

**RETHINKING THE THINKING ABOUT DOWNTOWN
CULTURE/ARTS/ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICTS ...
and for that matter, all kinds of downtown
monofunctional districts**

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade my work on Central Social Districts (CSDs), downtown arts districts, and 15 minute communities has led me to time and again see the weaknesses in using districts as the key geographic unit of analysis. For instance, I concluded that because the CBDs and CSDs refer to overlapping or the same areas in a downtown, it is better to just use the terms downtown, Central Business Functions, and Central Social Functions.¹ Of course, despite that effort, the use of the term, especially its CBD variant, persists and the downtown itself and some of its subareas such as its theater or major office clusters are all referred to as districts. Consequently, though work-arounds are possible, analysts seldom give the district concept the analytic attention it requires since they seem to wrongly assume the concept's meaning, and proper applications and definitions are well known and humdrum.

However, as a result of the serious problems many downtown office clusters are facing, the value or tolerance of monofunctional districts has lost considerable favor, and many downtowns are rushing to increase their functional diversity. At the same time, with the increasing recovery of our downtown culture/arts/entertainment (CAE) venues and the increased drive for more functional diversity, one might anticipate that growing CAE assets will be a frequent goal, and using CAE designated downtown districts will be a frequent tool for achieving it. Consequently, it is of growing importance to have a proper understanding of downtown functional districts.

That said, I want to be clear that I am not calling into question the use of the term district when applied to municipally designated downtown assessment areas, i.e., business improvement districts.

A reviewer of an earlier draft of this article noted that I provocatively raised more issues than I resolved. That pleased me since I hope this article provokes others to think seriously about downtowns, their clusters and districts, and the need to achieve functional diversity.

¹ N. David Milder. "A Search for a Clearer and More Useful Vocabulary for Talking About and Analyzing Downtowns." *Downtown Curmudgeon Blog*, December 14, 2021 <https://www.ndavidmilder.com/2021/12/a-search-for-a-clearer-and-more-useful-vocabulary-for-talking-about-and-analyzing-downtowns>.

DOWNTOWN MULTIFUNCTIONALITY WAS OFTEN THE RESULT OF A LOT OF SUB-DOWNTOWN MONOFUNCTIONALITY.

The very names of many of our downtown districts indicates what makes them so problematical: e.g. the central business district, the theater district, stamp district, furniture district, antiques district, flower district, diamond/jewelry district, the garment district, the arts district, the financial district, Chinatown, etc. All of these names denote the presence of one very dominant use/function, and while these districts probably have some other uses present, they only play supportive roles by serving those who work and visit the venues associated with the district's dominant use. A tell of these supportive functions in our large downtowns is that they seldom draw meaningful customer traffic from areas beyond about a five-minute walk from their locations.

