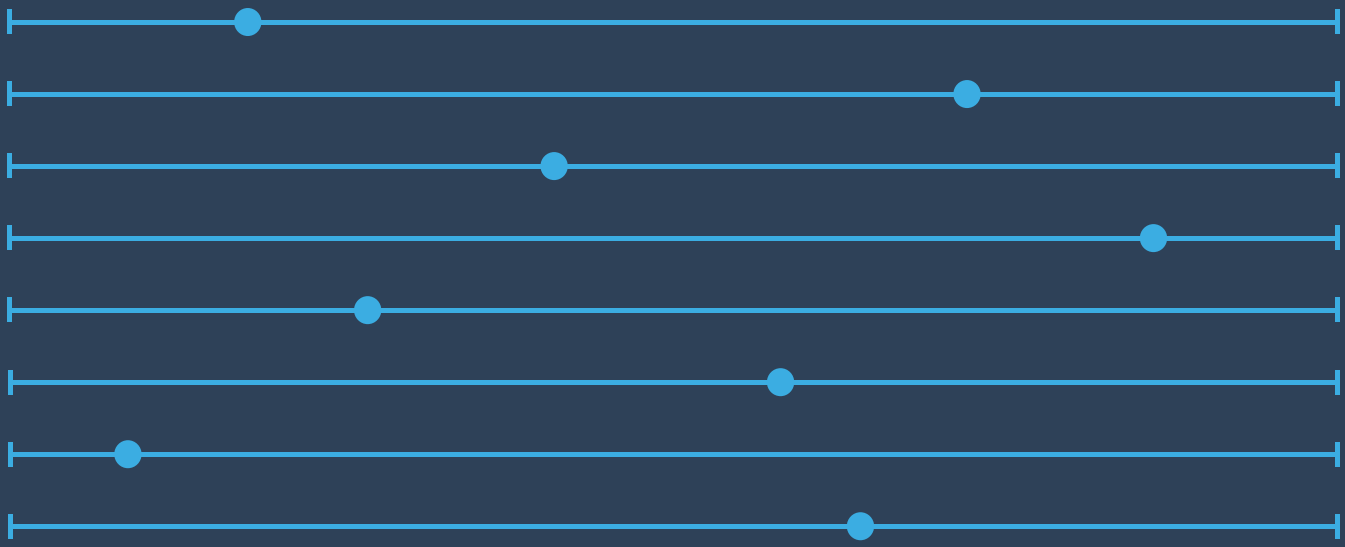


CIVIC SYNERGIES: CULTURAL DISTRICTS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Jordi Baltà Portolés and Christos Carras

GCDN
Global Cultural Districts Network
An Initiative of AEA Consulting

UCLG CGLU
United Cities and Local Governments

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About GCDN

The **Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN)** is committed to improving the quality of urban life through the contribution of the arts, culture, and creative industries. GCDN brings together policymakers, planners, and leaders from around the world, all working at the intersection of culture and sustainable urban development through convenings, research and collaboration. GCDN is an initiative of AEA Consulting.
www.gcdn.net

About UCLG

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is the world's largest organization of local and regional governments and their associations, representing and advocating for their interests on the global stage. Headquartered in Barcelona and present across all world regions, representing over 70% of the global population, UCLG brings together cities, metropolitan and regional governments, and national and subnational associations to promote democratic local self-government, strengthen cooperation among territories and amplify the collective voice of local and regional governments in international decision-making. Through advocacy, policy dialogue, knowledge-sharing and decentralized cooperation, UCLG works to ensure that local and regional governments are recognized as essential partners in addressing global challenges and advancing sustainable development that leaves no one and no place behind.
www.uclg.org

The **Culture Committee of UCLG** is the leading global platform of cities, organizations and networks on the role of culture in sustainability. Anchored in human rights and people-centered development, the Committee organises a biennial Summit and a global Award. It builds capacity on cultural rights and good governance with the Culture 21 Plus modules, in cities in all continents and contexts. It advocates for a Culture Goal in global agendas.
www.agenda21culture.net

Credits

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Forewords

GCDN

Whether the product of top-down masterplans, bottom-up community drive, or something in between, cultural districts are both policy tools and living microcosms of their cities. This dual identity gives them a potential for impact that few individual institutions can achieve, and makes them uniquely complex to get right establish successfully.

GCDN exists to foster conversations between the people trying to develop, govern and sustain cultural districts. Through our convenings, research and the experience of our members, we have developed a robust understanding of the different forms they take and how they shape, and are shaped by, their cities. But we had mostly treated government and public policy as part of the conditions districts work within, rather than looking at how districts themselves might influence policy and work with government.

This report, produced with United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), looks at that relationship from both sides of the table. Through Agenda 21 for Culture, UCLG has spent more than twenty years thinking about culture as a dimension of local public policy.

Drawing on surveys of cultural districts and local governments, an expert workshop and nine international case studies, the report finds no single model. Formal governance and funding matter, but so do trust, continuity and the ability to bring the right people around the table. We hope its framework, and what it shows about what enables or hinders these relationships, will help cultural districts and local governments understand one another and make them work better in practice.

Gregorio Lucena Scarpella, Director, GCDN
September 2026

UCLG

As part of its aims to strengthen reflection and action on cultural policymaking at local and regional levels, since 2004 the UCLG Committee on Culture has published a wide range of research reports, policy briefings and practical guides. These have allowed the Committee and its constituency to explore the manifold implications of making culture a central component in sustainable development, addressing emerging challenges and providing a shared lens while acknowledging the diverse circumstances in which local governments operate.

Collaboration with other global and regional networks is also essential to our work. The partnership with the GCDN leading to this report enables us to build on our respective strengths and address a theme of common interest. We are convinced that the report will provide useful insights for both local government and cultural district stakeholders and should allow them to improve joint reflection, governance spaces, policymaking and action. This should ultimately contribute to devising more sophisticated policy approaches, making cultural ecosystems more robust and dynamic and recognising the centrality of culture in local lives.

Jordi Pascual, Coordinator, UCLG Committee on Culture

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Jordi holds a doctorate from the University of Girona and the University of Melbourne, with a thesis focused on reviewing governance models for local cultural policies from a sustainability perspective. He is a lecturer in the MA in Cultural Management at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) and the University of Girona (UdG) and regularly contributes to other university programs.

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He is currently the Executive Director of the Dinos and Lia Martinos Foundation and working on the development of a major new arts centre in Athens designed by Renzo Piano, KYKLOS Centre for Arts and Cultures.

His work as an active independent researcher and writer focuses on cultural policy. In 2023 Dianeosis published an in-depth study of the Greek cultural sector of which he was the lead author and coordinator. In 2024 the *Handbook of Cultural Work* of which he was the editor was published by Bloomsbury Visual Arts.



Cirque Alice at The Civic, Auckland.
Photo: LK Creative

1 INTRODUCTION

CULTURAL DISTRICTS — large-scale entities, or agglomerations of spatially connected yet diverse cultural organisations — interact, almost by necessity and at many levels, with the local governments in whose territories they sit; and for cities and regions, conversely, culture is by now widely acknowledged as an essential component of development, societal well-being, and attractiveness.

Both sides of this 'equation' stand to gain from a synergetic relationship, and it is through the lens of reciprocity — of value flowing in both directions, of what each party has to gain from close collaboration, as well as of how these relationships impact on local residents — that this report sets out to examine it. The pages that follow do not, however, rehearse that premise in the abstract: they test it against evidence, and it is worth saying at the outset that the evidence both confirms the premise and complicates it, in ways this introduction anticipates and the conclusions draw together.

The conviction that culture matters to cities, and that its flourishing requires local governments to nurture it, is not new. In 2004 the local governments constituting United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) adopted the Agenda 21 for Culture,[1] enshrining a commitment to human rights, cultural diversity, sustainability, participatory democracy and the conditions for peace, and situating culture at the centre of local — and, where relevant, central — government policy.[2] The two decades since have produced an ample literature documenting culture's contribution to liveability and sustainable development: the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) analyses of culture and local development, culminating in its 2022 Culture Fix,[3] the framework advanced by UNESCO and the World Bank in Cities, Culture, Creativity for 'unlocking the power of cultural and creative industries for sustainable urban development, city competitiveness, and social inclusion';[4] and the European Union's Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor,[5] devised to render culture's role legible in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Across this body of work a common thread

1 UCLG (2004) *Agenda 21 for Culture*. Available at: https://www.agenda21culture.net/documents/agenda-21-culture.

2 For the purposes of UCLG and this report, local governments are decentralised entities operating at the local level, elected through universal suffrage and with general responsibilities and some autonomy with respect to budget, staff and assets. This distinguishes them from deconcentrated districts or agencies of central / federal / state governments established for administrative, statistical or electoral purposes. It should be noted that UCLG convenes both local and regional governments, the latter amounting to decentralised entities elected through universal suffrage and with responsibilities and resources, but which operate at a larger geographical level, between the local and the national / federal. The notion of 'local government' includes both cities, towns and municipalities, on the one hand, and other territorial units larger than towns but smaller than regions, such as counties or provinces where they exist. In some instances, literature addressing the relationships between cultural districts and regional governments has been used in this report, where it provided useful insights that could also apply at the local level.

3 OECD (2022) *The Culture Fix: Creative People, Places and Industries*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

4 UNESCO & World Bank (2021) *Cities, Culture, Creativity: Leveraging Culture and Creativity for Sustainable Urban Development and Inclusive Growth*. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10986/35621.

5 European Commission, Joint Research Centre, *Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor*. Available at: https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/cultural-creative-cities-monitor.

runs — that culture's value to the city is transversal, reaching well beyond the cultural sector itself — and, with it, a growing recognition of the limits of what was, too simplistically, construed as the 'Bilbao effect': an over-investment in landmark physical infrastructure at the expense of the social infrastructure, and of the robust connections to non-cultural areas of municipal policy, that, we now understand, do much of the work. The Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN) has long been alert to this multi-dimensionality — its 'lotus' framework for gauging the impact of cultural districts was built around it[6] — and its earlier report on value capture[7] made plain that maximising value for communities and cities depends on a robust engagement between cultural districts and municipalities. That the case is not yet fully absorbed into mainstream urban policy is evident even in flagship instruments: the 2020 New Leipzig Charter, for all its invocation of 'the transformative power of cities for the common good', accords culture only passing mention[8].

Yet for all the cases made for culture's centrality, and for all the guidelines addressed to policymakers, comparatively little attention has been paid to a prior and more practical question: how, in fact, cultural-sector organisations and the public sector interface and interact, and whether either possesses the capacities and the mindsets that genuine synergy requires. For cultural organisations, this means learning to see local government not merely as an obstacle in a permitting process, or at best as a source of supplementary funding, but as an essential partner in the fulfilment of their broader missions; for public authorities, it means recognising the benefits of collaboration at a moment when an ever more diverse array of actors is shaping the physiognomy of cities. Placemaking — an increasingly influential approach to the making of liveable environments, with co-creation at its core — points precisely to this need for 'a new capacity of the public sector to engage in strategic policy co-creation'[9], a need that others have framed as a shift of institutional mentality towards a 'creative bureaucracy'[10] and that the early literature on 'creative placemaking'[11] had already begun to map. It is on these interfaces and modes of interaction — between cultural districts and the public sector, primarily though not exclusively government, whether local or central — that this report trains its attention.

The report is organised accordingly. Following this introduction, a set of framing texts (Section 2) revisits the importance of culture in creating and sustaining liveable cities and proposes a typological framework for the cultural

6 Crossick, G. & Ho, S. F. (2022) *In search of... the social impact of cultural districts*. GCDN. Available at: https://gcdn.net/download/8725.

7 Arroyo, K. (2020) *Capturing value & preserving identity*. GCDN. Available at: https://gcdn.net/download/8720.

8 Anon. (2020) *The New Leipzig Charter: The Transformative Power of Cities for the Common Good*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/whats-new/newsroom/12-08-2020-new-leipzig-charter-the-transformative-power-of-cities-for-the-common-good_en.

9 O'Connor, J. (2024) *Culture is not an Industry: Reclaiming Art and Culture for the Common Good*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 205.

10 Landry, C. & Caust, M. (2017) *The Creative Bureaucracy & its Radical Common Sense*. Comedia.

11 Markusen, A. & Gadwa, A. (2010) *Creative Placemaking*. Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts.

district itself, since — as will become clear — the very object of study resists a single definition. It also includes a literature review of publications relevant to our understanding of the relationships between cultural districts and local governments. Section 3 presents the empirical core of the research: two surveys addressed respectively to cultural districts and to local governments, an expert workshop convened to interrogate their results, and a series of nine global case studies, each built on an interview with a district or, in several instances, with the municipality itself. These materials were assembled to answer a cluster of questions the project posed at the outset — what models of synergy between cultural districts and municipalities can be observed; how effectively districts are engaged in the formulation and implementation of municipal cultural strategies and policies; what synergies are possible beyond culture per se; and what modalities of public, municipal, private, non-profit and community-based collaboration can be developed, and what role districts might play within them. Section 4 gathers the conclusions, moving from the takeaways of the case studies to a set of cross-cutting discussion points and recommendations addressed to both districts and governments.

The research process has repaid the initial hypothesis with a more textured picture than the concept from which it grew could have foreseen. Reciprocity, we find, is real but rarely symmetrical: value flows in both directions, yet unevenly, and the two sides trade in different currencies — legitimacy, funding and regulatory stability on the one hand, employment, social cohesion and regeneration on the other. There proves to be no single model of the relationship, but rather a spectrum running from statutory embedding to wholly informal collaboration; the decisive tier of government is frequently not the obvious 'local' one; and it is, more often than not, the 'softer', relational dimensions of governance — trust, continuity, and the slow accretion of mutual recognition — that determine whether formal arrangements bear fruit at all. Certain themes, too, emerged with a force the initial framing did not anticipate: the role of real estate development as a driver of districts, and the associated question of value capture; the breadth of cross-sectoral collaboration, reaching far beyond culture; and the promise of the 'living lab' as an interface for co-creation.

We are equally bound to acknowledge the limits of the exercise — not least a pronounced geographical imbalance towards the Global North, itself in part a symptom of wider inequalities in access to research and publication. With these qualifications in view, the report is offered to a broad constituency: cultural districts and cultural organisations more generally, local and regional governments, the international agencies that treat culture as a driver of sustainable development, and the grassroots and developer-led initiatives through which urban regeneration is, increasingly, pursued.



A young boy from Govandi shares his wishlist for reimagining the streets of this neighbourhood during a public space design workshop. Photo: Community Design Agency, 2022

2

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The importance of culture in creating and maintaining liveable and sustainable cities

Places and territories, including cities, are social constructs — the fruit of the historical interaction of human groups in their appropriation and transformation of the natural landscape. They reflect the history, identity, and values of the populations that inhabit them, and as such they embody an evident cultural dimension. Because places, territories and cities are dynamic, changing in accordance with the communities that live in them and facing new needs, demands and challenges, citizens need to be able to contribute to shaping them, and to imagining their future.

Cultural life is one of the main spheres in which the expression of needs and the shaping of liveable futures can take place. It should therefore be seen as one of the substantial components of sustainable cities and societies, along with social, environmental and economic aspects. These different dimensions of sustainable cities should be integrated and balanced, understanding that culture is not primarily a tool to achieve economic or social goals, even if it may and indeed frequently contributes to them, but it is rather an integral, substantial dimension of liveable cities and communities. For this to happen, however, cities need to establish adequate conditions for citizens to take part in cultural life, in equality and agency. The notion of cultural rights, involving the ability of all inhabitants to discover, create, share, enjoy and protect cultural resources in a city,[1] illustrates this basic precondition.

Cultural rights should therefore inspire the action of local governments in the cultural field. In practice, this entails providing opportunities for citizens to access and actively take part in the creation, production and distribution of cultural activities and expressions, as well as in decision-making processes relevant to cultural life, through consultations, participatory forums or by engaging in the design and delivery of cultural initiatives. Cultural rights also involve identifying and monitoring the inequalities and imbalances that may prevent some citizens from participating in cultural life, and taking action to address them – for instance, through decentralised cultural activities, partnerships with educational, social or health organisations, adequate pricing policies, diverse communication channels, mediation programmes, and improved transportation and accessibility schemes.

In the context of its work supporting cities and local governments to develop cultural policies that contribute to sustainable and liveable cities, UCLG has identified heritage, diversity and creativity as some of the core values that should guide local cultural policies:

- Policies in the field of **heritage** should enable all citizens to identify, protect and pass on the tangible and intangible legacy of the past, recognising its diversity and seeing it as something dynamic and which can be reinterpreted through time.

1 UCLG and City of Rome (2020), *The 2020 Rome Charter: The Right to Participate Fully and Freely in Cultural Life is Vital to Our Cities and Communities*. Available at https://agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/2020_rc_eng_0.pdf

- **Diversity** is a fundamental component of human societies and needs to be respected and actively recognised, through policies that combat all forms of discrimination, enable diverse cultural expressions to be visible and foster an interaction among them, also as a source of creativity.

- **Creativity** is a central part of human dignity, allowing everyone to express themselves in a variety of languages and forms, reflecting the diversity of experiences of human life and helping to develop narratives, imagine future scenarios and design new activities and stories.

From this perspective, cultural districts can play many roles in the contribution to more liveable, sustainable cities. They can provide opportunities for citizens to access and participate in cultural life, discovering diverse cultural expressions from home and abroad. Particularly in the case of cultural districts based in heritage buildings and venues, or which contain heritage institutions (e.g. museums, galleries, archives, heritage interpretation centres), they can also connect communities with their past and that of others, enable learning, dialogue and contribute to heritage reinterpretation. Cultural and creative districts that cluster creative businesses and entrepreneurs can provide opportunities for graduates and citizens to develop professional careers in the field of culture.

From a public policy perspective, it is convenient to see cultural districts as part of a broader cultural ecosystem, fostering synergies between cultural stakeholders, citizens, visitors and other local institutions. This generates an enabling environment for the sustainable development of cultural districts while generating opportunities for all to exercise their cultural rights. The adoption of adequate policies and strategies and the establishment of plural governance frameworks with the engagement of all relevant stakeholders arise as some important measures in this respect.

