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Strategic Planning for Arts, Culture, and Entertainment Districts

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BY AMANDA J. ASHLEY

ART, CULTURAL, AND ENTERTAINMENT (ACE) DISTRICTS are an increasingly popular policy tool, marketing strategy, and targeted cultural investment for neighborhoods, cities, and regions in the United States. Public agencies, private groups, quasi-governmental bodies, and community-based organizations experiment with different types of ACE districts, typically with the intent of economic and community development. Districts are created by a variety of different types of people, from individual entrepreneurs and artists to more formal public/private partnerships.

Cultural districts policy is still a relatively young field. It continues to evolve as planners, policymakers, and advocates gain more insight from evaluation, community feedback, and professional convenings. What we do know is that districts have the potential to create and enliven place, to support creative and cultural enterprises, to provide opportunities for community and neighborhood engagement, to attract visitors and outside investment, and to support local workers and businesses.

The district itself is often a contemporary artifact of the community's history and culture, and is an important part of a region's arts ecology. District scale, mix, design, and audience vary considerably and are quite diverse. For example, some districts bring together traditional nonprofit arts activity, including museums, theaters, and galleries. Others feature artisans, artist entrepreneurs, and commercial creative industries. Some support existing neighborhood arts activity and creative community development. Districts also range in their designation and financial models. Some are state or locally sanctioned districts with taxing authority, while others are informal marketing devices driven by volunteer support and grant dollars.



Districts can be controversial for many reasons. People debate whether districts are a good use of public investment, whether they lead to gentrification and displacement, whether they are manufactured and inauthentic, and whether they lead to new economic and community growth. It is not always clear if cities should draw their own districts from scratch or support those that are market-driven and organic, or if cities and district advocates have the capacity to create sustained policy, regulatory, and marketing support as public priorities evolve. These important conversations should drive communities to consider the goals and values that they hope to achieve through development of a district, and how to address challenges as they arise.

All districts succeed in some ways and struggle in others. The best or most successful districts are those that have developed capacity—the harnessing of internal and external resources—by being reflective, innovative, nimble, integrated, and collaborative. At its core, building capacity helps move district leaders from hoping and planning to meeting their objectives and goals.



**Ground Control
International Space
Orchestra performing
in Santa Clara County,
California.**

PHOTO BY
NELLY BEN HAYOUN

For those interested in building and managing ACE districts, here are six lessons to keep in mind:

- 1. Be local:** ACE districts should reflect the history, culture, and place of their locations. No single solution or recipe for success exists. While it is helpful to see how others have proceeded, it is dangerous and ill-advised to follow their same path, as the political, economic, and social environments all reflect different realities and constraints. A more thoughtful and context-sensitive approach leads to more authentic districts that represent not just creative economies but creative societies.
- 2. Do your homework:** ACE visionaries, builders, and managers should examine their regional arts ecology to determine whether they are better off supporting existing arts activity or building a district from scratch. Studies have shown that it is more strategic to leverage already fertile grounds rather than pursuing a top-down strategy that just shuffles arts activity to new hubs. A big part of this process is not just looking at physical places but also at uncovering the needs of the artists, creators, and makers that give districts their robustness. This initial and ongoing preparation will help ACE builders figure out if their ACE strategy, and its associated costs, can support the artists and arts activity that make the districts thrive in the short- and long-term.
- 3. Connect the dots:** ACE leaders should develop integrated solutions that help build capacity. Focusing purely on arts programming and marketing keeps the district isolated in a silo, which make it difficult to achieve robust positive outcomes. Builders and managers should think about connections in the broad sense: is the district physically connected to the city's infrastructure, is the district politically connected to other citywide initiatives (whether it is livability, sustainability, or resiliency), and so on.
- 4. Invest in partnerships:** ACE leaders should identify stakeholders that can bring essential political, financial, regulatory, and cultural resources and expertise. It is wise to create partnerships from a diverse set of interests—whether it is well-funded foundations, entrenched neighborhood organizations, nearby universities and colleges, invested business and community advocates,

associated public policy staffers, or others. These stakeholders will make up different partnerships, whether it is hands-on advising or hands-off programmatic investment.

5. Be adaptive, flexible, and nimble: Visions and plans are wonderful and help set a longer course, but they need to accommodate the realistic and day-to-day realities of building and managing arts districts. Comprehensive and ongoing SWOT (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunity, and Threats) analyses and conversations help district stakeholders determine how to navigate sticky or difficult areas. Whether the district is a new, exciting concept or an established, maturing one, for the most part they all need to adapt to changing city priorities, new leadership, and periods of financial distress.

6. Be thoughtful about your management structure:

ACE should consider what financial and management model to follow in order to have a plan for financing and developing the district vision. Many arts district initiatives are underfunded. The key is not getting so lost in fundraising that the district leader or district organization experiences mission drift or is unable to divert time away from fundraising for operations. Many ways exist to finance arts districts, including local taxation powers, state tax incentives, philanthropic program investments, corporate branding, public façade improvement programs, Main Street programs, historic preservation programs, public/private partnerships, and more. Also a variety of ways exist to manage districts, whether it is through a public agency, a nonprofit organization, a collection of volunteers, a master developer, a community-based organization, a single entrepreneur, or a privatized model. It is important to consider management and financial structures in the short-term, but also how they might evolve depending upon a host of factors.

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Arts and culture is moving from the periphery of public policy conversations to the core. It is an exciting time for district enthusiasts who can help us see, imagine, and experience how arts, culture, and entertainment can help achieve broader community ambitions and make places more interesting. These districts are diversifying at a rapid speed, making it essential to figure out how we can best support them at a local, state, and federal level.

For more information on art, cultural, and entertainment districts, please visit the following resources:

Americans for the Arts National Cultural District Exchange at www.AmericansfortheArts.org/CulturalDistricts

Ashley, A.J. "Beyond the Aesthetic: The Historical Pursuit of Local Arts Economic Development." *Journal of Planning History*. 2015.

Sagalyn, L.B. and A.J. Ashley. "Cities as Entertainment Centers: Can Transformative Projects Create Place?" *disP - The Planning Review*. 2014.

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