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Do arts districts live up to their hype?

They're seen as a cure-all for urban blight, but there's a right way and a wrong way to go about creating them.



David Bielenberg, beside a guitar sculpture on North Avenue at Charles Street, is executive director of the flourishing Station North Arts & Entertainment District. (Baltimore Sun photo by Algerina Perna / May 6, 2010)

By Mary Carole McCauley, The Baltimore Sun
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"Ha!" reads a colorful poster near the **Creative Alliance**, the letters inscribed inside an oversize exclamation point. A few blocks farther, there is that enigmatic message again: "Ha!." And around the corner: "Ha!"

But though the exuberant punctuation mark indicates that the viewer is inside the Highlandtown Arts & Entertainment District, there's little to laugh about these days.

In 2003, the city waved the policy equivalent of a magic wand and declared that a new arts district had been created in an area encompassing **Highlandtown**, **Patterson Park**, and parts of **Canton** and Greektown. Then, officials sat back and waited for hordes of artists to turn up and bring about urban renewal.

Seven years later, they're still waiting.

Arts and entertainment districts, and the so-called "creative class" of sculptors, musicians and entrepreneurs they're designed to attract, have become seen as a sure-fire solution for urban blight.



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Baltimore has two arts districts — one that is booming, and one that is not. Meanwhile, the city is considering creating a third enclave on the west side, to be anchored by the **France-Merrick Performing Arts Center** and aimed at revitalizing the Howard Street corridor.

Whether a west-side arts district would flourish like the **Station North Arts & Entertainment District**, or flounder like Ha! is unclear. Some worry that even — or especially, if — a new district succeeds, it would create competition for already scant audiences and supplies.

"Our arts district is not funded," says Christopher Ryer, executive director of the Southeast City Development Corp, which operates Ha!

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"There's also no structure within the city to administer it. It's pretty hard to run a program with literally no budget at all and no support. So, creating another arts district — especially one downtown that might have much greater resources — would be threatening."

The experts say that a midsize city such as Baltimore can potentially support multiple arts districts, if they're properly designed and run.

"I'm suspicious of people who suggest that there is a limiting factor, that a city can have too many arts districts," says Enrique Silva, assistant professor of city planning and urban affairs at Boston University.

"It's like asking if a city can have too many people. Instead of competition, multiple arts districts can generate synergies. Just make sure to involve artists in the planning process, don't put the districts too close together and don't make them compete for the same audience."

Not every arts district has to cultivate hipsters, he says. Others can succeed by appealing to senior citizens or families. Just look at the Broadway theater district in New York.

Kathy Robertson, director of the West Side Initiative for the Baltimore Development Corp., says that planning for a third district is "in its infancy," but that the new venture could have a distinct personality.

"Station North might be more the area where you find visual artists, and the west side might be more of a theater center," she says.

The new district's character would largely be determined by its boundaries, which have not been drawn. But Robertson says the area under consideration includes vacant storefronts and warehouses with the potential to be transformed into performance halls and studios.

"Our planning goals include looking at the real estate, infrastructure and cultural resources that already exist," says Bill Gilmore, executive director of the Baltimore Office of Promotion & the Arts.

In a way, the city chose wisely when it designated the corridor along Charles Street and North Avenue as its first arts district in 2002. The neighborhood possessed many of the elements necessary for success.

Every year, the **Maryland Institute College of Art** graduates hundreds of gifted — and cash-strapped — young artists, who find in the blocks surrounding campus a plentiful supply of affordable housing, public transportation and inexpensive coffeehouses where they can brainstorm with friends.

"Artists were already living in Station North before it became an arts district," says David Bielenberg, the district's executive director. "Some of the artists got together on their own and cooperatively developed buildings. It's been an arts-centric area for years, and the city wanted to encourage and develop that focus."

Now, the once-decaying streets seem on the verge of turning a corner. A new troupe, gallery or nightclub seems to open in the district every few months. And though portions of the neighborhood are still ramshackle, there's now a reassuring and steady flow of foot traffic during the days and on weekend nights.

