

New Mexico Arts & Cultural District | Las Vegas

Cultural Plan: Introduction

OVERVIEW

Throughout its storied past as a crossroad of the American Southwest, the northeastern New Mexico town of Las Vegas developed the tenacity of a place that has endured the tests of numerous social and economic cycles. With its pedestrian-oriented downtown business districts, family-friendly neighborhoods filled with carefully restored Victorian homes and New Mexican Territorial style adobes, tree-lined boulevards and a thriving education sector embracing three institutions of higher learning, contemporary Las Vegas clearly benefits from these and many other enduring legacies of its forefathers.

In recent years a new crossroad began emerging on the Las Vegas landscape. It was prompted by factors that included the influx of a new generation of creative economy professionals, an expansion of the performing and visual arts programs at local colleges, and perhaps most importantly an awareness of the Las Vegas region's accomplished community of traditional Hispanic artists. Taken as a whole, Las Vegas is developing a locally nuanced creative economy.

For many towns the economic impacts of creative economy professionals have benefited those residents engaged in pursuits ranging from digital design to the fabrication of titanium mountain bike frames. But in Las Vegas' case a broadly based recognition of traditional and contemporary expressions of art and culture as being fundamental components of regional creativity has resulted in an effort addressing the needs of individuals from divergent cultural backgrounds, creative media, age groups, and economic standing.

Led by Las Vegas MainStreet, with support from the City of Las Vegas, the Las Vegas Arts Council, the Citizens Committee for Historic Preservation, the Economic Development Corporation, the three local colleges and other groups, the effort seeks to facilitate the growth of this segment of the local economy while expanding its impact to other parts of the community. Through the successful completion of a comprehensive application process the community was named as one of two New Mexico municipalities approved as pilot cities under the New Mexico Arts and Cultural District Act in January 2008.

Administered through New Mexico MainStreet, the act promotes implementation of a "...cohesive strategy with place-based arts and culture as an economic niche." Its intent is the enhancement of economies through local and state partnerships offering incentives and expertise necessary for the development of sustainable Arts and Cultural Districts. The act is the result of a collaborative effort between the New Mexico Economic Development Department, New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, New Mexico Tourism Department, the McCune Foundation and the New Mexico Museum Foundation.

Expertise in the form of four actions, beginning with the pre-designation draft of a Strategic Plan (SPACE), followed by a Resource Team Assessment, then a Visioning and Branding workshop, as well as an Asset Mapping effort, analyzed numerous facets of the community's arts and cultural sector. The findings of these four initiatives combined with input from community members to help guide this cultural planning process to its conclusions and recommendations.

Las Vegas is a proud and hard working community whose residents not only take pride in their *frontera* past but who also strive toward finding solutions to contemporary issues that might be framed in ways honoring the legacy of their forefathers. That awareness helped guide the development of this cultural plan, which functions to serve all aspects of this community's diverse arts and cultural sector through the establishing of an exemplary Las Vegas Arts & Cultural District.

PROCESS

The community-based process that's resulted in the development of an Arts and Cultural District Cultural Plan was led by a committee whose members are actively engaged within the Las Vegas arts community, education community, cultural heritage community and the downtown business community. To the committee's benefit, several of its members have interests in more than one of these identities and were thus able to add fresh perspectives to the dialogue of the cultural planning process.

In addition to the dedicated participation of these Las Vegas residents this process was assisted by a consulting team whose members included staff from New Mexico MainStreet as well as subject matter experts who engaged with the Cultural Plan Committee as consultants supervised by New Mexico MainStreet. Another resource from outside the Las Vegas area that engaged in the effort was the Bureau of Business & Economic Research of the University of New Mexico's Institute for Applied Research Services (BBER).

These parties took part in an energetic effort that stretched from the early weeks of April, 2008 to the conclusion of the cultural plan's drafting and editing in mid-June, 2009.

In April, 2008 a team of representatives from New Mexico MainStreet conducted a multi-day on-site Arts and Cultural District Resource Team Assessment in Las Vegas, collaborating with Las Vegas MainStreet in a focused effort to determine strengths, weaknesses and opportunities that should be expected as well as factored into the long range contingencies attached to the cultural planning process. The findings of this assessment are discussed in the Technical Findings section of this Introduction.

