





# Contents

# Executive Summary

Downtown San Francisco, Oakland, and San José have struggled to recover from the pandemic both socially and economically. The rise of remote and hybrid work has increased office and commercial vacancy rates and reduced the foot traffic and activity that typically contribute to a vibrant and welcoming urban atmosphere. Local businesses and institutions are finding it difficult to survive and thrive.

In response, the Bay Area's three largest cities have identified the strengthening of arts and culture as a primary strategy to increase social and economic activity. For example, San José is focusing on becoming the entertainment and cultural center of Silicon Valley, while San Francisco emphasizes arts and nightlife in its recovery road map. Oakland has developed a plan centered on culture to promote equity and belonging within the community.

Place-based cultural strategies are not new; American cities have long relied on arts and culture to activate dormant urban areas, draw in visitors, and repurpose vacant properties. Cultural districts play a crucial role in these efforts. These designated areas within cities host unique arts and cultural institutions and can be instrumental in revitalizing disadvantaged areas by investing in cultural amenities that attract tourists and local workers while supporting underrepresented communities. Funding for these districts can come from various sources, including local agencies, community organizations, and private investors.

In the Bay Area, cities have developed different types of cultural districts over many decades. San Francisco's Yerba Buena district serves as a historic example of revitalization efforts, while newer programs focus on preserving community heritage. San José lacks a formal program but has historic districts like Japantown and unofficial districts like SoFA, which celebrate cultural diversity. Oakland has provided direct funding to artists and institutions, and it recently established the Lakeshore LGBTQ Cultural District to uplift the local LGBTQ+ community.

As Bay Area cities consider and plan cultural districts, they can look to the examples of Boston, Cleveland, Denver, and Philadelphia, all of which have successfully implemented arts and culture strategies vveland,i5 (am b)4.1 mplemeerbS/t the ummunity

In Cleveland, Playhouse Square, the second-largest theater district in the United States, emerged from grassroots efforts to save downtown venues. The city has established significant public funding for the arts, fostering creative placemaking initiatives that involve local artists in community development, particularly in revitalizing postindustrial neighborhoods.

Denver uses public investment to enhance its urban landscape, creating programs such as Vibrant Denver to activate key corridors and support local arts organizations. The city has analyzed how people navigate areas around entertainment venues and cultural institutions and has identified opportunities to influence visitor behavior by changing the built environment to support increased foot traffic and activity downtown.

Philadelphia's cultural initiatives support a broader revitalization strategy by leveraging dedicated public funding through the Philadelphia Cultural Fund and private partnerships with nonprofits like Meantime to support artists and cultural institutions, activate vacant storefronts, and promote public art. The city has also partnered with local businesses to create a coordinated happy hour program that attracts visitors and increases social activity downtown.

Boston, Cleveland, Denver, and Philadelphia illustrate the importance of tailored, community-centric cultural strategies in supporting urban development and fostering resilience. All of these cities adopted creative placemaking to integrate arts and culture into their post-pandemic recovery plans. Their approaches suggest that sustained funding, good planning, creative uses of vacant spaces, cross-sector partnerships, and public realm investments are key ingredients of successful cultural districts. These case studies provide five lessons in crafting and implementing a successful arts and culture strategy:

- 1. Commit to funding.** Having consistent investments through programs like Percent for the Arts or a dedicated tax allows cities to cultivate cultural assets that serve as economic and social anchors. Cleveland's journey from minimal public investment in the arts to hosting one of the nation's largest arts funds is a testament to the power of grassroots advocacy.
- 2. Plan for the long term.** The Boston Creates cultural plan and the collaboration of the regional Metropolitan Area Planning Council have enabled Boston to adopt a far-sighted, holistic strategy for integrating arts and culture into land use planning.
- 3. Make the most of underutilized spaces.** All of the case study cities have leveraged vacant spaces to create more opportunities for local artists and community organizations. Cleveland's Artists in Residence Program demonstrates how integrating arts into community development can address challenges such as vacancy, population decline, and neighborhood disinvestment. Initiatives like Philadelphia's Meantime, which activates vacant storefronts, show how innovative approaches can transform challenges into opportunities benefiting local artists, entrepreneurs, and neighborhoods.
- 4. Nurture private sector leadership.** Private property owners and investors play a critical role in place-based arts and culture strategies. The success of Cleveland's Playhouse Square,





