Murals on Top:

Rewriting Hilltop's Narrative

Heather Cory
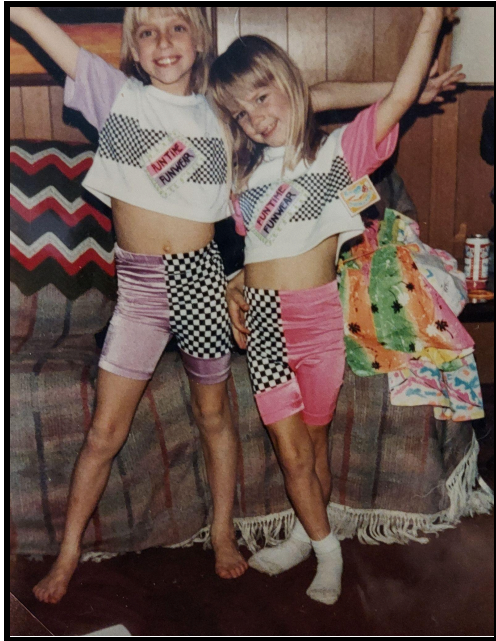**June 9, 2025**

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Figure 1.1: My sister, Lisa, and me, sporting our favorite 80's outfits.

A Personal Note:

I was born and raised along with my older sister in Hilltop on the west side of Columbus in the early 80s (see Figure: 1.1). I spent summers running through sprinklers, riding my bike to the Dairy Twist and eating frozen candy at the Valleyview Pool. My winters were full of snowball fights, classes at Westgate Recreation Center and hot cocoa after winter walks with my family. It was a good childhood, full of fond memories. But as time went on and we grew, Hilltop did not. Like many other families, my parents made the decision to move to the suburbs, where there was less crime and more opportunities. Surrounded by cornfields, I missed the freedom of my previous home, but life moved on, and eventually, so did I.

Maybe I was nostalgic for my childhood memories, but 30-some years later I decided to pick up my life and move back to Hilltop for a fresh start. So much had changed since I had last called Hilltop my home. The streets were riddled with boarded-up stores fronts, homes were left to decay and crime had become the new norm. It wasn't uncommon to find homeless wandering the streets, begging for money, or prostitutes on the corners looking for johns. Hilltop no longer reflected the wholesome childhood I once remembered. But despite all this, there was still a spark of the community I once knew and it appeared they weren't planning on going down without a fight. There was only one thing left for me to do, join the cause

Introduction:

You don't need to spend much time in the Hilltop area to understand it's struggling (see Figure 2.1). For the once thriving community, dwindling populations, lack of business opportunities

Figure 2.1: "Welcome to Hilltop, USA" sign reflects the struggling community of Hilltop at Rhodes Park in Columbus, Ohio.

and high crime rates are amongst the many challenges it's currently facing.   While the city has been investing in redevelopment, the process is slow. Poor reputations and few amenities make it hard to attract new residents and consumers. Even as new businesses pop up, the lack of customers seems to drive them to close in a matter of months. It can be disheartening to those who want to see the community succeed. To become more attractive to businesses, new clientele and residents, Hilltop needs to redefine its community and what it has to offer. But to move forward, we must understand the past and how Hilltop became what it is today.

History:

Hilltop is a working-class community in Columbus, Ohio, bound by Interstates 270, 70 and 62 (See Figure 2.2). Originally a farming community, Hilltop started to urbanize in 1863, (Envision Hilltop 22-31). It appealed to many, as it was safe from flooding and free of the dust and grime of the city.   According to Envision Hilltop, "Hilltop was regarded as one of the most desirable areas to live in Central Ohio," (30). Its popularity only increased after the flood of 1913, which killed over 90 people and destroyed the low-lying neighborhood, Franklinton (Motz). With the opening of local hospitals and warehouses, Hilltop's population continued to grow, reaching its peak in the 1960s with 33,000 people and

Figure 2.2: Hilltop boundaries in Columbus, Ohio (Google Maps)

371 businesses (Envision Hilltop 30). In 1969, Westland Mall opened with over 100 retail stores, and it quickly became the place people gathered to shop and socialize. Sadly, Hilltop would only have a few more years to celebrate its success before it started to drastically decline. See Figure 2.3 for Hilltop's Historical highlights.