In November, 2008 a team of subject matter experts representing New Mexico MainStreet conducted A Visioning Focus Group Branding for the Las Vegas Arts and Cultural District. The focus of this phase of the district's planning process was to identify themed images and messages to support the identification and promotion of the Las Vegas Arts and Cultural District. The findings of this effort are discussed in the Technical Findings section of this Introduction.

From the second week of January, 2009 up to the middle of June, 2009 there were bi-weekly meetings of the Cultural Plan Committee.

Alternating between the dining facility of Luna Community College and the busy downtown bakery known as Charlie's Spic n' Span Bakery, the committee was a demographically diverse group of local residents dedicated to developing a cultural plan that would address community arts and cultural needs while providing a framework for stabilizing the presence of artists, art businesses and cultural organizations.

MEETING CHALLENGES

The process of developing a cultural plan in support of the Las Vegas Arts and Cultural District has been greatly assisted through the expertise present on the Cultural Plan Committee. This talented and accomplished group of volunteers is as diverse as the community itself, with representation from all corners of the demographic spectrum.

But this diversity and expertise would not be as fully mobilized for guiding the Arts and Cultural District toward success were it not for the political acumen of several committee members. The members of the committee are extraordinarily effective at leveraging their knowledge of local communication channels in getting word out to the community at large regarding the group's projects and progress.

Maintaining the Cultural Plan Committee's current membership (while eventually expanding it to include new members with expertise and contacts) adds to the clout of the committee's functions. This is one of the main avenues through which the Arts and Cultural District Cultural Planning process can stay on track and achieve its goals. In so doing, the committee will be laying an important foundation that has the potential to improve the economic conditions and professional opportunities within the Arts and Cultural

District boundaries. The cultural plan's development will also be taking major steps toward providing the artists and creative field professionals of this diverse region with the kind of opportunities they are currently lacking.

The American Southwest is home to many of the leading arts and cultural institutions serving the interests of the nation's rapidly growing Hispanic, Chicano and Latino populations. There exists a wealth of opportunity for the Las Vegas arts community to network into the fabric of both the traditional and contemporary artistic and cultural mainstreams tying together cities such as Albuquerque, Denver, Tucson, San Antonio and El Paso.

Through the successful implementation of the Las Vegas Arts and Cultural District Cultural Plan, this impressive, historic community will be setting the stage for becoming a new type of crossroads its founders could never had envisioned in centuries past.

TECHNICAL FINDINGS

Communities qualifying for designation of a New Mexico Arts and Cultural District gain significant benefits. To encourage the development of vibrant, compact, mixed use, well branded arts and cultural districts, communities can institute measures such as a Local Option Gross Receipts Tax increment (LOGRT) to support the district's development. Other options include a doubling of the state tax credit for rehabilitation of historic structures within the boundaries of the Arts and Cultural District. Local options include implementing a Quality of Life Tax to fund the district's ongoing operations.

In developing an Arts and Cultural District Cultural Plan to most effectively serve the cultural demographic of this community's residents while at the same time being as supportive as possible of the aspirations of its arts and cultural sector, the state, local, and nonprofit entities behind this effort designed a process to guide and inform the community, its participating volunteers, and local officials.

From a local perspective the development of a Cultural Plan Committee, serving under the direction of Las Vegas Main Street and the Las Vegas Arts and Cultural District Steering Committee, and comprised of nearly a dozen well informed and active members of the community's arts, cultural, education, business and local government sectors, was an important step toward ensuring that Las Vegas voices would speak with authority during the development of the Las Vegas Art and Cultural District Cultural Plan. The committee's meetings took place biweekly from early January '09 through mid-June '09 and served to keep this group's efforts on track, on message, and on time.

The UNM Bureau of Business & Economic Research, under direction of Dr. Jeffrey Mitchell, was engaged for the purpose of developing two databases. The first database was the result of a Social Network Analysis that used interviews with key individuals to gather information about the Las Vegas creative sector. A separate database was developed from an Asset Mapping effort targeted at identifying the numerous exhibitions, performance and education facilities serving the local creative sector.

