

# 2014 National Cultural Districts Exchange

## CULTURAL DISTRICTS: BOTTOM-UP AND TOP-DOWN DRIVERS

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Americans for the Arts has commissioned five essays spanning the intricacies of arts, entertainment, and cultural districts specifically for policymakers, arts leaders, planning professionals, community development practitioners, and others who are interested in developing new districts or adapting existing ones.

> Creating Capacity: Strategic Approaches to Managing Arts, Culture, and Entertainment Districts

> **Cultural Districts: Bottom-Up and Top-Down Drivers**

> Cultural Tourism: Attracting Visitors and Their Spending

> Art and Culture Districts: Financing, Funding, and Sustaining Them

> State Cultural Districts: Metrics, Policies, and Evaluation

These essays and reports are part of our National Cultural Districts Exchange, where you can find more information on cultural district legislation, case studies, a national district survey, and a collection of webinars.

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## INTRODUCTION

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**T**he growing phenomenon of cultural district formation has resulted in the emergence of interesting urban neighborhoods of all shapes and sizes and known by many names in cities across the globe. As part of the cultural, social, economic, and physical development and re-development of urban communities, cultural districts are receiving considerable attention from scholars, planners, policymakers, and others concerned with the future of cities. In spite of their many names, varieties, and purposes, cultural districts are generally lumped into one category. Yet, each is as unique as the place and time in which it takes root as well as the conditions and players who bring them into being.

This paper takes a look at a spectrum of cultural districts in the United States at different stages of development and in different relationships to the forces of city planning, private development, and grassroots activity. The key thrust of this paper is to explore benefits to artists, residents, and others that accrue in different types of cultural districts. Benefits can vary widely in districts driven by aggressive outside planning and investment versus those driven by grassroots and artist-led efforts, and in those in-between. The roles artists play in the growth of cultural districts and the role cultural districts play in the lives and work of artists and arts organizations is also important to this picture. Several examples in different cities across the United States are described along with a look into recent academic research on the topic.

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## DISTRICT FORMATION: BOTTOM-UP, TOP-DOWN, OR OTHER?

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**P**eople who live, work, and operate small businesses in—and otherwise feel a sense of attachment to—a neighborhood are often active in and integral to that neighborhood's formation as a cultural district and to the identity it adopts.

The progenitors of a district sometimes benefit from its successes. In other cases, private developers and/or public sector planners drive the development and identity of a district. In these cases, local long-term residents, artists, small business owners, and other stakeholders may find themselves displaced or excluded from the benefits. Perhaps in the majority of cases, a combination of the above is at work. Few cultural districts, if any, are simply one or the other.

Generally, artists are among those most involved in early stages of district formation. They're also among those displaced if and when districts experience upward real estate pressures brought about by their success. The well-known phenomenon is called gentrification, which itself is not a simple or straight-forward phenomenon.

This paper uses the term cultural district, although different scholars and writers around the world use varied terms for the concept. Such places are generally named in relation to arts, artists, creative, cultural, design, gallery, museum, theater, or simply by a historic place name. Place descriptions also vary from cluster, corridor and precinct, to quarter, place, row, and zone. They may be called a cultural corridor, artist quarter, gallery row, creative zone, and so on. Labels for their process of formation also vary with terms such as vernacular, organic, natural, informal, or bottom-up, versus engineered, flagship, market-driven, planned, formal, or top-down. The reality is that most districts come about through a mixed heritage or combination of forces over time. The districts described in this paper are categorized based on their recent and current driving forces beginning with those considered bottom-up or in a nascent stage, followed by those considered top-down and/or in later stages of development.

When examined over time, cultural districts are neither simply top-down nor bottom-up in origin. They are neither natural nor planned, neither organic nor engineered. Those examined in this paper have produced different results to date and impacted artists, long-term residents, and small nonprofits in different ways. While they are categorized and described on a spectrum from bottom-up to top-down, this categorization is not definitive; it represents a snapshot in time.

Some level of planning, government involvement, private investment, and intentionality—even benign neglect—is always at work alongside so-called natural or organic processes. These natural processes include choices made by not only artists; arts organizations; festivals; and other cultural, educational, and creative enterprises but also those choices made by residents and neighborhood and local business groups.

The terms organic or natural, as well as the idea of bottom-up and top-down, may also refer to the relevance of arts organizations, artists, and cultural activities to people in the area. Are the artists and cultural activities taking place in direct relationship to the ethnicities and/or cultural interests of residents and local businesses? Are they of the community or part of an outside culture?

Italian researchers Pier Luigi Sacco and Giorgio Tavano Blessi (2007) looked at district formation and suggested that in many cases “the initial push comes from the bottom to be eventually taken over or supplemented by top-down initiative” (2007, p. 5). These authors also cited the reverse—districts formed through top-down initiative are taken over or become part of the agenda of grassroots organizers. They called such cultural districts progressive.

