

NEW ENGLAND CITIES USE THE ARTS, CULTURE, AND ENTERTAINMENT TO SPUR COMMUNITY GROWTH

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A shared belief that the arts enrich our lives, strengthen community ties, and make better citizens has been a common thread in the history of human society. The premise that the arts are an economic driver, however, is a more recent phenomenon.

According to a comprehensive 1994 study by the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies, the arts contribute \$36.8 billion to the economy every year and support 1.3 million jobs in nonprofit organizations alone. These impacts have undoubtedly grown since then, but even in 1994 this data understated the economic effects of arts and cultural activities. For one, the study did not count creative arts workers in the for-profit sector. Second, it excluded many activities that economists now place under the heading of arts and entertainment.

There's no disputing that people are keenly interested in the arts — more than 97 million people attended an arts-related event in the United States during 1997, according to the National Endowment for the Arts

Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, many of these held in the downtowns of America's big cities and smaller communities.

But the economic impact doesn't end there. Because people are attracted to an area by arts activities, other non-art related businesses look to move into a downtown or neighborhood district that has a steady flow of people. In particular, restaurants and retailers open where customers are virtually guaranteed.

The arts also enhance an area's quality of life, a major consideration in business retention and relocation. For many companies, advances in telecommunications create greater options, specifically the ability to do business from any location. In order to attract companies and their highly skilled workers, communities and regions are increasingly looking for something that sets them apart from other locations. To achieve that end, arts and entertainment are high on the list.

Originally published as "Coming to a Downtown Near You! How Arts, Culture and Entertainment Spur Local Growth," *Advances in Community Economic Development Affecting Connecticut*, Vol. 1, No. 1, December 2000. Published by Connecticut Light & Power, Northeast Utilities System, Hartford, Connecticut. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

A National Perspective

Communities across the country are looking at ways to take advantage of the economic benefits of the arts.

Eureka, California, designated 49 central city blocks as a “cultural arts resource district,” and encouraged the creation of artist living and working space in the upper floors of buildings in the district.

From big cities to small towns, communities are using theaters and other forms of arts and entertainment to attract people downtown — and it’s working.

Though a thriving financial and business center, **Seattle, Washington**, faced the common dilemma of essentially shutting down after the business day ended. Seattle successfully used the arts to reverse this trend and bring people back downtown — as many as 10,000 people a night. In efforts started more than a decade ago, using funding from city and state government and corporate contributors, the city developed/rehabilitated five arts facilities that consistently bring people downtown: the Seattle Art Museum, the Fifth Avenue Theatre, Paramount Theatre, A Contemporary Theatre and the Benaroya Concert Hall. As these cultural attractions pull in people, developers have built 15 million square feet of new office space, and more than 16,000 residents and 2,500 retail businesses now call the central business district home.

Providence, Rhode Island, successfully transformed its image from one of a struggling, older Northeastern city into a tourist hot spot by a decade-long effort to improve the livability of its downtown. Perhaps the single most important change was the recapture of the Providence River running through (but effectively buried under) the center of the city and its transformation into a pedestrian walkway and focus of community activity. Activities such as the innovative “Water Fire” events held on weekends in the summer have breathed new life into

the city. Providence also created incentives for its downtown arts and entertainment district, including income tax exemptions for district artists on sales of their items, and property tax breaks for landlords converting commercial space to residences for artists.

Many municipalities across the country are refurbishing a classic theater to serve as a community economic development catalyst. **Salisbury, North Carolina** (population 25,000) attracted some 14,000 patrons to its downtown Meroney Theater in its first year of operation after a \$1.5 million restoration spearheaded by two leaders of a local theater group. The Meroney, according to the *Main Street News*, a National Main Street Center publication, is the cultural and artist heartbeat of Salisbury and the centerpiece of its revitalization efforts.¹

Loveland, Colorado, takes a more direct approach through its “Art in Public Places” ordinance that dedicates one percent of the city’s capital construction budget for art purchases. Many artists have moved to Loveland because of this and other arts-friendly civic policies. The concentration of artists in the area led to the creation of two major shows — Sculpture in the Park and the Sculpture Invitational — which lure thousands of art lovers to the town. In February, Loveland hosts a day-long studio walk to showcase artist workplaces, and in April, there is a Governor’s Invitational Art Exhibition. The downtown Loveland Museum & Gallery and the Rialto Theatre, featuring performing arts and vintage movies, are also major draws.

