

CELEBRATING OUR URBAN HERITAGE

CAN THE CREATIVE ARTS STRENGTHEN REGIONAL ECONOMIES?

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Can New England's creative arts help to sculpt the region's economy for the century?

Five years ago the business-led New England Council, executives from such fields as manufacturing and banking, took a bold step. In a special report, they celebrated the region's growing "creative economy." They saw that the region's fine arts, music and drama fields were not only growing but inspiring such other fields of imaginative design as architecture, photography, film and web design. The resulting 245,000-job sector, they reported, was growing twice as fast as New England's overall economy.

If there were skeptics back then, there are many fewer today. In our interviews from Providence to North Adams, the Berkshires to the Maine Coast, no one claimed a creative economy solves all problems. But we found growing numbers focusing on the arts as key to their lives and livelihoods in what's become a bleak season for traditional manufacturing, lumbering and fishing.

In Providence, Mayor David Cicilline told us arts and culture are at the heart of Providence's 21st century strategies: "They contribute to our humanity and quality of life; they're a huge piece of our economic development." Roger Mandle, president of the fabled Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), backed him up, proclaiming all of Rhode Island "a very art-friendly place," a state where "artists aren't seen on the fringe," where government is willing to take such steps as tax-free zones for artists and designers.

Mandle's goal is to make Providence and Rhode Island a globally recognized center of design and "right-brain" thinking that sparks creative problem-solving. RISD's Center for Design and Business has helped hundreds of artist-entrepreneurs launch their own businesses. Probing new frontiers, it's now working with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab on new ideas and product design to ease the problems of aging.

In the Berkshires, one's reminded of New England's preeminence in the fine arts — the 300,000 yearly visitors drawn to the Tanglewood Music festival, Jacob's Pillow (arguably the US's best festival for contemporary and modern dance), the Williamstown Theater Festival (in top ranks of summer stock theaters) and the prestigious Clark Art Institute at Williamstown.

But for development drama, nothing beats Mass MOCA — the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art at North Adams. It's situated in what director Joe Thompson calls a "red elephant" space — one of New England's historic brick mills, "buildings with great bones — 10 or 12 foot high ceilings — humane comfortable environments, with lots of windows, places with a warmth and patina of 120 years of human labor in them, making them beautiful places to reclaim."

Today Mass MOCA isn't just a world-class modern art museum that's given fresh life to the 13-acre, 27-building site Sprague Electric deserted in the 1980s, leaving thousands jobless. MOCA has also — in the words of president Mary Grant of the Massachusetts College of Fine Arts — brought North Adams "an infusion of artists, writers, film-makers and others who bring new ideas, new energy, a degree of wealth and willingness to take risk."

Plus, North Adams has become a poster child of New England towns revived by arts and artists. In 1993, 20 percent of its downtown storefronts were occupied; today it's around 80 percent. Several high-grade restaurants have moved in. Thompson says "the Maginot Line between prestigious Williamstown and North Adams the tough mill town" is disappearing; indeed, "Mass MOCA sprang like a rib from Williams College; we have lots of Williams alumni and trustees on our board."

Thompson's point underscores the case made by Evan Dobbelle, president of the New England Board of Higher Education — that the region's world-famed array of colleges and universities “drive the creative economy” as they forge new connections and prepare “tomorrow's architects, painters, sculptors, writers, dancers, designers, thinkers, entrepreneurs.”

Indeed, claims Dobbelle, the combination of higher education, design, graphics, and now digital media, “make a real industry for the future” that's tough to duplicate elsewhere. Why? Because “culture here is so significant — everywhere an historical or art museum — this is a very civil place.”

In Brunswick, Maine, former Governor Angus King picked up on the point. Not only does New England have “a tremendous stack of intellectual capital” that feeds innovation, he said, but it offers exceptional quality of place — a huge asset when, for the first time in human history “people can work where they live instead of live where they work.” Provided New England can keep unsightly sprawling development under control, said King, its place advantage will only grow:

“A century ago Maine's asset was falling water. Then it was cheap labor. In the future the place itself will be the economic asset.”