Figure 2.3: Historical Highlights in Hilltop's History:

- 1890:   Construction of West Broad Street
- 1861:   Establishment of Camp Chase
- 1868:   Columbus State Hospital opens

- 1869:   Two rails installed through Hilltop
- 1870:   Columbus State Institute built
- 1891:   Electric streetcar service
- 1913:   The Great Flood
- 1940:   Electric streetcar service ends
- 1946:   General Motors Ternstedt plant
- 1954:   Westinghouse Plant opens
- 1969:   Westland Mall opens
- 1988:   Westinghouse Plant closes
- 1992:   Columbus State Hospital closes
- 2007:   General Motors Ternstedt Plant closes
- 2012:   Westland Mall closes
- 2012:   Hollywood Casino opens

(Envision Hilltop 24)

Hilltop's downturn became most notable in the 1980s and 90s, as large manufacturing companies moved overseas and state-run hospitals' funding dissolved. The loss of jobs heavily impacted the security of businesses and residents, starting an endless cycle. As more businesses closed and with fewer amenities available, many residents left the area for more prosperous communities, (Envision Hilltop 36).

Problem:

Today, Hilltop's population has dropped to below 19,500 people and with as few as 230 businesses reported in 2005, leaving many abandoned properties scattered along West Broad Street and Sullivan Avenue. With the medium household income being around $27,000, the poverty rate is at 42% (Envision Hilltop, 25 and 28). Most of Hilltop's residents are finding it challenging to survive, let alone prosper.

With so many families struggling, Hilltop has developed a bad reputation for its high crime rates and currently has a "D" rating on CrimeGrade.org. Hilltop was named the deadliest neighborhood in 2018 with 16 homicides (Envision Hilltop 48). Crime, prostitution, drugs, violence and vacancies have become major concerns to the neighborhood.   "The biggest problem with the Hilltop is the street walkers and bums,"

said Jason Strausbaugh, owner of Daddy-o's Pub, "My corner at Oakley and Sullivant has tons of hooker traffic!" According to Envision Hilltop, crimes most reported in the area in descending order are:

- Robbery
- Aggravated assault
- Sexual assault
- Homicide

This issue has only been exacerbated by the opioid crisis. Residents often speak of finding needles along sidewalks and other public areas. (Envision Hilltop 58). The homeless are often passed out in parks or at boarded-up store fronts. While efforts are being made to clean up the streets, both literally and figuratively, it hasn't been enough to change people's perception of the area. Hilltop's issues are still very much on display.

In the last few years Columbus has invested in redeveloping the Hilltop area. Programs such as RISE Hilltop and Envision Hilltop invest in physical infrastructure and Human Capital Development. They target health, wellness, transportation and housing (Envision Hilltop). Hilltop Arts Collective has commissioned local artists to paint murals to increase the visual appeal of the community. Each year they fund at least one major artwork to be displayed in the community and a number of smaller projects. Despite these efforts, businesses find it difficult to gain traction and attract consumers. See appendices for further information on these community groups.