Creative Cluster Boosts New England Economy

Recent groundbreaking research commissioned by the New England Council demonstrates the significant impact of creative arts and culture on the area’s regional economy.

A consulting group retained by the council performed an industry cluster analysis, where a group of businesses that share proximity and economic interdependence are analyzed to assess their competitiveness and collaborative potential.² In this study, data included both commercial and non-profit organization employees engaged in arts and culture, as well as the self-employed.

In total, nearly 250,000 people, or 3.5 percent of all jobs in New England, are employed in the so-called Creative Cluster, supporting an annual payroll of \$4.3 billion. (Connecticut alone boasts more than 64,000 creative workers, comprising some 3.7 percent of the state's work force.) These workers are engaged in one of seven product lines: applied arts, including various forms of design; performing, visual or literary arts; media; heritage tourism, embodied by museums or historical sites; or advocacy and support roles.

The report makes a compelling case that the Creative Economy is indeed a dynamic industry cluster that is an integral component of New England's workforce and quality of life. Collectively, the cluster employs four times the number of people in healthcare technology, 30 percent more than the software industry and nearly as many as those working at New England's computer equipment companies. Further, creative jobs are growing at a rate twice the regional average. The report notes that Creative Cluster jobs bring significant income to a region — cultural tourism is one example — and export substantial goods and services, through touring companies, publication of books and the like. Indeed, as the report notes, "Creative professionals...embody the very characteristics of the New Economy, where innovative, imaginative ideas are vital to job creation and technological progress."

The report suggests that state and local governments can leverage the multifaceted relationship between the arts and the economy, which includes the:

- Creative cluster — institutions, businesses and individuals whose work is rooted in the arts and culture;
- Creative workforce — artists, performers and others who may not be employed by a cultural organization but perform creative work;
- Creative communities — locations where quality of life is directly connected to higher concentrations of creative workers and industries.

In short, government and business should be cognizant of the fact that the Creative Economy is no longer a nicety worthy of philanthropic support. On the contrary, it is a rapidly growing sector that deserves public and private investment to achieve and enhance economic progress. In particular, the integration of arts and culture in municipal strategic planning is integral to downtown revitalization in large cities, rural communities and low-income neighborhoods across New England.

NEW ENGLAND SUCCESS STORIES

Steeped in history and culture, Connecticut cities and towns too are focusing on the power of arts and entertainment cluster development. In the state's largest cities and in many of its smaller communities, renovated old theaters, new entertainment venues and artist housing are increasing the vibrancy, livability and economic viability of downtowns and neighborhoods.

New Haven has long been known for the breadth of its cultural attractions, including Long Wharf Theater, Yale Repertory Company and the New Haven Symphony Orchestra, fourth oldest in the nation. A newer attraction involving the entire community is the city's annual International Festival of Arts and Ideas in June, which began as a five-day event in 1996. The festival has proved so successful at bringing people and business downtown and improving New Haven's image that it has expanded to two weeks, and in 2000 incor-

porated events held in New London and Stamford.

In the early 1990s, **Bridgeport's** leaders embarked on a downtown revitalization strategy keyed to renovating its theaters and museums as well as creating new attractions. Over the past several years the Polka Dot Theater was moved downtown, the Cabaret Theater and Barnum Museum refurbished (renovation of the Palace Theater is underway), an art museum opened within the new campus of Housatonic Community College (which itself was relocated to downtown from the east end of the city), and a ballpark built for the Bridgeport Bluefish, the city's new minor league baseball team. Nearby Beardsley Park, which houses the only major zoo in the state, underwent restoration and is once again a major regional attraction.

