

CULTURAL DISTRICTS AND THE POTENTIAL FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper explores districts designed to organize a city's cultural and arts communities and facilities. It further outlines some fundamental policy recommendations for community leaders undertaking such cultural district planning. Such planning policies cannot be uniformly produced across cities; they instead require careful preparation to accommodate the unique attributes of a specific urban area and its population. Furthermore, cultural districts can create disproportionate economic and social effects for residents of varying socioeconomic groups—in particular, low-income groups that may have unequal access to any benefits from cultural economic development. In order for a cultural district to fulfill its predetermined goals, it must garner support from local investors, businesses, culture and arts communities, and community residents who may benefit economically, educationally, and recreationally from its development.

Cultural economist Walter Santagata (2002, 12) defines a metropolitan cultural district as “a spatial agglomeration of buildings dedicated to performing arts, museums, and organizations which produce culture and related goods, services and facilities.” Cultural districts are sites where planning creates conditions primarily for economic activity and may cover vast swaths of a city or a just a few city blocks. Planning may emerge from public policymakers, private developers, or both; it may be the product of a short period of time or develop more slowly over a longer decision-making process. These districts may attract artists and artisans or consumers of culture, such as tourists or the general public.

A key feature of the cultural district is the interdependency of its constituent parts. Cultural institutions situated close to one another are thought to generate greater economic development and growth as a collective rather than if they operated independently. The networking propensity of a cultural district—as an environment ripe for cultural

productivity and innovation—creates what regional development theorist Philip Cooke (2008, 28) describes as a much desired “synergetic surplus.” However, achieving the goals of economic development and growth has proven far more elusive than policymakers would like.

It is now clear that successful cultural districts cannot be created unilaterally by municipal mayors or chambers of commerce as engines of economic development. Rather, a successful cultural district depends upon a willing network of cultural producers and associated institutions, favorable geographic and infrastructural settings, and public interest and support. Even if or when these factors are achieved, measurable economic growth is not a guarantee, and unintended or unwanted complications may result. In particular, cultural district planning may lead to gentrification and a loss of authenticity, and may further limit low-income socioeconomic groups’ access to its facilities.

In this article, a cultural district is loosely defined as a consortium of organizations working together for economic gain to form a larger cultural identity in a given city or region. This article presents an analysis of the motives behind creating a cultural district, as well as the positive and negative ramifications that result. Specifically, the paper analyzes two largely successful urban district models seen in Baltimore, Maryland, and Denver, Colorado.

BEHIND THE IMPETUS TO CREATE A CULTURAL DISTRICT

Proposals for and the creation of cultural districts in the United States are more frequently seen in the northeastern and Midwestern regions of the country and less so in the more economically prosperous sunbelt cities of the South and the West. They are associated with cities that experienced deindustrialization in the late 20th century (Cooke 2008, 27) and that had, as a result of that demise, an infrastructure of vacant industrial buildings that many local leaders saw as fertile grounds for redevelopment.

Cultural districts have also been viewed as facilitating the development of human capital. Richard Florida (2002, 68) famously argued that cities with a high “quality of place” could court a “creative class,” i.e., people who add economic value through their creativity. With the US economy’s shift from industry to services, Florida claimed that a city’s ability to attract creative class members is essential to its survival, growth, and potential for prosperity. In Florida’s definition, “quality of place” is determined by 1) the built and natural environment of a city; 2) presence of a professionally and stylistically diverse population that engages in the community; and 3) the vibrancy of street life, arts and music scenes, and cultural civic engagement

(232). Cities striving to create cultural districts as a means for establishing a strong quality of place would become attractive cities for new residents and thus enjoy economic revitalization.

Beyond economic gain, such districts were thought to provide a city with a cultural “identity.” The supposedly idiosyncratic nature of the cultural production of a locale was thought to serve as “cultural branding” for the area (Santagata 2002). Residents of a city or community could thus feel a sense of pride in its cultural assets and institutions: “this is *our* community arts center, *our* artisan quarter, *our* historical society,” and so forth.

Cultural districts may also serve to unite or strengthen existing cultural assets to form “natural” cultural districts, particularly on a neighborhood level and in economically underserved areas (Stern and Seifert 2001, 11). As an alternative to top-down planned cultural district models, planners and community developers could identify and recruit local cultural organizations and professionals and local residents rather than recruit externally to help leverage investment funds for development. Natural cultural districts thus strive to integrate economic opportunity and social inclusion, which can be overlooked by developers solely pursuing the effects of Richard Florida’s “quality of place” theory.

