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Power in a bowlful of noodles

By Kathryn H. Anthony

Guss Dussin opened his first Old Spaghetti Factory restaurant in Portland, Oregon, in 1969. Back then, no one would have guessed that a bowlful of noodles could draw throngs of people to some of America’s most desolate city streets.

But that is exactly what has happened in all 17 U.S. cities where Dussin owns restaurants. Operating from a remodeled warehouse in a depressed part of downtown, the typical Old Spaghetti Factory has either triggered or enhanced commercial development, thus helping to upgrade a seemingly unpromising district.

Dussin didn’t start out with a mission. He simply wanted to locate his Portland restaurant in a large building with expansive open space, high ceiling, reasonable rent, and plenty of parking. Only warehouses qualified. The one he chose is located on the riverfront, in the city’s original central business district. Dussin knew the place was right when a ladybug, a traditional sign of good luck, landed on his hand.

“Too much money has been wasted on market surveys,” Dussin says. “The place just felt right.” The rest, as they say, is history.

After Portland, Dussin opened restaurants in Seattle, Spokane, Tacoma, and Vancouver, British Columbia. In 1972, with the opening of his San Jose restaurant, Dussin formed a chain, The Old Spaghetti Factory International, Inc., which he serves as president. Besides the 17 U.S. restaurants, he owns 10 in Canada and one in Japan.

Dussin has devised a magic formula for success. To attract customers, he fills his warehouses with antiques and memorabilia: stained glass windows, trolley cars, and booths constructed from parts of bedsteads salvaged from old hotels. Another attraction is price: a complete dinner ranges from $2.95 to $5.95.

The restaurants are situated in former warehouses, a cable car barn, a Studebaker showroom, a printer’s loft. Invariably, the buildings are in marginal areas. The Seattle restaurant is near the docks, the Hollywood one in a neighborhood once known as Poverty Row, where aspiring actors used to gather in front of movie studios, hoping to be chosen for parts.

Seediness hasn’t deterred Dussin—or his customers. His restaurants annually gross 15 to 25 percent in profits. More important, from an urbanist’s viewpoint, they have become a catalyst for change.

Michael Stepner, deputy planning director of San Diego, says that the Old Spaghetti Factory in his city has been a boon to the Gaslamp Quarter. This area, considered unsafe and usable only for marginal industries, has “undergone a complete change of image,” he says.

After the Old Spaghetti Factory opened, other restaurants, new shops, and offices followed. The extensive renovation and rising property values have helped convince planners, city agencies, and developers that revitalization is possible in the Gaslamp Quarter.

Seattle’s Old Spaghetti Factory, located in a once marginal waterfront district, also has sparked development. Influenced by the success of the restaurant, the owner of nearby Pier 70 opened a restaurant and shopping complex. Nearby, the American Can Company manufacturing plant was converted into the Seattle Trade Center, a wholesale mart for the apparel industry.

The waterfront improvements also persuaded the Seattle City Council to rezone part of the area to allow residential development. A decade after the Old Spaghetti Factory pioneered there, “planners and developers see the area as having potential for additional recreational, commercial, and mixed-use development,” says Janeen Smith, coordinator of Seattle’s Denny Regrade Development Program.

The same thing happened in Denver where, for a long time, the Old Spaghetti Factory was the lone development in a blighted part of downtown. “There was virtually no neighborhood—just vacant land and
parking lots,” says central area planner Doug Goedert. Since opening, the restaurant has had a domino effect, he adds, and now reuse and preservation are common in that corner of town.

Planners in St. Louis, Salt Lake City, Cincinnati, and Nashville also are enthusiastic about their local versions of the Old Spaghetti Factory. In those towns, the restaurant was not the only reason that a dying district was saved, but the planners say it definitely helped.

Alvin Karetski, deputy director of planning in St. Louis, is one of these planners.

Referring to an area of his city called Laclede’s Landing, he says, “the Old Spaghetti Factory, not on its own but in concert with several other restaurants and offices, has contributed to a spectacular revitalization of what was once a severely depressed area. People have seen a shining light example of an area of the city that was going to hell and has now been brought back to life.”

Guss Dussin has his own explanation for the popularity of his restaurants and the ripple effect they seem to have. His restaurants are popular because Americans have rediscovered the city, he says. And people like him—proprietors of businesses in inner-city neighborhoods—are rediscovering it, too.

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