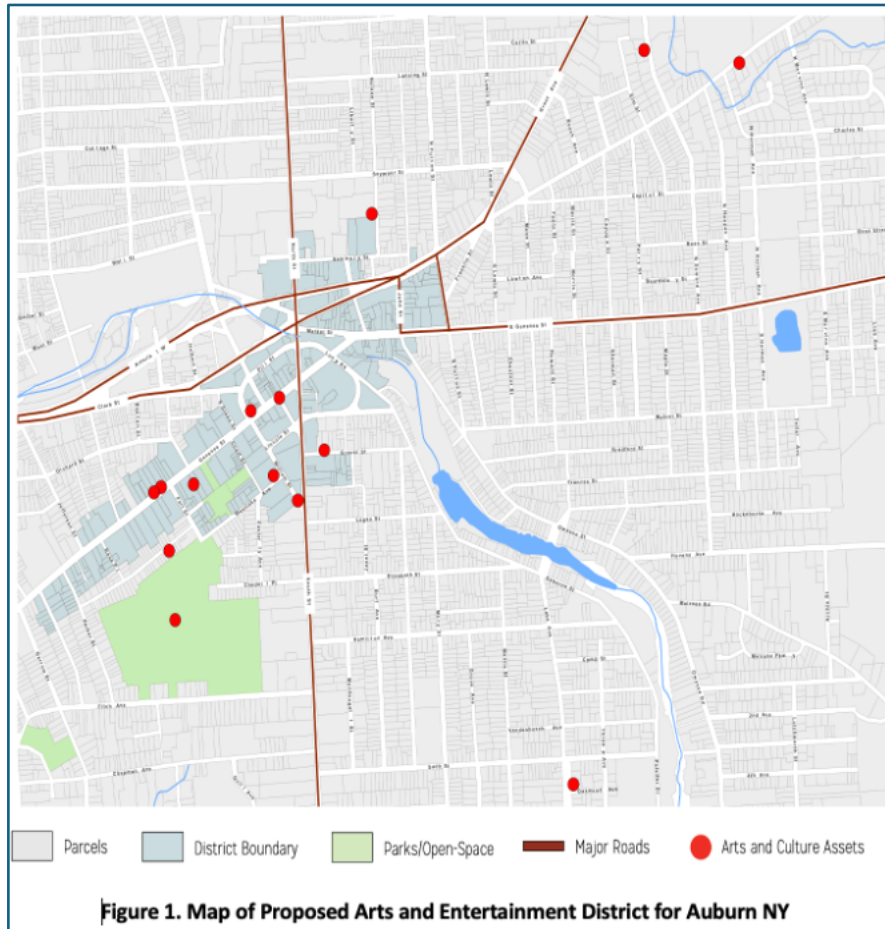
There is a very good reason that the district concept has had such a long and largely unquestioned standing and use among those who analyze and manage our downtowns: for many decades our downtowns were an aggregation of several of these monofunctional districts. For example, there were reportedly well over a hundred of them in Manhattan decades ago. Office buildings were far from the only use that developed into monofunctional clusters. The multifunctionality that observers often noted as a defining characteristic of our downtowns was regularly mainly the result of a lot of monofunctionality at the subdowntown level! It is important to note that the monofunctional downtown districts of yore are generally more properly referred to as unorganized clusters of venues, each associated with a particular use/function.

DESIGNATED ARTS DISTRICTS

Most of these downtown monofunctional districts were the product of organic growth resulting from a downtown neighborhood having congenial locational assets for a particular use/function. Others were the result of the planned construction of several buildings focused on meeting the needs of a particular group of users, such as the World Trade Center focusing on office uses and Lincoln Center being built as a major Performing Arts Center. Others were the result of a municipality "designating" an area in the downtown or elsewhere in the city as a special place for a particular use/function for non-health or safety reasons, but to support and incentivize the marketing and growth of that particular use/function. Such designations may provide favorable zoning, but the incentives offered often go beyond that if they are properly designed and organized.

While many of these downtown monofunctional districts have disappeared, for reasons that will be discussed below, pre-Covid19 there was a significant movement to create new CAE districts in communities across the nation that were meant to support the marketing efforts and growth of CAE venues in particular areas in or near a downtown. Such "designations" often are geographically defined to include important existing CAE venues (see Figure 1) and meant to make them stronger, while attracting new ones. However, such geographic designations are often problematical. Many arts districts fail to include all or even most of a city's arts venues. Also, the prior organic development of these CAE venues is often quite dispersed (see Figure 1), challenging any connotation

of their interacting with each other that the term district might have. More about that below.



These efforts to create designated CAE districts tended to be led by those who believed that the arts can be a very powerful engine for economic growth, and was backed by such organizations as Americans for the Arts that advocated for creating culture districts. Some impressive headway was made in a few states, such as the development of 30 “Creative Districts” in Colorado between 2011 and 2024. On the other hand, a master plan for the creation of downtown arts districts in five Central NY cities -- Auburn, Cortland, Oneida, Oswego, and

Syracuse -- published in 2019 has not moved forward. The Covid19 Crisis obviously probably had something to do with that, but how much is uncertain. That crisis probably also influenced Americans for the Arts to stop researching and marketing its culture districts concept, though it seems open to doing so should ample interest and demand return.

AS DOWNTOWN CAE VENUES RECOVER WILL THE MOVEMENT TO DESIGNATE MORE CAE DISTRICTS ALSO REBOUND?

