

Cultural Districts and Syracuse

Resource Paper

BACKGROUND

Many communities across the United States are employing cultural development as an effective tool for revitalization. The techniques vary considerably in each municipality. One of the common approaches involves the use of a defined "cultural district." A 1998 publication by Americans for the Arts lists 90 cities that have or are planning to create a cultural district. However, the concept of a cultural or arts district is different from place to place.

They range from ones that are focused primarily on marketing to others that engage a whole range of financial, zoning and legal tools to actually control the development of certain areas. Some are managed by non-profit entities and some are branches of local government.

SYRACUSE

As an outgrowth of initiatives advocated by FOCUS, the concept of a cultural district for Syracuse was advanced by Councilor Van Robinson and unanimously adopted by the Common Council on September 8, 2003. It had two main components.

- 1) It designated the entire downtown area, as defined by the Special Assessment District, as a "Cultural District."
- 2) It created a 7-member *Cultural District Commission* and invested it with duties to a) advise the city and county on ways to enhance arts and culture, b) establish a way-finding system for the district, c) gather data relative to economic development and the arts, and d) identify potential funding for the Commission and any cultural activities.

The Commission met from September of 2004 through June of 2005, with staff support provided by the Downtown Committee. It issued a report to the city and county in the spring of 2005. It made three primary recommendations:

- 1) The city and county should adopt strategies and initiatives to develop live/work space for artists within the district
- 2) The city and county should develop a comprehensive way finding system for the city of Syracuse
- 3) There should be a web-based information database relative to cultural activities in the district, managed by the Cultural Resources Council in conjunction with the public library system

The commission has been waiting for a formal response from the city and county in order to determine the next stage of activity.

OTHER COMMUNITIES

As mentioned, other cities have used cultural districts in a variety of creative ways to advance revitalization efforts. Some of the variables can be:

- Formal defined boundaries set by government legislation OR
- Informal boundaries, organically set by the geographic cluster of like entities

- Linear districts, running along a main street OR
- Districts encompassing several neighborhood blocks

- Emphasis on capital development of theater/concert/museum facility concentrations in a specific location OR
- Emphasis on programming and marketing of arts activities in one area OR
- Concentration of artist live/work spaces and galleries within the district

- Inclusion of special financial incentives such as waivers of sales tax on purchases of art work in the district and state income tax for artists on revenue made from the sale of art in the district OR
- Direct expenditure of public monies for capital improvement to district streetscapes and arts facilities

- Create district identity by installation of simple banners on light poles OR
- Create district identity through construction of distinctive physical elements such as public art, sculpture, and distinctive streetscape features

The following are some specific examples of municipalities using cultural districts:

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

Station North Arts District was designated by the State of Maryland in early 2002 and has become a focal point of Baltimore's massive urban redevelopment initiative. The district took shape as the city offered some innovative development incentives including a "Live Near Your Work" incentive to help residents purchase homes in the district; "Heritage Area" incentives that matched grants and loans for property renovations within the designated Heritage Area; "Enterprise Zone Credit" incentives of property, personal property and employment tax credits; "Midtown Community" benefits that include elevated levels of maintenance by the city in designated zones; and a variety of other tax credits. According to the annual report of Station North Arts & Entertainment, Inc., "the larger goals of the Station North Arts & Entertainment District are multi-fold: to promote the availability of the arts & entertainment district tax benefits, to create a hospitable live/work environment for artists, to preserve the diversity of the community, and to increase homeownership and enhance the neighborhood without displacing existing residents." The district was already home to an array of arts organizations like the Everyman Theatre, Charles Theatre and the Intercultural Museum Art Gallery, but the property tax incentives combined with personal tax incentives drew a number of new artists to the area. Some even purchased

and renovated their own gallery space, like the artist owned-and-operated Area 405. Two major art institutes (MICA and the Schuler School of Fine Arts) and newly renovated live/work space also helped make Station North a destination for artists. In addition to independent artists and organizations, Station North offers a number of district wide events like the Annual "Gotta Have Art" Festival that incorporates both individual artists and organizations. Station North has also sponsored two large-scale public art events: the Door & Window Project and the Building Alteration Project. Both events were done in conjunction with the Office of Promotion and Arts.