One morning, in western Massachusetts' heavily rural Pioneer Valley, we heard King's thesis underscored by civic leaders meeting at the Greenfield Community College. They regaled us with stories of multiple ways they've worked together to recover from loss of manufacturing and regional recessions, how they were encouraging small start-up firms, and seeking to keep downtown Greenfield vibrant despite a big nearby mall (even starting their own discount department store to give residents an option to the mass retailers.)

But the Pioneer Valley peoples' most amazing tale was of a “hidden tech” economy of hundreds of small (many just one-person) start-up enterprises. Some, they said, are formed by natives, more by young or mid-career professionals moving in from metro areas like New York or Boston, anxious to live in new “pristine” environments, yet more mobile than ever before because the Internet increasingly lets them work anywhere.

The “hidden tech” occupations? Many (though clearly not all) have an arts base. We heard about painters and musicians, a voiceover artist, graphic artists, web designers, software developers, novelists, management consultants, e-commerce retailers, and groups of performers. Similar stories abounded in our interviews across Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire. They seem to jibe with reports of northern New England leading a recent US boom in second homes for vacations, investment — and eventually, for many, a new place to live and do business.

Visiting with editors of Yankee Magazine, in Dublin, New Hampshire, we were told of 100 start-up firms in that single town. National charts show New England a leader in small enterprises as the bulwarks of local economies. Julie Eades of the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund estimates there are 100,000 microenterprises in her state. Maine Public Broadcasting's “Made in Maine” series, now in its 17th year, had identified hundreds of firms, a diversity running from one-man shops up to the Bath Iron Works.

Does the “creative economy” definition fade so easily into other fields that the phrase is meaningless? Bill Schubart, an entertainment industry executive in Burlington, Vermont, fears so. Even new agriculture enterprises can be called part of a creative economy, he said — and in fact we heard many stories of profitable niche industries in cheeses, syrups, dairy products, and meats (even llamas!) sprouting across New England. Their inventiveness may well open new economic frontiers.

And as we traveled, the stories of new and creative enterprises seemed never to cease. Bellows Falls, Vermont, on the Connecticut River, has used art to jump-start a now thriving downtown and tourist economy, including a community theater company, restoring the long-silent Town Hall clock, and returning vibrant life to its main street. Forty miles upstream, at White River Junction, a Center for

Cartoon Studies — a rare curriculum of art, graphic design, and literature to prepare students to create comics and graphic novels — opened this fall, to the delight of town leaders. Visiting Monhegan Island, 10 miles off the Maine coast, we found a thriving, entirely indigenous artists' colony — emblematic of a respect and love for arts that pervades the state.

Former Governor King told us he'd recently met a man in the Portland airport, asked him what he did, and was told: "I'm a clown." He and 100 colleagues fly out of their Maine base to do festivals for car dealers all over the US.

Shift from clowns on the move to high culture in New Haven: we heard claims that through Yale, with its world-class collection of departments in art, music, architecture, and drama, New Haven is now home to a significant chunk of the world's premier art talent. The Yale School of Architecture alone, for example, has spun off a bevy of architectural firms doing business around the world. The city's yearly International Festival of Arts & Ideas fuses brilliant music, dance and theater from around the globe with high-level intellectual thought.

Boston, meanwhile, has its sterling array of famed arts institutions, has just added its first two new theaters in 75 years, and is reaching out ethnically with a Center for Latino Arts in the South End and a new arts center in Roxbury's Dudley Square. Close to 80 percent of Bostonians attend live professional arts events in a year — highest among US metropolitan areas.

Do all the arts and intellectual activities assure a successful creative economy? There is hope. Arts do open imaginations — critical, as Mike McMahon of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation pointed out to us, "to make order out of chaos, have sensitivity, interact in groups, be creative and design" — skills that the standard engineering education in such countries as India don't yet deliver. In New Haven, an operation called "Factory Direct" recently placed artists in 13 manufacturing facilities for a period of time, letting them suggest new and inventive forms of problem-solving.

There are tough realities to face. Economist Charles Colgan of the University of Southern Maine says he's skeptical of how much creative arts and small entrepreneurs can impact the economy; for appreciable impact, he'd wait until a start-up firm reaches 500 or so workers.

Others say it's not the number of jobs but what people are doing. In the words of Rhode Island economic development specialist Kip Bergstrom: "A creative economy puts its marbles on innovation — and that's our future if there is to be one."

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