

Upfront

Bright Lights, Big Culture Cities are building museums and symphony halls to spur growth

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THE ARTS

Bright Lights, Big Culture

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Call it a “cultural building boom.”

According to a study published by Elizabeth Strom, a political scientist at Rutgers University-Newark, in the September 2002 issue of *Urban Affairs Review*, 34 of the largest U.S. cities have undertaken 71 major projects to build or renovate downtown cultural institutions since 1985. Cities are constructing or refurbishing art museums, performing arts centers, and symphony halls with seeming abandon.

And it’s not just happening in cultural centers like New York City, San Francisco, and Chicago. A bevy of smaller cities, including Wichita, Kan., Anchorage, Alaska, and Milwaukee, Wis., have made major commitments to downtown arts projects.

Strom searched for new or renovated cultural centers (with at least 1,000 seats) and museums (with at least 50,000 visitors annually) in cities with

populations of more than 250,000. She found that 24 of the cities built, began construction on, or started planning 34 new facilities in the past 18 years. Dallas, Los Angeles, and San Francisco have either added or plan to add four new cultural facilities apiece.

Strom notes that while the stock market boosted capital campaigns through the 1990s, many projects were started years before the U.S. economy took off.

“During the past two decades, city officials have learned to value the historic communities that their predecessors have been eager to raze; have dubbed desolate, derelict warehouses ‘art districts’; and have committed local tax dollars to their museums and performing arts complexes,” Strom wrote.

She notes that according to one study, the states allocated \$447.5 million for arts and cultural programs in

fiscal year 2001. Another study, she says, indicated that corporate backing for culture spiked from \$22 million in 1967 to \$1.16 billion in 1997.

Strom argues that for many cities, including Louisville, Seattle, and Philadelphia, expectations of local economic benefit drove much of the private giving to cultural projects, and government money often came from funds earmarked for downtown redevelopment. The New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, for example, was supported by \$106 million in state contributions, mainly economic development funds; the state’s entire annual arts budget, meanwhile, has never topped \$20 million.

“Whereas once the arts were considered a luxury, supported by philanthropy and enjoyed by an elite group of connoisseurs,” Strom writes, “today’s cultural institutions are constructed as an explicit part of a city’s economic revitalization program.”

But do arts institutions actually boost urban economies?

Here, Strom seems to take a mixed view, drawing from previous studies. She says large arts organizations often pitch themselves as engines of economic growth, hiring consultants to produce thick studies that back up the point. However, she says such studies are not intended as “rigorous cost-benefit analysis; rather, they are tools used by arts groups in their efforts to gain funding.”

Strom does point to some anecdotal evidence that suggests that cities reap economic rewards. Take the case of Seattle, for instance, where city planners put up a new building for the

MAJOR* NEW FACILITIES BUILT OR UNDER CONSTRUCTION SINCE 1999:

CITY	FACILITY
Albuquerque	New Mexico Cultural Center
Austin	Austin Museum of Art
Dallas	Nasher Sculpture Garden
Houston	Hobby Center for the Performing Arts
Los Angeles	Kodak Theatre
Los Angeles	Walt Disney Concert Hall
Miami	Performing Arts Center
Nashville	Frist Center for the Visual Arts
Philadelphia	Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts
Phoenix	Dodge Theater

*Arts centers with 1,000 seats or more; museums with an annual attendance of at least 50,000.

SOURCE: Strom, Elizabeth. “Converting Pork into Porcelain: Cultural Institutions and Downtown Development.” *Urban Affairs Review*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Sept. 2002): 3-21.

Seattle Art Museum and built Benaroya Hall, a performing arts complex that houses the Seattle Symphony. Seattle business leaders say those cultural institutions spurred the development of several retail complexes, and led to a 40 percent increase in the number of downtown residents.

On the other hand, Strom cites a 1981 National Endowment for the Arts study, which found that arts institutions often don't generate as much

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revenue as they cost cities – in terms of services and subsidies. “Even those cultural facilities deemed successful will never generate the tax revenue and employment to make them appear to be good investments in a cost-benefit analysis,” she writes.

Strom concludes by offering a sober reminder that making money for the city can never be a cultural institution's primary purpose. “If arts institutions are primarily seen as mechanisms for urban revitalization and are valued for their ability to draw large numbers of people to city hotels and restaurants,” she writes, “they may be less willing or able to realize the scholarly or educational aspects of their work.”

–Michael Fitzgerald