Operation Storefront aims to fill vacancies and dreams at the same time

Bakers, artists and others will move into empty spaces with help from downtown boosters

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At a forgettable, long-shuttered building on North Liberty Street that people hurry past without a second glance, LaTrice Whitaker will be selling cupcakes, playing jazz and pouring mugs of gourmet coffee. At a similarly empty building nearby, two local men will showcase furniture they craft by hand from salvaged wood.

And if Sarah Doherty has her way, after sundown every night, the blank facade of 307 W. Baltimore St. will become a virtual movie screen as she projects video artworks onto its arched front windows.

Over the next few months, lights will be flipped on at one darkened downtown address after another. Would-be entrepreneurs and artists will blow cobwebs from corners, wipe street grime from display windows and welcome people inside former stores and offices that no one's thought about in months, years or even decades.

Operation Storefront is what they're calling this fledgling campaign to breathe life into Baltimore's city center, where retail has struggled to find footing for generations and, on many blocks, there are as many closed stores as open ones. Instead of waiting for another real estate boom that might not arrive, with a little money and some creative thinking, downtown boosters fashioned their own boomlet, encouraging about a dozen dreamers to grab an empty property and start using it — right now.

Riffing on a revitalization concept that's worked in New York City and New Haven, Conn., the Downtown Partnership last year announced that if people proposed creative ways to use vacant commercial space — even short-term ideas — the nonprofit would not only help them find a building, but give them as much as $10,000 to get the project off the ground.

"When people think about cities, they usually think about buildings but it's the life on the streets that gives a city its energy and character," Downtown Partnership spokesman Mike Evitts says. "We see underused spaces in the older parts of downtown as an opportunity to incubate new street-level activity. These are places that can add energy and character. At the same time, we're helping budding entrepreneurs by taking some of the guesswork and financial risk out of opening a new business."

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