2.2. Defining the Cultural District: A Typological Framework

The term 'cultural district' has, as its usage has expanded, come to embrace a wide range of organisational forms, origins and intentions — a breadth that makes generalization dangerous but reflects genuine diversity in the phenomenon itself. A significant driver of this diversity is the expanding set of purposes for which cultural districts have been mobilized as policy instruments: tools through which governments seek to promote specific goals. Those goals have shifted and multiplied considerably over recent decades, from city branding and tourism attraction to urban regeneration, economic development, social equity and, more recently, public health and community resilience.[2] Not all districts, however, are principally the product of public policy. Some are primarily the outcome of private real estate development — the Ellinikon in Athens or Casa Anfa in Casablanca are cases in point — in which cultural programming is one component of a larger mixed-use scheme where retail, hospitality and residential

2 Ellis, A. (2024a) 'Cultural and creative districts in a changing Europe', in C. Carras (ed.) *The Handbook of Cultural Work*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, p.17.

uses play a correspondingly more prominent role. The diversity of forms is therefore in part a reflection of the diversity of actors and objectives involved, a dynamic of particular relevance to the relationship between cultural districts and the local governments that are so often their primary institutional interlocutors and funders. Any attempt to reduce the concept to a single essential criterion risks either excluding entities that clearly belong within the category or admitting ones whose membership is questionable. The more productive starting point is not a closed definition but a typological framework: one that identifies the key axes along which districts vary and treats each district as a composite configuration of elements present in different degrees rather than as an instance of a single type.

A very broad working definition, developed for a GCDN global survey that identified just under 500 cultural districts worldwide, treats a cultural district as 'any geographic area generally recognized as having a concentration of cultural activities, organizations, infrastructure and workers.'[3] For the purposes of this research project, which is concerned specifically with the relationship between cultural districts and local governments, we focus on a subset of this broader category: districts that have some form of centralising governance structure, whether horizontal in character — distributing decision-making across a broad range of diverse stakeholders — or vertical, with a clear centre of authority. That authority may be private, public, or constituted as a public-private partnership; the last of these is an increasingly visible model as governments seek to share both the costs and the risks of cultural investment with private actors, and as private developers recognize the value that cultural programming can add to mixed-use developments. Districts that lack any such structure — where the 'district' designation describes a geographic concentration without any accompanying organisational form — fall outside our scope, though of course they may play a significant role in local economies and cultural ecosystems. Several further features of the working definition are worth noting. It sets a deliberately low threshold of intentionality: a district may or may not have formal recognition through local or state government designation with associated fiscal or other benefits, and it may or may not have hard edges, that is, a well-defined geographic boundary. The cultural element itself, whilst definitional, is understood to be only one of several land uses present: commercial, non-profit, retail, business and residential elements will almost always be present alongside it. Cultural districts are not a new phenomenon — concentrations of cultural assets, makers and performers have been integral features of urban life throughout history — but their deliberate cultivation as policy instruments, and the institutional forms that have evolved to manage them, is a development that has gathered pace and sophistication over the past three decades.

Within this broad family, the most commonly drawn — and analytically most significant — distinction is between districts defined primarily by cultural *consumption* and those defined primarily by cultural *production*, a spectrum best

3 Ellis, A. (2024b), "Cultural Districts and Cultural Policy", in Amirtahmasebi, R.; and Schupbach, J. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Urban Cultural Planning*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, p.114.

understood as the ends of a continuum rather than a binary.[4] At the consumption end sit the large non-profit cultural institutions — museums, performing arts centres, concert halls — that anchor districts organized principally around presenting work to the general public: Vienna's MuseumsQuartier, Washington DC's Mall, or the museum districts of London's Exhibition Road and Berlin's Museumsinsel. At the production end sit concentrations of creative producers — film studios, design agencies, fashion ateliers, music makers — whose primary activity is making rather than presenting, and whose district affiliations are better described as creative than cultural in the strict sense. Most districts combine both orientations, and the combination is functionally important: districts characterized exclusively by consumption tend to lack the vitality and texture that attract cultural consumers in the first place.[5] Working artists and makers are not incidental to the visitor experience but constitutive of it — a point with direct implications for the land use and affordability policies that local governments must consider.

A second fundamental axis concerns the degree to which a district has *emerged organically* from the spontaneous co-location of cultural actors or has been *planned and developed with intentionality* — either from scratch or by formalizing and amplifying an existing cluster. The economic logic of spontaneous clustering, rooted in Marshall's account of agglomeration effects — the benefits of proximity in terms of knowledge-sharing, access to specialized labour, lower transaction costs, and the creative friction generated by competition and collaboration — underpins both types.[6] But origin has practical consequences. Organic districts tend towards fine-grained, varied spatial organisation, lower base rents and informal networks. Moreover, organic processes of district development include a broad range of cases: some led by independent artists, some by entrepreneurs and commercial initiatives, some by neighbours and other non-profit initiatives. These are characteristics that planned districts, whatever their resources, cannot straightforwardly replicate by mandate. The reciprocal envy between these two types — those responsible for top-down districts observing the bravura energy of organic ones, and those shepherding organic districts observing the infrastructure available to their planned peers — is a recurrent theme in comparative analysis.[7] For local governments, this distinction matters practically: the appropriate role for public institutions differs considerably depending on whether they are seeking to catalyse something new or to steward and protect something that has already taken root.

Beyond these two primary axes, a fuller typological account requires attention to at least six further dimensions.

- The *ownership structure* of key assets — buildings, land, venues — determines the degree of financial leverage available and the exposure to market pressures that tend to displace cultural uses as land values rise, a dynamic that has been documented in contexts from Berlin's Kreuzberg to Barcelona's Poblenou.

4 Ellis (2024a), p.17.

5 Ellis (2024b), p.116.

6 Ellis (2024a), p.18; Ellis (2024b), pp.114–15.

7 Ellis (2024b), p.119.

- *Governance model* shapes the capacity for collective action: the considerable autonomy of a district organisation that is itself a significant property owner — such as Cleveland's Playhouse Square or Pittsburgh's Cultural Trust — differs fundamentally from the more coalition-dependent position of a district whose resources depend on member organisations, from one managed directly by a city agency, or from one constituted as a public-private partnership in which governance authority is formally shared between public bodies and private investors.[8]

- The *revenue model* — the balance between contributed income (grants, philanthropy, public subsidy) and earned income (ticket sales, space rentals, commercial activity) — determines both financial stability and programmatic independence; a district heavily dependent on contributed income is vulnerable to shifts in funder priorities, while one tilted towards earned income risks commercial imperatives crowding out cultural ones.

- The dimension of *maturity* — the distinction between long-established districts with deep institutional roots and emergent ones still assembling the organisational and physical infrastructure on which long-term vitality depends — affects both the nature of the challenges faced and the range of interventions practically available.

- The presence of one or more *anchor institutions* is a significant factor. The dynamics of cultural districts anchored by one or more big cultural institutions are different from districts where such institutions are absent. The public profile of the district tends to be powerfully shaped by that of the anchors; they have responsibilities vis à vis the district and drive traffic and brand in a different way than in the case of districts composed of a number of smaller entities with more comparable profiles.

- Finally, the *'mix' of cultural activities and art forms* available to visitors within a district plays a significant role in defining its character and operational reality. A theatre district, for example, will predominantly be 'alive' at night and have strong peak visitation patterns. One comprised primarily of museums, galleries, libraries, etc., will on the contrary be equally active during the day.

Because no single position on any one of these axes determines a district's character or effectiveness, the typology is best understood as a composite metric rather than a classification system. Each district can be mapped as a profile across eight axes — consumption/production orientation; organic/planned origin; private/public ownership; broad/centralised governance; contributed/earned revenue; new/mature development stage; presence / absence of anchor institutions; presence / absence of a dominant cultural activity — with comparisons between districts, or changes over time within a single district, read as differences in configuration rather than differences in kind. This approach replaces the single question 'what is a cultural district?' with the more productive set of questions: what are the constitutive elements, and in what configuration do they appear here?

8 Ellis (2024b), p.122.

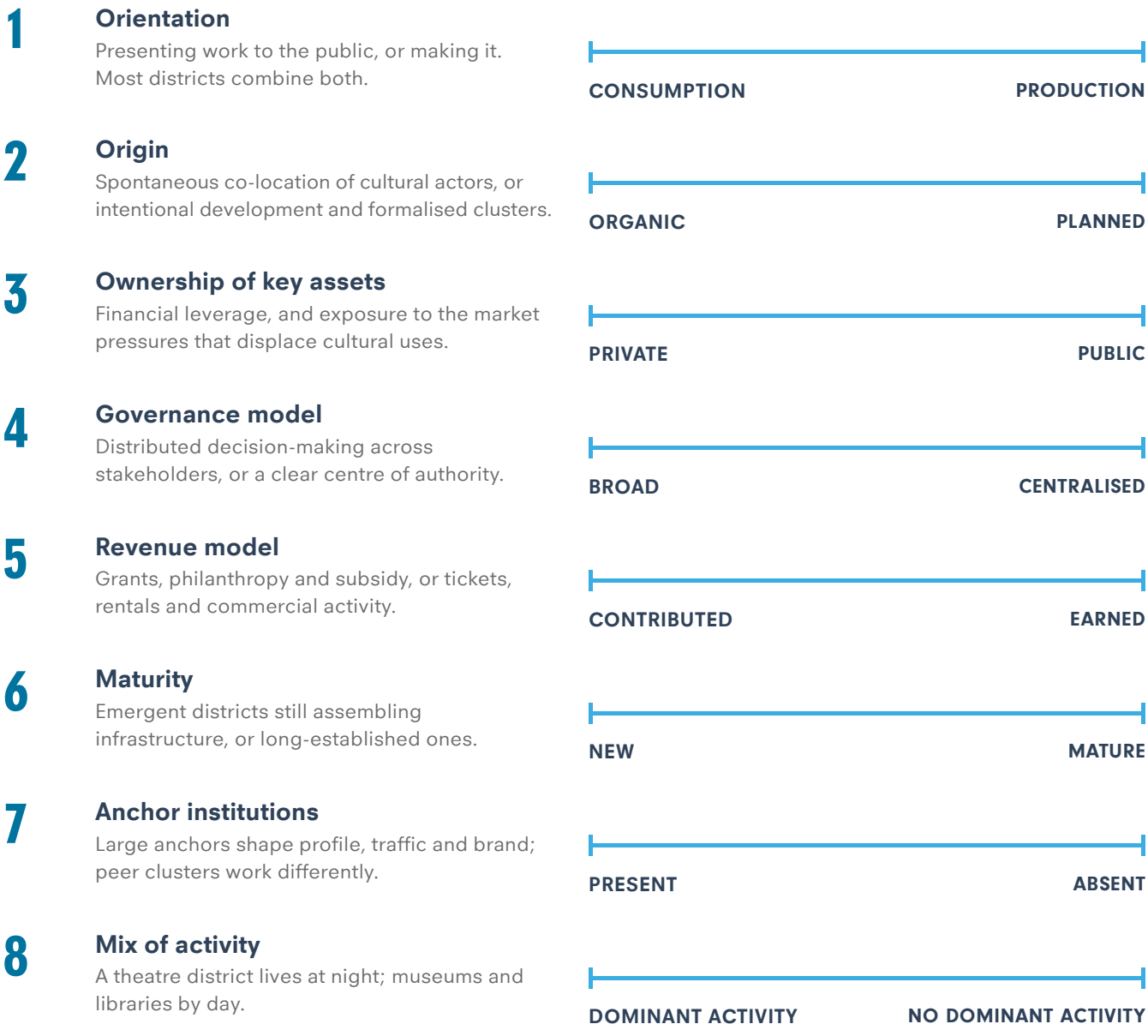
It is better suited to the genuine heterogeneity of the phenomenon, and to the practical task of understanding what forms of support, governance and protection are likely to prove effective in what circumstances.

The composite metric is equally useful, however, in the other direction: it provides a framework for understanding the diverse ways in which districts interact with local governments. Districts at different positions on these axes present different profiles of opportunity and challenge for public policy — different demands on regulatory frameworks, different needs in terms of financial instruments, and different capacities to act as partners in the delivery of broader civic goals.

The choice of case studies in this report strives to illustrate this diversity of typologies, but also to bring out the particularity of different geographies.

Figure 1

Eight axes of the cultural district



2.3. Literature review

This section examines existing knowledge on the relationship between local governments and cultural districts and, more specifically, what factors may facilitate or hinder successful relationships between them. The analysis also entails considering what effects are sought when local governments and cultural districts collaborate or support one another, and what forms of collaboration may exist.

Some underlying aspects need to be considered before examining the findings of existing literature. Firstly, the diversity of models of cultural districts, as well as of competences and roles held by local governments (as well as provincial, regional and other forms of subnational government, where relevant) in different constitutional contexts, implies that some considerations may be valid in some contexts but less so in others. Secondly, literature examining cultural districts comes primarily from English-speaking and Western contexts and has generally devoted less attention to developments in other parts of the world. Thirdly, and partly to compensate for these gaps, literature examining related developments (e.g. governance models in cultural policy, collaboration within cultural and creative ecosystems, etc.) provides findings which could be, at least partly, extrapolated to the relationship between cultural districts and local governments.

This literature review collects, in the first place, some observations on the forms of support and enabling factors and challenges to collaborations between cultural and creative districts and local governments. The second and final subsection focuses more specifically on governance, and the implications of local government engagement in the governance of cultural and creative districts.

The relationship between cultural districts and local governments: forms of support, enabling factors and challenges

The diversity of models of cultural districts, and how they respond to specific local circumstances, has been noted in previous research in this field, including in research commissioned by the GCDN.[9] One of the fields where this diversity is visible is the management models of cultural districts, including their legal status and the nature of the organisations leading them, which in turn have an impact on the relationship existing with local governments and other public bodies.

An analysis of the strategic models in the management of arts, culture and entertainment districts conducted by Amanda Ashley on behalf of American for the Arts in 2014, identified six management models, including government agencies; non-government agencies or quasi-government agencies (which generally create or manage a cultural district through a delegation or on behalf of

9 Doeser, J.; & Kim, A.M. (2018), *Governance Models for Cultural Districts*. GCDN. Available at https://gcdn.net/download/8716.

a government entity); for-profit entities (frequently driven by real estate interests or for-profit arts businesses); non-profit arts organisations; non-profit non-arts organisations (e.g. community development corporations that seek to leverage existing arts assets to help revitalise or stabilise neighbourhoods); and artist-led initiatives (which may or may not be organised as a non-profit organisation, and which may subsequently evolve into a different management structure).[10]

This set of models makes the diversity of relationships existing with government apparent – ranging from cultural districts directly led or managed by public bodies (including local governments) to those instances where relationships with local governments may only be informal or occasional. Despite this, it has been argued that *all* cultural and creative districts need some form of policy support: "In all types of cultural districts... policies and practical effort are needed to support district networks and their governance, as well as business development, skills and training."[11] In addition to the legal nature of cultural districts, a determining fact on the type of policy support needed may be whether a cultural district has emerged organically and incrementally (in which case policy support will tend to involve zoning, building preservation, heritage re-use and land-use controls, etc.) or results from top-down planning and is in its emerging state (where policy efforts may concentrate on capital investment, rent and employment subsidies and tax incentives for firms to locate and to attract employees and private sector investment).[12]

These forms of policy support serve to illustrate some of the challenges typically faced by cultural districts, including financing and securing funding, long-term planning, staffing and administration, relevance to local residents, affordability and gentrification.[13] In this respect, concrete government roles, particularly in those cases where public authorities are not directly involved in the management of a district, may typically include providing technical assistance and professional development, offering incentives to encourage business development, enhancing the visibility of cultural districts, and fostering a supportive climate for the arts and culture, where public and private funding and other forms of support are accessible.[14]

Looking more concretely at these roles, technical assistance could include, among other things, mechanisms to provide access to knowledge, consulting, networking, programme design and planning, marketing, evaluation, and fundraising.[15] Another important contribution made by local governments to

10 Ashley, A. J. (2014), *Creating Capacity: Strategic Approaches to Managing Arts, Culture and Entertainment Districts*. 2014 National Cultural Districts Exchange. Washington and New York: Americans for the Arts.

11 OECD (2025), *The role of culture-led regeneration in place transformation*. OECD Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Papers. Paris: OECD, p. 20.

12 Ibid.

13 National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) (2024), "State Cultural Districts", *State Policy Briefs. Tools for Arts Decision Making*. NASAA.

14 Ibid.

15 National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) (2018), "State Cultural District Programs: Key Issues, Strategies and Management Practices". NASAA.

support the sustainability of cultural districts involves adequate urban planning, lack of which may ultimately result in rising housing prices, more intensive capital investment in the areas originally inhabited by artists and creatives, and subsequent displacement and gentrification.[16]

The support provided by local governments to cultural districts leads to the question of the policy goals being sought. It has been argued that among the main drivers of public investment in cultural and creative districts tend to be tourism attractiveness and the enhancement of innovation and creativity, through the attraction of knowledge workers, inward investment and city branding, among others.[17] At the same time, other kinds of goals can also be sought, including access to culture and cultural consumption, social cohesion, and others.[18] In this respect, local governments' support for cultural districts can also be understood as a way to have a bearing on districts' development. This could include, for instance, ensuring that districts offer diverse and accessible public activities, open to all, that they collaborate with other stakeholders in the city's broader cultural ecosystem, integrate a gender perspective, or ensure that urban development initiatives in the context of the cultural district take into account the protection of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Meanwhile, the ability for governments to provide support through taxation is highly variable, depending on the competences held by local and regional authorities in each constitutional context. In some cases, governments may be able to provide tax exemptions for cultural districts, or to support cultural districts through the income generated by tourist taxes and other local duties and taxes. In some cases, they can also use schemes such as the 1% initiative on major development projects to ensure that funding is available for the activities of cultural and creative districts.[19]

Governments can best provide these forms of support when they engage in interdepartmental and interagency partnerships (connecting agencies and departments in charge of, for instance, economic development, tourism, heritage, arts, and urban or regional development), communicate the benefits of the creative economy, secure support from both the public and private sectors, combine different and complementary support mechanisms to local cultural districts, including artists, arts organisations and cultural industries (complementing financing strategies, partnerships and service provision and adapting them to the needs identified over time), and providing professional development opportunities for cultural district managers.[20]

16 Zukin, S. & Braslow, L. (2011), "The life cycle of New York's creative districts: Reflections on the unanticipated consequences of unplanned cultural zones", *City, Culture and Society* 2(3), 131–140.