Strong evidence suggests that the recovery of CAE venues in or near our downtowns has been surprisingly robust, if not yet complete. For example, as I have noted in another article, major museums and the Broadway theaters in Manhattan have

recovered about 80% of their pre-crisis audiences, a figure that is bound to rise as foreign and business tourist visitors return in the near future.²

CAE venues in several other large downtowns have reported similar or even stronger audience recoveries. For example, the recovery of CAE venues in Downtown Los Angeles has been strong and its management is now planning to create a formal Grand Avenue Culture District--and for reasons that suggest that as our downtown arts organizations rebound, creating more downtown CAE districts will again attract supporters. This is how Nick Griffin, the Executive Director of the DTLA Alliance has summed up the current strategic importance of his downtown's CAE functions: "The fact that the expansions of The Broad and The Colburn School are both based on demonstrable demand – growing student body and 500+ annual performances at Colburn and The Broad blowing their attendance projections out of the water by almost 4x within the first few years – speaks to the strength and appeal of Grand Avenue's cultural institutions, and while they certainly took a hit during the pandemic, they are not only recovering well, *they are positioned to play a key role in the reimagination of DTLA in the context of shifts in the office sector and growth in residential and hospitality....* I'll note that our long-envisioned dream of creating a formal Grand Avenue Cultural District is finally taking shape, with funding in place and a kick-off planning meeting scheduled for next week!"³

THE MESHING OF THE CONCEPTS OF DOWNTOWN FUNCTIONS/USES AND DOWNTOWN NICHES

In many respects, the Grand Avenue Culture District is already a de facto reality. The Los Angeles Music Center already exists -- though its official title is the Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles County. It is one of the largest performing arts centers in the United States. Its major venues are the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Ahmanson Theatre, Mark Taper Forum, Roy & Edna Disney CalArts Theatre and Walt Disney Concert Hall. Pre-crisis it was drawing an audience of about 1.3 million, and from what Nick reports it has probably now rebounded to around that number. Walt Disney Hall also attracts many visitors who come just to see its Frank Gehry designed building. The Broad and Colburn probably attract around another one million visitors. There is a defined geographic area with many very strong culture/arts venues, they are attracting appreciable audiences, and the venues are within reasonable waking distances of each other.

Given the de facto realities, why then opt for a formal designation? As someone known for creating niche revitalization strategies, I might suggest that this de facto cluster of CAE venues is the equivalent of an unorganized potential niche, and that formally

² N. David Milder. "Let's Recognize And Leverage The Opportunities The Covid Crisis Has Given Our Downtowns." *Economic Development Journal*, 2022, p34
https://www.dropbox.com/s/v9v5y0ovtxzlkco/Milder%20leverage%20crisis%20produced%20opportunities%20EDJ_Fall2022_final.pdf?e=1&dl=0.

³ In an email communication.

organizing it would enable enhanced branding, marketing and growth.⁴ That would add the magnetism of the niche as a whole to the magnetism that each of its CAE venues might possess. It also provides a unique kind of magnetism by providing consumers with a choice of CAE venues they might visit, increasing the chances they might find one in the district that they like.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF MONOFUNCTIONAL DISTRICTS

A. The Challenges

1. Many of these downtown monofunctional districts were birthed when the manufacturing and distribution of products were still important downtown functions. As our downtowns deindustrialized and shifted to having service-based economies, the districts associated with industrial type functions tended to weaken and/or disappear. On the other hand monofunctional office districts grew robustly.

Table 1. Estimated Detailed Space Expenses of U.S. Retail Firms by Kind of Business: 2017

NAICS Code	Kind of Business	Lease and Rental Payments for Land, Buildings, Structures, Store Space, and Offices	
		Space Expense Amount*	Percent of Total Expenses
	Retail trade, total	102,646	8.8
441	Motor vehicle and parts dealers	11,761	7.1
442	Furniture and home furnishings stores	6,077	13.7
443	Electronics and appliance stores	2,487	11.6
444	Building mat. and garden equip. and supplies dealers	5,214	5.9
445	Food and beverage stores	15,214	8.4
447	Gasoline stations	4,902	7.8
448	Clothing and clothing accessories stores	19,766	19.8
451	Sporting goods, hobby, musical instrument, and book stores	4,855	16.2
452	General merchandise stores	9,037	6.0
453	Miscellaneous store retailers	6,961	14.9
454	Nonstore retailers	7,256	3.9