---

# What Are Cultural Districts?

Cities can use place-based and placemaking strategies to preserve, revitalize, or drive investment to designated urban areas, either independently or as part of a public-private partnership. *Cultural district* is a broad designation applied to places within a city that have unique arts, culture, and entertainment institutions and opportunities. Depending on the size of the city, a cultural district can encompass the entire downtown area, a specific neighborhood, or particular blocks and streets.

Cultural districts have been used to drive economic revitalization, uplift underrepresented communities, preserve historical elements of a neighborhood, attract tourists, and streamline arts and culture projects. In areas facing rapidly rising real estate costs, displacement, and gentrification, cultural districts can preserve historic and cultural resources by fostering partnerships among city







## **Bay Area Cultural Districts and Plans**

Over the years, Bay Area cities — largely independently of the California Cultural Districts Program — have established their own cultural districts with distinct forms and purposes.

### **San Francisco**

San Francisco began exploring the idea of investing in arts and culture institutions to revitalize neighborhoods in 1976,

The San Francisco Cultural District Program is a partnership between communities and city government coordinated by the Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development, with support from other departments. The program is funded by an annual allocation of a portion of hotel tax revenues, approved by voter measure Proposition E in 2018. Each cultural district, with assistance from city staff, creates a strategic plan called a Cultural History, Housing, and Economic Sustainability Strategies (CHHESS) report. The document establishes goals and strategies to stabilize the culture of the district.

## San José

San José has no formal cultural district program but does have several unofficial districts with a high concentration of historic and cultural resources. The city's historic Japantown neighborhood is one of only three remaining Japantowns in the country.<sup>3</sup> Its cultural assets have been preserved through community and state investment, and the neighborhood continues to provide vibrant cultural programming for residents and visitors.<sup>4</sup> Another cultural district, SoFA (South First Area), was created by local business owners seeking to revitalize a neglected section of the city's downtown in the 1990s. Unlike in San Francisco, the district designation refers to a private partnership of participating area businesses, theaters, museums, and cultural organizations, while the term *SoFA* is used to describe the neighborhood in general. Dubbed "Silicon Valley's Creative District," SoFA includes historic theaters, nightclubs, restaurants, public parks, and several museums and galleries, such as the Institute of Contemporary Art San José, the Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana, and the San José Museum of Quilts and Textiles.

In recent years, local coalitions have advocated for establishing new, connected cultural districts in and around downtown San José to celebrate and preserve the city's existing arts and cultural resources, activate vacant ground-floor spaces, and revitalize downtown. In 2020, a public-private partnership among the City of San José Council District 3, the city's Office of Economic and Workforce Development, nonprofit organization Project MORE, the San José Downtown Association, and other local businesses funded the establishment of an LGBTQ+ business district called Qmunity on Post Street in downtown San José. Although it is considered a business district rather than a cultural district, Qmunity features distinctive signage, an LGBTQ+ mural, and other amenities to attract visitors and support LGBTQ+ businesses.<sup>5</sup> In the Mayfair area of East San José, the School of Arts and Culture (SOAC) at Mexican Heritage Plaza has raised nearly \$25 million to support its efforts to establish a cultural district along the Alum Rock Avenue Corridor. SOAC's La Avenida project aims to revitalize the corridor by acquiring vacant commercial properties to expand cultural programming and family wellness services; to build mixed-use retail, education, and affordable housing developments; and to apply for recognition from the California Cultural Districts Program. SOAC believes that becoming an official cultural district would create more opportunities for current residents and businesses while celebrating the history of arts, culture, and activism in East San José.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Japantown Business Association, "Japantown Landmarks: Cultural and Historical," <https://www.japantownsanjose.org/landmarks>.

