

## **Cultural Heritage Tourism in Washington, DC: A Community-Based Model for Neighborhood Economic Development**

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In Washington, DC, a nonprofit coalition of more than 185 historical and performing and fine arts organizations has been creating strategic and replicable approaches that link cultural assets to economic benefits for the city and its diverse neighborhoods. At the same time it is encouraging the preservation and interpretation of little-recognized historical attractions. The vehicle is the worldwide phenomenon of cultural heritage tourism.<sup>[1]</sup>

Cultural Tourism DC, which began informally in 1996 and incorporated in 1999, has developed a unique system for cultural asset mapping and a readiness model for developing those assets that has been recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It has also created innovative strategies for community involvement, partnership building, financial support, product development and promotion, as well as planning and evaluation. Creator, catalyst, and convener, it has most significantly put new structures in place that enable collaboration among groups unused to working with one another—arts and heritage organizations, big and little institutions, local and federal entities, the cultural community and the tourism industry. It is supported by both public and private funders.<sup>[2]</sup>

It might seem that Washington, DC, with its extraordinary complex of free museums operated by the Smithsonian Institution and its majestic marble monuments on the National Mall, would not need a cultural tourism program to entice visitors. More than 15 million visitors arrive in the city annually. Tourism is the city's number one private industry, yielding more than 5.24 billion dollars in economic benefits in 2006. This is true despite the fact that most visitors only patronize free museums, shop at tax-free shops, and grab a quick meal on the National Mall. In 1996, a group of local cultural organizations recognized a major opportunity to expand the economic impact of these visitors. Few of these travelers were discovering the rich historical and cultural attractions located downtown and in diverse neighborhoods across the city. Despite hundreds of other fascinating destinations scattered across Washington, when Cultural Tourism DC began there was almost no literature that alerted visitors to the presence of off-the-Mall attractions. The tourist maps of the city ended a short distance from the Mall, and only a handful of guides offered regular tours of the rest of the city. There was no publicly supported visitor center, and the Smithsonian Institution and the U.S. National Park Service, which control the space on the National Mall where the millions of visitors congregate, only distributed information about their sites. The city was losing tax dollars, local shops and restaurants were missing potential customers, important historic sites were unmarked and even derelict, and museums and historic homes and other cultural venues were missing needed revenues.

This case study will outline how Cultural Tourism DC is taking on this challenge with a readiness model that combines marketing as well as product development. While doing so, it is also enhancing the quality of life for Washington residents, building local pride, releasing new energy for neighborhood revitalization, and making the case that Washington, DC, is a good place not only to visit, but to live and do business.

### **The Vehicle: Cultural Heritage Tourism**

Cultural Tourism DC is part of the growing cultural heritage tourism phenomenon that began in the United States in the 1980s but crystallized at the 1995 White House Conference on Travel and Tourism. At that time, the National Endowment for the Arts, The National Endowment for the Humanities, the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, and the Institute of Museum Services prepared a white paper urging the nation's cultural organizations and hospitality industry to work together to promote America as a cultural destination in new and more effective ways. As a result, cultural tourism, then defined as "travel directed toward experiencing the arts, history, and special character of unique places," was listed as one of 10 top priorities for the American tourist industry in the conference report. The American Association of Museums and other sponsors joined the authors of the white paper in sponsoring four workshops around the country that encouraged cultural and tourism industry leaders to work together to implement the report.<sup>[3]</sup>

Publications of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities and the National Trust for Historic Preservation outlined steps for getting started and described best practices. A new advocacy group for the movement called Partners in Tourism grew out of a meeting of federal agencies and nonprofit cultural organization convened by the President's Committee, supported with resources from the American Association of Museums. The group continues to provide networking and educational opportunities for people in the field and to promote working relationships with the American travel industry. In 1998 cultural heritage tourism practitioners from around the country created an informal network of tourism professionals and cultural organizations called the Cultural & Heritage Tourism Alliance. It meets annually, and provides a national network for information sharing.<sup>141</sup>



Photo credit: Kathryn S. Smith

The cultural heritage tourism approach is perfect for promoting off-the-Mall Washington because it involves visitors in lesser-known places and experiences beyond the standard tourist fare. Off-the-Mall Washington is rich in such mostly undiscovered places. Cultural Tourism DC began its work with the marketing phrase, "Discover Washington Beyond the Monuments." Enticing visitors "beyond" the major attractions of a city was becoming a common theme for a number of urban cultural heritage tourism initiatives. We discovered, for example, a "Beyond the Alamo" brochure in San Antonio, Texas, and a "Beyond St. Marks" brochure in Venice, Italy. Most cities, it seems, have a dominant image that can be enriched by cultural tourism programs that expand visitor perceptions and expectations. In fact, by the 1990s, the world's most experienced travelers had been flying around the world for decades and had already seen the major tourist attractions, most likely a factor in the cultural tourism phenomenon.

## **Getting Started**

Unlike cultural heritage tourism initiatives in some other cities, where leadership came from a city travel office or a convention and visitors bureau, Cultural Tourism DC began as a grass roots, community-based effort driven by the need of local heritage and cultural organizations for more visibility in a city dominated by the federal presence. The federal monuments already attracted millions of visitors, and the existing tourism marketing efforts were considered sufficient by the official marketers of the city, dominated by the hotel and convention industries. We needed to change business as usual. Here is how we approached the task.