CONSIDERATIONS IN CREATING A CULTURAL DISTRICT

Despite the promise of cultural districts, Santagata (2002, 17) notes that designing a cultural district explicitly as a policy instrument for local economies or urban revitalization can lead to disastrous economic and social consequences. Any attempt to generate economic benefits requires asking several important questions: which individuals, communities, and institutions will best benefit economically and socially from its development? Is a cultural district best produced through policy and planning, or can it develop “naturally,” i.e., on its own, provided that the right conditions exist? And, finally, what should the primary purpose of a cultural district be—to spur economic development, to create a wide array of jobs that benefit both low-skilled workers and cultural professionals, to increase tourism revenue among locals and/or visitors, or to help educate and instill a sense of identity for the community?

To distinguish who and what a cultural district is designed for, Santagata defines four main types of cultural districts: *industrial cultural districts* gather technical and entrepreneurial professionals to create a cultural production center; *institutional cultural districts* revolve around a single organization that monopolizes an area of cultural production;

museum cultural districts house a campus of museums for the public; and *metropolitan cultural districts* are the previously defined most common form (17). Such districts are designed for either producers¹ or consumers of culture. Cultural districts for producers take longer to develop and require long-term commitments. Cultural districts for consumers² are often designed with the idea that they will generate revenue from the outset.

Understanding differences between these categories is critical in determining the best cultural district model to use in order to fulfill any particular urban area's goals. There are risks with many development plans. Florida argued for "quality spaces" that attract the creative class, but he also warned that an influx of "creatives" into specific districts or urban areas might generate inflationary housing-market pressures that negatively impact diverse populations and increase socioeconomic inequality (Peck 2005, 746). Urban cultural district planning needs to strike a balance between successfully recruiting creative professionals and improving access and opportunities that a cultural district offers to communities at large, which in itself is a difficult balance to attain.

Cultural districts that offer smaller-scale cultural attractions and elements of street-level culture defined as "neo-bohemian" (Lloyd 2002, 517) may seem like enticing commercial projects, but, as Lloyd observes, such consumer-driven spaces are often destined for failure through their "Disneyfication of urban downtowns" (220). In Lloyd's context, "Disneyfication" of an area refers to a whitewashed homogenization of consumption, merchandising, and labor in an effort to provide a more tourist-friendly atmosphere, generally at the expense of the local area's cultural and infrastructural authenticity.

Because cultural districts are often centered in the downtown areas of cities, any resulting economic benefits are often confined there, leaving outlying poorer populations unable to reap such benefits, or worse, displaced by gentrification. For example, in the 1970s, the Chicago 21 Plan promised to revitalize its downtown. Rather than having a city center surrounded by impoverished areas, Chicago city officials aimed to turn downtown into a catalyst for economic growth. The city spurred downtown development by partnering with private investors, purchasing massive tracts of land, and redistributing federal community development funds, which led to investments in infrastructure, cultural institutions, and commercial and residential development. Community leaders in ethnic and minority neighborhoods, however, saw the plan as an attempt to drive them to the fringes of the city (Grams 2010, 160). While the Chicago 21 Plan fueled the proliferation of many nonprofit arts organizations operating downtown and in the increasingly wealthy neighborhoods north of the Loop (161), the growth generated was highly unequal, as gentrification processes generally

benefited more affluent, white residents at the expense of underserved minorities.

Is it possible, however, to incorporate all residents of a city in developing a cultural plan? Philadelphia's Culture Builds Community initiative, which supported 38 arts organizations in neighborhoods and underserved areas citywide, has shown positive results. Approximately 80% of participants in cultural events traveled outside of their own neighborhoods in order to attend events in such areas (Stern and Seifert 2001, 3). Philadelphia's results show promise for the public's willingness to utilize a district, especially if it is a decentralized one. By defining a cultural district as a consortium of organizations working together to form a larger cultural sector, cultural planning policy could presumably break from the convention of a district as a geographic space (usually within the downtown of an urban area) in an attempt to better reach *all* inhabitants of a city, including those who traditionally have had limited access to cultural and culture-related jobs, institutions, and educational services.

With these considerations of economic development and cultural sector growth, professional population expansion, and underserved population service in mind, it is possible to better understand two different, yet arguably successful, cultural district policies in Baltimore and Denver, respectively.

CREATING A SUCCESSFUL CULTURAL DISTRICT

Baltimore: The Mount Vernon Cultural District

Prior to redevelopment, Mount Vernon was known throughout Baltimore as an historic neighborhood fallen on hard times. Once the cultural and bourgeois center of Baltimore during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the neighborhood now showed the scars of 1960s deindustrialization. In the 1990s it was marked primarily by abandoned buildings and high crime rates.

Despite these difficulties, the neighborhood still hosted a number of venerable cultural institutions, including the Baltimore Historical Society, the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, the Walters Art Museum, the Enoch Pratt Library, and the Basilica of the Assumption Cathedral, a part of the first Catholic diocese founded in the United States (Ponzini 2009, 439). Perhaps most importantly, Mount Vernon also had a robust transportation structure. When its major cultural institutions paired with the Baltimore City Planning Department and a host of development agencies, urban institutions, foundations, and property owners, the Mount Vernon Cultural District (MVCD) was created.