It's tempting to conclude that the impetus for change came from the ground up, and not the top down. After all, it was the community of artists, educators and business leaders who banded together to form Station North Inc., a nonprofit agency with an annual budget of about \$100,000 that coordinates activities in the district.

An arts district designation provides certain tax breaks for those who live, work or build within district boundaries, though the primary beneficiaries tend to be developers, not artists.

Bielenberg says, however, that the resurgence might not have come about as quickly if the city and state hadn't declared Station North an arts district.

"It's a signal that there's something going on here," Bielenberg says. "It's saying, 'We're going to recognize the character of the neighborhood and talk about it and make it bigger.' We find that artists are drawn to arts districts because other artists are already here. It's important for establishing a sense of community."



Studies bear Bielenberg out.

In 2001, urban planning researchers Arthur Brooks and Roland Kushner took a look at the per-capita revenues of arts organizations in nine cities. They found that performing groups and galleries located within arts districts averaged more than twice the proceeds of those arts organizations operating outside district boundaries.

"Station North connects us all together," says Elliott Rauh, executive director of **Single Carrot Theatre**, which operates a small theater in the district.

"Arts organizations tend to be so head down and concentrating on their next project that we might never meet people who are just two or three doors away. Having something like Station North Inc., which brings all these small organizations together and gets a dialogue going, is priceless."

Highlandtown lacks those natural assets — including, crucially, a critical mass of artists who could join forces for their mutual benefit, as happened in Station North. There's a dearth of warehouses that could be converted into performance and studio space, and the area feels cut off from the downtown.

"From the beginning, we were wrongly conceived," Ryer says. "Arts districts were originally thought of as being devices to revitalize old, industrial areas — not residential neighborhoods with 3,000 rowhouses. My guess is that we don't have more than 50 or 60 artists living in the whole area."

Ha! has just two arts group of any size: the Southeast Anchor branch of the **Enoch Pratt Free Library**, which opened in 2007; and the **Creative Alliance**, a community group that promotes an array of visual and performing arts in Baltimore.

However, the Southeast Anchor doesn't make policy decisions for itself, but functions as part of the citywide library system. That leaves just the Creative Alliance — and it can't create an arts district on its own.

"A single anchor or flagship arts project rarely sparks the revitalization of an entire neighborhood," says Carl Grodach, an assistant professor of public affairs at the **University of Texas** at Arlington. It's the linkages between several organizations, he says, that generate the buzz, the excitement that can make an area feel cutting-edge almost overnight.

The west side potentially has several arts groups that could generate crosscurrents: the refurbished **Hippodrome Theatre**; **Everyman Theatre**, which is scheduled to move to West Franklin Street in the fall of 2011; the **Eubie Blake Cultural Center**; and the **Bromo Seltzer Tower** and the **H&H Building galleries**.

Grodach says it's important that the city build on a nucleus of painters and performers, as it did with Station North. While it's possible to create a successful entertainment district in an area where no artists currently reside, such an undertaking is difficult and costly.

"Arts district designation should go toward those places where the city can nurture existing clusters of activity," he says, "rather than creating an arts district from scratch due to a perceived need to redevelop a particular area."

He urges Baltimore planners to provide support services for artists and inventors. A low-cost health insurance plan, for example, would lure more members of the creative class than a raft of tax breaks. And providing a quick, safe and efficient public transit system is key, he says.

"The emphasis on affordable living and work space could be coupled with strategies that recognize the precarious nature of artistic employment," he says.

Meanwhile, over on the east side, Ryer says a bit wistfully that there's hope for Ha! yet.

"We've been talking in-house about creating a different kind of arts district in Highlandtown that's not so much an economic development tool as a community-building tool," he says.

"Highlandtown is incredibly diverse. People from many different countries live here. Maybe we could use the arts as a way to build relationships between those groups."

The boundary lines of the district could be redrawn to the east to include nearby vacant warehouses that could provide housing stock. And if the proposed 14-mile Red Line is built, light rail could provide a vital link connecting Highlandtown to the rest of the city.

"Arts districts can be quite powerful," Ryer says. "With a little help, our future could be a lot brighter."

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