**We built a coalition around a clearly stated mission.** In 1996, two citywide heritage organizations, the Humanities Council of Washington, DC, headed by Francine Carey and the Historical Society of Washington, DC, headed by Barbara Franco, convened about 15 historic sites and cultural organizations to discuss the potential of cultural heritage tourism. Over the next few years, a series of brown-bag lunches with speakers helped to launch a membership organization called the DC Heritage Tourism Coalition, with the Humanities Council as fiscal agent. The Coalition quickly grew to 90 members because its cause so clearly met the needs of attractions with small marketing budgets or none at all, and those that felt left out of the city's official promotions. A workshop held to define common goals, however, produced a mission that went well beyond joint marketing and immediate self interest. The group decided it was dedicated to "strengthening the image and the economy of the District of

Columbia by engaging visitors in the diverse heritage of the city beyond the monuments.” A rising tide would lift all boats. This link to community economic development would become crucial to winning financial support for the organization.

During this period, the Coalition sponsored the creation of three bus tours to lesser known neighborhoods and sites, with its first partner, the DC Chamber of Commerce, as a co-sponsor. The tours made news because they went to places not previously thought of as tourist destinations, and the publicity drew attention to the new organization and its goals. The DC Heritage Tourism Coalition became a nonprofit organization in 1999, and changed its name to Cultural Tourism DC in 2003. At first the membership came predominantly from history museums and historic sites. Today nearly every arts and heritage cultural site open to the public is a member, more than 185, large and small, local and federal. Neighborhood historical societies, historic churches and cemeteries, neighborhood business improvement districts, Main Street programs, a walking tour company, and others that share the organization’s goals have also become members.

**We educated potential partners outside the cultural community.** In 1998, the organization invited the DC Office of Economic Development to cosponsor a day-long conference, “Culture and Commerce,” on the potential of cultural heritage tourism for Washington. Pioneers in the field from Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York provided case studies for more than 170 attendees, including leaders in the tourism industry, local government, historic preservation, history, and the arts. Participants then met in small groups to define how the models presented might work in Washington. The meeting was catalytic, and the conference report crucial to making the case. It cited new statistics from the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) that showed that cultural heritage tourists have higher incomes than the average visitor, are more likely to stay in hotels, and remain longer and spend almost 50% more than other American travelers. It also pointed out that, according to a 1997 survey by TIA, Washington was already the number one destination for this type of tourist, thus offering an enormous opportunity to encourage these visitors to stay one more day to see the kind of cultural and historical attractions they were seeking. The conference laid the groundwork for future partnerships and projects.<sup>[5]</sup>

**We mapped assets and conducted research.** There was a common perception, even among local residents, that there was, indeed, nothing much to see or do of interest beyond the national monuments and museums. To combat this misconception, the organization undertook a two-year project to produce an exhaustive list of the lesser known historical and cultural assets of the city. Lists in published sources were enlarged at meetings with neighborhood residents, who identified other significant places in their communities. The project was careful to ask which places were fragile, sacred, or otherwise not to be shared. As with all the work of the organization, the voice of the community was essential.

The result was a publication titled *Capital Assets* that revealed, for example, that there were more than 60 museums in the city beyond the National Mall, as well as 560 buildings, 100 parks and historic sites, and 39 historic districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places. *Capital Assets* also identified 15 neighborhoods and 12 new themes with potential for new tourism experiences in the city. Most importantly, *Capital Assets* listed sites in order of readiness—those being fully “ready” needing only better packaging and marketing, those being “almost ready” needing product development, and those that “could be ready” requiring heavy investment of time and resources. This standard continues to shape and guide the unique approach of Cultural Tourism DC.<sup>[6]</sup>

In 2001, with funds from the Hotel Association of Washington, Cultural Tourism DC hired Economics Research Associates, known for its experience with cultural heritage tourism and highly regarded by businessmen in the Washington area, to test visitor perceptions of the city, and discover what would bring them off the Mall. Interviews with 426 individuals revealed that visiting history museums and places where history was made were the top reasons visitors would venture into the city beyond the National Mall. (A 2005 report by the Travel Industry Association of American confirmed that historical places and museums remain the most popular activity cited by domestic travelers to D.C.) Research also revealed that a major reason visitors did not venture into the city was a simple lack of knowledge of the attractions that awaited them. About 5% could name only the very best known destinations—the Georgetown neighborhood, Ford’s Theatre where President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, and the National Zoo.<sup>[7]</sup>

About the same time, Cultural Tourism DC hired Randi Korn & Associates to test the behavior of visitors at local sites. The firm collected 1,400 surveys at historic sites in four neighborhoods and found that 58% of the people visiting those sites had patronized local shops and/or restaurants. *Capital Assets* had made the case that the attractions existed. The new research proved that visitors to Washington were looking for them, and when they came, they would spend money in museum admission fees as well at local shops and restaurants.<sup>[9]</sup>

**We built political support and created key partnerships.** Just one year after the Culture and Commerce conference, Cultural Tourism DC became an independent nonprofit organization. It announced its presence in the city with the publication of *Capital Assets*, first distributed at a cocktail event at the Washington Convention Center. The president and CEO of the Washington Convention Center Authority, Lewis Dawley, was building a major new convention center building and believed that the city's marketing message needed to be expanded beyond the familiar monuments. His early understanding of the cause was crucial, as was that of the chairman of the Economic Development Committee of the DC Council, Charlene Drew Jarvis. Previous meetings with Mayor Anthony Williams and the deputy mayor for planning and economic development, Douglas Patten, as well as the city's nonvoting delegate in Congress, Eleanor Holmes Norton, had interested them in the cause. All of the above were invited to speak at the Convention Center event and were photographed holding *Capital Assets* before a crowd of almost 400 cultural and civic leaders. It is significant that key introductions to the mayor and deputy mayor had been made by the chair of the city's Historic Preservation Review Board, Tersh Boasberg, who understood that cultural heritage tourism would call attention to the city's historic sites and preservation issues.