These and other researchers and planners have come to see that the process of district formation—the degree of local stakeholder involvement and investment, or the imposition of identity and development schemes from outsiders—plays a critical role in the economic and social outcomes the district generates and in the stability of artists as part of the community.

Another Italian scholar, Marco Paiola (2008), looked at a variety of cultural festivals across Italy and examined their organizational structures and strategies. He observed three basic organizational models that suggest interesting parallels to cultural district organization. Paiola concluded that different organizational models contribute significantly to different results. He described the three as the top-down model, the bottom-up model, and a middle ground he called the “ad hoc network” model. The top-down model can produce some success, he asserted, especially in attracting tourists. However, he argued it leaves a vulnerable system in its wake. It “has not left any valuable local richness, neither in terms of knowledge accumulation by local actors nor in terms of local entrepreneurship activation” (p. 526). In this top-down model, Paiola found, local interaction was hindered and creative potential was limited. In the bottom-up model, he found greater local capacity building and relationship formation between local actors and stakeholders across sectors. Economic returns in the bottom-up model were more widely distributed and proved more sustainable.

Formation patterns of cultural districts exhibit similar characteristics but are complex and not well understood. District formation takes place over decades and includes different actors at different times. Driving forces can shift from grassroots to city or institutional leadership and from small local business to major corporate developers. Some observers find each district unique, driven by the specific context of place and surrounding economic, social, and political conditions. A 2014 study of the locational patterns of cultural districts led by American scholars Carl Grodach and Elizabeth Currid-Halkett suggested “a comprehension of arts clusters requires specificity and particular attention to the uniqueness of the type of art and the place itself” (Grodach, Currid-Halkett, Foster & Murdoch, 2014, p. 17). Similarly, American researchers Mark Stern and Susan Seifert asserted “the key to building successful cultural scenes in cities is to examine the ecology within which those organizations and individuals operate” (2012, p. 2).

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## ASSESSING IMPACTS

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**D**o residents, small businesses, property owners, and nonprofits, along with artists, gain economically, socially, or in regards to their general quality of life to a greater or lesser degree from the top-down or from the bottom-up approach? There is scant research that has measured the impacts by different types of districts. In fact, there is no reliable typology or method for categorizing districts based on their origins or key drivers in their formation. What exactly is a top-down or a bottom-up process of formation?

In a research article based on a study of 99 U.S. urban cultural districts, American scholar Douglas Noonan (2013) found that on average they have significant impacts. “Districts appear to boost property values, incomes, employment, and turnover in the vicinity,” he wrote (p. 210). However, Noonan found that positive impacts on poverty, education, and families with kids were not in evidence. He did find evidence of displacement of locals who tend to be poorer, calling for more research on gentrification related to cultural districts. However, Noonan’s research sample does not distinguish between types of districts—those formed through top-down or bottom-up processes or those focused on cultural production (artist and creative enterprise districts) versus cultural consumption (theater, museum, and entertainment districts). Instead, he casts a wide net to find average trends.

American economist Steven Sheppard doesn’t weigh in on top-down versus bottom-up formation, but his 2014 economic analysis of cities across the United States finds evidence of more widespread benefits on the basis of per capita income when multiple cultural districts are distributed across a city. This is in contrast to fewer or a singular cultural or entertainment district where Sheppard found less economic benefit to individual incomes. Additionally, he found that cultural nonprofits tend to be more prosperous when clustered together as they are in many cultural districts.

Changes in people and economic fortunes of urban places are inevitable and ongoing; and they move in both directions. While deterioration was the norm among urban communities beginning in the 1950s, the tide began to change in some cities as early as the 1980s, bring-

ing an entirely new set of challenges. Concerns expressed by people sensitive to upward economic changes are: how fast is change occurring? Who is motivating it? Is change coming from within the community or as result of unwelcome city policy or actions of private developers? Who is benefitting and who is left behind? Is the cultural identity of the community at stake? Are artists perpetrators of change or victims?

This paper examines six districts within three formation types: 1) natural or bottom-up, 2) progressive or ad hoc, and 3) engineered or top-down. In the two examples for each type, varying conditions, different driving forces, and different formation patterns suggest different results for artists and for communities. Each is categorized based on its present condition as in its current primary set of driving forces. For instance, a district that may have emerged through grassroots or bottom-up development two or three decades earlier may now look or act like a top-down district driven by major developers, city policy, or large institutions. Thus, it is categorized as top-down.



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## BOTTOM-UP CULTURAL DISTRICTS: FROM NASCENT TO MATURING

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**S**tern and Seifert (2010), prolific researchers at the University of Pennsylvania Social Impact of the Arts Project, examined a variety of social impacts of the arts in Philadelphia over time. They used the term “natural” to distinguish bottom-up cultural districts, describing them as:

“networks of creators, consumers participants, and collaborators that exist within geographically defined neighborhoods. They are self-organized, emerge through community-generated action, and are cultivated and reinforced by a diverse range of participants and residents over time. They can serve as anchors for neighborhood-based economies, and also function as networks across areas, leveraging arts and culture within a regional economy.”