17 Ellis, A. (2024), "Cultural and creative districts in a changing Europe", in Carras, C. (ed.), *The Handbook of Cultural Work*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, pp. 17–24.

18 Ellis, A. (2024b), pp. 113–124.

19 Eger, J.M. (2014), *Arts and Culture Districts: Financing, Funding, and Sustaining Them*. 2014 National Cultural Districts Exchange. Washington and New York: Americans for the Arts.

20 NASAA (2024).

Other enabling factors suggested by previous research include the establishment of healthy and cooperative partnerships between the different tiers of government providing support to cultural districts (e.g., municipal and county governments, or local and regional authorities where relevant), the availability of funding mechanisms that cater for the needs of both small and large cultural organisations, and the quality of participation involving local governments and cultural communities.[21] The latter aspect relates to governance models, which will be further explored in the next section.

From the perspective of cultural districts, key enabling factors for successful collaboration include familiarity with the policy context and how it relates to the district's needs and aspirations. This can involve mapping the regulatory landscape to identify opportunities that advance public policy objectives in ways that benefit the cultural district, identifying key personnel and potential political allies with whom to forge strategic relationships and developing ways to measure and communicate how cultural districts can contribute to public priorities and resilient communities.[22]

Organisations and individuals that act as intermediaries between government and on-the-ground cultural districts can also enable synergies and collaborations, and facilitate policy alignment.[23] Intermediaries can be critical to address one traditional challenge to partnerships in cultural and creative sectors, and in policy collaborations more broadly – namely, power imbalances.[24] By helping to align practice with rhetoric, fostering empathy and recognising the value generated by each party, they can facilitate the emergence of more equitable and trusting relationships.

Governance models and participation

The relationship between cultural districts and local governments can be particularly intensive in the governance models of cultural districts, especially in those initiated by local government or in which local governments play an otherwise determining role. More broadly, the establishment of governance spaces open to multiple stakeholders can be conducive to enhancing the public value of cultural districts, with repercussions across several policy areas, as literature in this field suggests.

The "good governance attributes framework" for cultural districts proposed in the GCDN report on *Governance Models for Cultural Districts* (2018) includes several items that are relevant to the engagement of local governments. In terms of leadership, good governance should involve a diversity of organisations

21 Moon, M.J. (2001), "Cultural Governance: A Comparative Study of Three Cultural Districts", *Administration & Society* 22(4), 432–454.

22 Arroyo, K. (2020), *Capturing Value and Preserving Identity*. GCDN.

23 Virani, T. (2022), *Cultural Districts and Innovation: A focus on the Global South*. GCDN.

24 Rising Arts Agency (2023), *Power in Partnerships*. King's College London, Centre for Cultural Value and Rising Arts Agency.

in terms of dimension, scale, sector, and financial resources to reduce power imbalances, or perceptions thereof, moderate the co-operative and competitive forces of stakeholders and control opportunistic behaviours. In the field of strategy, with the aim of ensuring pro-active and responsive planning, governance should involve the development of a common vision of the district and the definition of clear goals shared by all participants, something that should also be reflected in the policy field. In terms of operations, good governance entails having diversified income sources, including public as well as private resources, and consider participatory decision-making processes. Finally, in terms of partnerships, good governance includes connecting with policymakers and city staff in planning, community development, and economic development departments, and understanding the networks of relations between public and private institutional actors.[25]

The report also looked at some of the tensions and conflicts that may threaten the sustainability and resilience of cultural districts, including the loss of consensus and democratic participation, particularly when economic interests become too dominant, and the tension between culture and commerce.[26] Ideally, governance spaces should provide a setting to address and negotiate those tensions, and local governments should play a role in facilitating consensus and the development of holistic, multidimensional strategies.

On the other hand, recent reflections on the governance of cultural and creative districts have emphasised that governance should be networked across hierarchies and sectors, highly collaborative and responsive to the concerns of citizens and society, including by involving local communities and fostering democratic engagement at the citizen level.[27] Some studies have recommended the importance of co-creation and co-production processes involving citizens and other local stakeholders.[28] In this respect, cultural districts can be a setting where to foster inclusive cultural participation, both through "creative programs that aim to ensure public policies represent and benefit diverse constituencies", operating as innovation labs and similar spaces,[29] and through the establishment of democratic and diverse governance spaces. This is in line with UCLG's proposals in terms of fostering local cultural governance driven by cultural rights, which emphasise the importance of participatory processes promoted by local and regional governments and engaging a wide range of stakeholders.[30] By doing so, cultural districts can strengthen their relationship with local government not only as institutional partners, but by demonstrating their effective contribution to broader policy goals.

25 Doeser and Kim (2018).

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 OECD (2025).

29 Arroyo (2020), p. 42.

30 UCLG (2015), *Culture 21: Actions. Commitments on the role of culture in sustainable cities*. Barcelona: UCLG.



Rave-L Party, Les Apaches, FAST, 2026
Photo: Manuel Abella

3

SURVEY, WORKSHOP AND CASE STUDIES

Section 3 constitutes the empirical core of this report. Where the preceding sections present why the relationship between cultural districts and local governments matters, and existing research concerning it, this section turns to primary evidence, gathered from those directly concerned: cultural districts and local governments themselves — canvassed through two dedicated surveys and a series of case study interviews — together with specialists in cultural policy, convened in a workshop to interrogate the results of the surveys. It is on this direct input, from both sides of the relationship and from those who study it, that the analysis and the conclusions that follow in section 4 are built.

3.1. Survey

A key element of the research process was a set of two online surveys addressed respectively to cultural districts and local governments in June 2025, followed by an online workshop held in November 2025 with a group of experts alongside GCDN and UCLG team members.[1]

3.1.1. Survey results

28
cultural districts

6
local governments

82%
of districts from the Global North

78%
report an official local cultural policy

SAMPLES

The survey addressed to cultural districts obtained 28 replies, with the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and Greece the most represented countries; overall, 82% of the responses came from the Global North. The survey addressed to local governments obtained only 6 replies, from six different countries, half of them in the Global North. Both samples — and the second in particular — are small, and, given the country bias, the analysis that follows gives priority to qualitative over quantitative findings; even so, the surveys revealed a number of interesting dimensions and served to inform both the November workshop and the subsequent phases of the research.

1 Experts: Sylvia Amman, Valeria Marcolin, Antoine Guibert, Tita Larasati, Beatriz García; UCLG: Jordi Pascual, Jordi Baltà Portolés and Marta Llobet; GCDN: Gregorio Scarpella, Stephanie Fortunato, and Christos Carras.

FORMAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CULTURAL DISTRICTS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Local government is the level of government with which cultural districts most frequently hold formal or legal links, followed — in decreasing order — by state or provincial, national, and regional or county governments. Around 30% of respondents (eight in all) reported links with more than one tier of government, and in seven of these cases local government was among them, reinforcing its position as the most common public partner.

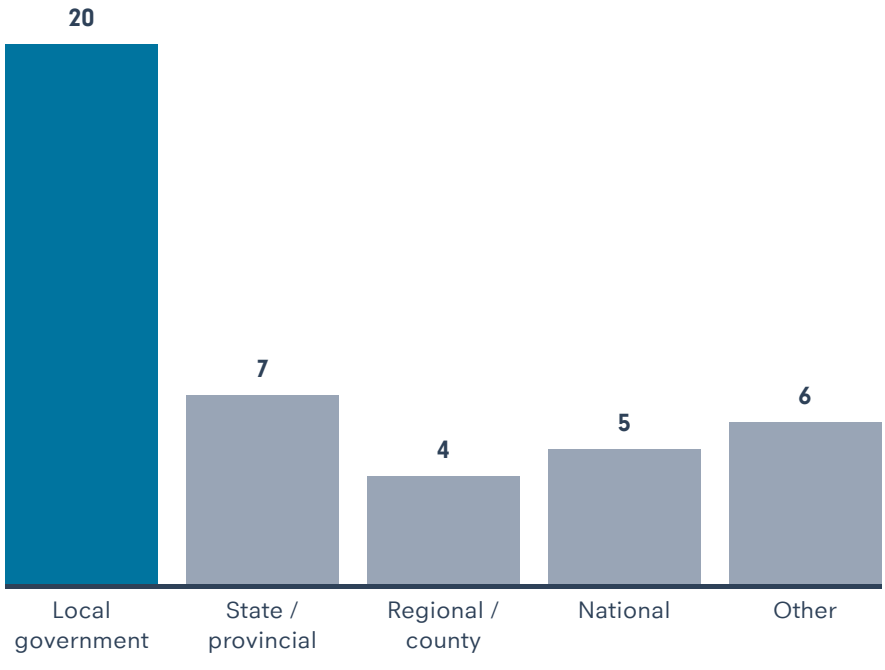
The links themselves take a variety of forms:

- cultural districts managed directly by a local government;
- cultural districts founded or legally established by a local government, and operating as a statutory body thereof;
- cultural districts operating as 'service providers' or 'managers' on behalf of the local government — for example through land-use agreements that give them stewardship of the spaces (including programming and fundraising), the management of business improvement districts, the provision of neighbourhood services, or the development of the cultural and creative sector;
- cultural districts with local-government representation on their boards of trustees or in other governance spaces;
- cultural districts that contribute to city planning;
- cultural districts that cooperate with local government at programme level, in areas such as culture or neighbourhood renewal;
- cultural districts that receive funding from local government ('they are primary stakeholders and funding source').

Figure 2

Formal or legal links, by level of government

Around 30% of the 28 districts that responded to the survey reported links with more than one tier of government.

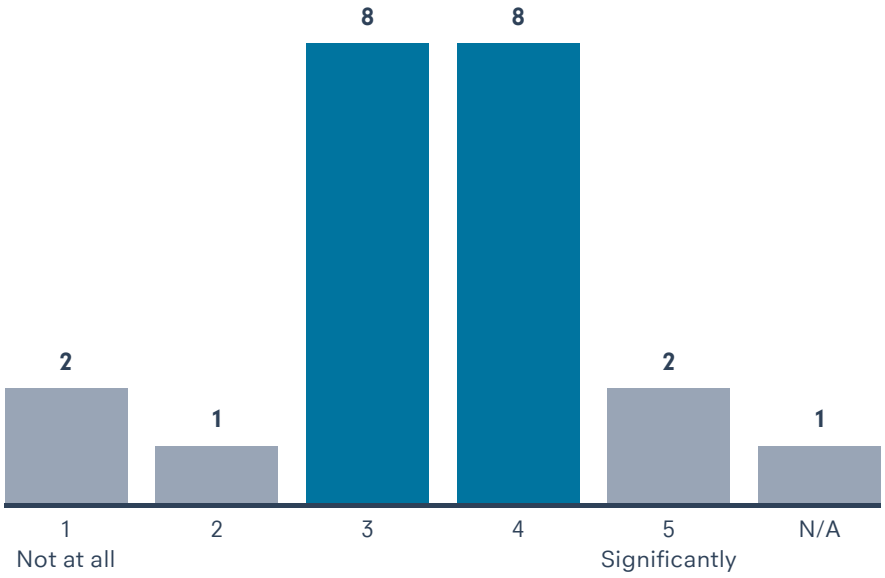


Many districts combine several of these relationships at once, and no single pattern predominates: partnership with local government is commonplace, but no particular form of collaboration prevails. The relationship is diverse, complex, and without a single universal model, its specific structure usually dictated by national legislation, administrative tradition and prevailing models of policymaking and management; links with other tiers of government resemble those found locally, and which tier a district partners with appears to depend largely on how competences are distributed under each constitutional framework. The one element that recurs most consistently — and which the local-government survey confirms as especially frequent — is funding.

Figure 3

Degree to which local government engaged the district's expertise

As reported by survey respondents when asked about the process for developing local cultural policy.



GOVERNANCE MODELS

Asked to describe their governance — structure, authority, roles and responsibilities, and forms of accountability — districts again revealed a wide range of models, often coexisting within a single district:

- districts governed directly by public authorities, with leadership appointed at the political level;
- districts responsive to public authorities, which set their long-term mission, but with relative autonomy in day-to-day management;
- districts established as partnerships between several bodies that share in decision-making through delegated committees and appointments;
- essentially independent districts bound to public authorities by lighter obligations, such as annual reporting;
- districts that have created committees and consultation panels to widen participation in decisions;
- districts operating as charities, governed by a board of volunteer trustees;
- districts operating, in practice, as vital intermediaries between public authorities, cultural agents and the communities they serve.

ROLE OF CULTURAL DISTRICTS IN LOCAL CULTURAL POLICY

A large majority of the districts surveyed — 78% — report that their local government has an official cultural policy (a policy document adopted by the council or assembly, a cultural strategy or action plan, or formal regulations and guidelines). Asked how far the local government engaged their expertise when developing that policy, on a scale from 1 ('not at all') to 5 ('significantly'), most placed themselves between the mid-point and the slightly positive end — suggesting that districts are consulted, but that in most cases their specialised expertise could have been drawn upon more fully.

The forms and frequency of engagement range from short-term, one-off involvement in the drafting of a policy to permanent participation — often through working groups — in its implementation and monitoring. That districts matter to local cultural life is underlined by the local-government responses, all of which stated that districts feature in some of their main cultural-policy documents. The role entrusted to districts differs in emphasis, however, between two poles:

- **strengthening the cultural and creative ecosystem** — 'promoting creativity, economic reactivation, social support and entrepreneurship'; and
- **the district as a space for citizens' access to culture** — 'to contribute to the cultural vitality of the area and to access to arts and culture, to promote citizen participation and to improve the quality of life in the neighbourhoods'.

COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND CULTURAL DISTRICTS IN LOCAL CULTURAL POLICY

Every local government that identified a cultural or creative district in its territory reported collaborating with it in some form. The modalities vary:

- direct management of a district by the local government, rather than 'collaboration' as such ('I lead the public commercial company that manages the cultural district');
- collaboration in planning exercises;
- collaboration on specific projects, such as the development of an urban garden;
- the provision of support to the organisations that lead a district.

Districts in municipalities with a formal cultural policy were also asked how closely their programming reflected that policy's priorities, again on a 1–5 scale: most reported a close connection, with 75% rating the alignment 4 or 5, and the proportion rises among districts holding formal or legal links with local government — a predictable correlation between formal ties and programmatic consistency. Tellingly, even most districts in municipalities without a cultural policy reported that their own strategic plans set out goals requiring engagement with government agencies.

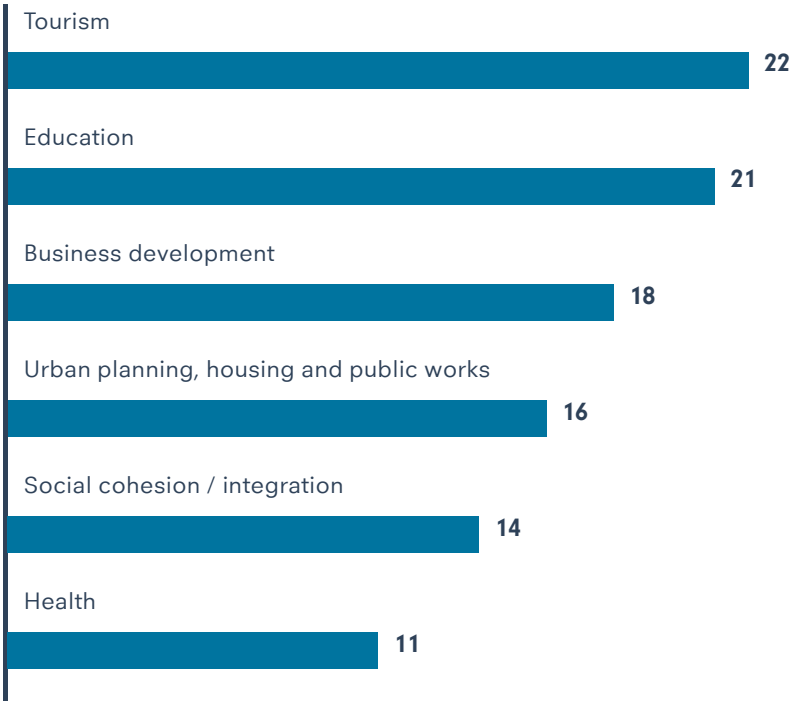
COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN CULTURAL DISTRICTS AND OTHER POLICY AREAS

Collaboration extends well beyond culture itself: a large majority of districts work with public services and agencies in other domains, evidence of the breadth of value they can generate.

Figure 4

Collaboration with public services beyond culture

Number of survey respondents working in other domains.



Beyond the six areas named in the survey, free-text responses added a longer tail of single mentions — among them economic development, parks, public transport, public-art strategies, advocacy and multicultural affairs. The local-government survey points the same way: every district was said to have collaborated with several non-cultural services at local level, with tourism and social cohesion or integration cited in all cases, followed by education and business development.

ASSESSMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CULTURAL DISTRICTS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Asked to grade their relationship with local government from 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive), districts returned a broadly positive picture — but one that resists explanation by governance model alone. Near-identical governance descriptions recur across ratings of 5, 4 and 2, and no clear relationship emerges between the quality of the relationship and the existence of formal or legal links. Success, in other words, depends more on relational dynamics than on formal structure: 'paper' links do not guarantee effective partnerships, and other factors — the effectiveness of the governance, the nature of the engagement, the particular local context — do much of the work.

A sentiment analysis of the open-text responses[2] bore this out: sixteen were neutral, eleven positive and only two negative.