*Dollar estimates are shown in millions of dollars and are based on data from the 2017 Annual Retail Trade Survey. Estimates have been adjusted using the final results of the 2017 Economic Census.]
 Source: <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/arts/tables/2017/bes.xlsx>

2. The small sizes of firms, sector variation in rent increase vulnerability, and strong specialization often means small addressable consumer markets, and light foot traffic. Many of the today's organically developed districts, in downtowns large and small, are composed of a cluster of relatively small firms that have modest annual sales or attendance. The economic sectors and subsectors they are in can vary in the average

sales per establishment and the percentage of their operating expenses that go for their operating spaces, be they offices, factories or shops. For example, as can be seen in Table 1, overall space costs account for about 8.8% of the retail industry's operating costs, but there is a good deal of variation among its subsectors. Space costs account for only 6% of the operating budgets of general merchandise establishments, but 19.8%

⁴ See my PPT presentation on niche strategies at https://www.ndavidmilder.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Niche_Revitalization_Strategies.pdf. It expands on my book: *Niche strategies for downtown revitalization: a hands-on guide to developing, strengthening, and marketing niches*. Downtown Research & Development Center, 1997.

for clothing establishments, 14.9% for miscellaneous store retailers, and 13.7% for furniture and home furnishings stores. Retailers with high percentages of their operational expenditures going to cover their store rents are more likely than other retailers to be adversely impacted negatively by rising rents, especially if the increases are appreciable.

The economic uses in these disappearing districts may have been failing, but the districts' prior strength often legitimated them as a business location, and these areas often became the sites for substantial redevelopment.

The businesses in these remaining monofunctional clusters can vary considerably in the amounts of foot traffic and patrons they attract, with some being most viable in the early stages of a downtown's revitalization process. In many medium sized downtowns, for example, it is not unusual to find in the early stages of their revitalization that a significant number of storefronts are occupied by plumbers, carpenters, electricians, floor care, window care and other trades associated with a home and hearth niche. However, these shops are not like retail shops with numerous in store sales transactions to consumers, but serve as offices and a base for the establishments' external operations. As the revitalization process in their downtowns strengthens, these establishments tend to disappear as the dominant function establishments are unable to afford the rising rates or are forced out by redevelopment projects. However, in an important respect they probably have performed an essential task for their downtown's revitalization: occupying storefronts in a manner that helped attract development and other quality businesses.

In the remaining industrial-birthing districts most of the animation comes not from shopper foot traffic, but from the movement of merchandise, often in easily observable and entertaining ways. The old Fulton Fish Market, the flower district, and the old garment district in Manhattan are good examples of such districts. In many instances this is because the main use's venues are often manufacturers, distributors or businesses that deliver services to customers in their distant homes or business locations.

Something similar very frequently happens to organically grown, unorganized arts districts/clusters where arts and crafts people live and work. After pioneering the initiation of the local revitalization process, they are priced out of the area by rising rents and or redevelopment projects. SoHo in Lower Manhattan is a good example of this.

In smaller cities, unorganized arts clusters composed of venues that depend on attracting audiences usually are limited in their potentials for growth and positive impacts by the relatively sparse populations and wealth of the market areas they can penetrate. Auburn, NY, is a good example of this. People in households with annual incomes over \$100,000 are an important market segment since they account for well over one half of the nation's consumer expenditures for entertainment fees and admissions. For Auburn's museums and theaters there is a need to have exhibits and performances that can penetrate their 60-minute drive shed to have a decent chance of

Table 2. Household Incomes in Auburn’s 15, 30, and 60 Minute Drive Sheds

	15 Min Shed	30 Min Shed	60 Min Shed
Population	47,547	111,320	954,332
Households	19,593	44,735	376,000
Median Age	43.3	44.3	39.3
Median HH Income	\$52,645	\$57,706	\$55,261
Average HH Income	\$69,764	\$77,245	\$77,399
Per Capita Income	\$28,966	\$31,182	\$31,442
HH's Incomes > \$75,000	6,660	17,430	140,811
HH's Incomes > \$100,000	4,150	11,342	93,549