Researchers from Europe, Asia, North America, and other parts of the world found that districts driven by bottom-up processes have more equitably distributed benefits, greater sustainability, and other positive results for artists and long-term residents than those driven by top-down forces. (Chapple, Jackson & Martin, 2011; Kong, 2009; Lin & Hsing, 2009; Mommaas, 2004; Sacco & Tavano Blessi, 2007; Pozini & Rossi, 2010; Stern & Seifert, 2005, 2007).

Some planners and government agencies purposefully stayed out of the picture in nascent districts in their early stages while artists and neighbors self organize and while small-scale entrepreneurs and nonprofits generate a creative or cultural milieu that attracts new people and new investment. On the flip side, at pivotal early moments in district formation, some artists and nonprofits have tried to stay off the radar of city officials for fear of zoning or building violations, or because they fear that official recognition and public investment could bring about change or gentrification detrimental to their way of life and economic survival.

## Bottom-Up: Azalea Park, San Diego, CA

Bottom-up cultural districts can require decades to emerge. One example of a nascent, grassroots-driven district is Azalea Park, a small area within San Diego's challenged City Heights neighborhood. A transition in population was well underway in this post-World War II sub-division by the 1980s and 90s as many residents from the original development passed away or moved to areas with larger homes or more amenities. Some moved because of growing crime and gang activity in the surrounding City Heights area which has an overall population of about 80,000.

Disinvestment and crime motivated residents to begin self-organizing in the early 1980s. They chose to form a community identity around creative expression, public art, and environmental sustainability. Named Lexington Park in 1949 by its developer, residents more recently renamed it for the city-owned Azalea Park in its midst, a name they felt sounded more aesthetically pleasing and inviting. Based on experience with other neighborhoods they considered successful, they built a strategy that included creating an artist- and gay-friendly area. Other gay-identified neighborhoods in San Diego and other cities were observed to be more active and inclusive, with greater reinvestment in property. The neighborhood association employed the tagline: "What a difference a gay makes," and marched in the city's gay pride parade. They took prizes for their entries—adding to the neighborhood's buzz.

According to resident and Azalea Park Neighborhood Association activist Felicia Shaw, a long-time resident and elderly woman, was a key force. "It takes a leader who is consistent and persistent and who carries the history to keep others going," Shaw said. Neighbors worked together to clean up, re-invest, and re-populate the small canyon neighborhood while attracting gays, lesbians, artists, and young families to its modest, affordable housing. Murals, mosaics, totems, painted electrical boxes, parklets, street furniture, and distinctive street plantings continue as the focus of community activities. Participatory demonstration gardens with drought-resistant plants and other small-scale civic projects brought people together in what evolved into a strongly networked multiethnic community.

Since 2010, the neighborhood has successfully attracted working artists and creative enterprises to a largely vacant commercial corridor that they unofficially declared the Azalea Park Arts District. In early 2014, they were in the process of considering a request to the city for formal designation but had not yet done so. San Diego had no formal cultural district program and neighbors were uncertain of the benefits or possible negative side effects that classification might bring. They observed that in some places, too much attention to a district can bring development by outside investors that is too rapid and ultimately creates conditions that are too expensive for artists to maintain a viable livelihood.

For Azalea Park, the goal was to reverse the familiar cycle of abandonment through resident organizing to maintain an affordable working- and middle-class neighborhood, one that was once threatened by drugs, crime, and a negative image. Fostering a creative milieu and

attracting and retaining creative people was their central strategy. To date, the results have included artists as active and stable members of the community valued for many contributions they bring and a low profile with city government.

### Bottom-Up: Northeast Minneapolis Arts District

By the 1980s, artists within the robust and active artist community in Minneapolis knew that vacant factory and warehouse buildings were available as studios in the working class area called Northeast. What has become a thriving artist district gained traction through the combination of artists legally and illegally occupying a significant stock of old industrial buildings. Availability of inexpensive working-class housing built during two waves of industrialization in the 1880s and 1920s served as an additional attraction as did many vacant corner storefronts beneath or attached to small homes already zoned as live/work spaces.

The downtown warehouse district was still the focal point for Minneapolis artists, galleries, and alternative art spaces until the early 1990s when construction of a major sports facility sent many more artists to Northeast. The city worked with the Minneapolis-based, nonprofit developer Artspace to establish studios in part of a vacant city-owned historic brewery. As a prodigious national developer of artist live/work and studio spaces, Artspace had not developed properties in Minneapolis until that point. Their Grain Belt Studios development met only a fraction of the demand. And, while some artists in Northeast were already experiencing eviction by other developers who saw potential for higher-end tenants, two entrepreneurial owners of several large industrial buildings made special efforts to attract and retain artists. They became godparents for hundreds of artists leasing a total of almost

**A century-old industrial, working-class neighborhood, Northeast Minneapolis provides a stable yet increasingly vibrant home to hundreds of artists as well as working- and middle-class families.**





**Events such as the annual Art-a-Whirl, Open Streets, and monthly Open Studios bring new energy to “Old Northeast.”**

1 million square feet of studio space and championing the arts district. At the same time, these artist-friendly owners provided somewhat of a precarious foundation on which this now-thriving arts district still rests.