Positive responses turned on strong collaboration, responsiveness and mutual support, typically involving:

2 The sentiment analysis of the open-text responses was carried out with the assistance of a large language model (Google Gemini).

- **responsive leadership** — e.g. a mayor's office 'responsive and willing to meet and discuss our needs or concerns';
- strategic partnerships;
- mutual benefit and shared vision;
- strong professional ties.

Negative responses pointed to challenges, weak structure or misaligned priorities:

- unstructured or shifting strategy;
- misaligned priorities and lack of support;
- **lack of engagement or input** — 'decisions are usually made by politicians in leadership positions without input from affected organizations or individuals'.

Neutral responses — the largest group — described the relationship in balanced terms:

- **ad-hoc collaboration** — relationships centred on 'ad hoc initiatives' rather than strategic ones;
- **inconsistent engagement** — enthusiasm 'at the top' but 'waning as it trickles down';
- **transactional relationships** — focused on applying for and receiving grant funding;
- **acknowledged challenges** — recognition of imbalances, with active work to improve them.

Local governments rated the relationship positively too, at an average of 4 out of 5; some described regular, fluid communication with districts and their constituent organisations, though one more moderate respondent (3 out of 5) observed that 'the scope for integration and cross-cutting involvement of the cultural district in the city's development strategy has a long way to go'.

ASSESSMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CULTURAL DISTRICTS AND THE BROADER CULTURAL ECOSYSTEMS

A parallel question addressed districts' relationships with the wider local cultural and creative ecosystem. Local governments assessed these much as before, if slightly lower, at an average of 3.8 out of 5, pointing to positive relationships — with cultural organisations, especially where districts provide services to them, and with the broader communities served — while remaining alert to limitations such as the time needed to consolidate relationships or strengthen synergies. From the districts' side, the distribution of assessments closely resembled that for their relationship with local government, and a simple sentiment analysis of the elaborating responses again found a similar spread: seventeen positive, two negative and ten neutral.

Positive Sentiment Responses (17 responses) highlight strong collaboration, active engagement, and mutual benefits within the broader cultural and creative ecosystem. Key components often include:

- strong ties and active participation
- proactive support and assistance
- strategic role and ecosystem development
- well-connected networks
- fostering partnerships and innovation

Negative Sentiment Responses (2 responses) indicate challenges, external pressures, or difficulties in maintaining positive relationships within the ecosystem. Key components often include:

- external challenges and pressures, e.g. how pressures on finances and capacity have led to new challenges and more barriers to collaboration.
- political influence

Neutral Sentiment Responses (10 responses) often describe the nature of the relationship without strong positive or negative connotations, or they highlight areas for improvement. Key components include:

- ongoing processes: Descriptions of being "in active trust building and repair mode from a difficult past year."
- broad recognition: Being "well known nationally, regionally and locally" within cultural networks.
- areas for improvement: Suggestions for "Better coordination and more time to assess and evaluate projects."

3.1.2. Workshop

The workshop took place online on 19 November 2025. The participants (named above) had received an analysis of the survey similar to that in the previous section, and in the first round of discussion were asked to comment on the format and the results; in a second round, they were invited to reflect on policies, procedures and methodologies for improving synergy between cultural districts and local (or other) government bodies.

A primary concern raised was the geographical imbalance and limited sample size of the responses. The experts accordingly advised that the survey data be read with care and interpreted qualitatively — used to prioritise areas for further enquiry rather than treated as a robust quantitative base — a caveat reflected in the way the results are presented in section 3.1.1. Nonetheless, supplemented by desktop research, collaboration with established international networks and relevant case studies to capture a more diverse global perspective, the results enabled certain key dimensions to emerge.

An important overall recommendation, which we hope the current document addresses, was to clarify the objectives of improving relationships between cultural districts and governance levels, questioning the types of relationship (vertical versus horizontal) and the specific policy changes sought. Other important takeaways include:

- Collaboration models are not 'one-size-fits-all': Effective strategies must account for regional work cultures, trust-building challenges between civil society and public domains, and existing hierarchical structures, and must reflect the diversity of the relationship, since the level of cooperation varies depending on whether districts are community-led, co-created, or fully planned by authorities.

- Effective strategies should enable a two-way interaction, an exchange rather than a one-directional flow: This calls for mapping the incentives for cities to engage — and, more fully, the interests and agendas of all the stakeholders involved — as well as understanding the entire process lifecycle, from initial advocacy and asset mapping to long-term implementation and monitoring; a critical perspective, meanwhile, should weigh potential negative impacts such as gentrification, integrate consideration of cultural rights, and attend to the role of informal cultural districts alongside more established ones.

- The group identified a need to look beyond local authorities toward multi-level governance — national and international — since many districts are engaged at several levels at once.

- The diversity of possible interfaces, methodologies and contexts for collaboration was highlighted, from policy instruments to funding programmes, shared spaces for reflection and collaboration, and public-private or public-private-people partnerships.

- The workshop underlined a key finding of the survey: That, although formal links matter, the maturity of these partnerships relies on sustained effort, shared agendas, and the active integration of community feedback into district management.

- Participants also pointed to specific tools and leverage points for sustaining these relationships, among them cultural asset mapping and tax increment financing (TIFs) — instruments that connect the discussion to the wider question of value capture.

- For the next phase, the group favoured a qualitative, case-study-led approach over further quantitative surveying, together with refined questions; this informed the case study interviews presented in section 3.2.

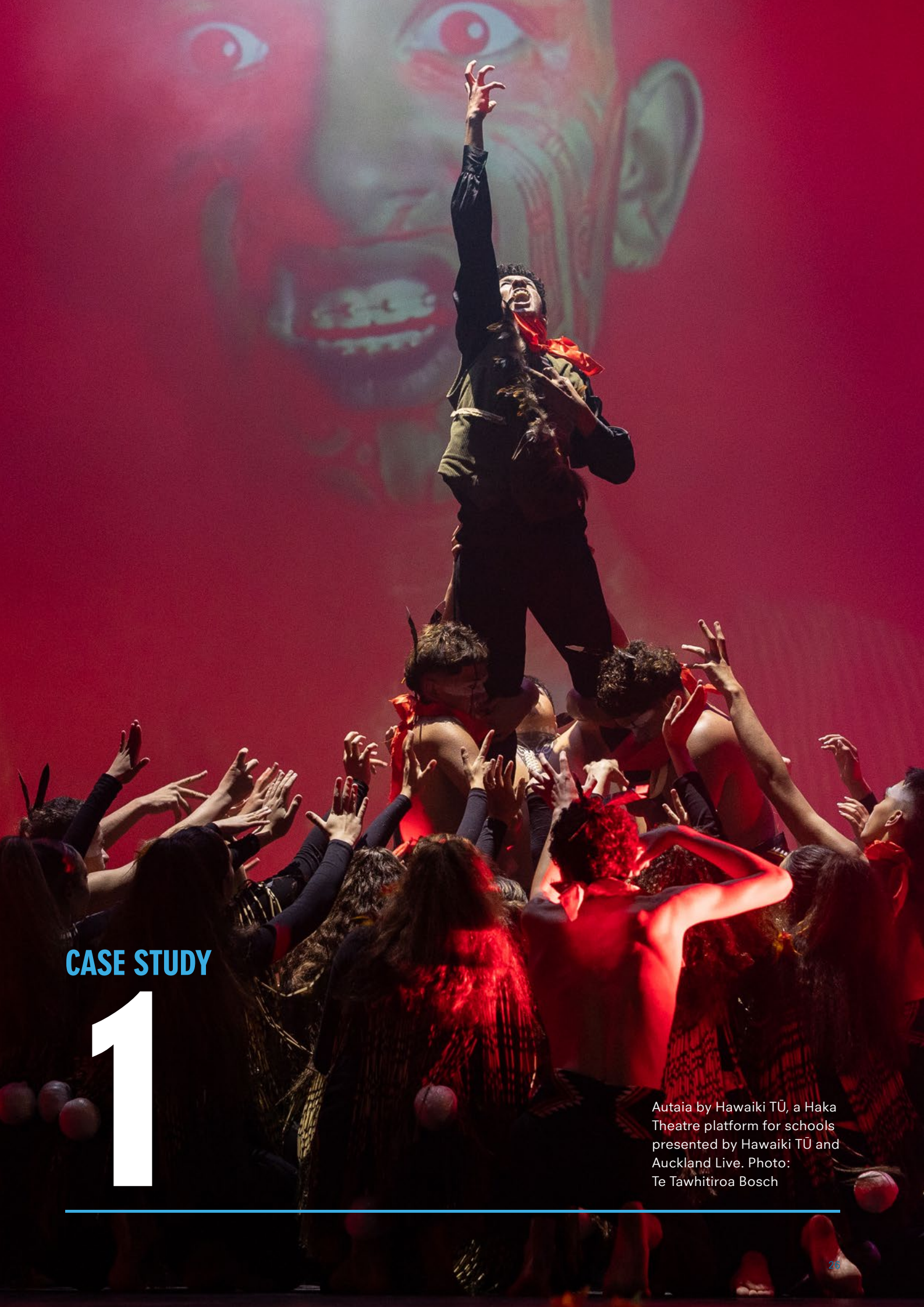
3.2. Case studies

The survey results, despite the limitations that have been mentioned, enabled us to define a certain number of key areas for further research. These were the relationships between cultural districts and local governments and the enablers and obstacles to collaboration. Bearing in mind the variety of typologies and contexts that were highlighted in the survey, we decided to conduct a series of nine in depth interviews articulated around these research questions with a cohort of very diverse cultural districts and types of local government, all of whom play important roles within their cultural ecosystems. The interviews are presented in alphabetical order.

1. **Auckland Live, Auckland**
2. **Concepción Creation Centre (C3), Concepción**
3. **Cultural hubs, Dakar**
4. **Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, New York**
5. **Fiminco Art Studios (FAST), Romainville**
6. **Govandi Arts Festival, Mumbai**
7. **Cultural quarters, Montréal**
8. **Plateforme 10, Lausanne**
9. **Salford Culture and Place Partnership, Greater Manchester**



Salford Creatives at Grit Studios. Photo: Creative Concern



CASE STUDY 1

Autaia by Hawaiki TŪ, a Haka Theatre platform for schools presented by Hawaiki TŪ and Auckland Live. Photo: Te Tawhitiroa Bosch

3.2.1

AUCKLAND LIVE

Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

Organisation	Live arts and entertainment division of Tātaki Auckland Unlimited, a Council-controlled Organisation (CCO) with an independent board
Key partners	Auckland Council; mana whenua; resident arts companies; Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra; city festivals
Scale	Civic Theatre, Auckland Town Hall, Aotea Centre, Bruce Mason Centre and two public spaces; c. 1 million audiences a year, rising towards 2 million
Interview	20 April 2026 · Daniel Clarke, Director; Lauren Whitney, Programme Manager

Context

Auckland Live is the live arts and entertainment division of Tātaki Auckland Unlimited, Auckland Council's cultural, events, and destination agency, operating as a Council-controlled Organisation (CCO) with an independent board.[1] It is the largest performing arts organisation in Aotearoa New Zealand, managing a portfolio of venues in the Aotea Arts Quarter — the civic and cultural heart of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland— including the Civic Theatre, Auckland Town Hall and Aotea Centre, alongside two major public realm spaces and the Bruce Mason Centre on the city's North Shore. As of January 2026, Auckland Live's remit expanded to encompass programming and activations across the entire city centre. The organisation has traditionally reached approximately one million audiences annually, but its new programming remit will see its programmes reach closer to 2 million.

Key partners and stakeholders include Auckland Council, mana whenua – iwi and hapū with ancestral authority in Tāmaki Makaurau, – resident arts companies, independent theatres, the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra, and a range of city festivals.

1 In a council-controlled organisation one or more local authorities directly or indirectly control at least 50% of voting rights or have the right to appoint at least 50% of its governing body (New Zealand, Local Government Act 2002, s. 6(1AAA)).



BNZ Auckland Diwali Festival fireworks in Aotea Square. Photo: David St George

Relationships between the Cultural District and Local Government

The CCO structure places Auckland Live in a relationship with Auckland Council that is described as "hand-in-glove": Tātaki Auckland Unlimited staff are in daily contact with Council departments, and Tataki Auckland Unlimited is increasingly recognised as the lead organisation for cultural vision in the city, centrally involved in any strategic review or working group. Formal arts and culture policy, however, remains within the Council.

A significant formal mechanism is the City Centre Targeted Rate — a levy on city property owners — which Tataki Auckland Unlimited and the Council successfully advocated to increase investment toward events and arts programming and marketing for the next five years, securing a dedicated funding stream to boost city activation and drive visitation to the city centre.

The Aotea Arts Quarter has its own layered governance structure: an overarching City Centre Steering Committee, a dedicated Aotea Arts Quarter Steering Committee, and seven thematic work streams involving Council departments covering economic development, transport, urban development, parks, and maintenance. This structure formally embeds an arts and culture lens within regeneration planning.

New Zealand's two-tier system — central and local government, with no state level — shapes the broader context: education and health are central government responsibilities, while the Auckland Regional Amenities Fund (ARFA) bridges central and local support for some major arts organisations based in Auckland. The largest funder of the arts in Auckland is the Auckland Council across Tataki Auckland Unlimited and other arts and cultural companies and programmes.

A distinctive feature is the formal partnership with mana whenua, treated not as stakeholders but as essential partners, with engagement managed through

dedicated Māori outcomes teams and underpinned by Treaty of Waitangi obligations.

Enablers and Obstacles to Collaboration

The CCO model is the central enabler: it provides Auckland Live with operational independence and recognised expertise while maintaining close institutional alignment with the Council. High levels of trust between Tātaki Auckland Unlimited staff and Council departments allow for genuine co-design, with Auckland Live's cultural knowledge explicitly respected within multi-disciplinary work streams. The City Centre Targeted Rate provides a dedicated funding mechanism (a result of successful advocacy), and the expanded city centre remit formalises Auckland Live's programming role, with Tataki Auckland Unlimited responsible for the coordination and marketing of all city centre events. The Treaty of Waitangi framework, meanwhile, provides a legally and culturally grounded basis for the mana whenua partnership that might otherwise be difficult to institutionalise.

The main obstacles are external and structural. The broader (central government) arts funding environment in New Zealand is constrained with no real growth in over 20 years, and the Council's arts and culture strategy is currently due for renewal. Auckland's geographical sprawl limits city centre engagement, and the gentrification pressures inherent in the Aotea Arts Quarter's private-public development model — including artist affordability — require ongoing active advocacy within the governance structures.

OBSERVATIONS

The Auckland Live case presents one of the more sophisticated governance models in this series of case studies. The CCO structure resolves a tension present in several other cases — between institutional legitimacy and operational agility — by creating an organisation that is simultaneously embedded in and distinct from local government. The result is a genuinely collaborative relationship built on mutual recognition of expertise rather than hierarchy.

The mana whenua partnership stands out as a distinctive and transferable principle: the formal elevation of Indigenous custodians from stakeholders to co-partners, underpinned by Treaty of Waitangi obligations, offers a model for meaningful community co-governance that goes beyond consultation.

The familiar tension between cultural development and real estate-driven regeneration is present here too, with artist affordability requiring active advocacy within governance structures. Finally, the current need to renew the city's arts and culture strategy could create difficulties in adapting to a rapidly evolving context.



CASE STUDY

2

Concepción Creation Centre (C3), Concepción, Chile.
Photo: Samy Akiki

3.2.2

CONCEPCIÓN CREATION CENTRE (C3)

Concepción, Chile

Organisation	Municipal creation centre managed by the Municipality of Concepción; established 2014
Key partners	Municipality of Concepción; resident cultural and creative organisations; neighbourhood groups
Scale	Former school building in the historic centre of Concepción
Interview	4 March 2026 · Mauricio Castro, Director for Culture, Concepción

Context

The Concepción Creation Centre (C3) was established in 2014 in Concepción, Chile, following a participatory process initiated by the local government in order to adopt a local cultural strategy. One of the findings was the need to establish more working spaces for cultural organisations. A former school in the historic centre of Concepción was identified as the venue that would help to address this need.



Festival of Cultures in Concepción hosted by C3

Relationships between the Cultural District and Local Government

C3 is managed by the Municipality of Concepción, with dedicated staff in charge of managing the building and budgetary resources allocated to its running costs. The City launches an annual call to select the creative professionals and organisations who will be allocated working space and additional support services, including mentoring and advice to improve their business skills and enhance their distribution and market strategies. Hosted projects are normally required to provide the City with something in return – for instance, a free performance in the case of performing arts initiatives.

Initiatives hosted within C3 form a "community", and meetings involving all members of the community and municipal staff are held approximately three times per year, providing an opportunity to address logistical issues related to C3 as well as broader needs for the development of cultural and creative organisations. Additional assemblies are organised when necessary. One member of the community of hosted projects also sits in the evaluation committee when annual applications are assessed following the annual call.

Over the years, C3 has seen an evolution in the type of projects hosted, and the needs experienced by applicants. While the initial focus was mainly on the availability of working space, some sectors such as the performing arts have seen the appearance of other producing venues since then, making this a less pressing need, whereas sectors like design have become more frequent users of C3 facilities in recent years. The latter has also led to an increasing need for other forms of support, including specialised advice on sustainable business models.

From the perspective of public value, C3 has contributed not only to supporting creative initiatives but also to improving safety in the vicinity and fostering neighbours' engagement, including in C3's community garden. Neighbours' groups can also use some of C3 rooms for their meetings. As a result, neighbours are also part of C3's broader meetings, and several departments in the local

municipality, in addition to the Department on Culture, are involved in projects related to the venue – including those in charge of youth, business development, environment, urban planning, sexual diversity, health and tourism, among others.

Enablers and Obstacles to Collaboration

Regular dialogue between municipal staff and the initiatives hosted by C3 has allowed to revise the nature of services and support provided, as well as to address needs identified in terms of maintenance, cleanliness or safety. In addition to formal meetings, everyday encounters are common, helping to identify challenges when needed. A set of internal rules has also been established.

Further to dialogue and collaboration with the local government, C3 fosters cross-pollination among the creative initiatives hosted, with meetings that allow residents to present their projects and skills and pave the way for subsequent collaborations.