<sup>4</sup> Senate Bill 307, 2001-2002 Reg. Sess., ch. 879, 2001 Cal. Stat., [http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/01-02/bill/sen/sb\\_0301-0350/sb\\_307\\_bill\\_20011014\\_chaptered.html](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/01-02/bill/sen/sb_0301-0350/sb_307_bill_20011014_chaptered.html).

<sup>5</sup> Qmunity District, "The Goal," <https://qmunitydistrict.org>.

<sup>6</sup> School of Arts and Culture, Mexican Heritage Plaza, "La Avenida," <https://www.schoolofartsandculture.org/la-avenida>.

---

## Oakland

Although the City of Oakland adopted a citywide cultural plan that recognizes the value in “naturally occurring” cultural districts and historic neighborhoods, it has not established a formal cultural district program. During the development of the city’s 2018 cultural plan, community members expressed concerns that allocating resources by district could reinforce inequities created by historic disinvestment in vulnerable communities, especially in East Oakland neighborhoods that lack cultural infrastructure.<sup>7</sup> The city has instead invested in supporting arts and culture organizations through its Cultural Funding Program, an annual competitive grant program established in 1985. In recent years, the program has awarded more than \$1 million in grants to artists and organizations.<sup>8</sup> In 2014, the Eastside Arts Alliance and several nonprofit organizations in East Oakland formed a coalition to establish the Black Cultural Zone (BCZ). The coalition aims to prevent the displacement of Black residents and businesses from legacy communities in East Oakland by centering Black arts and culture within a community development framework. The BCZ includes 50 square blocks from High Street to the San Leandro border. It is overseen by the BCZ Collaborative, which has focused on building power, securing land, engaging artists and community members in arts activism, and directing funding to community-driven projects in East Oakland as part of its anti-displacement arts and cultural strategy. Though not an official cultural district, the BCZ and its partners fulfill many of the community and economic development [cj/(p)30 B Tc 10 O O 10 d

---

# Case Studies

Outside California, four cities have established particularly successful place-based arts and culture strategies. Boston, Cleveland, Denver, and Philadelphia have leveraged strategic public and private investment that supports local artists and cultural institutions to preserve vulnerable communities, attract new visitors and businesses, and revitalize struggling neighborhoods. The following case studies illustrate that arts and culture strategies can best help cities thrive when they are centered on the unique communities and cultural resources, are tailored to achieve desired outcomes, and are supported by partnerships among state and local governments, business and property owners, art and cultural institutions, and artists, cultural practitioners, and entrepreneurs.

## Boston

The City of Boston has four official cultural districts, but many neighborhoods rely on arts and culture to build community, attract visitors, and support the local economy. Since 2011, the Mass Cultural Council has provided cultural district designations for urban areas with high concentrations of cultural organizations and programs. Neighborhoods must apply for the designation, and some community organizations have reported that they see little benefit in allocating resources toward completing the application process.<sup>10</sup> Boston's Latin Quarter has leveraged its cultural district designation to celebrate and preserve the existing Latino community's cultural identity as an increasing number of young professionals and families move into the diverse neighborhood.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the city's Chinatown neighborhood has not applied for a cultural district designation from the state, but local institutions and community-based organizations celebrate Chinese culture and provide important social services. The Pao Arts Center, opened in 2017, offers opportunities for residents to connect with Chinese arts and culture and take courses from a local community college. The Chinatown Community Land Trust, established in 2022, prevents displacement of low-income families and secures permanent affordable housing units and community spaces for Chinatown residents. The city promotes and invests in both official and unofficial cultural districts as part of a long-term strategy to celebrate its diverse communities and make arts and culture part of everyday life.