Source: ESRI Household Income Profile Report

tapping an appreciable number of households with incomes above \$100,000 (see Table 2). In my opinion, those with annual attendance close to or above 50,000 are probably doing that to some degree (see Table 3 below), the others probably are not. In such situations local arts leaders often become very interested in

adopting arts tourism growth strategies. *Implementing such a strategy, however, will usually have a higher probability of success if the district becomes much more multifunctional by making local restaurants, bars and hotels essential partners in their operations.* Smartly led districts will also add skilled chefs, bakers, beer makers, wine makers and whiskey distillers to their list of local arts attractions.

3. Specialization also can mean substantial hours when they are inert. In some instances this is simply a result of the local addressable market for that use being very small. In other districts the nature of their operations makes them largely inert after dark and on weekends, save for those with unusual nighttime or early morning hours like fish, meat and flower districts. Office dominated districts are classic examples of such limited activation and what happens as a result: large periods of time when the lack of foot traffic can produce a very fear-inducing environment and an image of nothing of interest happening.

However, theater districts also tend to be largely inert with low levels of pedestrian traffic during the daytime, save for those one of two days when they have matinee performances. In smaller downtowns, theaters may only be open on 90 to 120 days/nights a year.

In several of our largest downtowns -- e.g., in Midtown Manhattan, Houston, and Playhouse Square in Cleveland -- the theater district is located very close to substantial amounts of office space. While the two uses have positive impacts on their area’s activation at different times of the day -- lunchtime for offices, evenings for theaters -- the overall effect is minimized because the buildings the two uses are located in are in close but separate subareas. The buildings themselves are not sufficiently multifunctional.

4. Dispersion within districts and the existence of monofunctional archipelagoes. I think it is fair to say that when one hears the term arts district or office district or furniture district or diamond district, one expects to find many establishments involved in those uses within a specified geographic area. Moreover, one might also expect to see a clustering of such venues within a relatively small geographic area, one in which all the venues are within reasonable walking distance. If the district has been officially designated, then that probably will imply to potential visitors that it is in some way very

special that makes it worthy of such a designation. I would not be surprised if many of those visitors deduced that the district in question is being showcased as the best, or at least a very good place to find venues with that particular use within the community.

However, seldom do these monofunctional districts capture all of the venues in a community that are associated with its defining use. If, for example, one were to map all the office buildings NYC, LA, or Chicago the results would show several clusters in each city that could claim to be office districts. Together these functional clusters are like islands in each city’s archipelago of office use locations. The CAE venues in these cities are similarly dispersed.

If we look at the geographic locations of CAE related venues in cities large and small we find that their distributions usually take the form of similar archipelagos and that makes one or more of the above connotations of a district’s name inappropriate. Figure 1 above shows their dispersion in Auburn, a city with a population of about 26,000.

Auburn’s major CAE venues in Table 3 are divided into three sections. The bottom section contains those located in the downtown proper: the Auburn Public Theater (APT), the Seward House Museum and the new NYS Equal Rights Heritage Center. The section above it is about 0.50 miles from the APT, according to Google Maps. It contains the Schweinfurth Museum of Art, the Cayuga Museum of History & Art, along with its Pitch Theater. The top section lists the Harriet Tubman National Historical Park (HTP) that is on South Street about 1.3 miles away from the APT, and the Merry-Go-Round Playhouse and the Ward O’Hara Museum that are in the Emerson Park area about 3.0 miles away from the APT.