Among the challenges identified is the lack of an organisational culture within local government that supports horizontal, balanced relations with other stakeholders. While relationships are positive in general, some tensions and misunderstandings can also occur. Recent years have witnessed significant political tensions in Chile, which have led to heated debates within C3, with occasional demands for self-management by some residents.

An additional difficulty concerns the nature of the support provided. Since resident initiatives increasingly face challenges in making their projects financially viable, local government needs to increase its support in the form of business advice, an area in which its expertise is somehow limited.

OBSERVATIONS

This case is sustained by significant leadership and involvement from the local government, which provides continuity to a regularly changing set of hosted initiatives. At the same time, the existence of regular formal and informal interaction spaces (regular meetings, everyday encounters) has allowed government support to evolve over time, adapting the resources and mechanisms allocated.

Continuity is also provided by neighbours' involvement in the project, as users of C3, carers of its surroundings and collaborators in some creative initiatives. This is a significant element when compared to other cultural and creative districts.



CASE STUDY

3

Maison des Arts Visuels de Dakar, City of Dakar. Image: Direction de la Culture et du Tourisme, Ville de Dakar

3.2.3

CULTURAL HUBS

Dakar, Senegal

Organisation	City of Dakar network of cultural hubs under the Cultural and Artistic Development and Promotion Program (DACAR)
Key partners	City of Dakar; the 19 municipalities (communes); Grand Dakar and Ngor socio-cultural centres; Culture et développement
Scale	Hubs planned across all 19 municipalities; city population c. 2 million
Interviews	20 April 20, 2026 — Ibrahima Cissé, Head of Division, Arts and Culture, City of Dakar; Valeria Marcolin, Co-director, Culture et développement 28 April 2026 — Ibrahima Cissé, Head of Division, Arts and Culture, City of Dakar; Latifa Guéye Sow, Head of the Grand Dakar Socio-cultural Center; Abdoulaye Diagne, Head of the Ngor Socio-cultural Center.

Context

The City of Dakar, with a population of approximately two million, is subdivided into 19 municipalities (communes). In addition to the Mayor of Dakar and the City Council, each municipality has its own mayor. The dynamism of Dakar's cultural life combines a plurality of informal cultural activities and institutional initiatives stemming from local governments within the framework of their respective local cultural policies, with the aim of supporting artistic creativity, promoting cultural entrepreneurship, structuring Dakar's cultural organisations, and so on. For example, the Cultural and Artistic Development and Promotion Program (DACAR) plans the creation of cultural hubs distributed across all 19 municipalities (through a "zoning" approach in which each municipality specializes in certain artistic and cultural sectors, with major and minor hubs).

The relationships between the local government, cultural hubs and other cultural and creative actors

The City of Dakar currently has 14 operational socio-cultural centers, located in its 19 municipalities. These are local facilities that implement cultural projects in Dakar's neighborhoods and also host cultural partnerships with citizen initiatives and private and non-profit organisations. Within this framework, some socio-cultural centers also operate as hubs for the development of artistic and cultural sectors, providing training, support for artistic creation and cultural production, and promoting access to culture, among other functions.

The Grand Dakar Socio-cultural Center, for example, has hosted the Dakar Film Hub since 2020, through a partnership between the City of Dakar and the Yennenga Center, an organisation created by filmmaker Alain Gomis to make cinema accessible to everyone by involving local actors in the filmmaking process. This initiative has contributed to providing free training in film professions (with 20 young people trained in post-production over three years, 2021–2024, and 46 people completing short-term training courses in various fields), hosting and supporting emerging professional organisations, implementing media literacy programs for young people, managing a network of film clubs in several Dakar districts, and creating high-performance technical infrastructure (post-production facilities, screening rooms, studios). It is a film incubator that contributes to structuring film industry professionals and integrating trainees from the Yennenga Center into the professional world.

Although the situation of the major and minor cultural hubs in the City of Dakar [1-Urban Culture Hub (Ouakam), 2-Visual Arts Hub (Plateau), 3-Music Hub (Parcelles Assainies), 4-Dance Hub (Ngor), 5-Theater Hub (Hann Bel Air), 6-Film Hub (Grand Dakar), 7-Design Hub (Point E)] varies (with mixed results on both sides), public-private and/or public-nonprofit cooperation or collaboration is present in the actions undertaken regularly. Furthermore, the theater hub, located at the Hann Bel Air Socio-cultural Center, is managed by Kàddu Yaraax, a forum-theatre company. The cultural organisations or businesses that manage these major and minor hubs receive a subsidy from the City of Dakar to carry out their activities in accordance with the agreement between the two contracting parties.

Furthermore, the network of socio-cultural centers in the City of Dakar develops artistic, cultural, social, and educational projects and participates in initiatives within Dakar's cultural and creative neighborhoods. The Ngor Socio-cultural Center, for example, hosts numerous initiatives in the performing arts, visual and digital arts, audiovisual media, community education, and pastry-making training, as well as events led by local residents. Through its Fund for Supporting Private Cultural Initiatives, the City of Dakar periodically provides funding to various projects implemented in conjunction with its network of socio-cultural centers, thereby contributing to audience development through a diversification of artistic and cultural activities.

Enablers and Obstacles to Collaboration

Professional collaborations between the City of Dakar (through its socio-cultural centres) and local cultural operators involved in developing cultural hubs are facilitated by a spirit of co-construction or co-creation and ongoing collaboration. The continuity and sustainability of these initiatives, as well as their specialization within a specific artistic and cultural sector, also contribute to the training and professional development of young people and to building connections with various stakeholders in Dakar's cultural ecosystem, as demonstrated by the film hub established in partnership with the Yennenga Center.

The network of Socio-cultural Centers in the City of Dakar faces challenges related to the deterioration of buildings, a shortage of qualified staff, and insufficient financial resources for carrying out cultural activities. Furthermore, the coexistence of several artistic and cultural initiatives within the same socio-cultural centre sometimes creates problems already identified by the City of Dakar's Department of Culture and Tourism, which oversees these facilities.

OBSERVATIONS

This analysis of the cultural dynamism of the City of Dakar also acknowledges the diversity of situations existing within its 19 municipalities, with varying levels of development. The initiatives described demonstrate the capacity to combine the City of Dakar's cultural planning with partnerships developed at the municipality or neighborhood level, and the potential of public-private and/or public-nonprofit partnerships, which have positive impacts in the areas of training, professional development, the growth of entrepreneurial initiatives, and citizens' access to culture.

This case study also demonstrates the possibilities for harmonious coexistence between the network of socio-cultural centres in the City of Dakar and the dynamics of the "cultural and creative districts" in Dakar's municipalities, with forms of cultural mediation carried out by local cultural operators. Public cultural policies in the local context aim to guarantee universal access to art, culture, heritage, etc., through a participatory and inclusive approach.



CASE STUDY

4

Arturo O'Farrill, 2024.
Photo: Argenis Apolinario
for Downtown Brooklyn
Partnership

3.2.4

DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN PARTNERSHIP

New York City, USA

Organisation	Not-for-profit Business Improvement District (BID) organisation running three BIDs and a cultural district
Key partners	BAM, BRIC, Mark Morris Dance Center and the Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance (nearly 40 groups); property owners; city agencies
Scale	c. 70 cultural institutions; funded through property tax assessments
Interview	3 March 2026 · Regina Myer, President

Context

The Downtown Brooklyn Partnership (DBP) is a not-for-profit Business Improvement District (BID) running three BIDs in Downtown Brooklyn. The cultural district emerged from a 40-year joint effort between the City and local arts organisations, accelerated by rezoning under the Bloomberg administration in the early 2000s. It encompasses approximately 70 cultural institutions alongside real estate, commercial, educational, and residential stakeholders. Anchored by the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), the district includes major organisations such as BRIC Arts | Media House, the Mark Morris Dance Center, Theatre for a New Audience, the Center for Fiction, 651 ARTS, and MoCADA, as well as smaller resident organisations including StoryCorps, Bang on a Can, and Brooklyn Arts Exchange. Nearly 40 of these groups are federated within the Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance (DBAA). DBP's goals include supporting cultural growth, placemaking, and arts advocacy. Funded through property tax assessments, it provides supplemental services and acts as connector between cultural groups, City agencies, and property owners.

Relationships between the Cultural District and Local Government

The Downtown Brooklyn Partnership's relationship with government operates primarily at New York City level — not the Brooklyn borough — as services are centralised there. The BID framework constitutes the core formal governance arrangement: DBP receives funding through property tax assessments administered by the City's Department of Finance, while the Department of Small Business Services regulates its performance through a maintenance agreement. DBP also works regularly with the NYC Departments of Transportation, Parks, and Cultural Affairs (the Department of Cultural Affairs, DCLA).

The Cultural District's development was catalysed by a deliberate City policy under the Bloomberg administration (2002–13), which insisted on cultural uses when disposing of City-owned land near BAM in the early 2000s. This represents the most significant policy-based intervention shaping the district and illustrates how real estate development has been a primary vehicle for cultural growth: the City leveraged rezoning and land disposal to embed cultural institutions within mixed-use developments, with private developers ultimately embracing cultural uses as drivers of placemaking and added value. DBP supported this approach fully, and both parties share a common understanding of culture as foundational to urban development.

The relationship with DCLA operates primarily at an operational rather than policy-formation level: project management, public art maintenance agreements, and coordination on individual facilities. DBP and the Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance (DBAA) — the network of nearly 40 cultural organisations within the district — jointly produced *Culture Forward* (2016),[1] a strategic plan outlining 13 initiatives, which is the clearest example of a shared strategic document bridging district and City priorities.

DBP manages the public spaces throughout the district and presents an annual series of events at the plaza outside of L10, in the heart of the Cultural District, and has presented a number of noteworthy public art projects in that location as well. DBP has partnered with premier local organisations such as BAM, BRIC, Brooklyn Public Library, Mark Morris Dance Group, and Theatre for a New Audience to offer free, high-quality programming through the spring and summer seasons.

Through its weekly newsletters and social media, DBP promotes the Cultural District and its offerings year-round. In addition, DBP also launched a digital guide to the Downtown Brooklyn Cultural District on Bloomberg Connects, the free arts and culture app created by Bloomberg Philanthropies, to further promote the cultural organisations, public spaces, and public art installations that make Downtown Brooklyn one of New York City's most vibrant arts destinations.

Internally, coordination between DBP and cultural organisations is informal and activity-driven — formal meetings once or twice yearly, with no charter-driven

1 AEA Consulting, *Culture Forward* (DBP and the Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance (DBAA): 2016). Available at https://aeaconsulting.com/uploads/1400014/1669825639846/Culture-Forward.pdf

structure. Bi-weekly meetings help with regard to programming in both the planning and execution stages. DBP's most active informal role is as a connector, facilitating relationships between cultural organisations, City agencies, and adjacent property owners and potential donors.

New York State co-funds major cultural projects alongside the City with broadly aligned priorities. Federal involvement remains marginal.

Enablers and Obstacles to Collaboration

The most significant enablers are relational and structural. On the relational side, sustained access to City leaders who genuinely prioritise culture is identified as a key factor, one that has shaped productive working relationships across administrations. Structurally, the BID model provides DBP with a stable, independent funding base that insulates it from the volatility affecting cultural organisations directly. A shared understanding of culture's value — across DBP, DCLA, and private developers — has also been a key enabler, underpinning the city's commitment to embedding cultural uses in real estate development.

The main obstacle is funding uncertainty for individual cultural organisations, exacerbated by post-pandemic pressures, and acknowledged as largely outside DBP's control and remit. A secondary limitation is the absence of any formal coordination structure between DBP and its constituent cultural organisation, with the exception of event programming, meaning collaboration depends on goodwill and proximity rather than institutional design.

OBSERVATIONS

The Downtown Brooklyn case illustrates the strengths and limitations of embedding culture within the BID model. Culture is genuinely valued and is legitimated through its contribution to placemaking. This instrumental framing creates fragility: the culture's importance is contingent on the perception of its alignment with neighbourhood interests.

The cultural organisations themselves operate in persistent funding precarity that the current structure does little to address. The BID model provides DBP with financial stability, but this cannot flow to constituents, and there are no mechanisms enabling cultural organisations to capture a share of the value they help generate. Two coordination deficits compound this: no formalised relationship with the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs for co-developing cultural policy, and no structured coordination between DBP and its constituent organisations.

Finally, the governance framework is largely institutional, with limited space for community voices — a tension given the affordability pressures the interview acknowledges.



CASE STUDY 5

Inauguration of FAST, Romainville, 2026. Photo: Manuel Abella

3.2.5

FIMINCO ART STUDIOS (FAST)

Romainville, Seine-Saint-Denis, France

Organisation	Project of the Fondation Fiminco on a former industrial site
Key partners	Théâtre du Châtelet; Philharmonie de Paris; Parsons School; Conservatoire national supérieur d'art dramatique
Scale	120,000 m² site, of which 50,000 m² is devoted to culture
Interview	17 March 2026 · Katharina Scriba, Director, Fondation Fiminco

Context

Fiminco Art Studios (FAST) is a project of the Fondation Fiminco, located on a former industrial site in Romainville, on the eastern edge of the Greater Paris metropolitan area and accessible by metro. With a total area of 120,000m², of which 50,000m² are devoted to culture, FAST operates as a multidisciplinary ecosystem hosting major cultural institutions including the Théâtre du Châtelet, the Philharmonie de Paris, the Parsons School, and the Conservatoire national supérieur d'art dramatique, alongside artist residencies, exhibition spaces, workshops, and an auditorium. The Fondation Fiminco's mission centres on supporting contemporary artists through residency programmes and ensuring broad cultural access for local and wider audiences.



Open Studios, Fondation Fiminco, FAST, 2026. Photo: Manuel Abella

Relationships between the Cultural District and Local Government

FAST engages with government across multiple territorial levels. The most active relationship is with Est Ensemble, the agglomeration of nine communes that manages cultural activities in the area, identifies complementary projects, and enables connections with local citizen associations and schools. The Department of Seine-Saint-Denis supports cultural project mediation, while the Île-de-France Region and the French state are also present — the latter through the major state institutions hosted on site. Collaboration is further enriched by cross-sectoral partnerships within the agglomeration, encompassing education, health, business, and inclusion. Synergies are generally described as satisfactory, though the difference in decision-making pace between a private organisation and public bodies can give rise to challenges.

Enablers and Obstacles to Collaboration

Several factors enable effective collaboration. The multi-level structure of French territorial governance — agglomeration, department, region, state — provides FAST with distinct entry points at each level, allowing for complementary rather than duplicative engagement. The presence of major state institutions on site creates a natural, embedded connection to national government. Within the Est Ensemble agglomeration, the identification of complementary projects and the cross-sectoral breadth of partnerships — spanning education, health,

inclusion, and business — reflect a genuinely integrated approach. The broader decentralisation dynamic of Metropolitan Paris also works in FAST's favour, increasing the area's visibility and attractiveness.

The primary differences are in the ways of operating: as a private organisation, FAST can move significantly quicker than its public partners. Two potential improvements are identified — the development of iterative processes for testing collaborative formats, and the organisation of a central flagship event around which diverse initiatives could be structured.

OBSERVATIONS

FAST illustrates how a private initiative can create conditions for wide-ranging synergies — across government levels, sectors, and communities — through the concentration of cultural activity in a single district. The link to real estate and housing again proves significant, confirming a pattern seen elsewhere in which cultural development and urban development are deeply intertwined.

The multi-level governance structure functions relatively well, with discrete responsibilities at agglomeration, departmental, regional, and national levels reducing overlap and confusion. Citizen engagement, channelled through associations, is a genuine strength, though achieving balanced demographic representation remains an acknowledged challenge.

FAST's hybrid economic model combines a rental model, a mixed model (for artists paying less rent but participating in the activation and mediation) and philanthropy. It offers a degree of financial resilience that distinguishes it from many cultural districts more exclusively dependent on public or philanthropic funding cycles.

Areas for development include greater programming coordination — potentially through a formal framework agreement — and the institutionalisation of systematic experimentation with diverse cultural formats.

It is clear that any move toward institutionalising structures should be carefully calibrated: the current phase of experimentation is itself a core methodological value, essential for discovering which formats work and find their audiences. Rather than standardisation, what FAST's approach points toward is the deliberate co-construction of projects with local, national, and international partners — a curatorial sensibility applied to partnership-building itself, in which meaningful collaborations are identified, developed, and sustained over time. A more enabling framework, if and when developed, should support this logic rather than constrain it.



CASE STUDY 6

Glimpse from the children's stage, Govandi Arts Festival 2025

3.2.6

GOVANDI ARTS FESTIVAL

Mumbai, India

Organisation	Community-led arts festival, incubated and hosted by Community Design Agency (CDA)
Key partners	Local community; municipal bodies; ward-level politicians; local contractors; police
Scale	Govandi, M East Ward: over 70% of residents live in slums — the city's most marginalised area
Interview	2 March 2026 · Natasha Sharma, co-founder

Context

The Govandi Arts Festival (GAF) is a community-led arts festival based in Govandi, in Mumbai's M East Ward — the city's most marginalised area, with over 70% of its population living in slums and the lowest Human Development Index in Mumbai. Incubated and hosted by Community Design Agency (CDA) following eight years of participatory work in a Resettlement and Rehabilitation colony, GAF uses performance and visual arts to reclaim community identity, rebuild lost infrastructure, and advocate for improved urban conditions. Key stakeholders include the local community and local community members, municipal bodies, ward-level politicians, local contractors, and the police.



Inauguration of the first book published from the Govandi Arts Festival artist residency program, 2023.

Relationships between the Cultural Organisation and Local Government

GAF's relationships with local government are multiple but informal, operating across several tiers of Mumbai's complex governance structure. The Municipal Corporation handles basic services and has provided in-kind support — including heavy machinery and no-objection certificates for initiatives. The MMRDA (Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority), responsible for infrastructure and the rehousing of slum populations, has allocated rent-free space for a community library. Ward-level politicians act as community custodians and are cultivated as allies, alongside local contractors who implement ward-level projects. The police, initially a source of friction, have become engaged partners — at one point proposing to activate a festival ground as a playground.