Like other large American cities, Boston is facing social and economic challenges due to high vacancy rates in downtown office and retail spaces and a dearth of affordable housing. But its

---

<sup>10</sup> Annis Whitlow Sengupta, Metropolitan Area Planning Council, personal interview, August 20, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Arts & Culture Department, Metropolitan Area Planning Council, *Boston's Latin Quarter Cultural District Plan*, September 2019, <https://www.mapc.org/wp-content/>



The 2024 St. Anthony's Feast in North End, unofficially known as Boston's "Little Italy." Events like this street festival not only celebrate unique communities and cultural resources but also support local businesses by attracting visitors and creating a lively atmosphere.

Photo by [Kyle Klein Photography](#), courtesy of Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism

recovery has been aided by a decade-old arts- and culture-based strategic initiative. In 2015, the city released *Boston Creates*, a 10-year cultural plan to align public and private resources to strengthen cultural vitality over the long term.<sup>12</sup> The plan outlines five strategic goals:

1. Create fertile ground for a vibrant and sustainable arts and culture ecosystem.
2. Keep artists in Boston and attract new ones, recognizing and supporting artists' essential contributions to creating and maintaining a thriving, healthy, and innovative city.
3. Cultivate a city where all cultural traditions and expressions are respected, promoted, and equitably resourced and where opportunities to engage with arts and culture are accessible to all.
4. Integrate arts and culture into all aspects of civic life, inspiring all Bostonians to value, practice, and reap the benefits of creativity in their individual lives and in their communities.

<sup>12</sup> Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture, City of Boston, *Boston Creates Cultural Plan*, July 2016, <https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/embed/b/bccp.pdf>









- 
- In 2001, the City Council passed a live-work ordinance to allow artists to turn disused industrial buildings into safe home and studio spaces.
  - In 2003, the City Council established a percent-for-art ordinance, requiring Cleveland public building projects to allot 1.5% of their construction budgets for public artwork in and around the new structures.
  - In 2006, Cleveland voters approved Issue 18, a ballot measure that placed a 30-cent tax on packs of cigarettes to support the Cuyahoga Arts & Culture fund. The tax was renewed in 2015. In 2024, voters approved an increase of the tax to 70 cents per pack to generate an additional \$160 million in funding over the next 10 years.

The 2008 Great Recession ultimately led to the development and implementation of a bold creative placemaking program in Cleveland's North Collinwood neighborhood. *Creative placemaking* is the intentional integration of arts and culture into a comprehensive community development strategy. In North Collinwood, a postindustrial neighborhood on the south shore of Lake Erie, a community development corporation called Northeast Shores partnered with CPAC to launch a pilot program that involved local artists in community building as part of efforts to revitalize the neighborhood. The program, Artists in Residence, aimed to

- Recognize, honor, incorporate, and nurture indigenous cultural assets.
- Tie artists to community through property ownership.
- Initiate small, artist-led projects that spread roots in the community.

The 2009–2013 program was massively successful and led to national recognition for North Collinwood's arts community. Artists in Residence created a coalition of residents, local artists, arts-oriented businesses, and city government agencies to complete a series of community development projects that helped reverse local population decline, rebuild a central commercial corridor around arts businesses, and restore a positive identity to the neighborhood.<sup>22</sup> The program provided opportunities for participating artists to purchase affordable homes in North Collinwood, reducing the number of vacant houses and spurring property improvements and community art projects. Existing residents benefited from the revitalization and revenue as the budding creative community attracted new businesses and investment to the neighborhood.

Cleveland's successes demonstrate that creative placemaking through arts and culture is not only a viable strategy for urban revitalization and economic development but also a way to engage residents and foster the growth of vibrant and resilient communities. By leveraging and preserving existing cultural resources, local stakeholders in Cleveland were able to identify opportunities to help neighborhoods weather economic downturns and thrive again.