Some of the findings from the UNM BBER study of Las Vegas include the following challenges:

- The study revealed an astounding degree of institutional decentralization. Unlike many small towns, a small group of institutions do not dominate the cultural life of Las Vegas.
- The principal cultural organizers in town are not fully representative of the population of the region as a whole. (San Miguel County is 75 percent Hispanic, and includes a large number of young adults—both of these populations are under-represented among those engaged in organizational leadership).
- There is a surprising degree of geographical disconnect—though Las Vegas is the central point of contact, communities outside of the center are overly dependent upon a few individuals to maintain contact.

- The business end of Las Vegas arts and culture tends to proliferate in numbers rather than in financial strength.
- The impact of 9/11 on arts & culture industries appears to have been very significant. The impact of this national disaster interrupted what had been ten years of steady growth in the region's industry.

However, recent efforts to organize the arts and cultural community in Las Vegas have shown a measure of success:

- *The Las Vegas Arts Council*, the newly established *Arts & Cultural District Steering Committee* and *MainStreet de Las Vegas* measure the highest in BBER's social network analysis in the statistical terms of "betweenness"—their effectiveness in linking otherwise disparate or disconnected individuals or organizations. These types of organizations are showing to be effective in creating hubs with the potential to organize the huge number of small, far-flung individuals and organizations that comprise the Las Vegas cultural community.
- These and other organizations have established key events that both draw together members of the community and attract others from outside the area. These events help to establish a common identity within and consistent representation of the region to other areas.

"Although many of the measures included in this study emphasize the challenges that Las Vegas faces in developing its arts and cultural economy, the broader message is overwhelmingly positive. The patterns of decentralization described in this study are characteristic of a long history along a unique path of creative development. Indeed, the cultural landscape of present-day Las Vegas is not one of radical disagreement or disparity but of a multiplicity of efforts to maintain the subtle differences and nuances of an otherwise consistent vision of regional traditions. The current challenge is to organize these disparate initiatives in order to be more effective in the emerging regional, national and global cultural economy while at the same preserving the rich differences that exist within the community. The balance of diverse organization and central coordination serves these ends." – UNM BBER Study: Las Vegas Arts & Cultural Industries

In November 2008, a team of three NMMS consultants working alongside staff from Las Vegas MainStreet conducted "A Visioning Focus Group Branding the Las Vegas Arts and Cultural District", a community-wide exercise on the campus of Luna Community College. Originally structured toward identifying branding themes for the Las Vegas Arts and Cultural District, the exercise's participants also discussed "...themes and opportunities critical to the district's success, as well as the effectiveness of branding campaigns." A SWOT analysis detailed various strengths/weaknesses/opportunities that related to the current identity of Las Vegas. Participants proceeded to visualize the best-case scenarios of a Las Vegas in 2015, linking that visualization to the goals of a community branding campaign.

In April, 2008 a team of NMMS staff and consultants working alongside staff from Las Vegas MainStreet conducted an "Arts and Cultural District Resource Team Assessment", whose working groups addressed four subject areas determined to be key to the success of the Las Vegas Arts and Cultural District. Tasked with providing the community and the Las Vegas Art and Cultural District Steering Committee with expertise and insight into best practices drawn from successful similar efforts in other parts of the nation, subcommittees were assigned to address each of the four key subject areas.

In its general findings the Resource Team identified four values critical to the success of the cultural planning process: Communication, Coordination, Collaboration and Community.

In its specific recommendations relating to the four key subject areas the subcommittees reported their findings to the Resource Team as a whole.

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Cultural Plan: Vision, Mission, Strategies

Everyone knows that Las Vegas is a place with a past – but we need to remember that it is also a place with a future. The choices we make today will determine what kind of future we create for generations to come.

VISION

Las Vegas as a unique American Cultural Treasure.

MISSION

Keep traditions alive while creating a vibrant artistic and cultural future.

