

Protecting Cultural Space or Urban Re-colonization: *When Do Cultural Districts Cross the Line?*

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Abstract

The formation of arts and cultural districts or clusters may be organic or planned (or a hybrid) but they often result in dislocation of those outside the district's dominant cultural group or those without escalating economic capacity. Some districts primarily serve real estate development interests; some propel local artists and creative enterprises; some protect space for community cultural expression and make life better for existing residents. Few can mix more than one of these purposes but for a short time. This paper reviews six cultural districts in the United States, each at a different stage of a development continuum. In some cases district formation stabilizes a community, others transform or de-stabilize a community. Winners and losers are generally evident. The mix of local conditions, leadership, and policy choices determine their trajectory. Whether they evolve in ways that foster civic engagement and accrue political capital among a wide range of stakeholders determines the winners and losers.

Keywords: Cultural Districts, Gentrification, Urban Development, Arts Districts, Cultural Space, Civic Engagement

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Introduction

The growing phenomenon of cultural district formation has resulted in the emergence of interesting and culturally rich neighborhoods of all shapes and sizes in cities across the globe. As part of the cultural, social, economic, and physical development and re-generation of cities, 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 six 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 characteristics of districts that accrue benefit to residents, artists, small local businesses, and vernacular cultures, and of the characteristics of districts that serve upscale or wealthy new residents and outside cultures as well as developers, franchise businesses, and/or large institutional interests.

District Formation: Bottom-up, Top-down, or Other?

People who feel a sense of attachment to a neighborhood such as those who live, work, and operate small businesses there, are often active in and integral to the formation of cultural districts and to the identity the community adopts. These progenitors of a district sometimes benefit from its successes and become empowered stakeholders in the process. In other cases, private developers, and/or public sector planners drive the development and identity of a district. In these cases, long-term residents, artists, small business owners, and other stakeholders may find themselves displaced or excluded from the benefits. This well-known phenomenon of economic or cultural gentrification is not itself a simple or straightforward phenomenon.

In looking at district formation, Italian researchers Sacco and Tavano Blessi suggested that in many cases “the initial push comes from the bottom to be eventually taken over or supplemented by top-down initiative.”¹ These authors also cited the reverse where districts formed through top-down initiative are taken over or become part of the agenda of grassroots organizers. 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 ability of culture bearers to remain part of the community.

Formation patterns of cultural districts 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.²³

Assessing Impacts

Do 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 when a district evolves through a top-down or a 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 top-down or a bottom-up in district formation?

A study of 99 U.S. urban cultural districts by American scholar Douglas Noonan found that on average they have significant impacts. “Districts appear to boost property values, incomes, employment, and turnover in the vicinity,” he wrote.⁴ However, Noonan found that positive impacts on poverty, education, and families with kids were not in evidence. And, he did find evidence of displacement of locals who tend to be poorer. 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.

Changes in people and economic fortunes of urban places are inevitable and ongoing. And, they move in both directions. Deterioration was the norm among post-industrial cities beginning in the 1950s, but the tide began to change in some cities as early as the 1980s, bringing an entirely new set of challenges. Concerns expressed by people sensitive to upward economic changes include: 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 outside 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?

Below, six districts are examined 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 where 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. 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.

Bottom-Up Cultural Districts: From Nascent to Maturing

Stern and Seifert 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.⁵

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.^{6 7 8 9 10 11 12}

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.

a. 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, more inclusive and see 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, one elderly woman, a long-time resident, was a key force. "It takes a leader who is consistent and persistent and who carries the history to keep others going," she 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, and street furniture, along with 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 multi-ethnic community.

Since 2010 the neighborhood has successfully attracted working artists and creative enterprises to a largely vacant commercial corridor that residents 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 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 threatened by drugs, crime, and a negative image. Fostering a creative milieu and attracting and retaining creative people was the central strategy. To date, 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.

b. Bottom-Up: Northeast Minneapolis Arts District



Figure 1. Northeast Minneapolis Arts District.

