blow to an area already blighted by the movement of residents and businesses out of downtown and the closing of one of the city's train stations.

"Everything downtown was abandoned; there was no control on development out into the suburbs, and there was a flight of business once people's homes were out there," says June West, executive director of Memphis Heritage.

Slowly at first, then with growing momentum, the atmosphere changed. Homes started going up on the riverfront. The National Civil Rights Museum was built, freezing the Lorraine as it was the day King was shot and drawing thousands of visitors a year. Galleries and studios opened in renovated spaces, as did boutiques, gift stores and restaurants. It was as if a light had been turned on, increasing in brightness every day. Now, more than 40 shops and galleries comprise the South Main Arts District.

"The feel of the place was right," says Michael Johnson, whose Blue Monkey restaurant and bar has opened to success beyond his expectations. A solid lunch business has surprised Johnson, who had hoped to become the nighttime neighborhood hangout for the community — and has. The appeal of the Blue Monkey is its artful blend of the past and the present. Flat-screen plasma TVs hang from exposed brick walls under the building's original tin-roof ceiling; traditional plate lunches share menu space with new-generation pizzas made on tortillas.

The last Friday evening of each month, South Main shops and galleries stay open late for the Last Friday Trolley Tour. Trolleys roll through the district, dropping riders at galleries and shops where they can grab a glass of wine and mingle with artists and gallery owners, or browse through gifts and clothing.

The shops are as diverse as the crowd, with African-American artists featured at Joysmith, fresh-cut flowers and unique gifts at Gestures, folk art at D'Edge Art & Unique Treasures, and the collection of the late Vogue photographer Jack Robinson at the Robinson Gallery/Archives.

"I didn't know a Rothko from



A.J. WOLFE / THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL (MEMPHIS, TENN.)

The South Main Arts District is situated just south of downtown Memphis.

## If you go

**Getting there:** The South Main Arts District is six blocks south of Beale Street on South Main Street. Most of the shops, galleries and restaurants are on South Main, between Huling and G.E. Patterson; many others front Huling, G.E. Patterson and Front streets.

a Kandinsky," says Brenda Durden, discussing her decision to open a gallery on South Main. She found someone who did in Aaron Frye. A newcomer with a graduate degree in art, Frye showed up on South Main and liked what he saw.

"It's a vibrant, growing area,"

**Getting around:** Metered street parking and some paid parking lots are available. Trolleys run through the district at regular intervals and can be boarded at stops along Main Street, including Peabody Place, the Cook Convention Center and the Marriott Hotel. The trolley is 30 cents a ride. The last Friday night of each month, South Main shops and galleries remain open until 9 p.m.,

Frye says. "I think it has a lot of potential. Unlike New York or Chicago, here there's a love of getting (the arts community) established."

"I'd rather paint than work," artist David George Hinske says with a laugh as he greets patrons at Durden Gallery on a recent

and the trolley is free from 6 to 10. Trolley maps and neighborhood information can be found at [www.downtownmemphis.com](http://www.downtownmemphis.com) or by calling 1-901-575-0540.

**More information:** [www.southmainmemphis.org](http://www.southmainmemphis.org), [www.downtownmemphis.com](http://www.downtownmemphis.com), [www.artvillagegallery.com/main.asp](http://www.artvillagegallery.com/main.asp), [www.durdengallery.com](http://www.durdengallery.com), [www.memphisheritage.org](http://www.memphisheritage.org).

Friday night. When he's not working at FedEx, Hinske works mostly in acrylics that can fool you into thinking they're oils. He views his art as a great second career, not a hobby, with studios in Memphis and Taos, N.M. "It's something I can do until I fall over."

Back at the corner of Huling and South Main, Ephraim Urevbu perches on a leopard-print stool in his gallery. He talks of how his world now revolves around this corner building. He lives upstairs over the gallery, does his own framing and that of others in the basement frame shop, and entertains in Zanzibar, his restaurant next door that is going through a "re-evaluation."

"My vision, really, is to create an eclectic art district where you can come and have coffee, listen to poetry and book reviews, see art exhibitions, jazz," Urevbu says excitedly.

From the vibrant colors of his paintings, the rapid movement of his gestures and the animated expressions on his face, energy flows from this man — as it does all across South Main.

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