The MVCD action plan identified its mission as the development of an attractive, safe, and enjoyable cultural destination for all residents of the city (Ponzini 2009, 440). The plan argued that Mount Vernon's challenges were shared by all residents and institutions in the community. Thus, the MVCD committee argued that the best way to revitalize Mount Vernon was through the concept of a "common campus" in which all participating institutions, with the help of the city, pooled their resources and opened their doors to form an open, interconnected district for Baltimoreans to experience.

During its ten-year implementation, all major institutions underwent substantial remodeling projects aimed at improving street accessibility and accessibility among projects. The Peabody Institute increased its shuttle services between the MVCD, the Johns Hopkins campuses, and downtown, further improving accessibility to the site and increasing its flow of college-aged visitors. The Maryland Historical Society produced several walking tours and publications about the area's history and architecture, modeled after Boston's famed Freedom Trail. Mount Vernon residential associations, together with the Maryland Historical Society and local arts organizations, also founded several cultural programs, festivals, and annual events to take place in Mt. Vernon (Ponzini 2009, 441). Many of these events showcase local artists and entertainers. Other events are family-friendly and encourage family participation from across the Baltimore area.

As the MVCD network progressed, residential and commercial developers took notice. In the late 1990s, one of the neighborhood's larger long-abandoned buildings was converted into the Gallery Tower, a luxury apartment complex. Other historical buildings, such as the Stafford and Rochambeau hotels, were considered problematic by the MVCD coalition and were subsequently torn down. The Basilica's soup kitchen, "Our Daily Bread," was also closed and relocated to create more public space near the cathedral.

Since the MVCD's completion in 2006, the neighborhood has consistently been attracting new residents and visitors. Its cultural reputation has since become a brand, with new local arts centers and retailers prominently displaying the Mount Vernon name in their organizational titles (Ponzini 2009, 443).

Denver's Scientific and Cultural Facilities District

In the late 1980s, Denver's arts and cultural organizations were struggling financially and continually losing visitors due to a prolonged regional recession and massive cuts in state funding for the arts. However, in 1988, citizens of the seven-county Denver metropolitan area voted by a wide margin to create the Denver Scientific and Cultural Facilities District

(SCFD), a non-geographical arts finance policy managed through an increased sales tax of 0.1% (Hansberry 2000, 13). According to the SCFD website, more than twenty years later, this cultural policy continues to serve as a reliable revenue source for more than 300 arts organizations across the Denver region.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, a group of trustees at the Denver Art Museum devised a template for the SCFD, but found that any effort to advocate for it by themselves to City Hall would prove futile. While traditionally considered adversaries and competitors with one another, the Denver Art Museum formed a coalition with the Denver Zoo, the Denver Botanic Gardens, and the Denver Museum of Nature and Science in order to jointly advocate for the policy and create a public campaign to garner support.

In persuading the public to support the SCFD, the coalition's advertising campaign highlighted the benefits of supporting science, culture, and the arts. Specifically, the campaign emphasized that the economic well-being of the region and the quality of life for all communities would be enhanced by greater access to cultural amenities. With public support, the coalition was also able to appease county legislatures by selling the plan's minimal administrative structure, with less than 1% of its revenues going towards the administration of the tax (Hansberry 2000, 14). Since its implementation in 1989, this formula has generated more than \$40 million a year and created upward mobility for cultural organizations in the Denver area (Hansberry 2000, 15).

DISCUSSION: BEST PRACTICES IN PLANNING URBAN CULTURAL DISTRICTS

The single biggest factor in the ultimate success of the Baltimore and Denver districting plans was the collaboration of multiple parties across different fields. By pooling resources, institutions in both cities strengthened their collective voice as an arts and culture sector and consequently established a recognizable, localized identity.

Garnering public support was also crucial since ultimately the general public's attendance, participation, and engagement with each finished product would be the measure of its utility. For example, in Baltimore, the MVCD did not focus on bringing cultural production to their district, but many stakeholders in the MVCD utilized their unique assets to help make Mount Vernon an active, engaging neighborhood instead of a "Disneyfied" consumer center. An influx of students and staff from Johns Hopkins and a full calendar of cultural events and festivals from the area's residential and cultural boards proved successful in order to give the MVCD a dynamic and

culturally engaging environment. And while not a purely industrial cultural district, a proliferation of arts organizations and retailers bearing the Mount Vernon name serves as proof of a district climate favorable to cultural producers. Finally, the MVCD strived to preserve the area's rich history and managed to utilize Mount Vernon's authentic character throughout its development.