The DC Department of Housing and Urban Development (DHCD) also played an early role. In 1997 and 1998 an ambitious citywide economic development planning effort created by Richard Monteilh and Marc Weiss of DHCD organized task forces around strategic economic objectives for the city. Weiss, now the Chairman and CEO of Global Urban Development, was among the first in the city to understand the power of cultural heritage tourism for economic development. He involved Cultural Tourism DC and gave it early visibility, as well as some of its first financial support. Other major partners, public and private, would be added as the group progressed, most importantly the DC Department of Transportation, the Downtown DC Business Improvement District, and the National Park Service.<sup>[9]</sup>

The most difficult partner to engage was also the most central to success, the Washington DC, Convention and Tourism Corporation (WCTC), the official marketer of the city, understandable perhaps because Cultural Tourism DC was entering its turf. Creating sustainable partnerships between the tourism industry and the cultural community has been the biggest challenge in cities and states across America. The development of this key alliance in Washington is described later in this article.

**We developed a strategic plan.** Upon incorporation in 1999, Cultural Tourism DC hired a consultant with extensive experience in heritage tourism, Scott Gerloff, to work with the organization on a three-year strategic plan that included a business plan for a sustainable organization. The plan relied heavily on sales of new tourism products and licensed goods from our members. While that did not develop as the financial base for the organization, having a plan that tied activities directly to the mission was crucial to the organization, and it was faithfully reviewed and revised at every fall meeting of the board of directors.

**We developed sustainable financial support.** Despite all of this planning and political energy, the struggle for funding persisted. The ideas promoted by Cultural Tourism DC were appealing but untested. Most significantly, the existing structures in both government and philanthropy did not connect history and historic preservation, the arts, and economic development. The key was finding at least one funder or civic leader who understood the power of the connection enough to provide the first major gift. It turned out to be the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, the city's most strategic and catalytic private foundation, led by a visionary president, Julie Rogers, who understood the importance of local history and culture to community revitalization initiatives. The Meyer Foundation not only gave the first sizeable gifts, but convened other members of the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers to hear our case.

As money began to flow in from the philanthropic community after this pivotal session, private funders asked for assurance that the city government would follow their lead. A private meeting with Mayor Anthony Williams made

that case, and the first city funding followed, a promise of \$150,000 annually for five years. It was a small but significant sum. What is unusual about the cultural heritage tourism movement in Washington is that it was a grass roots, community-based effort using early money from local philanthropy to trigger public support. It took a bottom-up effort to change business as usual.

Between 1999 and 2008, the budget of the organization grew from \$79,000 annually to more than \$2 million. Financial support has continued to come from both public and private sources. Maintaining sustainable financial support for the group's ambitious goals is a continuing challenge for the leadership of the organization.

### **Pursuing the Readiness Model**

Thus Cultural Tourism DC has created an unusual, bottom-up approach to cultural tourism, built extensive partnerships across sectors unused to working with one another, and involved the community in planning. Perhaps most significant, however, is its unique approach to the substance of its work, a combination of promotion and product development based on the readiness model outlined in *Capital Assets*.

*Capital Assets* had listed hundreds of attractions across the city by theme and by neighborhood. In some cases the attractions were completely ready for visitors, with regular open hours and a trained interpretive staff. In other cases, buildings and places of great historical and cultural significance were totally uninterpreted, with no signs and not included in regular guided tours or guide books. These were termed "almost ready." In the third category, termed "could be ready," were places and entire neighborhoods with great value and significant potential as cultural destinations that were not only uninterpreted, but in disrepair, derelict, or otherwise lacking in the amenities most visitors find essential. This set of readiness categories continues to shape the work of Cultural Tourism DC. Each category of work attracts funding from different kinds of public and private sources.

### **Packaging and Promoting "What is Ready"**

*Capital Assets* listed more than 60 art and history museums spread across the city beyond the National Mall. Just one example was the Phillips Collection, the first modern art gallery in the United States in the grand home of collector Duncan Phillips, a centerpiece for the cosmopolitan and international Dupont Circle neighborhood. Among them were also 13 house museums with trained interpreters open most days of the week, associated with such national figures as President Woodrow Wilson and 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American orator and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Almost every site at this level of readiness has joined Cultural Tourism DC as a participating member. According to the readiness model, such places needed packaging and marketing in innovative, collaborative ways. Inclusion in these promotions was a major benefit of membership in the organization.