By 1995, a critical mass of artists in Northeast got together to organize an annual multisite open studio tour they named Art-a-Whirl. Far more successful than ever imagined, more than 700 artists now participate with tens of thousands of visitors attending Art-a-Whirl during an extended weekend each May. Over the years, monthly open studio and other events were added. In 2007, the nonprofit that grew from Art-a-Whirl, the Northeast Minneapolis Arts Association (NEMAA), raised funds to commission a district plan. Among other recommendations, this plan called for formal city designation as the Northeast Minneapolis Arts District—the city’s first designated cultural district.

While Northeast experienced decades of post-industrial decline and a thinning of residents, it retained strong social fabric and political clout. Earlier waves of immigrants, mostly from Poland, Italy, the Ukraine, and other European countries were attracted to once abundant factory jobs in what became a well-organized labor city. They established many businesses, churches, social and civic organizations, and elected many city leaders. Aging residential areas are now seeing widespread small-scale investments in properties as the population grows and housing gradually turns over. Many artists are among the homeowners and business entrepreneurs. Commercial areas are filled again. Existing residents were at first less than enthusiastic about the influx—more for fear artists would harm property values. Now, “Old Northeast” welcomes them to what is widely seen as “New Northeast.”

Beyond assisting with the early Artspace studio development, there has been little active role for the city. For the first decade or more, the city helped by not aggressively enforc-



ing codes and by helping launch Art-a-Whirl. And, while NEMMA is generally identified with the district, it assumes little coordination or leadership responsibility beyond Art-a-Whirl and various other events and services to support its member artists. Four neighborhood associations included all or partly within the arts district, as well as the Northeast Chamber of Commerce, Northeast Community Development Corporation, and NEMMA all value the district highly and assume active ownership. However, no single entity is focused on management of the district.

Even though the city's arts district designation brought no policy benefits or material resources, the act of naming has attracted increasing investment in redevelopment and new creative enterprises locating there. Threat to the relative stability of Northeast or significant change in real estate values is not imminent but may not be far off. Older (mostly white) residents largely embrace artists and the arts district as well as the re-investment in homes, local retail, and restaurants. A new creative and entrepreneurial generation is now established in Northeast, with artists in many leadership roles in neighborhood organizations and through business and property ownership.

### **Progressive or Ad Hoc Network Models: Communities in Transition**

Increasingly, planners, policymakers, and developers see the utility of cultural districts and find ways to connect “heritage preservation, creative production and consumption to a larger set of ongoing local economic and social policies through coordination and integration” (Ponzini, Gugu & Oppio, 2014, p. 9).

Through his research of Northern European cultural districts, Dutch scholar Hans Mommaas (2004) assembled a list of what he called public justifications for district development. He advocated bottom-up approaches in his work and asserted that cultural districts, when organized and managed through the most advantageous strategies, can: 1) strengthen the identity, attraction, and market position of cities or their sub-districts; 2) stimulate a more entrepreneurial approach to arts and culture; 3) stimulate innovation and creativity; 4) provide new uses for old buildings and derelict sites; and 5) stimulate cultural diversity and cultural democracy.

A nascent, organic cluster like Azalea Park, or more established bottom-up districts like Northeast Minneapolis, may ultimately attract attention of planners and developers who see opportunities for larger transformation, new development, or upward-moving real estate values. And, while this can be the kind of investment neighbors seek—and it can provide the conditions for artists to thrive—too much development occurring too fast can disrupt the social fabric and result in economic dislocation or gentrification. In cases where a district is planned and/or implemented by a city or a developer, the project may lose its luster and the developer may retreat. This allows artists and other residents who are organized and invested more emotionally to set the direction of growth or change. Alternately, residents, artists, and local stakeholders may organize in response to undesirable pressures of gentrifi-



**Eclectic, Afro-centric businesses, a monthly Art Walk, and numerous annual cultural events project Leimert Park's identity as both a cultural hub and stable middle-class residential neighborhood.**

education or cultural dislocation that is caused by too-rapid development or by an influx of new residents that feels overwhelming to the old.

### **The Progressive Model: Leimert Park, Los Angeles, CA**

Leimert Park in South Los Angeles is an organically clustered mix of African-American artists, cultural venues, and a stable residential area that began to form its current identity in the 1960s. About 80 percent of the population is African-American. Compared with Los Angeles in general, Leimert Park has not experienced rapid rises in real estate or gentrification. In fact, racial politics and marginalization kept it in a form of economic stasis while it grew as a hot bed of African-American culture. Beginning in the late 1960s, galleries, nightclubs, music venues, restaurants, and regular drumming circles—along with shops selling African arts and clothing—grew to become the dominant features of Leimert Park. A multitude of performing arts and music venues, nonprofits, and retail shops including Los Angeles' preeminent Black bookstore, make Leimert Park widely known across the city. It is home to half a dozen annual festivals and monthly Art Walks.