STRATEGIES

1. Preserve, protect and promote our multiplicity of authentic cultural and artistic traditions. This is based upon respect for traditions while making them relevant to the lives of young residents. The processes, stories and intent that lie behind the various cultural traditions of the region will be conveyed in compelling ways to an ever widening circle of children, students, visitors and even long-time residents. Keeping these traditions alive and well (not preserved under glass) is a crucial for the continuing cultural vitality of Las Vegas.
2. Celebrate the various histories and peoples of Las Vegas and it's surrounding region. As described in the Introduction, the history of the region is long and multilayered. Keeping this diversity of narratives alive is the foundation of learning, understanding and compassion. A compassionate – and even enthusiastic – grasp of the traditions of others is necessary to build strong bonds across cultural boundaries.
3. Build bridges between East and West, sacred and secular, traditional and contemporary, past and future. The history of the region is long, complex and multilayered – like a fine wine. Despite the fact that some of that history was contentious, all of it is now a part of the rich historic and cultural fabric of Las Vegas. Everyone here is a part of that story.

The collective and multi-faceted story we tell about ourselves becomes the foundation for envisioning our future and a key to building bridges connecting all of us.

4. Develop rich artistic, cultural and economic opportunities for Las Vegas and it's residents. From co-op galleries and studio space to production facilities and broadband infrastructure; from entry-level jobs in galleries and design firms to entrepreneurial development and outbound marketing programs -- we will design, plan and implement the practical and logistical elements required for successful creative ventures and community-wide economic vitality.
5. Put Las Vegas on the map as a unique American cultural treasure. New Mexico is already well known as a center for traditional Native American and Spanish Colonial arts... but Las Vegas is known, (if it is known at all), primarily as a gritty wild-west town. This is definitely a fascinating part of its history, but also marginalizes other aspects of the unique character of Las Vegas. Emphasizing the rich traditions of Las Vegas and its surrounding region will further define Las Vegas as a National Treasure – an original source of art and culture in New Mexico.

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Cultural Plan: Five Approaches

The major cultural objectives will be implemented in coordination with the five tactical approaches outlined in the Strategic Plan for an Arts & Cultural Environment (SPACE):

1. Talent Development
2. Economic Assistance
3. Infrastructure Development
4. Community Coordination
5. Coherent Marketing

Talent Development: Offer robust artistic and cultural training & educational programs. These programs will emphasize education for children and young adults, and provide rich educational opportunities, for Las Vegas of all ages, backgrounds and economic situations. The programs will run the gamut from traditional to contemporary, from hand-made to high-tech, from local to international, from spiritual to practical.

Implementation Example: The UWC Arts & Cultural Community Educational Center project

Economic Assistance: Provide business opportunities for creative professionals and cultural entrepreneurs. Artists, designers, musicians, writers – the entire range of creative activity will be supported with internship and mentoring programs, business startup assistance (including financing) and continuing business education opportunities. The objective is to give creative professionals and cultural entrepreneurs in Las Vegas the most chance of success possible. Printed material may be made available in Spanish where practical.

Implementation Example: The Mentorship program offered by the EDC and business programs at Highlands, Luna and UWC.

Infrastructure Development: Identify and implement working space and opportunities for exhibiting and/or performing work. This may range from special exhibitions to studio space, rehearsal space, co-op galleries and co-op workshops – the entire gamut of tools and facilities required by the full range of working creative professionals.

Implementation Examples: MainStreet programs to work with property owners to make use of underutilized buildings; programs by area colleges to develop art exhibition space in the District.

Community Coordination: Special and signature events, volunteer development, sharing of responsibilities. Events and special programs require bringing together many different people with expertise in a variety of areas. Coordinating such events will be shared across the full spectrum of Las Vegas entities and organizations and will utilize community-specific channels and methods of communication to encourage participation in events and programs. The more participation there is, the more sense of ownership will be engendered among many. This will result in healthier, more energetic, more creative and more sustainable results.

Implementation Example: Heritage Week

Coherent Marketing: Emphasize the history and traditions of Las Vegas in its branding. Many cities and regions try to develop brands by hiring marketing experts – but most brands that are developed this way are unsuccessful because standard “market think” tends to shoot for the lowest common denominator. Las Vegas has an authentic character that is unique among small American cities. That authenticity is based upon its striking history and complex culture. Making that authenticity the core of its brand is key. We will develop authentic and effective frameworks for elevating awareness of the community brand. All marketing will be based upon the collective narrative of Las Vegas.