By the 1980s, the post-industrial, working-class area called Northeast became known within the robust and active artist community in Minneapolis as offering vacant factory and warehouse buildings as studios. 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 one 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 a highly successful annual multi-site open studio tour they named Art-a-Whirl. Far more successful than ever imagined, over 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 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. Now many artists are among the homeowners and business entrepreneurs. They carry on the strong social fabric and political efficacy of the earlier generation. 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 enforcing codes and by helping launch Art-a-Whirl. And, while NEMMA is generally identified with the district, it assumes little coordinative or leadership responsibility beyond Art-a-Whirl and various other events and services to support its member artists. As of 2014, there was no entity providing management or planning for the district.

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 and the reactivation of dormant industrial infrastructure as a new creative and entrepreneurial generation is now established in Northeast. Artists hold many leadership roles in neighborhood organizations and through business and property ownership.

Progressive or Ad Hoc Network Models: Communities in Transition

According to Italian scholars Ponzini, Gugu, and Oppio, planners, policymakers, and developers increasingly 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.”¹⁴

Through his research of Northern European cultural districts, Dutch scholar, Hans Mommaas, 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.¹⁵

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 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 to set the direction of growth or change. Alternately, residents, artists, and local stakeholders may organize in response to undesirable pressures of gentrification or cultural dislocation that is caused by too-rapid development or by an influx of new residents that feels overwhelming to the old.

a. The Progressive Model: Leimert Park, Los Angeles, CA



Figure 2. Leimert Park, Los Angeles, CA.

Leimert Park in South Los Angeles is an organically clustered mix of African American artists, cultural venues, and stable residential area that began to form its current identity in the 1960s. About 80% 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 and 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 over 40 years. However, imminent changes resulting from public infrastructure development move it into a new game. Construction began in 2014 of a mostly underground light rail line, known as the Crenshaw 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.

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.

A strong sense of identity and many "horizontal" relationships – relationships across sectors and interests – formed in Leimert 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 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.

b. The Progressive Model: Roosevelt Row, Phoenix, AZ

Phoenix may be best known for its vast automobile-oriented sprawl. However, some older downtown neighborhoods, abandoned decades 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 a once-lively commercial area with some surviving physical assets where artists and small local businesses took root. It connects five historic, mixed-use neighborhoods and 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, naming it an arts district. 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 although it began in 2014 with neighbors 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."¹⁶ 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 National Endowment for the Arts' 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 "Feast on the Street" 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 over 50,000 people passing their key intersection of Fifth Street and Roosevelt, claiming a record attendance for one of the largest free monthly art walks in the U.S.

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."¹⁷ 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 creative class strategies on Phoenix city plans. "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 study 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 residential 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, wrote 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.”¹⁹ Artists, galleries, and small local businesses remain part of Roosevelt Row but future development scenarios provide them limited opportunity.

Top-Down Cultural Districts: Large Forces at Work

On what may represent the top end of the top-down spectrum, Chinese scholar Lily Kong extensively researched development of large-scale, government-driven cultural districts in Asian cities that include flagship cultural facilities. Kong argued they bring no benefit to local culture or ordinary working and middle class residents and certainly not to local artists.²⁰

Among examples of similar flagship developments, American scholar Amanda Johnson 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.²¹ New York scholar, Sharon Zukin studied and wrote about New York’s SOHO District in the 1970s and remains a leading voice on gentrification and urban transformation.²² Writing with Laura Braslow, 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.²³

a. 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 over half a century with widespread poverty, racial division, and disinvestment. At the same time, its vacant housing and industrial structures attract artists, start-up creative enterprises, and fringe nonprofits.