The first major promotional materials were put out in 2000 under the theme, "Washington, Beyond the Monuments," and featured nine neighborhoods and two themes: historic houses and parks and gardens. Cultural Tourism DC and its partners produced attractive rack cards with an iconic photograph and a list of the member attractions for each neighborhood and theme and an engaging map that located these places in the city in relation to nearby Metro subway stops. The cards and maps were distributed in a new visitor information kiosk in the convention center, at member sites, at a visitor center run by the DC Chamber of Commerce, and in Metro subway stations. This promotion would not have happened without the enthusiastic support of the president and CEO of the Washington Convention Center Authority. The National Endowment for the Humanities paid for the map, which was a project of Cultural Tourism DC's founding partner, The Historical Society of Washington, DC. The Endowment also funded posters for the subway stations. Metro supplied free printing. It was the first time that neighborhoods and their attractions had had this kind of major attention. It was certainly the first time that these partners had worked together.

About the same time, the organization developed a Web site that used the contents of the Beyond the Monuments promotion as a featured attraction, with the promotional phrase on its homepage. Members of Cultural Tourism DC were given a page as a membership benefit, and their events were included in a growing cultural calendar that has become the most complete on-line guide to local historical and cultural attractions. The Web site now attracts

34,000 visitors monthly and more than 14,000 people subscribe to an e-mail weekly events update. Cultural Tourism produces a new brochure each year that lists member sites by neighborhood and by theme. These promotional pieces stand out as among the few tourist materials that have maps of the entire city, rather than just the Mall and environs.

While the cultural heritage tourism initiative in the early years included some fine arts and performance centers as members, its strongest base was in heritage sites and museums. It was always clear that to reach its full potential, the organization had to involve major attractions in art, theater, music, and dance. It also needed to work with, rather than be in opposition to, the nationally known attractions on the National Mall. And it needed the full partnership of the tourism industry, the hotels and the restaurants, and the city's official marketers, and the Washington DC Convention and Tourism Corporation.

Ironically it would be the events of September 11, 2001, tragic in so many ways, that would open the door to collaboration. As the twin towers of the World Trade Center went down in New York, a plane crashed into the Pentagon in Virginia, just across the Potomac River from Washington. Reagan National Airport closed, hotels emptied, and the city came to a shocked standstill. In the wake of this enormously challenging situation, Cultural Tourism DC approached the Washington DC Convention and Tourism Corporation (WCTC) about a joint cultural promotion that would invite visitors to come back, in the way that New York was putting out a message that the theaters and museums were open, and that therefore the city's spirit was alive. The two organizations formed a joint Cultural Tourism Steering Committee to draw up plans. WCTC began to supply financial support to Cultural Tourism DC in recognition of the cultural content it was bringing to the marketing of the city.

The result was Washington's first citywide themed cultural promotion, organized around an exhibition that featured First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy both as an international cultural ambassador and as a resident of Washington, personally involved in its history and culture. The Corcoran Gallery of Art, a privately supported major gallery off the National Mall, agreed to provide the first anytime, any-day ticket to an exceptionally popular exhibition, linked to hotel accommodations, a type of promotion that had been the centerpiece of cultural promotions in other cities such as Philadelphia and Atlanta. The sale of this kind of tourism package had been considered impossible in Washington because the largest art galleries are federally supported and open free-of-charge. Sixty cultural organizations and restaurants provided themed programming over a period of three months that related to Jacqueline Kennedy's interests in art, theater, historic preservation, fashion, and children. More than a dozen hotels offered hotel packages that provided the anytime tickets and information on these special cultural attractions.

As a first-time effort at a time when tourism was down in Washington, package sales were not as high as they might have been at a better time, but the promotion drew thousands to the Corcoran, and, according to the WCTC, earned extensive free media attention that changed the prevailing story from one of disaster to hope. Most remarkable, however, was that this was the first time that the entire cultural community, arts and heritage, had joined with the city's marketers as well as restaurants and hotels. It was a breakthrough. Small organizations participating in the event also rode the wave; attendance at the Black Fashion Museum tripled by calling attention to the African American designer of the First Lady's inaugural gown.<sup>[10]</sup>

It was significant that the next year, the National Gallery of Art, federally supported grand dame of the Washington art world on the National Mall and a new member of Cultural Tourism DC, proposed to the Steering Committee that it provide the anchor attraction for the 2003 citywide promotion. The National Gallery's Romare Bearden exhibit, the first one-person show accorded an African American in the gallery, became the centerpiece for a promotion titled, "Blues and Dreams: the African American Experience in Washington." It was the first time that African American history and culture in Washington, a majority black city since 1957, had been the focus of a major tourism promotion of any kind. And it was the first time a major, federally supported museum on the Mall had partnered so fully with cultural attractions across the city. With the third annual promotion, America Celebrates the Greatest Generation, focused on the dedication of the long-awaited World War II Memorial in 2004, success began to show in the figures. Hotel package sales indicated an \$8.5 million economic impact on the city.

Sometimes success can be measured by the extent to which others move your agenda even without you. As the saying goes, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. In 2006 the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the

Shakespeare Theatre, two of the cultural giants in the nation's capital, announced a six-month Shakespeare festival modeled totally on Cultural Tourism DC's citywide celebrations, with 40 participants including ballet, art, film, the renowned Folger Library and the Library of Congress. The model included small theaters with which the majors usually do not collaborate, such as the cutting edge Woolly Mammoth and a local group for disabled performers, as well as the visiting Royal Shakespeare Theater and the Kirov Ballet. The announcement made the front page of the *Washington Post*, not usually home to cultural news.

