



# Cultural Districts

An Investment  
in Rich Urban Life



**GCDN**

Global Cultural  
Districts Network

An Initiative of AEA Consulting



As many look expectantly toward a post-Covid-19 world, rebuilding and renewing our cities will be a colossal challenge. Yet this is also an opportunity for transformational change and to build the transition to a greener, more inclusive and more resilient tomorrow.



To that end, cultural districts offer a powerful source of light for cities aiming to reignite their economies and strengthen the resilience of their communities. The value of cultural districts is immense, multi-layered and far-reaching. Cultural districts attract investment, knowledge workers and tourists; build community and social capital; and reveal a distinctive local identity.

However, your support is vital for cultural districts to thrive. Together with your strong support and partnership, we can forge and ensure vibrant and dynamic cultural districts.





Cultural districts are a global phenomenon. They are places characterised by a high concentration of cultural activities and organisations. Some are centuries old but over the last two decades the number and profile of cultural districts have grown rapidly all around the world as their unique contribution to urban life has been more fully understood.

# What Are Cultural Districts?

Whether old or new, planned or “naturally occurring,” cultural districts are increasingly recognised for the synergies and critical mass that they foster and the contribution they make to the quality of urban life.



As clusters of creative and cultural activity concentrated within a geographic area, successful cultural districts create, maintain, and nurture the conditions in which culture and creativity thrive, adding significantly to the quality of urban life.





# Why Do Cultural Districts Matter?



Image Credit: MuseumsQuartier Wien, in Vienna

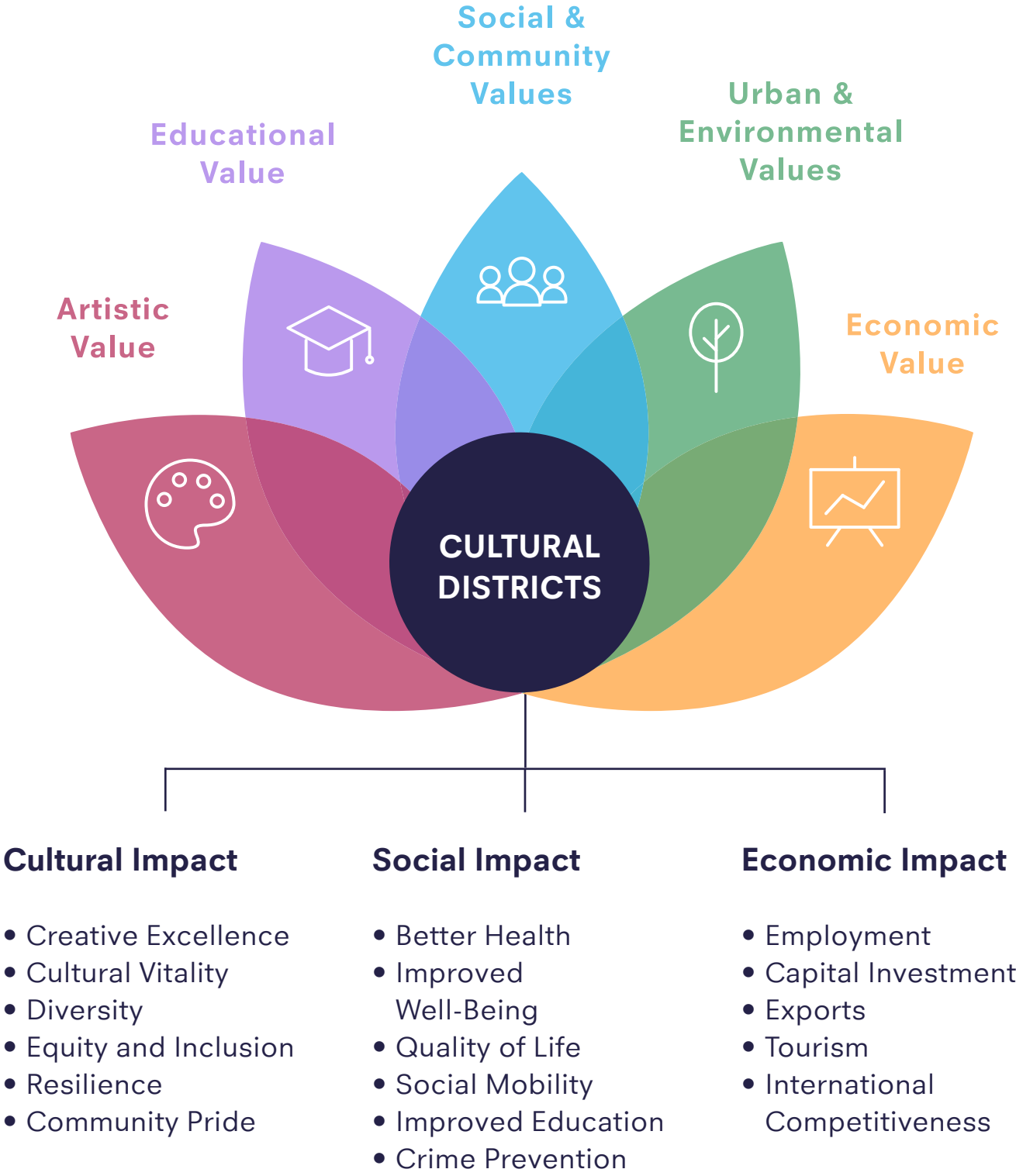
Today, cultural districts are often organised into and supported by entities created to help them thrive and make their fullest contribution to economy and society.