Providence, Rhode Island

The City of Providence is home to the largest number of working artists, per capita, in the nation. Over the years, the performance and visual arts community has contributed to the resurgence of this historic City. Today, in the City's Arts and Entertainment District, that arts community has become a community in every sense of the word.

The Arts and Entertainment District was established for two reasons: First, to keep artists living and working in Providence and, second, to make use of an older downtown core area - an area anchored by some of the finest arts and entertainment venues in the nation - that provided a perfect, ready-made "colony" for artists. City officials believed that artists would help revitalize this area - and they were right.

Before the project began to bring tangible results, the City already enjoyed the benefits of having the Tony Award-winning Trinity Repertory Company in the District, along with AS220, a complex that provides living and working space for artists. The Providence Performing Arts Center was there, housed in one of the most glorious historic theaters in the country, and a number of smaller theaters, dance companies and visual and musical artists also were in the area. Still, City leaders envisioned attracting more artists downtown, utilizing storefronts in very visual and dramatic ways, and refurbishing historic upper floors for apartments and studio space.

The City approached the Rhode Island General Assembly with landmark legislation to make the project work and secured - even in the face of a Governor's veto - both income tax and sales tax breaks for artists living and working in the A&E District. Mayor Vincent Cianci's Office worked with the General Assembly to go a step further, creating additional tax breaks for District property owners who refurbish their properties for residential use.

Before the tax breaks went into effect in January of this year, the migration of artists began. Most notably, a New York theater company, A to Z Theater, relocated in a newly-refurbished building, bringing with it a performance space, apartments, and additional studio and apartment rentals for photographers, recording artists and others who have since moved in.

In response to the demand for space in the District, the City established a commission to place interested artists, identify available qualifying homes and studios, encourage private sector investment, and work with property owners to renovate their buildings.

AMES, IOWA

Established on January 1, 2004, the Main Street Cultural District (MSCD) serves as a means for residents of this rural town to bolster a local identity, rich in turn-of-the-century history. The goals of the district are to:

- “Sustain a focus on arts and cultural activities, unique businesses and the heritage of Ames as expressed in railroad-theme public art, historic architecture and the 1900 Depot.
- Enhance partnerships between for-profit entities & non-profit arts/cultural/historical organizations, private sector & government entities, and retail & hospitality venues.
- Coordinate marketing and events.”

Unlike some cultural districts that suffer from infrastructure problems, Ames boasts a pedestrian-friendly, accessible district with plenty of parking and public transportation. The district is home to both a performing arts center and local auditorium, permanent and rotating public art works, numerous arts-centric festivals and a small local, creative economy. The Ames MSCD was officially designated as a State of Iowa Certified Cultural and Entertainment District which will provide for increased state funding for signage.

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Broad Street was renamed the “Avenue of the Arts” as part of major redevelopment efforts along South Broad Street by former Mayor Ed Rendell.

The project was expanded to include North Broad Street, past Temple University in North Philadelphia by Mayor John Street. Many of the city’s most highly regarded performing arts venues like the Kimmel Center, Merriam Theater, and the Academy of music lie just south of City Hall. It is home to noted educational institutions like the University of the Arts, the Philadelphia High School for Creative and Performing Arts and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, all with arts-centric programming. The growth along the Avenue has also created a reemergence of cultural museums like the Fabric Workshop & Museum and the Philadelphia Doll Museum.

The district is managed by Avenue of the Arts, Inc., a nonprofit organization “created to coordinate and oversee and related development along North and South Broad Street.” Efforts were refocused onto North Broad redevelopment in 2001 by AA, Inc. Their chief responsibilities lie in continued planning and development especially on North Broad; maintenance of South Broad Street, including a Streetscape/Beautification project; and district-wide marketing efforts. The Streetscape Project included the introduction of planters, “Philadelphia Beacons,” a walk of fame, and public art/murals.

The Avenue has become a popular tourist destination in the city and is home to many shops, restaurants and hotels. This economic development was in part encouraged by the designation of Philadelphia as a federal Empowerment Zone/Renewal Community and granted tax incentives to new and existing businesses. With its North Public Outreach and Advocacy Project, AA, Inc. has been hosting a series of meetings in North Philadelphia aimed at generating public awareness of their development initiatives focusing on Art & Culture, Historic Preservation, Visual Aesthetics and Mixed-Use Development.