One of the earliest master planned communities in Los Angeles, Leimert Park was designed and built by developer Walter H. Leimert in the late 1920s and early 1930s. According to City of Los Angeles Community Planner Reuben Caldwell, "Leimert Park is an incredible example of an intact, complete community" with mixed-income housing, community services, a commercial hub or "village center," and a historic theater that directly faces a central park known as Leimert Plaza. Along with the city-owned but still largely shuttered Vision Theatre, this



compact vernacular commercial village and the Plaza serve as the real and symbolic center of a larger residential neighborhood and for the African-American community across the city.

In many ways Leimert Park is a model bottom-up or natural cultural district that has been led by artists, cultural entrepreneurs, and local small businesspeople for more than 40 years. The City of Los Angeles only recently took an active role with purchase and planned renovation of the neighborhood's iconic, art-deco Vision Theatre as well as adjacent property in the center of the commercial district now held for parking, festivals, and outdoor events. Sensitive city planning over the past couple decades reflects community wishes, but there has been no major public or private investment in business or housing in Leimert Park since it was built. City planners, activists, artists, and local business owners alike assert that Leimert Park remains the most cohesive cultural center for African-Americans in Southern California.

However, imminent changes resulting from public infrastructure development move it into a new game. Construction began in 2014 on a mostly underground light rail line that will include a station at Leimert Plaza within clear sight of and easy walk to the Vision Theatre and commercial village center. Retired city planners, seasoned community activists, artists, residents, nonprofits, and Afro-centric businesses are among the neighborhood's leadership and they know full well what the light rail station means for the future of the neighborhood. In 2013, they launched an aggressive planning program known as Vision 2020, funded by the City and the local Business Improvement District. Social bonding, grassroots organizing, and protecting of cultural space and identity are high on the neighborhood's list.

**As part of a planned community from the 1920s, the prominently located Leimert Plaza attracts people from across Los Angeles for cultural, social, and political activities.**

A strong sense of identity and many “horizontal” relationships—relationships across sectors and interests—formed in Liemert Park because of the active arts scene. These horizontal relationships fuel the neighborhood’s capacity to quickly organize to address economic changes and development threats that are inevitable, and in this case, imminent.

Since the light rail station was announced in 2013, upward pressures on real estate began to put a financial squeeze on some artists and small businesses. At the same time, neighborhood planners hope the light rail brings better conditions for artists, galleries, performance venues, and local businesses through more robust commercial activity and cultural tourism.

### **The Progressive Model: Roosevelt Row, Phoenix, AZ**

Phoenix may be best known for its vast automobile-oriented sprawl. However, some older downtown neighborhoods, abandoned a decade ago for newer malls and strip centers, began a struggle for revitalization and recognition as early as the 1980s. Some older areas fell to the wrecking ball in the 1970s to make way for parking lots and future high-rise development sites. Historic structures and pockets of intact neighborhoods survived. Roosevelt Row is one once-lively commercial area with some surviving physical assets. It connects five historic, mixed-use neighborhoods with active community associations with a central commercial corridor.

In the 1980s, under Mayor Terry Goddard, the city launched efforts to revitalize the area and began to invest in historic preservation. The 1985 General Plan for the city first designated the Roosevelt neighborhood a special planning district as part of an effort to reverse downtown decline. Then in 1986, Roosevelt Row was designated as Phoenix’s first historic district. Artists seeking inexpensive working and living spaces moved into the area that slowly attracted vernacular businesses, cafes, and the like.

Meanwhile, other city investments in public transportation and public art, along with private housing and retail development downtown, began to attract new residents and jobs. By 2006, the city re-zoned the Roosevelt Row area as a mixed-use district to allow galleries, loft housing, artist workspaces, and retail. Plans were also put in place for streetscape improvements to narrow streets and create a more walkable district. This work took the city many years to realize; in 2014, neighbors started seeing wider sidewalks, new street lighting, and other pedestrian amenities.

At the turn of the century, the Roosevelt Row Community Development Corporation (CDC) was formed “to further the unique cultural character and creative assets of the Roosevelt Row Arts District.” Under the CDC umbrella in 2011, the Roosevelt Row Merchants Association was created and quickly grew to more than 60 members. The CDC launched and managed a range of programs and events and hosts First Friday Artwalks. They were awarded grants from the NEA Our Town Program and from ArtPlace America, a national funder of creative placemaking projects that partnered the CDC and the city with nearby



Arizona State University Art Museum and others. Through these projects, they brought internationally acclaimed artists to its Feast on the Street event and other temporary public art events through a program they call Adaptive Reuse of Temporary Space (A.R.T.S). In 2012, the CDC boasted more than 50,000 people passing its key intersection of Fifth Street and Roosevelt, claiming a record attendance for one of the largest free monthly art walks in the United States.