Station North sits within a section of the city that spans historic African American neighborhoods of Charles North, Greenmount West, and Barclay and near a major transit hub known as Penn Station. This hub 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 in 2002, easily added up to a State of Maryland-designated Arts and Entertainment District branded as

Station North Arts and Entertainment District. 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, the nonprofit Station North Arts and Entertainment, Inc. formed 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."²⁴ 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 US Arts Districts signaling success with the first part of its vision.²⁵ One advocate claimed upwards 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. It built on grassroots creative assets in place but is now considered an archetypal top down development. Stern and Seifert reported that "some observe that district designation has actually stunted growth in Station North by triggering speculation" 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."²⁶

A \$200,000 Art Place grant in 2013 financed a group of artists and designers from Europe to install work in Penn Station "to begin the transformation," wrote Sheena Lyonnais in BmoreMedia.com.²⁷ According to the city's arts promotion office, this effort will "connect Baltimore to arts on an international level."²⁸ Station North, however, continues to experience difficulty connecting with residents, local artists, and its long-time neighbors. According to Stern and Seifert, some artists working in the neighborhood have discovered "that many black-owned businesses and neighbors do not identify with the arts district designation."²⁹

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 young (mostly) white American artists, and businesses that cater to upscale culture have not been a comfortable fit for older African American neighborhoods.

Speaking at a national symposium exploring Arts/Cultural/Entertainment Districts 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.”³⁰

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.,” wrote one blogger.³¹

Another Baltimore blogger, Klaus Philpsen asked “Are artists in reality just the useful pawns who colonized a district to then get pushed out themselves while the district gentrifies?”³² Warned Stern and Seifert, “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.³³

In their assessment of urban cultural policy in Baltimore, Italian scholars Ponzini and Rossi 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”³⁴

b. Top-Down: DUMBO, Brooklyn, NY



Figure 3. 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 there escalated. 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 did happen.

Sharanya Haridas writing in *BrooklynInk* 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.³⁵

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 Guliani 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*, 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 quickly 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.³⁶

While artists began to inhabit 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 more deep-pocketed creative types to DUMBO. Meanwhile, up-scale 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*, 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.”³⁷

Conclusion

Places that began as bottom-up, organic, or natural cultural districts, such as Station North or DUMBO, evolved as forces of city planning, development and/or major institutional partners began to drive change. As seen in the six cultural districts profiled here, places do not stand still. Some situations enable communities to form and gain political traction and 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 were not driving development, artists and local art activity can remain relatively stable and thrive.

Lin and Hsing 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 mobilisation* and argued that involvement in place-making decisions encourages “local inhabitants to reshape a distinctive regeneration project and to enhance active citizenship in the long term.”³⁸

Community mobilization was evident to varying degrees in Azalea Park, Northeast, Leimert Park, and Roosevelt Row where a mix of residents, artists, nonprofits, and small business owners were part of the fabric of community organizing and planning, and important to the local economy. Whether artists and creative enterprises can remain part of these vibrant neighborhoods in the long term remains a question. In this analysis, Leimert Park and Roosevelt Row sit at or near a tipping point while Station North – and to a greater extent DUMBO – have tipped. Station North also reflected evidence of cultural dislocation where a new set of residents and businesses created such a different social milieu that older residents (including some artists) feel they no longer belong. This is a phenomenon organizers in Leimert Park are working to avoid.

A backdrop of well-developed systems of neighborhood-level organizing exists in Los Angeles and Minneapolis where numerous individual leaders demonstrated strong capacity to move between business, the arts, government, residents, and other stakeholders. A variety of people actively engage in a variety of associations, some of which are connected structurally to local government. Those individuals and organizations played key roles in linking and solidifying horizontal networks that enable greater efficacy of the entire district in protecting its identity, stability, and role within larger cultural and economic ecosystems.

Modernist land-use planning not only separates uses but people and interests. If planners, policy-makers, and community activists expect to bring about equi-

table, resilient communities, the capacity for organizing and building horizontal networks must be integrated into the practice. They must bring together people across sectors, ethnicities, professions, and stakeholder groups to identify shared interests, assets, and collective challenges to co-create and sustain a vision for their community.

Endnotes

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