There are no formal agreements or policy frameworks underpinning these relationships. Instead, they rest on sustained presence, demonstrated results, and constant relationship-building — made necessary by frequent turnover of officials, which requires proposals to be remade repeatedly to new interlocutors. GAF's approach is explicitly bottom-up: concrete examples are established first, then presented to authorities to leverage scaled-up support.

The most significant structural outcome to date is the municipality's decision to allocate spaces in other resettlement colonies for CDA and GAF to establish additional community centres — a tangible shift in institutional recognition. GAF also plays an intermediary role, mobilising communities to participate directly in discussions with municipal bodies, effectively creating an informal channel of inclusive governance where none formally exists. Direct financial support from government remains absent; the relationship is sustained almost entirely through in-kind contributions, goodwill, and above all by the successful creation by GAF of the understanding that their actions lead to concrete improvements in the city, including at a developmental level.

Enablers and Obstacles to Collaboration

The most significant enabler is long-term, sustained presence. Continuity of work in a single location has been essential to building trust with officials who initially question the organisation's motives, and to demonstrating tangible results — from shifts in media coverage to reductions in youth drug use — that make the cultural case concrete and credible. A bottom-up approach, prioritising small replicable examples over master plans, has proven more effective in securing government engagement. The ability to demonstrate economic as well as social value has been particularly important in a governance context where economic development dominates.

A primary obstacle is the lack of continuity at the local government level: frequent rotation of officials means relationships must be rebuilt repeatedly from scratch, with proposals remade to each new interlocutor. More fundamentally, arts and culture have no formal policy standing in Mumbai's municipal framework, making all collaboration discretionary and fragile. Direct public funding remains effectively inaccessible.

OBSERVATIONS

The Govandi case presents a model in which culture operates entirely outside any formal policy framework, with no institutional agreements and no direct public funding. Yet it achieves tangible governance outcomes — spatial allocation, institutional recognition, inclusive community participation — through sustained organising and demonstrated impact. It is a powerful example of the role of arts and culture for both urban development and youth engagement, generating both social and economic value.

The central challenge is fragility: a model built on personal relationships, continuity, and goodwill has no structural protection against political change or organisational fatigue. The case makes a compelling argument for formalising what currently depends on exceptional commitment — embedding arts and culture as a policy instrument, with genuine community co-governance, rather than treating it as a discretionary add-on.



CASE STUDY

7

Public event in the context of cultural vitality activities, Borough of Saint-Pierre, Montreal. Photo: Annie Laurin

3.2.7

CULTURAL QUARTERS

Montréal, Québec, Canada

Organisation	City of Montreal cultural development policy, with cultural quarters (quartiers culturels) supported at borough level
Key partners	The 19 boroughs (arrondissements); artists and community initiatives; Borough of Saint-Laurent
Scale	City population c. 1.75 million; 19 boroughs
Interviews	3 March 2026 — Marie-Odile Melançon, Head of Division, Support for Cultural Development, Montreal; and Arlett Abrego, cultural development agent, City of Montreal 8 May 2026 — Virginie Simard-Tozzi, Head of Division, Culture and Libraries, Borough of Saint-Laurent, City of Montreal

Context

With a population of approximately 1.75 million inhabitants, the City of Montreal includes 19 boroughs (arrondissements). The local government has decentralised services at borough level to adapt and implement several local policies, including those in the field of cultural development.

In recent decades, Montreal has reflected on the role of neighbourhoods in terms of cultural vitality, and developed strong cultural policies in this field. Along with well-known examples like the Quartier des spectacles, based in the city centre and which gathers several high-profile cultural organisations, a broader notion of "quartier culturel" (which could be translated as "cultural district" or "cultural neighbourhood") has been adopted in the City's cultural policy. It understands cultural quarters or neighbourhoods as "living environments" comprising several cultural services and activities that cater for the local population. This notion emphasises the community dimension, the need to respond to bottom-up initiatives and the important role of artists in the development of cultural neighbourhoods (Politique de développement culturel 2025–2030). Rather than the built dimension, therefore, local policies underline "cultural vitality" and emphasise the need to adapt City-level policies to each borough.

Relationships between Cultural Districts and Local Government

The City of Montreal's cultural development policies encourage adaptation at the borough level, through community consultation exercises and governance frameworks involving neighbours and cultural organisations. While a common framework and methodology are provided by the City (including for the design of development plans), a diverse range of concrete pathways have emerged at borough level. As a result, what was initially a slightly top-down approach has progressively led to more community engagement and local adaptation, through a diverse set of approaches – new local partnerships, integration of a new project in an existing participatory board or working group, establishment of a shared leadership between local government and a partner organisation, etc.[1]

An example of this is the borough of Saint-Laurent, where a local partnership involving local government services (including municipality staff, the local public library and the Maison de la culture or local cultural centre), a museum, social and environmental NGOs as well as youth, educational and research services and other initiatives, was established in 2022 to develop a "quartier culturel". Following community consultations and a public vote, a decision was taken to identify the initiative as "Vieux-Saint-Laurent, quartier culturel", connecting local heritage and local cultural identity with contemporary cultural vitality. Its subsequent Development Strategy 2026–2029 aims to develop a range of cultural, heritage and socioeconomic activities for the local population, based on citizen participation and local and community initiatives, as well as to become, in the long term, an attractive destination, offering unique, bold cultural experiences and bringing together a diverse, inclusive and welcoming community.

In parallel, a Governance Charter for the partnership involved in the cultural strengthening of Vieux-Saint-Laurent has been developed, which emphasises the notion of shared governance and the aim to engage citizens in the design of activities and as participants in cultural activities. This remains, however, an informal partnership, without a separate legal personality.

In addition to providing a general cultural strategy at the local level, as well as methodological guidance, the City of Montreal provides support to these initiatives through the direct engagement of its decentralised services as well as through the provision of funding for the design of strategies and the implementation of projects. A programme for cultural participation in neighbourhoods with annual funding calls has also been established, resulting from a financial agreement between the City of Montreal and the Government of Quebec. Several networks of cultural facilities at city level (e.g. the networks of libraries and Maisons de la culture) also provide space for peer-learning and networking across boroughs.

1 Melançon, M-O. (2025), "Quartiers culturels à Montréal et gouvernance: suite des expérimentations et apprentissages", in Casemajor, N.; Lamoureux, E.; Jacob, L; & Beauchemin, W.J. (eds.), *Cohabiter: imaginer les médiations culturelles au XXIe siècle*. Montreal: Presses de l'Université Laval, pp. 209–214.

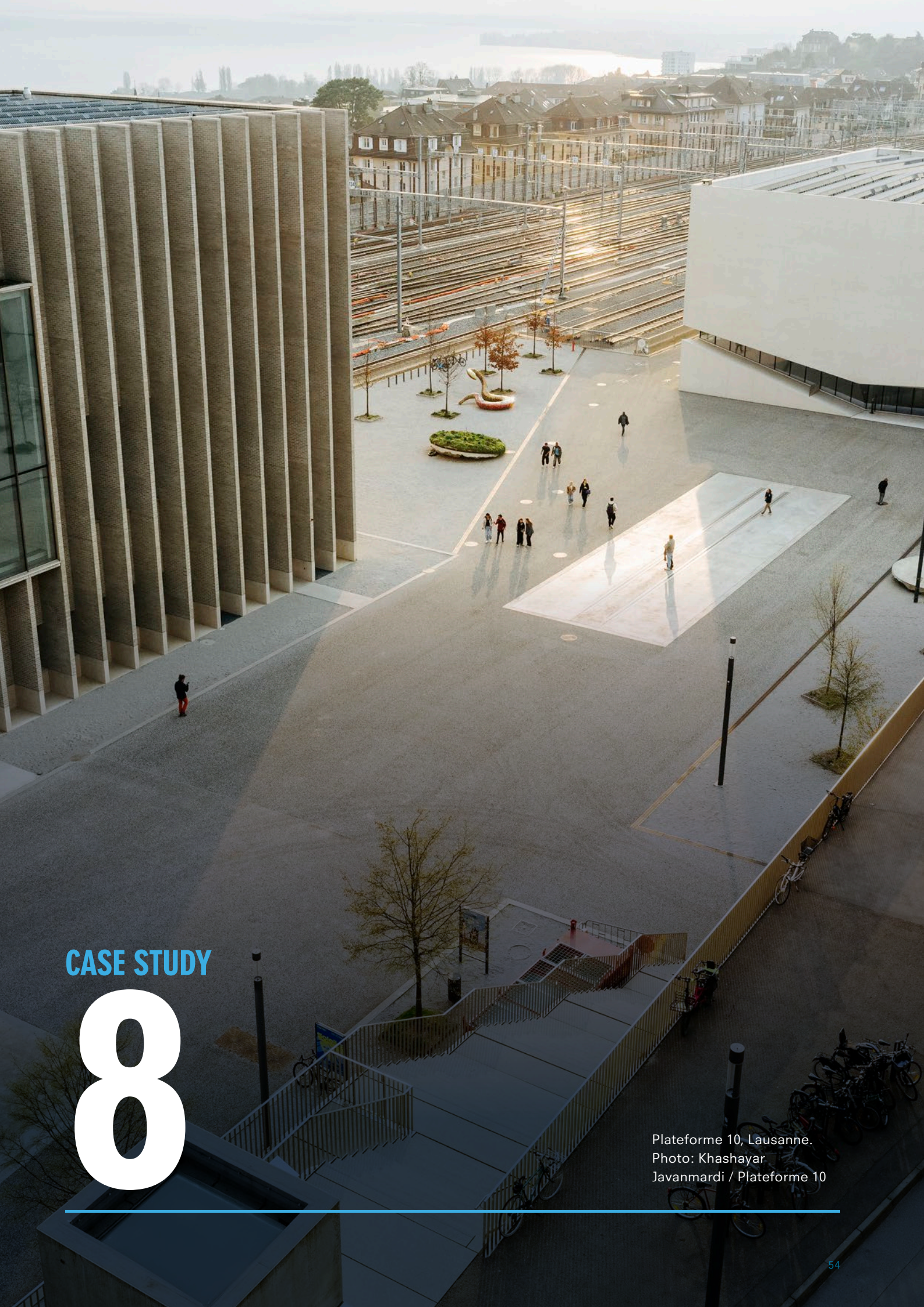
Enablers and Obstacles to Collaboration

The adaptation of City-wide policies at the borough level has provided a setting for collaborations, through consultation and engagement of different partners. The notions of cultural vitality and cultural development which underpin this work have also enabled a broad understanding of culture, which connects with socioeconomic and environmental aspects, diversity, inclusion and learning, and allows cross-sectoral partnerships, involving partners beyond the arts and creative sectors. The existence of long-term visions and strategies, which facilitate the emergence of learning and trust among public, private and non-profit partners, and the role of the City's cultural facilities, including libraries and cultural centres, also help to structure this work.

Among the difficulties encountered are the unequal resources and capacities of organisations engaged in local partnerships, which mean that the leadership and continued engagement often lie mainly on public agents. On the other hand, the cross-sectoral nature of partnerships existing at the borough or community level does not always fit into the sector-based nature of public funding programmes (e.g., those that support culture, social inclusion, etc.).

OBSERVATIONS

This case evidences the multiple understandings of cultural quarters and cultural districts, particularly when emphasis is placed on community engagement and on cultural vitality beyond buildings and venues. The important role of local government policy in providing a city-wide framework and facilitating the emergence and/or strengthening of partnerships at borough level should also be noted. This approach allows the emergence of diverse initiatives at the grassroots, while also being highly reliant on community relationships and informal collaborations, entailing some risks of fragility and discontinuity.



CASE STUDY 8

Plateforme 10, Lausanne.
Photo: Khashayar Javanmardi / Plateforme 10

PLATEFORME 10

Lausanne, Canton de Vaud, Switzerland

Organisation	Public foundation under a dedicated law, the first of its kind in Switzerland; opened 2021
Key partners	MCBA; mudac; Photo Elysée; Canton de Vaud
Scale	Arts district housing three cantonal museums
Interview	11 March 2026 · Patrick Gyger, Director-General

Context

Plateforme 10 (P10) is an arts district opened in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 2021. Established as a public foundation operating under a dedicated law (the first of its kind in Switzerland), it houses three pre-existing museums – the MCBA (Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts), the mudac (Cantonal Museum of Contemporary Design and Applied Arts) and Photo Elysée (Cantonal Museum of Photography).



Museum Night 2025: Coralie Ehinger, Switzerland's leading theremin player, fills the grand staircases of the MCBA with the resonant waves of her instrument. Photo: Khashayar Javanmardi

Relationships between the Cultural District and Local Government

Cultural policy in Switzerland is largely decentralised, with responsibilities lying primarily in the hands of municipalities and cantons (which are the equivalent of states or regions). The P10 Foundation was established through a law of the Canton de Vaud, which also provides most of its funding. The Canton and the Foundation sign funding conventions for each five-year period, corresponding to each governmental term. The Canton drafts cultural policy guidelines for each five-year governmental term, which feed into P10's strategic plan. P10's plan is formally approved by the Canton.

The Foundation reports annually on the basis of indicators outlined in the convention – which were mainly related to the opening of the three museums comprising Plateforme 10 at first and increasingly related to activities more recently (e.g. cooperation, acquisitions, types of activities, ticket sales, fundraising). The funding provided to the cultural district amounts approximately to one-fourth of Vaud's cultural budget, thus making it a central institution in regional cultural policy.

The programming of activities within the three museums is independent from government. There is, however, an expectation that some artists from Vaud will be included in programmes, and that cantonal collections will be shown periodically.

The Board of the Foundation involves independent experts elected by the Canton's Conseil d'État (government), as well as the Canton's Head of Culture and, without voting rights, the Head of Culture of the City of Lausanne. The Board's existing members can recommend their successors, which need to be validated by the government of the Canton. Relationships with the City of Lausanne are generally limited, although some collaborations with local institutions exist for specific projects or activities.

There is also a Board of Directors, involving the Foundation's CEO, the directors of the three individual museums and the Foundation's senior staff. The Board of Directors is responsible for submitting P10's annual reports to the Canton.

Enablers and Obstacles to Collaboration

Since P10 is a foundation under public law, with funding provided by the Canton de Vaud, relationships are very formalised and occur on a regular basis, through Board meetings, reporting and financial contributions, as well as through ad-hoc meetings and exchanges where needed. There is also a direct connection between the Canton's cultural policy and the Foundation's setting of goals.

On the other hand, the Foundation and its museums do not participate in the drafting of the Canton's cultural policy. Furthermore, there is a perception that, beyond the goals and metrics related to activities and management, more strategic objectives in areas such as audience development, education or international relations, could be integrated in the conventions governing the relationship between the Foundation and the Canton, thus enabling longer-term, more ambitious development.

Whilst the relationships with the Canton are highly formalised, the absence of a significant financial contribution from the City of Lausanne means that the City's relationship with the Foundation is very limited, despite P10's role in Lausanne's cultural life. On the other hand, however, there are person-to-person relationships with local institutions (e.g. the city's park service, local hospitals, university), for specific projects.

OBSERVATIONS

This case highlights the potential of formal relationships between cultural districts and local or regional governments in ensuring financial and institutional stability and sustainability. The existence of public legislation supporting the existence of P10 and embedding it within the Canton's cultural infrastructure guarantees its policy alignment, visibility and significant role in local cultural life.

At the same time, the case also illustrates some of the challenges that dependence on one institutional partner may entail, including limiting the ability of cultural districts to collaborate with other stakeholders, including public authorities like the City of Lausanne. Other aspects to be considered include the risk that cultural districts' activities do not evolve substantially, particularly if no significant changes in policy goals are introduced in the institutions governing them, preventing the adoption of more ambitious goals in areas like education, social inclusion or cultural diversity. In this respect, more informal spaces for discussing and designing policy goals, involving institutional, civil society and professional stakeholders, could be considered.



CASE STUDY 9

Salford Creatives at Islington Mill. Photo: Creative Concern

3.2.9

SALFORD CULTURE AND PLACE PARTNERSHIP

Greater Manchester, UK

Organisation	Salford Culture and Place Partnership (2017): an informal consortium coordinated from the City Council's Place directorate
Key partners	Salford City Council; University of Salford; Arts Council England; The Lowry
Scale	City-wide, including the Makers District, Salford Crescent and Salford Quays
Interview	7 April 2026 · Darren Grice, Director of Culture; Sally Gilford, Culture Programme Manager

Context

The Salford Culture and Place Partnership is the City of Salford's Cultural Compact, established in 2017 through a Memorandum of Understanding between Salford City Council, the University of Salford, and Arts Council England, facilitated by The Lowry as anchor institution. Operating as an informal consortium coordinated from within the City Council's Place directorate, it oversees cultural strategy and placemaking across the city, including the emerging Makers District, Salford Crescent and the Salford Quays waterfront. Key cultural assets include The Lowry, MediaCity, University of Salford, Salford Museum and Art Gallery and a cluster of artist-led spaces including Islington Mill, Hotbed Press, and Paradise Works.



Salford Creatives at Grit Studios. Photo: Creative Concern

Relationships between the Cultural District and Local Government

The Salford Culture and Place Partnership occupies an unusual structural position: its coordinating team sits within Salford City Council's Place directorate, yet the partnership itself operates as an informal consortium with no separate legal entity. This hybrid arrangement — formally anchored in local government while remaining deliberately unbounded — enables the team to reach smaller creative organisations, artist-led spaces, and civil society groups in an organic way that a more formal structure would make harder. The council consciously positions itself as the "battery in the background," avoiding the role of lead brand in order to ensure the partnership is genuinely sector-led.

At the national level, Arts Council England maintains a senior representative on the partnership, attending quarterly meetings and participating in co-design processes, creating meaningful two-way communication that extends to consultative phases of national strategy development.