The lesson learned here, for an organization that had been thought of as championing the underdog, the small, the lesser-known, is that there are enormous benefits to be gained from working with larger institutions. Using big ticket attractions to leverage attendance at related sites is an effective promotional tool.

In 2003, the DC Heritage Tourism Coalition changed its name to Cultural Tourism DC, a reflection of its expansion to include the arts as well as history. It also replaced its underdog starting position, "Beyond the Monuments," with a mission to promote the entire city of Washington, on and beyond the Mall, as a cultural destination. The competitors were beginning to become partners and collaborators. A broader sense of cultural community was evolving, one that included the federal and the local, the large and the small, heritage and the fine and performing arts.

### **Developing Products Around What is 'Almost Ready'**

*Capital Assets* had also listed historic sites and attractions that were defined as "almost ready." Included in this category were just some of the more than 600 historic buildings and sites on the National Register of Historic Places. Among them were 15 neighborhoods with distinctive architecture and unique cultural qualities with potential as cultural tourism destinations. Their stories, however, were inaccessible. There were almost no signs. There were no marked trails. There were almost no regular guided tours of neighborhoods for walk-up customers, and few licensed tour guides in the city offered local itineraries for group charter.

In business terms, Cultural Tourism DC had identified rich raw material for cultural heritage tourism products. People on the staff and membership, steeped in the humanities, had to learn to use the word "product" in getting involved in the business of tourism. The experiences created had to be high quality, they had to satisfy the visitor, and they had to be regularly available. To convince professional marketers that they were competitive, they had to measure up to commercial products. Cultural Tourism DC also had to persuade marketers of traditional tourism that visitor interest in experiencing unique, lesser-known places was the hottest world-wide trend in the industry.

The need for product development, and the costs involved, was difficult to explain to the traditional tourism industry marketers of the city. Therefore the funding partners would be different, with major support coming from the DC Office of Historic Preservation, the DC Department of Transportation, and local foundations interested in cultural programming.

New products developed by Cultural Tourism DC have centered on a variety of tours and trails, as well as an innovative neighborhood art project. The flagship project in this phase is a series of neighborhood heritage trails, marked with signs large enough for mini-exhibits of photographs and text, with trail booklets available free from local merchants. Each trail has from 14 to 21 signs. A map on each sign and in the booklet provides a self-guided route. At this writing, seven trails are in place. Major funding from the DC Department of Transportation, including Federal Highway Enhancement Funds (available through the Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century or TEA-21), is supporting this project. A multi-million-dollar contract has been signed that provides for a total of 17 trails throughout the city.

Like all projects of Cultural Tourism DC, these trails rely on community involvement. A community must request participation in the project and prepare a proposal for an advisory committee in the Department of Transportation that includes a unique theme in the area's history and a draft route through the community. Once the proposal is approved, the community receives funds to do its own research. The staff of Cultural Tourism DC works with the community to refine and edit the final product. Excellent historical pictures are key and the staff helps with this and

other research. Each trail takes approximately two years to complete and costs about \$250,000. This process builds community pride, encourages new research, educates and excites residents about their own place in the city, and inspires intense loyalty to and care for the trails. Each one is announced with a neighborhood celebration and news conference, with the mayor attending whenever he can.

Cultural Tourism DC has also created guided bus and walking tours. The first three bus tours, cited earlier, featured three African American neighborhoods and were supported by the DC Chamber of Commerce. They were followed by three other neighborhood tours done in collaboration with a commercial company, Gold Line/Gray Line. The first walking tour focused on the history of central downtown, and was funded by the Discovery Channel Store, which had just located a new flagship store in the city's new downtown sports complex, the MCI Center. Another walking tour of the Shaw/U Street area was developed with foundation funding. All of these products involved extensive research, careful preparation of routes, guide training, issues of quality control, business plans, and scheduling. They were expensive to produce and none were commercially successful. One tour, however, featuring the African American heritage of Shaw/U Street, was consistently popular and was key to gaining publicity for the neighborhood in national media.

As a whole, the guided tours drew attention to neighborhoods not previously considered cultural destinations. An associated program of annual, now semi-annual, weekends of free walking tours organized and sponsored by Cultural Tourism DC called "Walkingtown DC" has become enormously popular with residents and visitors, drawing 3,500 people to tours on one weekend in spring 2007. Here again, success is measured by the extent to which others are inspired and encouraged to carry on the work. Local, professional tour guides have been encouraged by all this new interest to develop a variety of neighborhood tours open to the public at regular times. Satisfied at having primed the pump, Cultural Tourism decided that it did not have the capacity to be in the tour business, given the variety of skills involved, and licensed all of its existing tours to a professional tour guide company, an early member of Cultural Tourism DC. The company pays Cultural Tourism DC a royalty for use of its intellectual property.

Another project encourages neighborhoods to engage artists and historians in a collaborative effort to identify and share their communities' unique histories and cultural assets. Abandoned, antique metal boxes on ornamental stands survive in neighborhoods across the city, once used to call the fire department in emergencies and for police to check in with headquarters. These call boxes have been adopted by Cultural Tourism DC as potential neighborhood icons. The Department of Transportation paid to clean the boxes and add a base coat of paint, most likely more economical than the cost of removing and discarding these very heavy objects. Once again communities must take the initiative, and so far six neighborhoods have turned their boxes into appealing sources of information about the corners on which they stand but more communities are in the planning stages. Named "Art on Call," this is an ambitious project that will take years to complete.