These benefits are enhanced by the economies of scale and synergies that cultural districts foster through clustering.

There are several dimensions to the impact they can make on urban life.



Cultural districts matter and make a difference because of their multi-dimensional values.



**Artistic Value**  
Nurturing and sustaining the cultural and creative industries ecosystem



**Educational Value**  
Building capabilities and promoting active citizenship



**Social & Community Values**  
Strengthening community revitalisation, belonging and social inclusion



**Urban & Environmental Values**  
Fostering strong sense of place and enhancing liveability



**Economic Value**  
Stimulating innovation, and fostering international engagement



**Cultural value** is multi-dimensional and broadly refers to the worth attributed to arts and culture.



**Impact** implies that something changes as a result of a cultural experience, at least temporarily. It includes the variety of positive outcomes that are associated with arts and culture, from intrinsic benefits to tangible outcomes such as economic gains. It can be applied to individual, communities and cities.





# Artistic Value

Cultural districts nurture and sustain the cultural and creative industries ecosystem.







Creative people are the heart, soul and driver of the cultural and creative industries. They generate new ideas, push boundaries and bring exciting new work to life.

Creating new work can be challenging. Creative practitioners and organisations, particularly small, emerging and independent players, operate in a complex system involving a multitude of people, institutions and places. To flourish, they require access to a range of interconnected resources and capabilities.

Cultural districts support the conditions for art-making and creative practice by:

- Fostering a supportive arts ecosystem that nourishes the creative and innovative energies of artists and creative practitioners
- Creating places and opportunities to enable the arts and culture to thrive and grow
- Taking the lead in supporting the burgeoning virtual cultural community through new forms of collaborative and/or hybrid programming



All citizens have the right to a creative and culturally fulfilling life. Regardless of race, background, age, gender or ability, all citizens are entitled to see themselves reflected in our cultural life - on our screens and stages, in our literature, art and music.

Cultural districts can foster participation and engagement by:

- Broadening equitable access and providing new pathways to a rich diversity of artistic and creative expression to diverse communities

- Supporting artists, creative practitioners, organisations and businesses in their search for wider audiences, new markets and increased revenue
- Celebrating, promoting and preserving cultural heritage as a legacy for future generations







# Educational Value

Cultural districts build capabilities and promote active citizenship.







Numerous longitudinal research studies have demonstrated that exposure to, and engagement in the arts and culture increase people's capacity for learning, as well as enrich the lives of adults.

Young people demonstrably benefit from arts and culture-based learning, which cultivates imagination and builds enduring social and personal capabilities. Importantly, cultural engagement develops critical-thinking, communications, and innovation skills essential to a productive 21st century workforce.

Cultural districts can create a positive environment to enable capabilities and capacities for learning and development by:

- Providing equitable access to high-quality educational programmes spanning from early childhood through to higher-education and workforce training
- Serving as a hub for skills development, knowledge exchange and networking





The arts and culture act as an engine for civic renewal and contribute to community vitality. Citizen engagement in the arts creates a strong shared identity, connectedness and pride.

Investing in cultural districts will support the development of arts and culture-based education opportunities, which will nurture active and empathetic citizens who care about their communities.

Cultural districts are a civic asset in today's global society by:

- Offering arts and cultural programmes that facilitate intercultural understanding, foster trust and increase tolerance and empathy
- Fostering active citizenship and nurturing the collective efficacy of a community to address major problems together





# Social & Community Values

Cultural districts strengthen community revitalisation, belonging and social inclusion.





Cities are home to a wide range of diverse communities with differing socioeconomic backgrounds and distinctive identities. Communities are not static: as populations grow, social challenges such as integrating new residents and citizens with diverse cultures and traditions, keeping our aging population active, and our mobile population rooted, will increasingly take centre stage.

The idea that artists, designers and creatives have a role in shaping a community is as old as human civilisation. However, the arts and culture are under-utilised assets in community planning and development.



Cultural districts can support and respond to social and community challenges by:

- Creating strong social infrastructure that builds community, supports wellness and creates opportunities for cultural experiences that uplift individuals and communities
- Developing people-centred policies and strategies that facilitate social integration, social mobility and the formation of social capital



The arts and culture have immeasurable impact on community and quality of life. They are able to heal, bring joy, inspire, and build bridges between cultures through shared experiences. Creative services and cultural experiences have immense potential to deliver wide-reaching social and community outcomes, but have suffered from lack of investment and coordination.