Salford sits within the Greater Manchester Mayoral Combined Authority — a collective of ten local authorities that cooperate on matters beyond the reach of any individual council. Greater Manchester has its own cultural strategy, currently in its second iteration, focused on what the city-region can achieve collectively, alongside a dedicated Creative Industry Sector Plan driving growth in multiple sectors including screen industries, AI, and immersive technologies. This regional layer provides Salford with both broader leverage and a framework for economic as well as cultural planning.

Cross-sectoral collaboration — spanning health, education, and creative industries — is embedded in the partnership's approach, with creatives given genuine space to provide feedback on, and engage with council-led regeneration decisions.

Enablers and Obstacles to Collaboration

The partnership's most distinctive enabler is its structural design: the informal consortium model, combined with a council team that consciously avoids institutional dominance, creates the conditions for genuine sector engagement and organic outreach to smaller creative organisations and communities. This is reinforced by the long-term continuity of the partnership since 2017, which has allowed trust to accumulate across partners. The embedding of Arts Council England within the partnership structure, and the regional leverage provided by the Greater Manchester framework, add further depth. The UNESCO Creative City application is emerging as a powerful catalyst for shared mission, providing both an aspirational framework and a practical tool for galvanising partners.

The main obstacles are resource constraints and communication gaps across the partnership's many sectors and layers — candidly acknowledged as less than optimal. Tension between rapid urban regeneration and the needs of established creative communities also requires constant management, even where the council is actively investing in retaining creative spaces.

OBSERVATIONS

The Salford case demonstrates how locating a partnership team within local government, while keeping the partnership itself informal, can produce a genuinely productive middle ground — providing institutional legitimacy without bureaucratic rigidity. The model enables organic stakeholder engagement and gives creative communities a meaningful voice in urban development decisions, rather than a merely consultative one.

The partnership also illustrates the value of combining long-term continuity with periodic moments of greater intensity. The UNESCO Creative City application functions as a catalyst — a focused, time-bound effort that galvanises partners around cross-sectoral synergy and elevates ambitions beyond the local. The framing of Salford as a "living lab" captures this well: a city that treats its own cultural development as an ongoing experiment, open to learning and change.

The main risk is complexity: with many partners, sectors, and governance layers, coordination remains dependent on limited resources and key individuals.



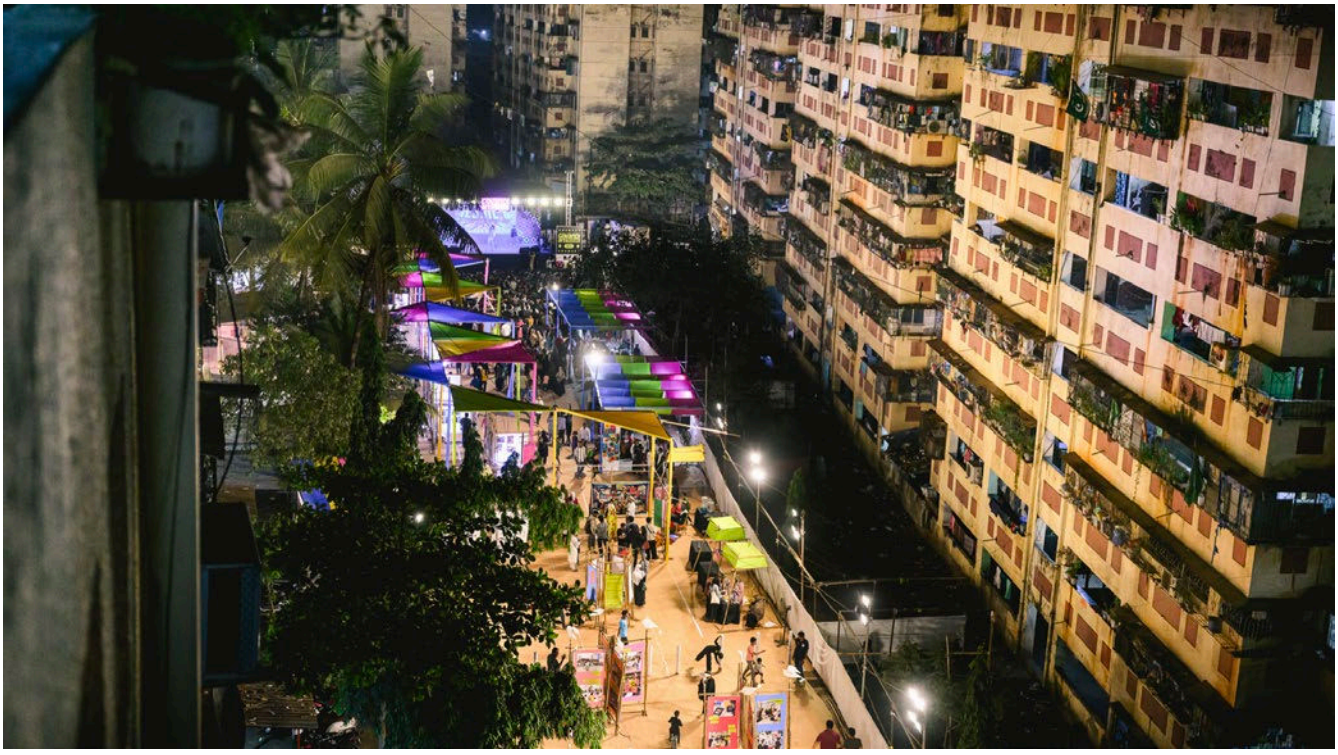
Traf, a puppet built at C3 Concepción

4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Key observations from the case studies

The nine interviews that anchor this report were each structured around three axes — the type of relationship binding a cultural district to its local government, the factors that enable or obstruct their collaboration, and a set of broader observations arising from the case — and it is along these same axes that their principal lessons can most usefully be gathered. What follows is deliberately synthetic rather than case-by-case: an attempt to hold the heterogeneity of the nine configurations in view while drawing out the patterns, and the instructive divergences, that recur across them. Three of the nine — Concepción, Dakar and Montreal — speak from the side of the municipality (or, in the case of Concepción, of the municipally-run cultural centre) rather than from that of an autonomous district, a difference of vantage point that inflects several of the conclusions below.[1]



Celebration of the Govandi Arts Festival 2025 on the reclaimed open ground

1 Salford is also embedded with a municipal structure, but its tone of voice reflects its self-understanding as occupying a middle-ground between city and cultural stakeholders.

4.1.1 The types of relationship with local government

The first and most robust finding is that the relationship between a cultural district and its local government resists any single template: the cases distribute instead along a spectrum of formalisation whose poles are occupied, at one end, by arrangements anchored in law or in direct public management — Plateforme 10 (P10) exists by a dedicated cantonal statute, Auckland Live operates as a Council-controlled Organisation (CCO), and Concepción's Creation Centre (C3) is run directly by the municipality — and, at the other, by relationships that rest on nothing more codified than presence and goodwill, as in the Govandi Arts Festival, which functions with no formal agreement whatsoever; between these poles lie two variants of a deliberately cultivated middle ground: in Salford the city-anchored partnership is itself an informal, unincorporated consortium, whereas in Montreal it is not the city but the individual 'cultural neighbourhoods' ("quartiers culturels") that remain informal, unincorporated partnerships, convened within a common framework and methodology that the municipality itself provides. This diversity of position is mirrored in a diversity of vehicle: the CCO, the Business Improvement District (BID), the public-law foundation, the Cultural Compact constituted by memorandum of understanding, direct municipal management, the private foundation, the municipal network of socio-cultural centres governed by subsidy conventions, and the city-wide framework adapted at borough level all appear among the nine, and each institutional form carries its own logic of dependency, accountability and reach.

Several further regularities cut across this variety. The tier of government that proves decisive is rarely the nominally 'local' one: Downtown Brooklyn's meaningful interlocutor is the City of New York rather than the borough, P10's is the Canton of Vaud rather than the City of Lausanne, and FAST's is the Est Ensemble agglomeration — so that the relationship is, in practice, frequently a multi-level affair offering distinct points of entry at agglomeration, departmental, regional and national scales. This serves to exemplify, in any case, the diversity of models of local government, and other forms of sub-national authority, existing internationally. The mechanism of funding, more than any statute, tends to define the texture of the relationship with cultural and creative districts — a dedicated levy, a property-tax assessment, a multi-year statutory convention, a municipal budget line, a subsidy convention, in-kind support alone, or a hybrid of rent and philanthropy each producing a characteristic pattern of obligation. Within these, formal authority over cultural policy generally remains with government, the district retained as deliverer and coordinator rather than as co-author of policy.

Two motifs recur with particular force: the role of real estate and urban development as the vehicle through which culture and government are bound together, and the role of the district as intermediary or 'connector' between cultural organisations, public agencies, property owners and, increasingly, the community, citizen and Indigenous partners written into governance as co-actors rather than as consultees.

The salient differences, finally, are those of origin and of legal form: some of these configurations were initiated from above, emerging from deliberate public policy or statute — the participatory municipal process behind Concepción's C3, the city programmes of Dakar and Montreal, the founding legislation of Plateforme 10 — whereas others arose from private or community initiative, as with the Fiminco foundation and the community-led festival in Govandi (and, though ultimately catalysed by city policy, the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership); and, cutting across this distinction, some are constituted as bodies possessing their own legal personality (Plateforme 10, Auckland Live), while others deliberately forgo one, whether at the level of the partnership itself (Salford) or of the neighbourhood initiatives it convenes (Montreal).

REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT, VALUE CAPTURE AND CULTURAL DISTRICTS

Real estate development has emerged as a recurrent driver of the creation and expansion of cultural districts (at least in the Global North), and the interviews are usefully illuminated by Ellis and Hiebert's analysis of how this works in practice. The underlying mechanism is the capture of land value: a cultural anchor raises adjacent property values — by an estimated 20 to 50 per cent for the nearest properties — so developers partner with culture, while planning authorities extract cultural infrastructure as a condition of permission to build. The policy levers are familiar from the cases: zoning incentives that relax floor-area ratios in return for cultural space, sales of air rights, and land disposal tied to cultural use, as in the rezoning that catalysed Downtown Brooklyn and the regeneration framing in Auckland.

The dynamic is, however, conditional and double-edged. It operates only where there is genuine development pressure, a willing long-term developer, and a public authority with the capacity to negotiate and enforce. Left unmanaged, it can produce hollow, "stranded" cultural facilities, gentrification and the displacement of the very communities and artists a district is meant to serve, with cultural institutions often weakly enfranchised relative to developers and master planners.

Crucially, this argument is largely museum and building-centric: it assumes a built cultural asset whose externalities can be captured. It therefore applies most strongly to districts based on physical assets and least to community-led initiatives such as Govandi, where culture rebuilds lost infrastructure with no land-value play at all.

Source: A. Ellis & J. Hiebert (2024), "Museums and Real Estate Development: A Roadmap for Positive Impact", Museum International, 76:3–4, 98–105.

4.1.2 Challenges and enabling factors

If the forms of relationship are various, the conditions under which they flourish are strikingly consistent, and they are, tellingly, more relational than structural, thus confirming the survey findings. What recurs across the cases is the primacy of time and trust: the long-term, sustained presence that has allowed the Salford partnership to accrue confidence since 2017, or that has rendered the Govandi festival legible to officials who first questioned its motives; the mutual recognition of expertise that underwrites Auckland's 'hand-in-glove' co-design; and the accumulated, largely informal exchange that converts proximity into collaboration. To these relational enablers are added a set of structural ones: a stable and independent funding base that insulates the district from the volatility affecting its constituents, as the BID does for Downtown Brooklyn and statute does for P10; an institutional design that balances legitimacy against agility, epitomised by the CCO and by Salford's council positioning itself as the 'battery in the background' of a sector-led consortium; a genuine cross-sectoral breadth that connects culture to education, health, business and inclusion; and the galvanising force of a catalytic or 'flagship' moment, such as Salford's UNESCO Creative City application, around which otherwise dispersed partners can be brought into alignment.

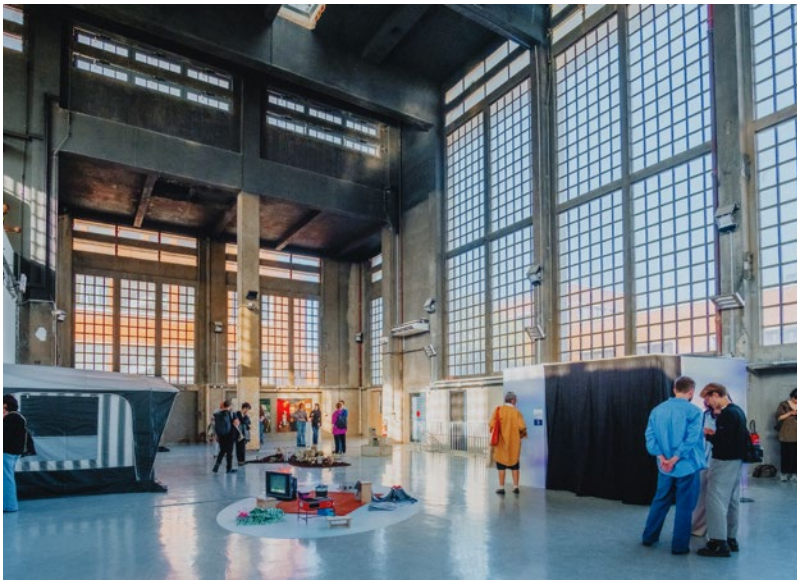
The obstacles are, in a sense, the shadows cast by these same enablers. Chief among them is the funding precarity of the cultural organisations themselves — a precarity that the stability of the district does not necessarily relieve, since for example Downtown Brooklyn's BID, secure in its own funding, cannot of itself reach the independent institutions clustered around it, and the resident initiatives at Concepción's C3 struggle likewise to make their projects financially viable — compounded, where culture enjoys no formal policy standing, by the discretionary and therefore vulnerable character of the whole arrangement, nowhere more acutely than in Govandi. Relationships built primarily on persons and goodwill are exposed to the discontinuities of political change and official turnover, which oblige proposals to be remade to each new interlocutor; the differing tempos of public and private actors create potential for friction, as at FAST; the imperatives of urban regeneration press against the needs of established creative communities, so that questions of artist affordability demand continual advocacy; and coordination itself, rarely budgeted for, is candidly acknowledged — by Salford among others — as 'less than optimal'. The instructive differences here concern degree and kind: the severity of precarity ranges from P10's statutory security to Govandi's near-total absence of public finance, while the source of fragility inverts as one moves along the spectrum of formalisation — the more formal models risking rigidity and over-dependence on a single institutional partner, the more informal ones risking discontinuity and an over-reliance on particular individuals.

CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION BEYOND THE CULTURAL SECTOR

Alongside real estate, cross-sectoral collaboration emerges as a defining feature of the relationship between cultural districts and local government — confirming the survey finding that culture rarely works through a single department. In practice, breadth varies considerably. FAST and Salford come closest to the survey's model, explicitly bundling health, education and social inclusion (and, at Salford, screen, AI and immersive industries) as live partnerships. Concepción shows the same breadth from the municipal side, with culture interfacing departments for youth, business development, environment, urban planning, sexual diversity, health and tourism.

Two patterns stand out. First, the sectors named most often go well beyond health, education and social services: transport, parks and green space, environment, public safety and policing, youth, tourism, heritage and vocational training (from film and audiovisual in Dakar to pastry-making) all recur. Second, the same sector can occupy very different positions — an active partner (FAST, Salford), a named municipal department (Concepción), an operational one-off (Lausanne's links to local hospitals and the university), an aspiration not yet realised (Lausanne's wish to add education and social inclusion to its conventions), or something explicitly assigned to another tier of government and so outside the local relationship (Auckland, where health and education are central-government responsibilities).

The underlying trend is that cross-sectoral collaboration, in practice, means a district interfacing with multiple parts of the local-government machine rather than engaging an abstract policy field. This breadth is both a strength — evidence of the wide public value culture generates — and a coordination challenge, since cross-sectoral partnerships seldom fit neatly into sector-based public funding structures.



Art Emergence, 2026, FAST.
Photo: Manuel Abella

4.1.3 Observations

Read together, the nine cases yield a set of higher-order observations that recur across geography and governance model: that the relationship is governed by a productive tension between formalisation and flexibility, with the most promising cases occupying a deliberately cultivated middle ground; that the instrumentalisation of culture through urban development is genuinely double-edged; that community, citizen and Indigenous co-governance emerges as a distinctive and transferable value; and that culture, especially in the most marginalised contexts, generates social and economic value at once. Rather than develop these observations here — where they would anticipate the discussion that follows — we carry them into section 4.2, which reads them alongside the survey, the workshop and the literature, draws out the tensions they raise, and turns them into recommendations addressed to both districts and governments.

4.2. Cross-cutting discussion points and recommendations

4.2.1. Framing — why local governments engage with cultural districts

Before the takeaways themselves, it is worth naming the rationales that lead local governments to engage cultural districts, since they underpin much of what follows. Four recur across the cases and frequently combine within a single instance: the district as an interface between cultural 'supply' and citizen 'demand'; the structuring of cultural institutions, gathered for the sake of synergy, visibility and recognition (Plateforme 10, Auckland, and — through its municipally-run centre — Concepción, but also, more organically, Salford); the strengthening of local creative and cultural capacities through training, professional development and advice (Concepción, Dakar); and contribution to broader policy goals such as urban regeneration, economic development and placemaking (Downtown Brooklyn, Auckland) or safety and citizen engagement (Concepción). Districts typically pursue several of these at once, blending properly cultural aims with others; and even those that arise organically or independently of government (Govandi, FAST) end up demonstrating the same breadth of value.

4.2.2 Key takeaways

1

The formalisation–flexibility trade-off

Building on the spectrum of formalisation established in the case synthesis (4.1.1), the question this raises for practice is not whether a single model exists — it does not — but where, in a given geography and political context, the productive middle ground lies, and how a district can gain institutional stability without forfeiting organic reach.[1] Two observations refine this. Master plans and formal legal instruments do not in themselves appear decisive; yet where a district does emerge from deliberate policy (Downtown Brooklyn, Plateforme 10), that policy also fixes its position in relation to its constituent organisations, Downtown Brooklyn playing an active role as mediator and connector where Plateforme 10 does so much less. And where districts are lodged within the local authority's own structures (Dakar, Concepción, Auckland), this embeddedness lends sustainability and a shared language among public actors even as it risks opening a gap towards grassroots initiatives. It may therefore help to complement the 'no single model' finding with a positive typology of collaboration forms: public–private partnerships, arrangements internal to the public sector, and broader public–private–civil-society configurations.