One last new product must be noted, a two-year project to create a self-guided African American Heritage Trail. With 98 sites organized into 15 neighborhood walking tours, this highly illustrated, four-color booklet has opened the eyes of local residents to a little-recognized and seldom celebrated history and has attracted press and requests from across the nation. The brochure is supplemented by more than 100 additional places listed on the Cultural Tourism DC Web site, a list that continues to grow. A highly regarded local African American historian was commissioned to do the work, assisted by an advisory committee of scholars and citizens from all political wards of the city. The publication has been enormously popular; more than 110,000 copies have been distributed free of charge in four successive printings. The catalyst in this case was the DC Office of Historic Preservation, eager to call attention to important African American sites, most of which are not yet protected by official historic designation and in danger of neglect or even demolition. These sites have now begun to be marked by individual signs. Public funding for this expensive project came from a variety of public sources, including the DC Office of Historic Preservation, the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development, the DC Department of Transportation, and the National Park Service.<sup>144</sup>



## **Developing Products Around What Could Be Ready**

The final category of readiness, termed “could be ready,” was the most difficult to explain to funders and civic leaders and remains the most ambitious. In some cases entire neighborhoods have the potential to add tourist dollars to their local economy, but had no regularly open cultural attractions to serve as centerpieces for a visitor experience, few shops or restaurants ready to cater to these visitors, and in some cases real or perceived issues of cleanliness and safety. Adding to the complexity, the attractions as well as different parts of the community were themselves in varying states of readiness. This phase requires major local commitment and organization and major investment from public and private sources. Here the funding partners became the DC Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development as well as local foundations interested in community revitalization.

Cultural Tourism DC chose to develop this concept in one neighborhood as a model, and focused on Shaw, a historically African American neighborhood just north of the commercial downtown. Its boundaries, set by urban renewal in the 1960s, actually include four separate and individually named historic districts. It is adjacent to the premier African American education lodestar, Howard University, and was infused with its dedication to educational and cultural achievement. Leaders in medicine, science, law, the military, entertainment and the fine arts taught and learned there, and many made the neighborhood their home. Its upscale boulevard, U Street, was the commercial centerpiece, with professional offices as well as clubs and restaurants featuring the jazz greats of the nation. Intersecting 7<sup>th</sup> Street attracted newcomers from the South and working people and had a jangle and verve that inspired the early poems of one-time resident Langston Hughes. The internationally known jazz icon Duke Ellington, who grew up with the music of its churches, clubs, and pool halls, was the area’s most famous local hero. Many of Shaw’s major buildings were financed, designed, and built by African Americans, and most of the neighborhood, unlike the historically African American neighborhoods in other major cities, was physically intact, its fine brick row houses an outdoor museum of late-19th-century Victorian architecture.

This neighborhood was chosen as the model for this category of work for a number of reasons. It had a powerful history worthy of national attention, its jazz history had enormous tourist potential, a number of its most important civic buildings had been or were in the process of being restored, and new subway stops were providing new public access. The neighborhood was also in need of revitalization after years of disinvestment that began with the end of legal racial segregation in the 1950s and urban riots in the 1960s following the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Cultural Tourism DC also had five members in the area—the restored Lincoln theatre, a 1922 movie palace; the new African American Civil War Memorial; the Black Fashion Museum; the Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage; and the Mary McLeod Bethune House operated by the National Park Service. Several long-time local businesses and civic organizations were also interested in being involved.

While its history had national significance, the area was not ready for most visitors. The African American Civil War Memorial was the only attraction open regularly, and its hours were limited. The Lincoln Theatre was not open for tours, and the Black Fashion Museum and the Thurgood Marshall Center were open only by appointment. There were no walking tours. Major historic sites, such as the Howard Theatre, where Duke Ellington and all the jazz greats had played, were empty and derelict. So was the home Carter G. Woodson, the leading African American historian and founder of Black History Week, now Black History Month. The streets were often littered with trash, and the area still was home to drug traffic and crime.

This project, of all the work of Cultural Tourism DC, made the most direct link between cultural heritage tourism, historic preservation, and economic revitalization. Attracting visitors to the area could bring new dollars and jobs to local cultural attractions and businesses, while calling attention to the need for services that would improve the quality of life for those that lived and did business there. Cultural Tourism DC made the case that the millions being spent on restoring major buildings in the area could be leveraged to benefit the community in a major way if they were appreciated and interpreted together as evidence of the nationally important history of the African American community in the nation’s capital. The city’s economic development office and local foundations interested in community revitalization supported the work in Shaw.



Photo credit Kathryn S. Smith

The first step was to build local awareness of the national importance of the history of the area, forgotten, under-researched, and underappreciated except by those who had lived it, many of whom had moved away. A 160-foot long outdoor exhibit of historical photographs and documents and excerpts from oral histories, which evolved out of the previous work of the author with the Thurgood Marshall Center, The Historical Society of Washington, DC, and the locally organized U Street Festival, stood for two and one-half years on the fence of a construction site at a key corner in the neighborhood, attracting attention night and day. For national exposure, nothing did more than a one-hour documentary on the neighborhood, Duke Ellington's Washington, inspired by Cultural Tourism DC and produced by Hedrick Smith Productions. It was shown on more than 300 public television stations nationwide. Hedrick Smith, personally excited by the history, raised more than half-a-million dollars to produce the film.