Cultural districts deliver wide social and community impact that support and celebrate the unique and important strengths of their communities by:

- Empowering at-risk youths and underserved communities by harnessing the power of the arts and culture to give voice to the issues that impact them
- Acting as community anchors that prioritise equitable development and authentic engagement that are responsive to community needs







# Urban & Environmental Values

Cultural districts foster a strong sense of place and enhance liveability.







All across the globe, cities are recognising the importance of creating neighbourhoods and places where people are able to live, work and play. Cultural districts have the power to reshape the way we experience our cities: they can remake streetscapes and improve public safety, enliven public spaces, draw in visitors and enhance residents' quality of life.

Cultural districts are able to foster a strong and shared sense of place by:

- Developing a shared narrative to promote and enable positive perceptions of the cultural district's distinct creative ecology
- Providing an unrivalled visitor experience by clustering cultural institutions, animated public spaces and streetscape improvements





A city's resilience is defined by the ability of its communities to survive, adapt and grow despite the chronic stresses and shocks it experiences. When communities are resilient, they are safer, healthier, happier and able to thrive despite everyday stresses.

Building a resilient future also requires preparation for future challenges, especially the growing impact of climate change and to ensure equitable planning and development.

Cultural districts can strengthen a city's resilience by:

- Advancing creative placemaking as a strategic means to recognise existing assets and incorporate community voices to foster a vibrant, safe, green and equitable environment
- Taking the lead in enabling sustainability by improving resource efficiency and raising sustainability awareness





# Economic Value

Cultural districts  
Stimulate innovation,  
and enable international  
engagement.







Creativity is not limited to the cultural and creative industries. As the basis of innovation, creativity can drive productivity, economic growth, and job creation.

In fact, creativity is a cross-industry, transferable skill being increasingly recognised for the variety of benefits it brings to the wider economy.

Cultural districts deliver wider economic impact by:

- Supporting a thriving mixed economy by facilitating crosssector collaboration and networking amongst varied partners
- Catalysing new kinds of innovation and entrepreneurial energy by supporting new ventures and kinds of relationships between creative practices, businesses and audiences
- Attracting talent, creating jobs and supporting social mobility



Cultural districts contribute to and are shaped by the wider global community. The most successful creative places operate on an international scale, connecting with overseas partners, collaborators, and audiences. Global engagement amplifies opportunities for ideas and inspirations, for trade and tourism and for cultural relationships and diplomacy.

Cultural districts project a city's impact and profile to global audiences, visitors, and markets by:

- Promoting the overall image of a city and being internationally known and visited for its exceptional cultural infrastructure and experiences

- Encouraging inward investment as well as attracting and retaining top talent and knowledge workers





Overall, cultural districts strengthen the resilience of their neighbourhoods and cities, as well as add value to the communities that they serve.





In times of crisis,  
the arts and  
culture have a  
critical contribution  
to make...

and cultural  
districts matter  
more than ever







The world changed in 2020,  
and there is no going back.

Research shows that during and following major crises such as natural disasters and health pandemics, the arts and culture play a critical role in enabling people to adjust and make sense of the changes; in reconnecting affected communities; strengthening sense of place and connection; reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation; providing opportunities for contemplation and fostering a shared sense of hope.



The arts and culture are also integral to tackling the multifaceted challenges that businesses face, including improving staff well-being, sparking creativity and innovation, and supporting cross-sector collaboration.

The arts and culture can also enhance a city's soft power potential, a critical resource during this period of global disruption.

Within GCDN, cultural districts are already harnessing these benefits to “build back better and stronger.”







Cultural districts have been playing an active role in the recovery and renewal of cities by:

- Swiftly adapting to meet residents' immediate needs, by providing residents with access to critical infrastructure and resources to remain fed, active and digitally connected during the pandemic
- Innovating with low-cost, immediately responsive and creative public realm interventions to promote local businesses, health and social equity
- Producing arts and cultural activities that contribute to positive educational, social, health and well-being outcomes amongst communities
- Combatting growing issues of loneliness and isolation, and building feelings of community, belonging and trust through fostering arts and cultural participation
- Facilitating and/or driving creative transformations that enable innovation and economic growth



There is still much to be done to understand more fully the immense potential of cultural districts and the unique ways in which they are formed, structured and sustained.





Support your  
cultural district  
in playing a  
critical role in  
the recovery  
and resilience  
of your city







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This guide was written by Dr. Su Fern Hoe, GCDN Senior Research Advisor, and is based on work done by Professor Geoffrey Crossick and Anna Jobson for GCDN.

To find out more, contact [info@gcdn.net](mailto:info@gcdn.net)

For case study examples, check out the accompanying fact sheet.



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Front cover:  
Camille Walala colourful crossing,  
Bankside - London Design Festival 2016

Back cover:  
Balancoires by Martine Doyon – image  
courtesy of Partenariat du Quartier des  
Spectacles