ELEMENTS FOR A RECOMMENDATION

Identify the 'sweet spot' of this middle ground, which will vary with geography and political context, attending in particular to how the chosen model positions the district in relation both to its constituent organisations and to grassroots actors. Cultural asset mapping, and facilitated workshops with local government departments, or within living-lab like structures, can be useful tools in this process.

1 In practice the opposition is rarely pure: most cases combine formal and informal elements, and the picture shifts again when seen from the City's side, since a single municipality may host several districts of different types (e.g., Dakar, Houston – though the latter was not one of the case studies).

2

Relationships run on relational dynamics more than formal structure

That these relationships run more on relational dynamics than on formal structure — established across the cases in 4.1.2 and echoed in the survey's finding that 'paper links do not guarantee partnerships' — is among the report's central findings, though two cautions are due: the role of structure and funding should not be underplayed, and this 'soft' dimension is notoriously difficult to capture within a theoretical framework. It is telling, nonetheless, that funding, while frequent, does not itself appear to be a precondition for collaboration — Govandi sustains its relationships on in-kind support alone — even as it can generate dependence, which confirms the primacy of the relational without discounting the material.

ELEMENTS FOR A RECOMMENDATION

Emphasise trust, continuity and a 'Creative-Bureaucracy' mindset, and treat adaptive institutional culture as a capacity to be actively cultivated rather than assumed. Two enablers deserve particular mention: the 'living lab', understood as a space of interaction, dialogue and adaptation and hence of institutional-culture change; and the simple fact of spatial coexistence, whereby the physical proximity of public and private initiatives within a single hub or building (FAST) itself fosters encounter.

We Invented the Weekend 2025. Photo: Courtesy of Quays Culture



LIVING LABS AS AN INTERFACE FOR COLLABORATION

Several cases already gesture toward the idea of the "living lab" — Salford frames itself explicitly as one, and FAST treats experimentation as a core method — making it a promising structure for deepening collaboration between local governments and their cultural ecosystems. A Living Lab is a collaborative, user-centred ecosystem in which research and innovation are embedded in real communities, operating as a "public-private-people partnership" (4P) that brings public authorities, industry, universities and citizens together to ideate, prototype and test solutions. This composition is based on the 'Quadruple Helix', a collaborative framework for experimental methodology and open innovation, and it typically combines three roles: enablers (usually municipalities or regional bodies providing infrastructure, funding and regulatory space), providers (universities and professionals offering specialised knowledge) and users (citizens as the "pulse" of the lab).

Its appeal for cultural districts lies in what it offers the relationship itself. Acting as an intermediary between districts, municipalities and civil society, it replaces the traditional "bi-polar" model — experts dictate, citizens react — with one where "everyone is on the stage." Because it operates outside the highly regulated routines of government, it can trial new financing models and concepts; iterative feedback aligns solutions with real needs; and the 4P approach lends results democratic legitimacy, bridging the "lifeworld" of inhabitants and the "system world" of institutions.

The obstacles are equally clear and echo the cases: the need for a management-mindset shift toward open innovation, the difficulty of harmonising diverse interests, reluctance to fund open-ended experimentation, and ambiguous authority for a body sitting "betwixt and between" top-down and bottom-up approaches. Applied to culture — where social innovation is now central to the expanded role of cultural districts — the Living Lab offers cities a way to treat artistic and social innovation as seriously as technological progress, and to ensure development models are genuinely owned by the community.

3

Reciprocity is confirmed, but it is not a simple two-way exchange

Reciprocity, posited in the Introduction and confirmed by the interviews, proves neither simple nor symmetrical. Value flows in both directions, yet unevenly and in kind rather than in equivalence: Concepción's residents repay support with performances, but Downtown Brooklyn's funding stability cannot reach its constituent organisations, and districts routinely supply programming and placemaking while government supplies funding, space and legitimacy. As the Introduction anticipated, the two sides trade in different currencies — and the rationales set out in section 4.2.1 give this exchange its concrete content. The difficulty is structural: a district may be stable while its member organisations remain precarious, with no mechanism to capture the value they help to generate, and grassroots organisations in particular struggle to secure support relative to better-placed intermediaries. That imbalance is sharpened by the observation that grassroots initiatives can produce a holistic social value 'frequently absent in comparable public-led initiatives' (Govandi), even as they remain least able to win recognition or resources, while the embeddedness of some districts within public structures, for all that it aids sustainability, can widen the same gap.

ELEMENTS FOR A RECOMMENDATION

Articulate this reciprocity explicitly as a complex exchange of distinct contributions rather than a two-way transaction; analyse the value flows and the methodologies available for value-capture; and formalise the resulting understanding into an advocacy toolkit attuned to local realities.

4

Cross-sectoral value is generally confirmed

The cross-sectoral reach of cultural districts — documented in the survey, discussed in Section 2.1, and set out in the box on cross-sectoral collaboration — is confirmed across the cases. The point for practice lies in a specific difficulty: some districts are designed with such non-cultural goals from the outset while others build alliances with social or youth organisations over time, and the latter frequently struggle to fund projects that deliberately blend social and cultural objectives. What makes this breadth possible is a broad understanding of culture itself, which opens the way to partnerships across a wide cross-section of local stakeholders (Montreal, Salford); tellingly, even districts that emerged organically or independently of government (Govandi, FAST) display the same range. Among these channels, the strengthening of local creative capacities — training, professional development and advisory services (Concepción, Dakar) — deserves to be named in its own right, alongside the more familiar policy domains. At the same time, local governments, frequently structured around individual policy areas, are not always prepared to recognise and support initiatives with a more holistic reach.

ELEMENTS FOR A RECOMMENDATION

Analyse examples that show both designed-in and organically-built cross-sectoral value, distinguishing what is general from what is specific to particular cases; address the difficulty of funding hybrid social-cultural projects directly through focused advocacy.

5

Intrinsic versus instrumental value of culture

A consequential tension concerns the prioritisation of intrinsic versus instrumental value in the rationales for cultural policy and programming. In section 2.1., relying on UCLG's understanding of culture as a central element in sustainability, we suggest that culture is 'not primarily a tool' for economic or social ends, or should not be one, yet the interviews describe relationships that are, at least in some cases, heavily instrumental — organised around placemaking, real-estate value and economic justification — and identify that very instrumentalization as a source of fragility. The risk is real, but the report suggests that this is not a simple dichotomy: a single programme can at once be an exercise of cultural rights and a contribution to broader policy goals, so that intrinsic and instrumental value routinely coexist. The case studies locate the tension more precisely still, in two recurrent fault-lines: between strengthening the cultural ecosystem and pursuing urban regeneration, and between privileging high-profile cultural production and securing access to culture for everyone.

ELEMENTS FOR A RECOMMENDATION

Analyse the full range of a policy's or programme's impacts, including through extended and longitudinal stakeholder analysis, ensuring that priority impacts beyond its nominal motivation are identified and that the conditions for their realisation are put in place. Recognise the value in allowing creative projects to develop over time, enabling access to diverse cultural expressions, preserving heritage assets etc., and reflect this through publicly available documentation and advocacy.

6

The language of cultural rights is largely absent on the ground

A related tension is that the language of cultural rights is largely absent on the ground. Participation and co-governance recur across cases — Auckland's partnership with mana whenua, Montreal's governance charter, Govandi's mobilising of residents — but is rarely (with the exception of Concepción in this report) framed in terms of rights, and the post-survey workshop identified the integration of cultural rights as a task that is still outstanding. This observation echoes a frequent finding that the discourse on cultural rights has frequently been more visible in some geographical and political contexts (including in particular Latin American and Spanish-speaking countries), even if recent years have seen an increasing adoption elsewhere, including in regional and global settings (most notably through the work of the UCLG Culture Committee (through the Culture 21 toolkits), the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights, as well as recent UNESCO initiatives such as the MONDIACULT conferences and the Global Report on Cultural Policies, and the European Commission's Cultural Compass for Europe). The vocabulary used in cultural districts is itself geographically uneven, yet the underlying principles of access and participation are visible even where the terminology is not, which is precisely where this tension meets the question of access-for-everyone raised above.

ELEMENTS FOR A RECOMMENDATION

At a moment of widespread push-back against rights discourse, retain the understanding that cultural rights can furnish a political framework for the relationship between government and civil society.

7

Which tier of government is the ‘local’ partner?

That the decisive tier is rarely the nominal ‘local’ one is established in the case synthesis (4.1.1), and the workshop also urged attention to multi-level connections. ‘Local government’ should not be over-simplified, since it spans boroughs, metropolitan authorities and regional bodies such as the Swiss cantons, each a distinct legal reality. The observations illustrate how different these logics can be: Dakar’s top-down ‘zoning’, which assigns each neighbourhood a function within a city-wide scheme, stands in contrast to Montreal’s negotiated adaptation to local needs through a common methodology tailored in implementation.

ELEMENTS FOR A RECOMMENDATION

Map the various types and levels of connection to government tiers, with a focus on what levers each one offers; reflect on how best to implement the principle of subsidiarity — which of the policy or operational levers could perhaps be best handled locally?



Public launch of the Development Strategy 2026-2029 of Vieux-Saint-Laurent quartier culturel, inviting participants to join the citizens’ committee, January 2026. Photo: Borough of Saint-Laurent

8

The public sector as enabler — and as constraint

If the Introduction casts the public sector as enabler and supporter, the case studies (4.1.2) show that the relationship is not free from difficulties — personnel turnover, top-down decision-making, limited capacity in areas such as business advice, a slower operating tempo, and the exclusion of districts from policy formation; Concepción names the underlying problem as a 'lack of organisational culture supporting horizontal relations'. It must also be acknowledged that the government's own voice in this research is thin, since only four interviews (Concepción, Dakar, Montreal, Salford) and six survey replies come from the local-government side, and a better understanding of the reciprocity of the relationships would depend on hearing both. The barriers themselves fall, following the case studies, into three families: institutional obstacles (the absent culture of collaboration at Concepción, the mismatched speeds of public and private actors at FAST, the staff turnover at Govandi); the lack of a shared vision, where a diversity of agents generates competing goals and expectations; and insufficient resources. The last of these carries a revealing corollary: because dialogue and coordination are seldom budgeted for, they fall to additional and voluntary effort, with the result that public authorities must retain the lead — and so reproduce the very hierarchical relationships that horizontal collaboration was meant to loosen.

ELEMENTS FOR A RECOMMENDATION

In line with UCLG's call for 'plural governance frameworks with the engagement of all stakeholders', and in light of the coordination deficits and limited community voice several cases reveal (Downtown Brooklyn's gaps, Lausanne's exclusion from policy), cultural departments across the tiers of government could develop dedicated interfaces with their cultural ecosystems — the 'living lab' being one such model — and coordination and dialogue should be explicitly budgeted for, so that collaboration neither depends on goodwill nor defaults back to hierarchy.

9

Geographic balance

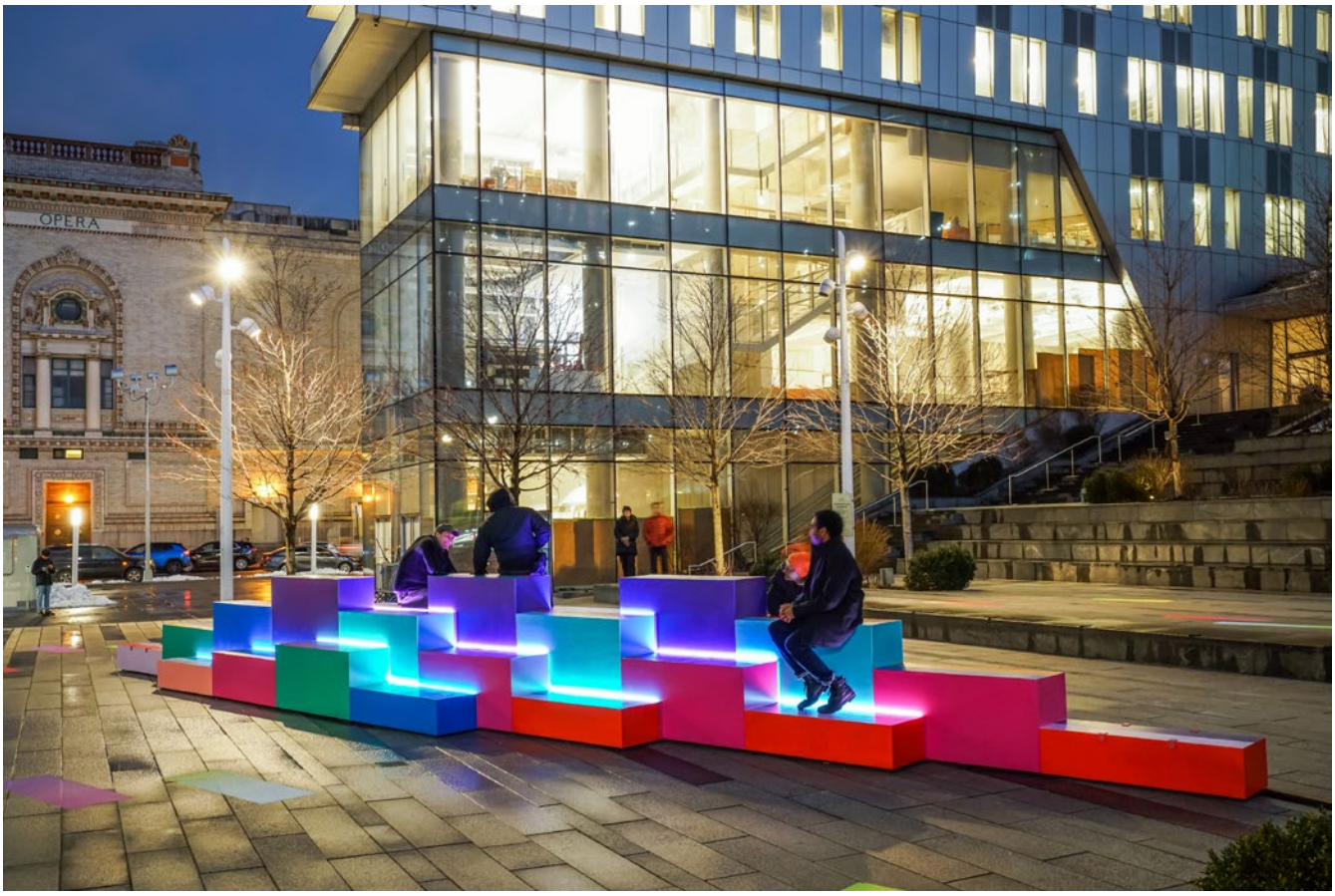
Finally, the research is geographically unbalanced. The survey drew 82 percent of its responses from the Global North, and although the interviews add three strong Global South cases — Concepción, Govandi and Dakar, where culture operates largely outside formal policy frameworks — the imbalance remains and should be acknowledged, not least because it is itself partly a product of existing inequalities in access to research and publication.

ELEMENTS FOR A RECOMMENDATION

We would suggest that specific research initiatives be sponsored to redress this imbalance as much as possible.



Presentation of training certificates, Urban Culture Hub, Dakar. Photo: Maison des Cultures urbaines de Dakar



Common Ground by Cheryl Wing-Zi Wong, 2023. Photo: Cameron Blaylock for DBP

Closing remarks

This report began with an emphasis on reciprocity, and it closes with a more qualified account of that notion. The relationship between cultural districts and local governments is genuinely reciprocal, but rarely symmetrical: value flows in both directions, yet unevenly, and often in different denominations. What is clear — across survey, workshop and case studies alike — is that there is no single model of the relationship, only a spectrum running from statutory embedding to wholly informal collaboration; and that whether a partnership succeeds or fails is determined less by its formal architecture than by its 'softer', relational dimensions: trust, continuity, access to leadership, and the slow work of building a shared language and a more horizontal institutional culture. It is precisely on this interface — in the modes of interaction between districts and the public sector, and in the capacities and dispositions each brings to them — that the report has sought to train its attention, foregrounding the district's role as intermediary and connector and exploring the range of modalities that the relationship can involve.

Two elements nuance the idea of reciprocity developed in the report. The first is a tension that surfaces repeatedly: the frequent use of culture in the service of urban development and the capture of land value — a dynamic that is double-edged, securing investment and political attention while rendering culture's standing contingent, and often exposing the very communities and artists a district is meant to serve to the pressures of gentrification and displacement, most visibly in the Global North. As a counterweight that also crosses the report we would place the language of cultural rights, which — though still largely absent on the ground — offers a political framework for the relationship between government and civil society, and the practice of community, citizen and Indigenous co-governance, which recurs across the cases as a distinctive and transferable value. The second is the report's own limits: a pronounced imbalance towards the Global North and a relatively limited representation of the governmental voice, both of which point to the need for further, more geographically balanced and qualitatively grounded research. Likewise, it would be of great value to translate these findings into practical instruments adapted to present challenges — advocacy toolkits, methodologies for value capture, and durable interfaces for dialogue — of use to districts, to local and regional governments, to international agencies, and to the grassroots and developer-led initiatives through which so much urban change now proceeds. The report aims to highlight the importance of the relationship between local governments and cultural districts, somehow filling a void, and provide a common platform for subsequent debates.

A final word, of caution and of hope. Throughout, we have resisted the temptation to reduce the 'cultural district' to a single essence: it is better understood as a configuration of elements present in varying degrees than as an instance of a fixed type — and the same holds for the local governments with which districts engage. There is, accordingly, no template to be applied; and this is less a limitation than an invitation. Our deeper hope is that this report will motivate leaders and staff alike, within both cultural districts and local governments, to engage one another and to devise their own, context-sensitive ways of leveraging culture for the benefit of all.

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