A signature fundraising event of the CDC is an annual Turning Brown Lots Green. The outdoor lot on which the event was held in 2011 included a view of a vacant lot next door. The 2012 event on the same lot, "was shaded by the new eight-story, 325-unit, \$52 million infill housing development Roosevelt Point" (CDC Annual Report, 2012). In this case, the double entendre of turning brown into green takes on a clear economic development dimension.

A February 2014 Arizona State University Working Group study on Roosevelt Row, written by Michelle Bickert, described the city's efforts to turn "abandoned warehouses into art galleries, historic homes into swanky bars and restaurants, and a crime-ridden neighborhood into a destination arts community." The report cites the influence of Richard's Creative Class strategies on Phoenix city plans (Florida, 2002). "The Roosevelt Row district is a prime example of a revitalization project that can give Phoenix a clear cultural identity to help bolster the city's competition in the knowledge economy," the ASU paper reported.

Downtown land clearance and decay in the 1970s continues to be in evidence. According to the CDC report, more than 40 percent of the land in Evans Churchill, one of the neighborhoods comprising Roosevelt Row, remains vacant due to speculative owners holding it and due to zoning policies promoting high-rise structures. The "missing teeth" phenomenon still plagues Roosevelt Row while artists are employed to bring active uses and create vibrancy by temporarily activating vacant lots. Roosevelt Row cultural development, writes Bickert in the ASU report, "was initially intended to lure artists with cheap gallery and loft space." Instead, she pointed out, its eclectic character is "increasingly attracting young professionals and retirees who are willing to pay more for luxury apartments." Artists, galleries, and small local businesses remain part of Roosevelt Row, but future development scenarios provide them limited opportunity.

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## TOP-DOWN CULTURAL DISTRICTS: LARGE FORCES AT WORK

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**O**n what may represent the top end of the top-down spectrum, Chinese scholar Lily Kong (2009) extensively researched development of large-scale, government-driven cultural districts in Asian cities that include flagship cultural facilities. They bring no benefit to local culture or ordinary working and middle-class residents and certainly not to local artists, Kong argued.

Among examples of similar flagship developments, American scholar Amanda Johnson (2010) cited Lincoln Center in New York City for its questionable achievements. It brought high-end housing and deeper-pocket culture consumers and tourists to a once down-trodden area of Manhattan. Using culture, economics, and architecture, Lincoln Center's construction displaced low-income residents and small local retailers. New York scholar Sharon Zukin (1982) studied and wrote about New York's SOHO District in the 1970s and remains a leading voice on gentrification and urban transformation. Writing with Laura Braslow (2011), they argue that the presence of Lincoln Center and its social milieu also send a message to poor people, people of color, and others outside the milieu of Western high art that they do not belong there.

Johnson described how other such brick and mortar projects in Dallas, Denver, and Pittsburgh represented early attempts at economic development "to enliven decaying areas that cater to underperforming industries and unsavory businesses" (2010, p. 12). In some of these cases, she wrote, neighborhood organizers "accused local governments of using arts to encourage gentrification" (p. 5). Zukin and Braslow (2011) described a pattern in New York City where "the unanticipated consequences of unplanned or naturally occurring areas where artists work and live are higher housing prices, more intensive capital investment, and eventual displacement and gentrification" (p. 131). They suggest that such consequences are not always unintentional and that the bottom line for most public officials is not promotion of cultural districts. "Instead, the object of their industrial and land-use policy is to prepare the ground for private-sector real estate developers" (p. 33).

## Top-Down: Baltimore's Station North District

For some cities, cultural districts are a last-resort solution for neighborhoods with intractable poverty and deterioration. Baltimore has struggled for more than half a century with widespread poverty, racial division, and disinvestment. At the same time, vacant housing and industrial structures invariably attract artists, start-up creative enterprises, and fringe non-profits. Baltimore is no exception.

Sections of the city spanning historic African-American neighborhoods of Charles North, Greenmount West, and Barclay sit near a major transit hub. Known as Penn Station, it provides access to Amtrak and MARC commuter rail service as well as connections to city light rail. The area encompasses parts of the Maryland Institute College of Art, University of Baltimore, and Johns Hopkins University. Other major cultural amenities are also near. These ingredients, along with a reported population of 385 artists, easily added up to a State of Maryland-designated Arts and Entertainment District in 2002 branded as Station North. The area boasts a long history of underground or fringe arts including African-American clubs and music venues from the 1950s.

As the first district to be designated under a new state program, Station North was born as an arts-based revitalization strategy and announced amid a fanfare of hundred-million-dollar investment plans. Building on decades of under-recognized cultural activity, Station North Arts and Entertainment, Inc. formed as a nonprofit in 2005 to coordinate players in the district. Its stated vision is to build the district's "reputation as a nationally recognized creative hub" and to "maintain its appeal to a diverse population of locals and visitors." Its board is composed of institutional, business, political, and architectural/design firm representatives. In the spring of 2014, USA Today listed Station North among the top 10 U.S. arts districts, signaling success at part of its vision. One advocate claimed upward of \$500 million in investment related to arts and culture since 2000, including Maryland Institute College of Art studio spaces, nonprofits, small business and increasing presence of loft and other residential development. The annual artist-run Artscape Festival as well as other street-level arts activity create an active, although spotty, vibrancy.