Next came community organizing and research. An economic development firm on U Street with experience in cultural heritage tourism, Jair Lynch Consulting, was hired to develop a report on the potential economic benefits for the area. As part of this effort, about 80 civic and cultural leaders as well as long-time residents gathered at a planning conference, co-sponsored by Cultural Tourism DC members and key local civic organizations, to explore whether the neighborhood wanted this initiative. The answer was yes, and the group proceeded to set the priorities that would shape the project from that point on. The co-sponsors of this planning meeting would become the core of a Greater Shaw/U Street Cultural Tourism Steering Committee that would meet monthly to share news and monitor the project.<sup>[12]</sup>

In terms of marketing, U Street became one of the destinations included in all Cultural Tourism brochures and promotions that featured neighborhood-based attractions. Events in Shaw were featured in the Blues and Dreams citywide promotion. Cultural Tourism DC put out the area's first tourist map, including business and cultural attractions, in collaboration with the U Street Business and Arts Coalition. It also developed a working relationship with a new Main Street program, a project of the National Trust for Historic Preservation supported by city funds, which also linked culture and economic development. Main Street also focused on marketing the area and began to create special events and promotions to draw people to the neighborhood.

In the category of what was "almost ready," the focus was on product development. A four-hour bus tour with lunch had been developed in collaboration with the DC Chamber of Commerce in the early days of the organization. Now the walking portion of that tour was expanded to a regular two-hour walking tour offered every Saturday at 10 a.m.,

stopping in time to direct participants to lunch places on U Street. The tour included a planned “chance” encounter with a long-time resident who was a good story teller, and visits inside historic places still not regularly open to the public. Marketing these tours to a public unaccustomed to coming to this location was a constant effort, but the tour’s regular presence made an impression and attracted some of the best national publicity for the neighborhood. It was frequently requested as a charter for special groups, and was the precursor for tours now operated by a number of independent guides and neighborhood residents.

Shaw/U Street also became the location of Cultural Tourism DC’s first self-guided, marked neighborhood heritage trail. Fourteen signs with mini-exhibits featuring photos, text, and maps, with an accompanying guidebook available at local attractions, take the visitor around a trail that includes information on the area’s social, religious, civic entertainment, and cultural history.

One ambitious project took years to accomplish but has in the end been enormously satisfying. The 14<sup>th</sup> and U Main Street project took the lead in creating a “Green Team” of 11 homeless individuals who would be a welcoming presence on U Street while helping to maintain its cleanliness and appearance. They were trained by Main Street to plant and maintain attractive tree boxes. Cultural Tourism DC, as a partner in developing the project, created a training program that taught the members of the Green Team the history of the neighborhood and taught them ways to greet visitors and make them feel welcome. In the first phase of the program, almost all members of the team found homes and several stood out as eager interpreters, proud to learn and tell some of the history of their own neighborhood. The fact that the famous poet Langston Hughes lived in the neighborhood and once was a busboy in a restaurant was inspiring to them. After a hiatus caused by funding challenges, the program is now once more in place.

The Shaw program was supported by a Greater Shaw/U Street Cultural Tourism Roundtable made up of representatives from the cultural attractions, historic businesses, and government and preservation organizations meeting regularly to measure progress and create synergy. A conference in December 2004 brought those involved together, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, to explore “the Rest of the Story,” looking at how to deepen interpretation of aspects of history that visitors are not accustomed to hearing, such as the challenges of poverty and discrimination. This remains work to be done.

Thus Cultural Tourism DC has called attention to the potential of the area for cultural tourism, developed plans and convened partners, planned promotions, and created maps, trails, and tours. It has also worked with partners to advocate the restoration of historic buildings key to the story, among them the home of a local civic rights leader, Mary Church Terrell, the home of African American historian Carter G. Woodson, and the 1910 Howard Theatre. With many other voices involved, the Terrell and the Woodson homes are now on their way to restoration. Most significantly, the city’s economic development office has designated the area of Shaw that stretches from the Lincoln Theater to the Howard theaters a cultural destination district. It is now putting the planning tools of the city to work in advocating appropriate development of vacant land and abandoned buildings in the area in ways that support cultural visitation as well as improve the cityscape and the quality of life in the area. Key to this development is the imminent restoration of the historic Howard Theater, the neighborhood icon deemed number one priority by the first planning session organized by Cultural Tourism DC in March of 2001. The initiative of Cultural Tourism DC in Shaw has thus been integrated into the city’s formal planning processes.<sup>[13]</sup>

New challenges often accompany success. Ben’s Chili Bowl, a neighborhood icon in Shaw, has added a new kitchen and dining room to handle the crowds coming from across the country and the world to savor its ambience, its history, and its chili dogs. But rising taxes are a threat to Ben’s and to other new and old businesses on U Street that pay increased rents now that U Street is once again the place to be. It is the high quality housing stock located on a new subway line just two stops north of downtown and the movement back to urban neighborhoods going on across America that has caused property values to spike. But efforts to preserve the area’s history that make it more appealing are now sometimes considered part of the problem by those forced to move, even though it is their history, and the history of their ancestors, that is being preserved. Cultural Tourism DC hears these cries and agrees that ways must be found to mitigate the impact of gentrification and preserve the people and the life of the community as well as the places they value.