Table 3. Annual Attendance in 2018 at the Major Arts/Cultural Attractions in Auburn, NY

Arts Cultural Attraction	Annual Attendance
Harriet Tubman Nat. Historical Pk	50,000
Merry-Go-Round Playhouse	46,345
Ward O'Hara Museum	24,827
Subtotal	121,172
The Pitch	822
Schweinfurth Art Center	14,704
Cayuga Museum	8,162
Subtotal	23,688
Auburn Public Theater	16,000
NYS Equal Rights Heritage Ctr	25,000
Seward House Museum	13,484
Subtotal	54,484
TOTALS	199,344

Notably, the most distant venues, the O’Hara Museum and the Merry-Go-Round Playhouse have the largest audiences. Nevertheless, they are still probably connected functionally to downtown Auburn since it is very likely that they are drawing visitors who need places to dine, sleep, and find interesting ways to fill the remaining time of their trips to the Auburn area. The downtown has many more assets to meet these needs than the areas immediately surrounding these two venues. This indicates how downtown Auburn’s non-CAE assets functionally strengthen the city’s CAE archipelago.

B. Making CAE Districts Stronger

1. Downtown districts, especially those focused on CAE uses need to be strongly multifunctional, regardless of what their names denote or imply. In the past, most downtown monofunctional districts had one strong dominant function/use and some supportive function venues that served those who worked for and visited the dominant uses establishments. These supportive functions were too weak to draw customers from beyond about a five-minute walk from their locations. Today, these supportive functions/uses are still needed, but they also need to be much stronger, strong enough to draw considerable customer traffic, and probably more than 50% of their annual revenues, from well beyond their immediate neighborhoods.⁵

In many cities, large and small, a very large portion of the attendance at shows, museums, concerts and dance performances are tourists. For example, pre-crisis, over 75% of the visitors to MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Guggenheim Museum of Art were tourists, as were 60% of the audiences of Broadway shows. The ties between these venues and nearby hospitality venues are obvious.

2. In addition, the venues of such non-dependent functions/uses need to be “packaged” in structures that are designed to facilitate the ability of the uses present to positively interact with each other. This is best achieved in buildings that are strongly mixed use. There is, for example, a trend for many museums and PACs to have restaurants on site. If the supportive functions just serve the venue’s audience and staff, they are probably just playing an old fashion supportive role. If instead they are drawing lots of other diners who are attracted by the restaurant’s features such as its chef, cuisine, service, and the museum’s or PAC’s ambience is seen as an important restaurant asset, then the eateries are providing the needed level of functional diversity. Part of the attraction of The Modern in Midtown is the ability to dine while viewing the famed garden of MoMA filled with wonderful sculptures. Lulu at the Hammer Museum in Westwood, CA, attracts many visitors because its leader is David Tanis, a noted chef and cookbook author, and the renowned chef Alice Waters was involved in its conception.

Also, in many downtowns such as those in Austin, Buffalo, Dallas, Philadelphia and Midtown Manhattan, large downtown buildings have been built or repurposed to include three to five uses such as offices, residential units, hotel rooms, retail shops, entertainment venues, and personal and professional services with each occupying 100,000+ square feet.⁶ CAE operations located in buildings with their uses patterned in a similar fashion are more likely to benefit from positive impacts from other functions and uses.

Most CAE nonprofits use a business model in which earned income accounts for less than 50% of their annual revenues. In response, some CAE operations have become

⁵ N. David Milder. “How downtown multifunctionality is packaged is a key to its success.” *Journal of Urban Regeneration & Renewal*, Volume 17 / Number 3 / Spring 2024, pp. 255-274(20).

⁶ Ibid.

more active in the ownership and development of real estate to stabilize and grow their financial positions or to create more space for their operations. That may require much more functional diversity in their projects to achieve success. I expect that others will follow suit. For example, a considerable amount of the new space created by MoMA's last expansion is in a residential tower built next to it in which it has a financial interest.

Another interesting example is the Red Door at City Center in downtown Syracuse. It is a theater that is transforming into a PAC, and located across the street from the well-known Landmark Theater, and just down the block from the relatively new Salt City Market. It bought the old Sibley's department store building and converted about 40,000 SF into performance, gallery and rehearsal spaces for its own operations, and then tried to redevelop and lease the remaining 160,000 SF for other uses. That effort apparently failed and ownership changed in 2023. Since then City Center, as the building is now known, has made offices its primary tenant use. The owner developer has moved its own offices into the building, and attracted a few high tech firms.

