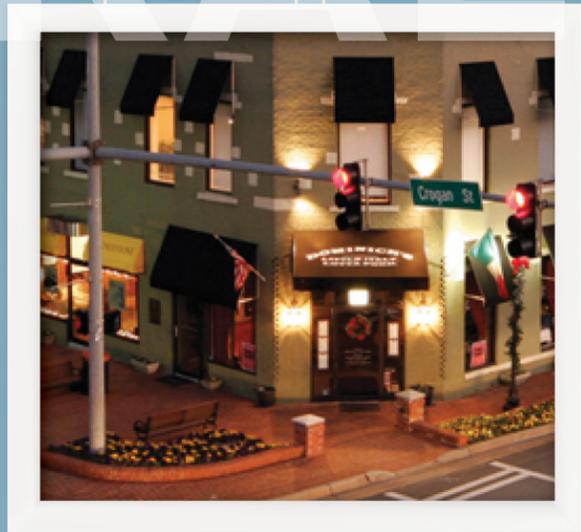


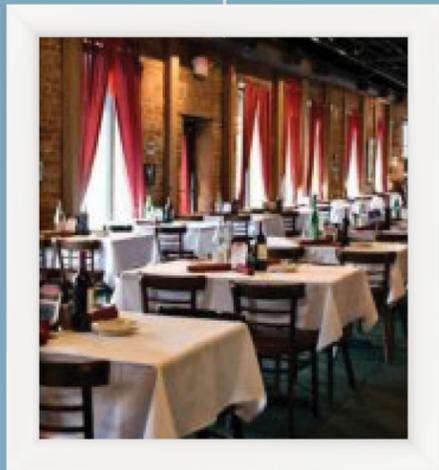
CULTURAL DISTRICT



What are the unique elements that embody a cultural district?

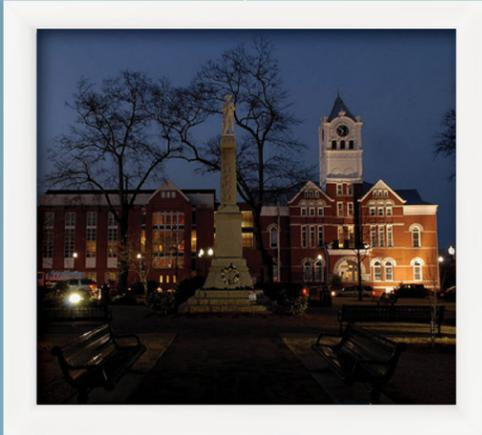
Is there a strict definition?

Should there be?



Much of what is currently written about cultural districts goes back 15 years to a 1998 publication by Americans for the Arts (AFTA) titled "Cultural Districts: The Arts as a Strategy for Revitalizing our Cities." The nomenclature of cultural districts fits snugly into the context of urban planning, and its core principles have been recycled, chapter and verse, in local and state programs that establish cultural districts throughout the country. Significant resources exist for those seeking to create such an area. A simple internet search will yield pages of documentation, including the above referenced AFTA document, as well as state programs (Louisiana and Texas are helpful), city programs (Seattle and Atlanta both offer specific zoning guidelines) and numerous examples of the successful models of in all shapes and sizes across the country.

Many potentially interesting conversations might be had about the definition of cultural districts, their role in community place making and their ability to serve as revitalization tools. The following abstracts and questions are intended to provide context and some background about elements of cultural districts and serve as a starting point for dialogue about the power and potential of these areas.



CULTURAL DISTRICTS

are summarized as:

- 1) Geographically distinctive areas anchored by arts and/ or cultural destination(s); and
- 2) Created (in no particular order) to: celebrate community identity, foster creative placemaking, generate local economic development, attract tourists, preserve historic resources, increase property values, foster redevelopment, and attract new residents.

Must cultural districts occur naturally or can they be created through policies, incentives and regulations?

Stone Mountain has been an icon of the Atlanta region since pre-historic times. The Mountain and surrounding state park attract 4 million visitors annually. The development of the modern-day Stone Mountain Park dates to 1941, and contemporary park management has embraced highly commercialized recreation and tourism products as well as an idealized historical narrative to attract visitors. The City of Stone Mountain is intrinsically tied to the geological feature from which it takes its name. Dating to 1839, the city's economy has benefited from early tourists seeking recreational opportunities. The economic and social history of Stone Mountain Park and the City of Stone Mountain are uniquely intertwined through boom and bust cycles, and arts, culture, recreation and tourism have been used by both to meet challenges in unique and innovative ways.