## **Evaluation**

Cultural Tourism DC has measured its success in a variety of ways. Whenever possible, it has counted numbers and dollars, as in 3,500 people on walking tours in one weekend of Walkingtown, DC and an \$8.5 million economic impact related to promotional hotel packages sold. But there are other signs that cannot be easily quantified. The pictures in official promotional materials now almost always include neighborhoods. The phrase “beyond the monuments” became so generic that it could not be trademarked. The fact that Washington is a city of neighborhoods is now a cliché.

In my last year as director of Cultural Tourism DC, the organization developed an innovative approach to evaluation that measures success and documents impact against the stated goals of the organization, simultaneously identifying learning opportunities to help the organization operate more efficiently. The model called for collecting quantitative and qualitative data from all participants inside and outside the organization, applying that data to the specific goals of the strategic plan, and analyzing ways in which performance might be improved. In the case of Walkingtown, DC, for example, data collected showed that 97% of 700 participants surveyed would come back to the neighborhoods they were touring, and that 46% were from the Virginia and Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. The event thus engaged residents of DC as well as visitors and fostered interest in DC neighborhoods, both stated goals of the organization.

Another step encouraged staff to learn from the data and improve performance, in this case finding better ways to manage large crowds and ensure quality control. This evaluation tool valued qualitative data as well as numbers. While hard to measure the impact, the fact that tour guides found the experience “exhilarating” and “fun” because they were interacting with “curious, engaged” audiences encouraged them in their dedication to giving neighborhood tours while providing excellent promotional opportunities.<sup>[14]</sup>

In looking at the entire program of Cultural Tourism DC, two things stand out. First of all, the organization has established the importance of product development—the need to develop new visitor experiences steeped in local history and culture. This distinguishes the program from those that focus only on marketing and promotional advertisements and brochures. Secondly, Cultural Tourism DC has created structures that not only shake up business as usual but institutionalize the change. Membership in Cultural Tourism DC provides regular opportunities for collaboration among cultural organizations large and small, local and federal, in history and the arts. The Cultural Tourism Steering Committee, co-chaired by Cultural Tourism DC and the WCTC, institutionalizes the working relationship between this more united cultural community and the tourism industry. And the official adoption of the heart of Shaw as a cultural destination district by the DC Office of Planning makes the connection between historic preservation and community economic development a recognized public policy in the District of Columbia.

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<sup>[14]</sup> The terms “cultural tourism” and “heritage tourism” have different meanings in different places. Most practitioners today use the phrase cultural heritage tourism.

<sup>[2]</sup> National Trust for Historic Preservation (1999), *Share Your Heritage: Cultural Heritage Success Stories*, p. 63.

<sup>[3]</sup> Institute of Museum Services, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities (1995), "Cultural Tourism in the United States: A Position Paper for the White House Conference on Travel and Tourism."

<sup>[4]</sup> The National Trust for Historic Preservation, (1995) "Getting Started: How to Succeed in Heritage Tourism" and (2001) "Share Your Heritage: Cultural Heritage Tourism Success Stories. Both are available from [www.preservationbooks.org](http://www.preservationbooks.org). The President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities (1995), "Exploring America Through its Culture." The cultural heritage tourism program of the National Trust and Partners in Tourism now share a Web site at [www.culturalheritagetourism.org](http://www.culturalheritagetourism.org).

<sup>[5]</sup> D.C. Heritage Tourism Coalition (1998) "Culture and Commerce."

<sup>[6]</sup> D.C. Heritage Tourism Coalition (1999), "Capital Assets: A Report on the Tourism Potential of Neighborhood Heritage and Cultural Sites in Washington, D.C."

<sup>[7]</sup> *The Washington Post* (April 11, 2005) "Tourists Answer Washington's Call," by Lori Montgomery. Economics Research Associates (2001), "Summary of Baseline Market Research and Survey Research Findings prepared for the DC Heritage Tourism Coalition."

<sup>[8]</sup> Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (2001), "The DC Heritage Tourism Coalition Visitor Survey: Executive Summary."

<sup>[9]</sup> D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development (1998), "The Economic Resurgence of Washington, D.C."

<sup>[10]</sup> Another hotel-related campaign in early spring 2002, in which Marriott Hotels offered packages on the Web site of the Washington, D.C. Convention and Tourism Corporation offering free Metro subway passes along with literature on neighborhood cultural sites provided by Cultural Tourism DC sold more than 6,000 hotel rooms and \$100,000 worth of Metro tickets in the difficult months following September 11, 2001.

<sup>[11]</sup> [www.CulturalTourismDC.org](http://www.CulturalTourismDC.org) includes the expanded version of the African American Heritage Trail as well as other information about Cultural Tourism DC, its members, its programs, and a calendar of events.

<sup>[12]</sup> Jair Lynch Consulting, LLC (2001), "Heritage Tourism-Based Economic Development Strategic Plan for the Shaw Neighborhood".

<sup>[13]</sup> Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (2005), "Duke: Draft Development Framework for a Cultural Destination District Within Washington, D.C.'s Greater Shaw/UStreet."

<sup>[14]</sup> The research firm of Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. has adopted elements of this approach in its work.