I think Red Door's story illustrates the benefits and risks of CAE organizations getting involved in real estate. I strongly suspect that Red Door came out of this experience owning a new, better and larger facility that has a superior location to its old one. On the other hand, Red Door lacked the real estate development skills to make the total City Center project a success, and probably endangered the overall project while stressing its own financial situation. Yet Red Door did have the acumen to take control of a strategically located large building that did have considerable redevelopment potential. In any case, involvement by CAE organizations in real estate projects will probably mean that other strong uses also will be involved in such projects as tenants and partners.

3. Two important strategic considerations for downtowns of any size that want to nourish and grow their CAE functions/uses are: 1) how their existing or new CAE venues can play functional roles that strengthen the local CAE archipelago; and 2) the roles non-CAE venues can play in generating this increased strength. Let's postulate a Downtown X in a rural city of about 30,000 residents that has about seven art galleries and 14 gift shops (such a downtown does exist). Survey research has shown that the biggest need of artists and craftspeople is effective help in marketing their creations. The galleries and gift shops typically are sales channels for arts and crafts products, and the 21 shops in Downtown X are providing such channels for the artists and craftspeople in its archipelago.

Other downtown venues can also help the artists and craftspeople market their products. Restaurant walls and vitrines (a glass case or cabinet for displaying things) in hotel lobbies have also been used to showcase the paintings, sculptures and crafts products of local artists. Local colleges and universities can help them get the training they often feel they need about marketing and running a micro business. Downtowns with such assets thus play a critical role in maintaining the economic well-being of its arts archipelago that probably extends at least to within about an hour's drive of it.

At the same time these 21 shops constitute a very substantial unorganized niche that can function organically as a specialized destination shopping center focused on arts products that is capable of attracting shoppers from a much larger trade area than the other retailers in the downtown. *Organizing these arts and arts related venues in a formal CAE district can provide much more powerful marketing that reaches farther and deeper than do the independent efforts of the individual venues.* It also provides a key factor for attracting visitors: lots of choice among arts related places. When successful, such organized niches also attract new businesses that mesh with the niche.

THE BOTTOM LINES

1. Regardless of what they are called and their names connote or imply, a downtown's districts these days must have considerable and strong functional diversity to be really effective. This especially holds true for CAE districts.
2. Such diversity must also produce positive interactions between the venues of the functions that are present. Supportive functions can no longer just feed off of patrons that work for or visit the venues associated with the dominant function. They need to attract a consistent flow of customers from beyond the district's borders. They need to be strong, even if not the dominant use. In CAE districts these non-CAE uses, such as hospitality and retail venues, can be critical to the well-being and growth of CAE venues.
3. The strong functions within the district need to be marbled to the extent that many individual buildings are strongly multifunctional, with each use having a substantial magnetism that is independent of that lent to it by the other uses in the building.
4. Many downtown districts have a dominant use that may influence how they are named. However, those uses often have a wider geographic distribution so the individual district resembles one important island in a functional archipelago that may reach out through the city and well into the surrounding counties. It is important that the district's strategy understands and leverages the district's economic role in that archipelago.
5. Unorganized CAE clusters are much like unorganized niches. Sometimes they can be quite large and strong, as the lighting district centered on The Bowery in Lower Manhattan was for several decades. However, most would benefit from being organized because of the greater ability that creates to brand and market the district as well as to attract quality new venues.
6. It's high time we ditched using the term district so often and indiscriminately. The notion of a geographic cluster of venues that are very worth visiting can be communicated in other ways such as The Miracle Mile, The Magnificent Mile, Jeweler's Row, Museum Mile, The Farmers Market, etc. I'm sure downtowns have many people capable of conjuring up even better nomenclatures for highly valued clusters of venues. We should refrain from calling a downtown a district -- the term downtown says it all, the term district doesn't. Calling something just an arts, culture or entertainment district to me signals poor imaginations at work that will produce poor marketing results.

From much that I have stated above it should be obvious that I do not oppose municipally designated areas in which the uses' venues are given zoning privileges and/or organizational capabilities or incentives. Save for the whole downtown, that political legitimation can provide a decent legal reason for calling them districts rather than clusters, though I still think that using the term in their name writes off some strong marketing opportunities. Organically developed functional clusters should not be called districts.