---

<sup>22</sup> The Kresge Foundation, *Creative Placemaking Case Study: North Collinwood*, [https://kresge.org/sites/default/files/library/cleveland\\_cp\\_full\\_case\\_final\\_sep\\_25\\_1\\_links\\_corrected\\_6282017.pdf](https://kresge.org/sites/default/files/library/cleveland_cp_full_case_final_sep_25_1_links_corrected_6282017.pdf).

---

## Denver

The City of Denver has leveraged public investment in arts, culture, and entertainment to activate urban corridors, enhance public spaces, and attract visitors and businesses. In 1986, the Colorado State Senate passed legislation to create the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD), which serves the seven-county Denver metropolitan area. The SCFD collects a 0.1% sales tax to support local cultural organizations, distributing \$80 million to more than 300 organizations each year.<sup>23</sup> Another key piece of state legislation allows municipalities to fund downtown economic development projects by collecting a portion of the incremental taxes generated within the central business district through a Downtown Development Authority (DDA).<sup>24</sup> The City of Denver established a DDA in 2008 to support the redevelopment of Denver Union Station and is currently working to update and expand the DDA to fund transformative public investments in the downtown core.<sup>25</sup> Denver voters approved a \$570 million bond measure to support downtown revitalization, to be repaid through tax increment financing generated by the updated DDA.<sup>26</sup> City leadership plans to use this revenue to revitalize a major downtown corridor along 16th Street, one of the main downtown arterial streets. The focus area is bounded by Union Station at one end and Civic Center Park and a cluster of government buildings at the other. The initiative, Vibrant Denver, aims to activate retail, arts, and



Attendees enjoy the 2020 For the Culture Convention, a collection of live performances, fashion, art, and food vendors that was curated to

Performing Arts Complex is a 12-acre site with 14 unique entertainment venues, public open space, and a sculpture park connected by a glass canopy. This downtown anchor attracts many visitors, but the city is looking to activate areas between venues by adding amenities such as food and drink vendors, restrooms, and greenery around parking structures to encourage visitors to linger after performances and visit more downtown establishments. The city is also exploring a public-private partnership to construct the tallest mural in the world and add a climbing wall downtown.

Downtown Denver includes or neighbors other anchor institutions, but two eight-lane thoroughfares and many railroad tracks divide the city center into distinct areas and make it difficult for pedestrians to access and move among these institutions. A combination of public and private investment could improve pedestrian walkways to make downtown more walkable and connected. The City of Denver and the State of Colorado are exploring options to build pedestrian connections between city and county buildings and the state capitol. A privately financed mixed-use development proposed for the nearby Ball Arena would also build pedestrian bridges to connect the arena — as well as 6,000 proposed housing units and Auraria Campus, a higher

---

education hub for three universities with 40,000 students — to the rest of downtown.<sup>27</sup>

These improvements will be enhanced by a creative placemaking and rebranding campaign as the city explores adding arches, lighting, and signage to create a “destination feeling” that is unique to downtown Denver. Major construction and improvement projects downtown have resulted in a difficult environment for the city to manage the reblock

the(t)15 untryhe(t)15 n (tue27 t)15.1 (a )JJO -1.6 Tdgebtrcnhaiti.(a )Js/T1\_O 1 TJ-O.12 Tc O. O Tw510 O O510 58.6049977.  
uivbrehip sng anpe rotov  
the citpnren ( r)22 dts witloc l(nretleaderctn an37t)15 mms ucitmemberctt(t)15 (n f)10ajm [thPhiladelphia2-f)10 a



from moving into these neighborhoods due to low visitor traffic. However, the ongoing demand for street-facing commercial space among new and smaller businesses could activate these spaces and attract new visitors and investment to downtown and historic neighborhoods.