Solution

One solution to Hilltop's current challenges is to showcase local murals and businesses as part of a scavenger hunt through the Hilltop area, called "Murals on Top." By drawing new euthusiasm for the neighborhood, established businesses can flourish and new
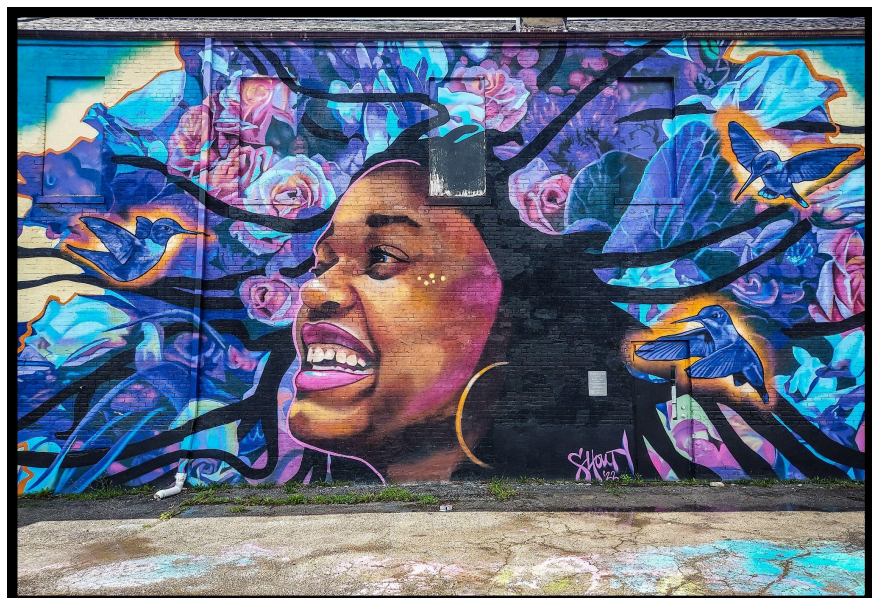

Figure 3.1: Mural "Free to Be" by Sarah Hout located at 2338 W. Broad Street, Columbus, Ohio.

businesses can stabilize.

Murals on Top would address two of the major obstacles that prevent Hilltop from achieving the current goal of redevelopment. First, increasing foot traffic to small businesses is pivotal to both the success of the individual business and the community as a whole. According to a recent poll of local business owners, 75% feel increasing foot traffic in the area would greatly help their business. As most business owners say the majority of their customers live locally, it's important to focus on attracting new clientele to the area. The second challenge that needs to be addressed is to change the negative reputation of the Hilltop area, which prevents many consumers from traveling to this part of the city.   "People only see the bad. They don't see the good," said Terri Nino, owner of Clay Street Ceramics. By concentrating on these two areas, Murals on Top creates an avenue for Hilltop to change its narrative from within.

Figure 3.2: Untitled mural by Eric Hernandez, located at 2331 West Broad Street, Columbus Ohio.

Figure 3.3: Mural "Caught in the Act" by J. Jarvis at Thirdway Cafe and AJ's Tacos located at West Broad Street, Columbus Ohio.

The plan is relatively simple. Murals on Top would create a facebook page to highlight local artists, murals and businesses in the Hilltop area, featuring 1-2 every month. Businesses wanting to be included as part of the group would offer a 10% discount to participants while conducting their scavenger hunt. Once completed, the participants would post their pictures to the facebook page and sign up for a free t-shirt.   By reframing Hilltop as an art community, people can start to see the community in a new light. This approach has been very successful in a small neighborhood in Miami, Florida.

Figure 3.4: Mural "Her Glow Up" by Jodie Herrera and Jher Seno, located in Miami, Florida at Wynwood Walls.

Wynwood Walls:

What was once an abandoned warehouse district in Miami, Florida, is now the thriving Wynwood Walls, an outside street art museum. As part of an urban revitalization project, Goldman Global Arts created 35,000 square feet of graffiti art. Over 100 artists are featured for over 3 million visitors each year. Miami Mayor Francis Suarez said, "They did it unconventionally, through creativity. When you have that kind of vision, you create places as opposed to buildings. They turned what was once an undesirable, impoverished, and crime-ridden area into one of the most iconic, most visited neighborhoods in the city." (Laster). According to a Premier Inn study, Wynwood Walls is number nine in the world's top 50 instagram landmarks, making it to number one in the United States. With murals already part of the Hilltop landscape, creating an outdoor art museum similar to Wynwood Walls will be low cost and simple to construct.