COLUMBUS, OHIO

Short North is situated between downtown Columbus and the campus of Ohio State University. Urban redevelopment began in this area as early as the mid-1970's when "urban homesteaders," including artists, began to purchase and renovate properties in the area. By the mid-1980's, historic renovations were increasing property values and driving out the crime and drugs the area was once known for. Many artists continued to flock to the area and the district is now home to a number of galleries, performance groups and creative industries. It boasts two community newspapers and a number of arts consultants. Community events like Gallery Hops and the "Doo Dah Parade" connect residents, artists and visitors.

Public art is a major component of the district and through streetscaping efforts in conjunction with the Short North Special Improvement District project, there are now around 20 small "pocket parks" throughout the district that have allowed for beautification and art display.

The district is served by the Short North Business Association, Short North Special Improvement District, Inc. and the Short North Neighborhood Foundation

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust was formed in 1984. It was the brainchild of philanthropist Jack Heinz who began investing in area arts organizations in 1971 by putting up money for the new home of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Heinz Hall. In 1987, the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust began work on developing their ideas for a cultural district. In conjunction with Pittsburgh's Urban Redevelopment Authority, the Allegheny Conference on Community Development and the City Planning Department, official Cultural District Development Plans were commissioned in 1989. Once a "red-light" district, downtown Pittsburgh only claimed two arts venues. Beginning with the Trusts' transformation of the old Stanley Theatre into the Benedum Center for the Performing Arts, there are now over 14 cultural facilities in the 14-block district.

The Trust is responsible for building four major facilities as well as developing the Pittsburgh Broadway Series, the Wood Street Galleries, Riverfront Park and numerous works of public art in the streetscape of the district. The Trust has also dedicated significant resources to pioneer programs like the Storefront Arts Initiative, Façade Restoration Program and Banner Program in order to create a unified and pleasing district aesthetic. They have also invested in Real Estate Development projects to further the impact of the cultural District like collaborating on the Creative and Performing Arts High School of the City of Pittsburgh, developing plans for a new Education Center/Multi-use Art Space, and pledging to invest \$460-million in Riverfront redevelopment. Along with the PCT amenities and facilities, the District is home to over 100 shops and restaurants.

SAN JOSE CALIFORNIA

While the South of First Avenue (SoFA) district was established in the early 1990's through community initiative, the San Jose Redevelopment Authority (SJRA) created a strategic development plan to better define the role of the district in 2002. It exists as a mixed-use area dedicated to arts, entertainment and commerce and is managed by the San Jose Downtown Association (SJDA). SoFA was developed under a unique plan that called for streetscaping, design standards and development initiatives under the management of the SJRA.

Separate policies were created for SoFA to expedite private development, extend entertainment hours and implement new parking strategies in order to increase accessibility and appeal. Other cornerstones of SoFA are combined marketing efforts and an extensive list of community events, including "first Friday" celebrations, organized by the SJDA.

With the expansion of the San Jose Convention Center in the district, SoFA has also increased their potential in the field of cultural tourism. Summary "The South First Area (SoFA) district, a distinctive arts/entertainment area, is located at the southern end of Downtown San Jose, between San Jose State University and Convention Center."

SOME COMMON THOUGHTS ON CULTURAL DISTRICTS

- Districts should be geographically specific with a distinct identity, not too big. More than one can exist in a city.
- Financial incentives can be a big boost in establishing viable districts
- Public art within a district (murals, outdoor sculpture, unique street furniture, historic marker systems, etc.) can help create identity and become another cultural attraction itself
- Many cities with arts districts have also completed master plans for same that set out clear goals and methods to achieve same (example=Worcester, MA see www.ci.worcester.ma.us/reports/ArtsDistrictMasterPlan.pdf)
- There is a consensus that the goals and management of arts districts have to be fully integrated with a municipality's overall economic development agenda, with all city departments supportive of the district's goals
- The various "audiences" that an arts district may be targeted to address (downtown residents, college students, artists, tourists, local suburban population, etc.) and their unique needs should be understood at the outset.

SOME ISSUES FOR SYRACUSE TO CONSIDER

- Size of district
- Relationship to "Cultural Corridor" concept advanced in OCL's 2002 Study
- Management plan and long term goals for the district, economic and otherwise
- Relationship of city and county to district operation. District is a city entity but majority of cultural funding comes from county
- Relationship of district and commission to CRC and Downtown Committee