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How Memphis got its groove back

Pittsburgh could learn some lessons from this soulful city: To keep swinging, keep growing

For someone involved in the affairs of his own city, a visit to another facing perhaps similar issues is of special interest. Thus, a four-day visit to Memphis, Tenn.

Pittsburgh and Memphis have comparable populations. Both are old. Memphis started as a trading crossroads for native Americans because of its high bluff on the Mississippi River. It has one river, but what a river. Pittsburgh became important because of its three.

Memphis depended on cotton trading for its wealth; Pittsburgh, iron and steel. Both commodities faded in importance, contributing to a decline in the prosperity of both cities.

Both downtowns have seen or are seeing hard times. Memphis' took a beating in the wake of the 1968 assassination in Memphis of Martin Luther King Jr. School desegregation and busing led to "white flight" to its suburbs and de facto segregation in education — white children into private, church and other schools in the suburbs and African-American children into city schools, which became of less interest to white taxpayers.

The city of Memphis has been unable to get a commuter tax to help it with its problems either.

The primordial question is, what lessons can Pittsburgh learn from the experience of Memphis? Memphis has definitely approached some of its problems

constructively, using imagination.

The most mind-blowing example for me was a sports venue, currently used by the National Basketball Association Memphis Grizzlies, which moved from Vancouver, Canada, in 2001. In 1991 Memphis had built for \$65 million with city, county and state financing an arena called the Pyramid, which the Grizzlies use. It is bright and shining, adorning the horizon. The Grizzlies' owners and the NBA have now decided that it is obsolete and that a new arena must be built. Price tag: \$250 million. Still unpaid cost of the Pyramid? \$32 million. The debt, a showstopper? No. Memphis' solons think the new arena has to be built.

The philosophy behind this approach? Keep building new projects or the city will stagnate and die. Memphis has also built a new downtown stadium for its triple-A baseball team, the Redbirds. Moral for Pittsburgh? Extend the "T" to the North Shore. Build the Penguins a new arena. Perhaps. (*Please don't write or call me on this point.*)

Another Pittsburgh comparison and question: How did Memphis turn around the seemingly irreversible decline of its downtown? There was no flagship department store to attract or keep. They were all gone. What did remain there in real estate stock included a closed, old, famous hotel — the Peabody, which Memphians (that's what they call themselves) — had used and

revered since the salad days of the cotton traders.

Entrepreneurs with imagination, led by the Belz family, bought the Peabody in 1975 and maintained it, closed, paying the utility bills and protecting it from looting with security guards for a number of years. They also bought up a number of surrounding downtown properties. They then reopened the attractively renovated Peabody, with ceremony, in 1981. It's now in the midst of an eight-square-block area of shops, restaurants and other attractions.

Led by the Peabody and the baseball stadium, Memphis' downtown is now definitely back on the road to life, with some 10,000 residents. It also includes the Memphis Rock 'n' Soul Museum just off Beale Street, a very entertaining shrine to the city's musical traditions — soul, Stax Records, and country, Sun Records. Graceland, Elvis Presley's mansion — allegedly the third-most-visited residence in the world — is outside of downtown Memphis.

Memphis' downtown atmosphere is helped by the absence of beggars. Its police enforce anti-begging laws, unlike Pittsburgh's, who do not deign to patrol our Downtown on foot. Downtown Memphis also has \$5 all-day parking, and trolleys at 60 cents a ride.

Memphis' primary problem is its schools, which are still failing to produce easily employable graduates. The city's high-tech employers are FedEx

and AutoZone, neither of which soak up many minimally educated employees.

There is also still a race problem. Both the city of Memphis and Shelby County — comparable to Pittsburgh and Allegheny County — have African-American mayors, reflecting the makeup of the population as well as the leadership qualities of the individuals in the two posts.

At the same time, as one of the mayors put it, management of the two entities has changed hands, from white to black, but ownership hasn't. What I found really striking was the willingness of Memphians to talk frankly about their problems as *common* problems, including in front of Yankees.

The final image of the spirit of Memphis that I carried away with me back to Pittsburgh was from the Memphis zoo. It spent a stunning \$17 million to lease two pandas from China and build them a magnificent enclosure, completed in 2003 with the arrival from Beijing of the beasts, YaYa and LeLe. Rather than resting on its laurels, the zoo has now launched a new \$21 million drive to build a Northwest Passage habitat, operating clearly within the city's guidelines: "Grow or die."

I have the feeling they have it right and that we should go and do likewise.

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