Figure 3.5: Proposed T-shirt Design

Projected Costs:

The cost of the Mural on Top will be minimal. The program will start out with 100 free shirts to give participants, which will cost $718 (see Figure 3.5 for T-shirt design). Participants will be asked to cover their own shipping costs. As a way to continue building up the Hilltop community, using a local business, such as

Shout Out Loud Shirts is important. They have fair prices and are located in the heart of the Hilltop community (see Figure 3.6 for projected pricing). For the first year, Murals on Top facebook page will be built and managed by volunteers.

Figure 3.6: Projected costs

Category	Description	Amount
Small	15 shirts	$107.40
Medium	25 shirts	$179.00
Large	25 shirts	$179.00
1x Large	20 shirts	$143.20
2x Large	10 shirts	$71.60
3x Large	5 shirts	$35.80
		$716.00

Timeline:

Once approved, the timeline to complete this project should take around 7-8 weeks (see Figure 3.7). After review, it will take up to a month to have the t-shirts printed and shipped. To build the facebook page and its content will take around 3 weeks, leaving 1 week to launch the final project. Each year Murals on Top will be reaccessed with a new set of goals based on its success and specific areas to be targeted for improvement.

Figure 3.7: Project Timeline

PHASE		DETAILS	Month 1				Month 2		
			Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7
	PROJECT WEEK:								
1	**Project Conception and Initiation**	- Plan Review	Plan Review						
		- Order T-shirts		Order T-shirts					
		- Finalize participating businesses		Finalize participating businesses					
2	**Project Facebook Page Creation**	-Collect material for Facebook				Material for FB			
		-Artist inteviews and bios				Artist Interviews and bios			
		- Set up facebook page					Set up Facebook page		
3	**Project Launch**	- Launch facebook page							Lauch FB page

Looking Towards the Future:

There are some promising projects currently underway, which help solidify the future of Hilltop. Most notable is the hotel being built at Hollywood Casino and an outdoor mall and senior living apartments at the old Westland Mall site. Both will bring new jobs, revenue and clientele to the area. Murals on Top could continue to grow along with the community, adding a local touch to the growing businesses, potentially selling locally made merchandise and community pride products. The future is full of possibilities for both Hilltop and Murals on Top.

Summary:

"Strong and vibrant neighborhoods do not become great by accident, but are the result of vision, planning, leadership, and a sense of community."
        -Mayor Andew J. Ginther, City of Columbus, (Envision Hilltop 8).

Figure 4.1: Mural by unknown artist, located at 2381 Sullivant Ave, Columbus, Ohio.

In summary, Hilltop is in desperate need of rebranding to be successful in its revitalization projects. By using local murals and established businesses the narrative can be rewritten to be an exciting place of diversity, art and culture.

Appendix: Community Projects

Envision Hilltop:

Envision Hilltop is a community plan that addresses physical infrastructure and human capital development. The plan took 20 months to complete, with extensive research, community involvement and planning. Envision Hilltop outlines current issues in the Hilltop area and maps out their goals to address those issues.

Form more information: https://www.envisionhilltop.com/

Hilltop Arts Collective

Hilltop Arts Collective is a non-profit organization whose goal is to empower the Hilltop area through art and culture. Each year they are involved in a variety of projects, including Summer Jam West Arts and Music Festival, commission art projects throughout the community as well as other community events.

For more information: https://www.hilltoparts.org/

Rise Hilltop:

Rise Hilltop is a private economic community development corporation which connects business owners, property owners and the community with available resources, opportunities and education.

Goals:
  -Safe and welcoming businesses areas
  -Economic Diversity and Inclusivity
  -Affordable real estate

For more information: https://hilltoprise.org/

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