Denver's SCFD pushed for collaboration and community input on an even grander scale, echoing the call for social inclusion seen in the development of "natural" cultural districts. In the pursuit of improving access to culture for all metropolitan area residents, the SCFD specifically set aside funds to provide opportunities for families at or below the poverty level, children and adults with disabilities, and seniors. According to the SCFD website, such programs include educational outreach programs delivered on-site to schools and community centers and "admission-free days" held by institutions throughout the year. Many of these programs are operated by cultural organizations in low-income communities, with broad public support for their services.

IMPLICATIONS: SOCIAL IMPACTS OF PLANNING URBAN CULTURAL DISTRICTS

While both Baltimore's MVCD and Denver's SCFD succeeded in enhancing their urban areas' respective cultural landscapes, the two plans contrast greatly in terms of their impact on underserved residents of their cities. The MVCD's greatest flaw in its planning was that it claimed to be a new cultural asset for all Baltimoreans; yet, it fueled low-level gentrification, displacing a number of residents deemed incompatible with the MVCD's mission. Just as the Basilica relocated its soup kitchen, both the Stafford and Rochambeau hotels had government-subsidized renters who were displaced by new developments. The MVCD's plan made efforts to mitigate these effects: relocation services were provided to displaced residents, and the Basilica's soup kitchen moved to a larger facility near the neighborhood. However, the effectiveness of these efforts is questionable. Although gentrification has been limited in part due to the MVCD's actions, real estate prices have nonetheless been steadily on the rise since the MVCD's development (Ponzini 2009, 444). Over the long term, these rising prices will likely continue to attract higher-income residents and displace lower-income ones.

Denver's SCFD plan dismantled conventional geographic notions of urban districts with broad support from both cultural professionals and the public. By viewing all of Denver as relevant to the district, the model effectively mitigated the gentrification effects as seen in the MVCD.

Instead of displacing residents in favor of a new, geographically framed cultural district, the SCFD's funding model actually *bolstered* the cultural capacity of underserved neighborhoods and areas of the region. In 1999, SCFD organizations provided 2,700 programs to underserved populations including children at or below the poverty level, people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, the elderly, and people with disabilities (Hansberry 2000, 15). In addition, SCFC organizations enrolled more than 489,000 people in free and low-cost courses.

Denver's SCFD thus shows that in planning for a cultural district, favoring a region-based policy over a specifically designated location policy can positively impact underserved populations' prospects for employment, education, and recreation. Due to the SCFD's model, outskirt areas such as Brighton, Colorado, have been able to harness public support and resources to develop their own cultural infrastructure. Since 1995, the town has developed an Arts and Culture Department and sponsors several cultural events a year, which serve to promote local music and art communities and trades (Hansberry 2000, 15).

That being said, it is important to note what made these respective cases unique. In Baltimore, the MVCD already had an abundance of historical significance and character, was conveniently located near downtown, and had a robust transportation infrastructure already in place. As arts consultant Adrian Ellis (2006, 1) notes, culture alone cannot revitalize a downtown or create a vibrant new district: transport systems, public and private investment in other civic amenities, and housing availability are also needed. Ellis also shows that amenities such as transport and housing availability are crucial in spreading the potential benefits of cultural district development to communities throughout the area. By improving the accessibility of cultural facilities to underserved residents, such individuals and communities are better positioned to engage in employment and educational opportunities that a cultural district might offer. In short, cities and regions should look to best practice models in designing their own cultural districts. More importantly, however, they must also analyze the unique compositional factors that might go into creating a cultural district.

CONCLUSION

In defining a cultural district as a consortium of organizations working together to form a larger cultural identity in a given city or region, one cannot miss the vast number of forms that a cultural district could possibly take. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of cultural districts as tourist centers, cultural districts aim to generate cultural capital for the benefit of

both cultural producers and consumers in a given area. In some instances, cultural districts even inspire to be more, such as catalysts for citywide revitalization efforts or a perpetual source of revenue and organizational growth for an entire region. Yet whether in Denver, Baltimore, or elsewhere, any successful cultural district must be firstly planned in a matter that fits the unique characteristics of its city, and secondly, be built with the broad support it needs to meet its original goals set out in the first place. By doing so, cultural districts can avoid or mitigate the creation of disproportionate economic and social effects for low-income residents and instead improve their access to benefits from cultural economic development, thus bringing economic, educational, and recreational benefits to all residents of a city.

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NOTES

¹ Arguably, the most successful district for production is the Hollywood film industry in Los Angeles, California. The multi-disciplinary nature of film production created a co-dependency among various firms and trades, which made having a location in Hollywood not just beneficial, but crucial to sustaining business. Even today, Hollywood's economically favorable setup continues to foster new establishment growth: throughout the 1990s, Hollywood's businesses grew at an annual rate of 16%, adding approximately 188 new firms a year (Santagana 2002, 13).

² Cultural districts designed for consumption are most common and are generally born within the political sphere of local public authorities and the private interests who have a stake in their creation (Santagana 2002, 21).

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