Meantime facilitates low-cost, short-term agreements between landlords and local artists and entrepreneurs, lowering the risk threshold for landlords by helping them obtain temporary certificates of occupancy with minimal up-front investment. Over the past year, Meantime has hosted four 30- to 60-day activation events in neighborhoods throughout Philadelphia, drawing attention to vacant spaces in support of longer-term leasing efforts while activating streetscapes and helping local artists and entrepreneurs sell goods and build brand awareness with physical retail spaces and temporary art installations.<sup>30</sup>

In the future, Meantime hopes to create a more predictable round of opportunities for local artists, entrepreneurs, and small business owners rather than relying on relatively short-notice pop-up events. The City of Philadelphia has recognized the value of this initiative and may investigate streamlining the process for commercial landlords to obtain short-term occupancy

---

<sup>30</sup> IS Architects, "What If Vacant Storefronts Could Be Employed to Test Creative Ideas for Retail?,"

---

permits to facilitate the activation of vacant spaces with nontraditional tenants and lease agreements. While there are many opportunities to improve the activation process, landlord education remains the primary barrier to short-term activation. Meantime and other stakeholders continue to reach out and share information with property owners about the harmful impacts of vacancies on businesses and the community and the benefits of ground-floor activation through short-term agreements with nontraditional tenants.

Philadelphia is more experienced in retail conversions than Bay Area cities. To support its large residential population, the city has been converting vacant retail spaces into day care centers and other community anchors. The city hopes to build on its past success by facilitating more retail/office conversions in downtown districts and by providing amenities such as affordable child care to incentivize workers to return. In addition, city leadership is rethinking public programs to appeal to a younger audience (mainly local university students) and to encourage workers to return to the office and patronize local businesses, particularly with evening events such as its long-standing Wednesday happy hour program, SIPS. On Wednesday evenings between June and August, dozens of participating local restaurants offer discounted food and beverages between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. In 2024, SIPS drew an additional 28,000 people (visitors and nonresident workers) downtown, on average, compared with a typical summer weekday, bringing much-needed revenue to local businesses and increasing ridership on the local transit network, SEPTA. SIPS is concentrated in the Center City area, but the event also attracted more than 5,400 nonresident workers to the nearby West Market Office District, which has lagged other districts in post-pandemic foot traffic recovery.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Center City District, "A Successful Summer With CCD SIPS 2024," blog, September 25, 2024, <https://centercityphila.org/blog/successful-summer-with-ccd-sips-2024>.



---

# Cultural Planning for Success

The examples of Boston, Cleveland, Denver, and Philadelphia underscore the transformative power of arts and culture as tools for community development, economic recovery, and urban revitalization. These cities, despite their varying levels of resources and challenges, have all adopted unique strategies to integrate arts and culture into their post-pandemic recovery plans, using creative place-making as a central theme. Their approaches make it clear that sustained funding, good planning, creative uses of vacant spaces, cross-sector partnerships, and public realm investments are key ingredients of successful cultural districts.

Five other lessons can be gleaned from these case studies:

- 1. Commit to funding.** Having consistent investments through programs like Percent for the Arts or a dedicated tax allows cities to cultivate cultural assets that serve as economic and social anchors. Cleveland's journey from minimal public investment in the arts to hosting one of the nation's largest arts funds is a testament to the power of grassroots advocacy.
- 2. Plan for the long term.** The Boston Creates cultural plan and the collaboration of the regional Metropolitan Area Planning Council have enabled Boston to adopt a holistic strategy for integrating arts and culture into land use planning.
- 3. Make the most of underutilized spaces.** All of the case study cities have leveraged vacant spaces to create more opportunities for local artists and community organizations.

**5. Invest in the public realm.** Denver's focus on pedestrian connectivity, rebranding, and placemaking provides a blueprint for cities seeking to make the most of public realm investments to strengthen cultural districts.

Establishing and investing in arts and cultural districts and leveraging partnerships with local artists and cultural institutions will not resolve all of the challenges confronting downtown districts in Bay Area cities. However, short- and long-term funding for cultural assets and creative placemaking measures can restore or strengthen communities, support existing businesses and institutions, and create opportunities for new attractions that bring more visitors and investment to the region's urban downtown centers.