At first glance, Stone Mountain may not seem to be a cultural district in the traditional sense, but it is a cultural destination for the region. Most recently, the Village in the City of Stone Mountain has embraced policy and incentives available through its historic district to develop an arts incubator space which serves as a tool to reinvigorate economic opportunity in its downtown. The concept is supported through the efforts of the local government and partner organizations such as ART Station Contemporary Arts Center. In return for its commitment to the arts, the City of Stone Mountain benefits from having colorful, exciting businesses in buildings on Main Street that had been vacant for many months. It also reaps the rewards of having visitors who come to the studios and galleries discover other businesses in this charming, historic small town.”

Can cultural districts help revitalize areas of the Atlanta region?

IT TAKES A PARK TO GROW A VILLAGE

CULTURAL

OVERHAUL

Is limiting the “cultural” in cultural districts to the arts, entertainment, science, museums, galleries and theatres a bit dated?

By broadening the definition, is it possible to expand the identification, creation and promotion of cultural districts more equitably across the region?



The AFTA document on Cultural Districts is very clear that their intent is to consider only areas that have been identified as a cultural district, arts district, museum district, theatre district or similar designation by a government agency, private development group, promotional bureau or planning authority. The Atlanta region is fortunate to have a number of these traditional cultural districts, both existing and developing, that meet this definition. These include the area around the Woodruff Arts Center and the emerging “Museum District” around the Georgia Aquarium and the Center for Civil and Human Rights.

This AFTA disclaimer indicates that it recognizes only formal districts, but in doing so, it misses a large number of other existing cultural institutions, as well as opportunities to develop new ones. Limiting cultural districts to the traditional definition could, not only inhibit the identification and creation of additional areas, but also constrain their promotion equitably across the region. The definition does, however, recognize that Cultural Districts may have some relationship to other city amenities such as Historic Features and Natural Amenities. It may be worth blurring the lines further to enhance the definition because without thinking creatively these limitations will be perpetuated.

The Atlanta region can currently boast of several successful models of creating cultural destinations that are not anchored by a traditional arts venue. It is worth reflecting on a number of these outside-the-box examples.

Look no further than some regional communities for inspiration:

SOCIALLY COHESIVE AREAS

Mill Villages In the City of Atlanta, the neighborhood of Cabbagetown is the historic mill village for the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill. Mill Villages were a type of factory town, typically developed by the owner of the mill to provide low-cost housing for employees. Common living and labor conditions led to the development of a cohesive social culture. Long after the factories ceased operations, the footprints of the community remain and its unique features and physical identity – narrow streets with small houses on small lots – still imprints itself on the current social identity. Mills and Mill Villages still feature prominently in communities throughout the region, including Whittier Mill (Atlanta), Brumby Lofts (Cobb County), and Canton Cotton Mill and Mill Village (Cherokee County).

CULTURALLY DISTINCT COMMUNITIES

Buford Highway Through decades of international immigration to metro Atlanta, Buford Highway has become a linear multi-ethnic neighborhood. This corridor is home to one of the highest concentrations of foreign-born residents in the country and, as the neighborhoods and their diversity grow, the infrastructure to serve them – markets, farmers' markets, restaurants, specialty shops, and cultural institutions – grow as well, adding to the cultural distinctiveness.

HERITAGE AREAS

Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area

By definition, Heritage Areas are places where natural, cultural and historic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape. The land that comprises the Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area includes active

quarries, rolling topography, rural landscapes, and granite outcroppings that are the backdrop to historic, cultural, and spiritual resources within the community.

TRAILS

Silver Comet Trail This rails-to-trails project commemorates the physical corridor of the Silver Comet passenger train, introduced by the Seaboard Air Line Railroad in 1947 and operated until 1969. The rail line itself was closed in 1989. It connects with other trails and extends out of the Atlanta region to the Alabama state line and is a major attraction in the communities through which it passes. The Beltline is another example of a Rails to Trails project that is developing its own unique culture along a linear corridor.

South Fulton Scenic Byway This is 29-mile loop that travels Cochran Mill Road, Hutcheson Mill Road and State Highway 70. The Byway is a collection of landscapes that preserve the cohesive rural character of the area. Reminiscent of the days when "motoring" was a recreational pastime (think the National Park System's Blue Ridge Parkway), the Fulton Scenic Byway is enjoyed by motorists and cyclists alike.

Cool Communities The Metro Atlanta Region has an abundance of neighborhoods that are destinations for residents and visitors alike. Communities have invested in central gathering places with parks and amphitheaters that attract concerts, festivals, arts shows, as well as farmers markets, food trucks and culinary celebrations.