Baltimore has celebrated an economic and image turn-around brought about by massive harbor front development begun in the 1980s. Many cities continue to look to such large-scale redevelopment to attract capital and new residents. The operative vision for Station North stemmed from key institutional partners and the city, notably the Maryland Institute College of Art. While Station North was built on grassroots creative assets organically in place, it is now considered an archetypal top-down development. Stern and Seifert (2012) reported that "some observe that district designation has actually stunted growth in Station North by triggering speculation" (p. 47) as developers buy and hold property waiting for the optimal conditions for large-scale development projects. Cultural designation, Stern and Seifert wrote, is about promoting "a real estate brand."

In 2013, a \$200,000 ArtPlace grant financed a selection of artists and designers from Europe to install work in Penn Station “to begin the transformation,” wrote Sheena Lyonnais in BmoreMedia.com (August 6, 2013). According to the city’s arts promotion office, this effort will “connect Baltimore to arts on an international level.” Station North, however, continues to experience difficulty connecting with residents, local artists, and some of its long-time neighbors. According to Stern and Seifert (2012), some artists working in the neighborhood have discovered “that many black-owned businesses and neighbors do not identify with the arts district designation” (p. 111).

In spite of a continued abundance of substandard or vacant properties, Station North is concerned with losing artists and some long-term poor, or what they term “legacy,” residents. Calls of gentrification have been heard. The influx of European artists, young (mostly) white American artists, and businesses catering to upscale culture mavens has not been comfortable in traditional African-American neighborhoods.

In speaking at a national symposium exploring arts, entertainment, and cultural in April 2012, Baltimore artist and writer for the local *City Paper* Michael Farley dropped a bombshell. “Station North is dead,” he was quoted as saying. “People came in from the suburbs and brought their values.” He said, “[Station North] isn’t the neighborhood I fell in love with 10 years ago.” (*City Paper*, “Can Station North Save the City?”, Baynard Woods, July 3, 2013).

With economic recovery fueling large urban investments in the 2010s, multi-hundred-million dollar plans are taking shape around Penn Station designed to fan out and complement the Station North Arts and Entertainment District. Johns Hopkins and University of Baltimore look to expand, as other significant housing and retail developments are in the works. “Speculators are swarming into the area unchallenged by city government,” (Unidentified writer on website, *A Path: Race, Class, Power and Organizing in East Baltimore*, February 9, 2014).

Asked another Baltimore blogger Klaus Philpsen, “Are artists in reality just the useful pawns who colonized a district to then get pushed out themselves while the district gentrifies?” (Community Architect blog, March 11, 2013). “If the real estate market in the district picks up again, there is likely to be serious competition between arts-based uses and residential development for a more upscale commuter market,” warned Stern and Seifert (2012, p. 4).

In their assessment of urban cultural policy in Baltimore, Italian scholars Davide Ponzini and Ugo Rossi (2010) acknowledged that an inclusive approach to culture-led regeneration can renew the image of long-deprived cities and neighborhoods, provide a strengthened sense of belonging, and improve the liveliness and attractiveness of places. In the Baltimore case, they found whether intended by key players or not, “a primary effect of these policies has been the sparking of the real estate sector” (p. 1050).



**A once-decayed industrial/warehouse district along Brooklyn's East River, DUMBO has transformed into a highly desirable residential and commercial area unaffordable to most artists.**

## **Top-Down: DUMBO, Brooklyn, NY**

Cities and neighborhoods evolve and grow as an ongoing process. The DUMBO section of Brooklyn, NY has often been cited as a developer-driven arts district in which artists and other low-income residents were dislocated over the course of a mere decade beginning in the mid-1990s. However, as early as the 1970s, artists began moving in to its inexpensive industrial spaces a short trip from Manhattan. Some probably left SOHO as prices escalated there. The name, Down Under Manhattan Bridge Overpass (DUMBO), reportedly originated with artists who felt that such an unattractive moniker would deter developers and up-scale residents from gentrifying the area. However, that is exactly what happened.

Sharanya Haridas, writing in *BrooklynInk* (November 5, 2013), reported the story of how real estate developer David Walentas met an artist in the 1970s at a social gathering who jokingly suggested the next SOHO would be DUMBO. Later, Walentas walked the neighborhood and saw its potential. He and his son Jed bought several large, key buildings beginning in 1981 and patiently waited 15 years leasing to artists at low rents and giving small arts organizations free space to create a buzz.