This year, Bridgeport adopted tourism as an official industry cluster as part of its participation in the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City (ICIC), a business-development strategy devised by professor Michael Porter of Harvard University. Bridgeport intends to nurture an entertainment and tourism cluster emerging from ongoing downtown and waterfront development. A new hockey arena is nearing completion next to the ballpark and there are plans to create a regional commercial and retail center at Steel Point on the harbor, with new shops, restaurants and condominiums. City leaders anticipate that all of this development will provide a ten-fold increase—from one to ten million—in visitors to Bridgeport within five years.

With a big boost from state bond funds, **Hartford** is poised to become a major entertainment destination in New England. Construction of a state-of-the-art convention center at Adriaen's Landing on the Connecticut River, beginning in 2001, will cap an unprecedented period of expansion for Hartford's arts and entertainment offerings. Ongoing development of the riverfront as part of Riverfront Recapture's 20-year cam-

paign has acted as a catalyst for rediscovery of the city by suburbanites and city residents alike. Joining the party are major expansions at Hartford's signature attractions, such as the Bushnell Theater, Mark Twain House and Wadsworth Atheneum, as well as a new home for the Artists Collective in the city's north end, the exciting Learning Corridor near Trinity College (with performance space for community arts groups), and even a big new addition to Hartford's famous public library.

Enhancing the arts cluster is helping to turn Connecticut's cities into vibrant centers of activity all day, every day, rather than just business centers that empty as commuters leave work. In this way, arts and entertainment complements other businesses, creating synergistic growth between the worlds of work and play.

The Connecticut experience is by no means limited to large cities. **New London** is a good example of a community using tourism as a primary component of its revitalization plans. This town of 24,000 people has five pillars of development, including three keyed to bringing in more visitors: downtown revitalization (using a "preservation/rehabilitation" approach); a waterfront park project; and redevelopment of Fort Trumbull, an historic Revolutionary War era fort. The other pillars are business oriented, including the expansion at Pfizer and a new marine terminal at the state pier, demonstrating again the compatibility of the arts cluster with traditional business development.

Downtown New London restoration aims at "re-energizing" the town core by renovating historic buildings and creating a new retail/entertainment complex. One of the anchors for the downtown is the Garde Theatre, restored to its earlier Moroccan-style interior glory, which brings thousands to performances of touring companies, individual artists and community shows, and epitomizes New London's rebirth. New

London also plans to make a visit from several "tall ships" an annual event at Waterfront Park, capitalizing on the hugely successful Op-Sail event in 2000.

New London's emphasis on arts/entertainment is consistent with southeastern Connecticut's growth strategy highlighting the region's many tourist destinations (such as gambling casinos, Mystic Seaport and area beaches), while leveraging these attractions to sell the region's quality of life to corporate site selectors, company decision makers and their families.

Torrington is also using the restoration of an historic theater as the catalyst for revitalizing its downtown commercial district. Having suffered many years of decline, there are early signs of a turnaround in several new boutique-style businesses on Main Street, as well as the refurbished landmark Yankee Pedlar Inn. But the focus is on restoring the art deco Warner Theatre to its past glory. The Warner will mount original dramatic productions through its own stage company and host touring dance companies and Con-

necticut symphonies. Its success is inspiring spin-offs such as a studio theater nearby, a local ballet company and new music and dance studios. With an abundance of funky buildings and storefronts, downtown Torrington could soon become a mecca for aspiring artists and performers.

While it is too early to call the efforts by Connecticut cities and towns to use arts and entertainment as an economic catalyst a roaring success, all the signs are positive. Really the trend is nothing new, rather a reaffirmation that cities and, particularly, downtowns are centers of culture and commerce that define a community's sense of place.

Notes

1. National Main Street Center, "Main Street News," August 1998.

2. Mt. Auburn Associates in *The Creative Economy Initiative: The Role of Arts and Culture in New England's Economic Competitiveness*, June 2000.