Fearing rapid change, the DUMBO Neighborhood Association, made up largely of artists, mounted some resistance to the Walentas' plans in the 1980s and early 1990s that faded during the Giuliani administration. Through their development company, Two Trees Management, the Walentas completed their first condo project in 1998. Many have followed. While they remain the dominant land-holder and developer, they are not the only developer at work in DUMBO.

As early as 2004, Jesse McKinley, writing in *The New York Times* (June 29, 2004), observed

“a mass exodus of artists” from DUMBO. Luxury loft apartments between 1,500 and 3,000 square feet were selling for \$1,000 a foot. New York real estate is well known for pricing out artists and other low-income residents, but according to *The New York Times* reporter, “what shocked many in DUMBO is the extreme speed and calculation” with which the transition occurred.

While artists “discovered” DUMBO in the 1970s, invented the name, and created its artsy ambiance, artists are now all but absent when it comes to living or having working spaces there. Some frequent its bars and cafes or work at nonprofits. The performance space, St. Ann’s Warehouse, and the visual arts center Smack Mellon, continue to benefit from low or no-cost space provided by the Walentas as they attract creative types to DUMBO. Meanwhile, upscale shops catering to newborns, lovers of fine chocolate, and spoiled pets attract residents and shoppers who remain fond of avant-garde cultural offerings. Added to panoramic views of the Manhattan skyline, dramatic presence of the massive Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges overhead, film festivals, new city parks on the riverfront, and easy transit via subway, bus, ferry and car to Manhattan, DUMBO now has many assets to offer its new residents and visitors.

Two Trees Management followed a successful recipe in DUMBO to turn a district of hundred-year-old industrial buildings into a hip and high-priced neighborhood. They catered to artists who generated an identity for the area and then they harvested their real estate gains. Artist Jack Warren quoted in *The New York Times* (2004) described it as “the classic scenario of getting dummied into pioneering an area, building a community, and having that community usurped into another sort of community that you can’t be part of.”

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## CONCLUSION

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Arguing for the benefits of bottom-up approaches, Lin and Hsing (2009) cited the value of community engagement that generates a desired sense of belonging among residents and supports traditional cultural practices, heritage conservation, and environmental improvement. They highlighted the process of local organizing that they called “community mobilization” and argued that involvement in placemaking decisions encourages “local inhabitants to reshape a distinctive regeneration project and to enhance active citizenship in the long term” (p. 1322). Similarly, Stern and Seifert (2010) looked at cultural districts for the social benefits brought by the connecting agent of culture. They found “cultural clusters spur civic engagement; cultural participants tend to be involved in other community activities, and neighborhoods with many cultural organizations also have concentrations of other social organizations” (2010, p. 263).

Inclusion of local artists, historical or symbolic resources, local skill sets, and even local business entrepreneurs and suppliers have a marked and positive impact on the success of cultural districts, according to many scholars. Such inclusion, they argue, leaves behind greater benefits through the development of local stewardship, capacity, cohesion, and more equitable distribution of economic gains (Chapple, Jackson & Martin, 2011; Mommaas, 2004; Sacco & Tavano Blessi, 2007; Pozini & Rossi, 2010; Stern & Seifert, 2005, 2007).

These traits were evident in Azalea Park, Northeast, Leimert Park, and Roosevelt Row where artists were part of the fabric of community organizing and planning, and where they were part of the local economy. Whether artists and creative enterprises can remain part of these vibrant neighborhoods in the long term remains a question. In the above analysis, Leimert Park and Roosevelt Row sit at or near a tipping point, while some argued that Station North—and to a greater extent DUMBO—have already tipped. They are places where artists, small arts nonprofits, and low-income residents are pushed out and forced to relocate as escalating real estate costs spur growing economic segregation.

Some researchers have found that cultural districts that rely too much on attracting outside artists, cultural assets, and investment have detrimental impacts on local residents, artists, and small businesses, and they tend to be less stable (Kong, 2009; Jakob, 2011; Lin & Hsing,

2009). Station North also reflected evidence of cultural dislocation where a new set of residents and businesses create such a different social milieu that older residents (including artists) feel they don't belong. This is a phenomenon organizers in Leimert Park are hoping to avoid.

Places that *began* as bottom-up, organic, or natural cultural districts, such as Station North or DUMBO, have evolved as forces of city planning and development and/or major institutional partners begin to drive the bus. As seen in the six cultural districts profiled here, places do not stand still. Some situations allow artists and locally generated cultural activity to remain in place and contribute to life conditions for a community at large. At early stages of growth and/or under conditions where upward real estate pressures are not driving development, artists and local art activity can remain relatively stable and thrive. When market conditions heat up and become dominant drivers, most artists and local cultural activity must seek other places to live, work, and operate.

Zukin and Braslow (2011) asserted that cities are in the business of preparing the ground for new development. However, many cities claim they want to hold ground for artists and for future creative and cultural activity that generates both social and economic capital. Until more long-term research can track the stability as well as the impacts of artists and creative communities, we won't know if good intentions translate to creating and maintaining good places.



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