Photograph courtesy of the Convention and Visitors Bureau of Charlotte.

Charlotte is a city of the New South. This means the city's energy, government and public policies tend to focus more on the future than the past. Drive, or better yet walk, through the center of town today and you'll find few buildings from the city's history as a 19th-century trading crossroads and textile center. Although the early 20th century brought considerable industry and growth to the town, urban renewal in the 1970s leveled nearly half the central wards' houses and churches to make room for plazas, malls, skyscrapers, performance venues, a sports stadium and condominiums. The now-vibrant city core is referred to only as Uptown. There is no "down" in Charlotte's civic image of itself.

The arrival of the banking and insurance industries meant tremendous pressure—and money—directed toward creating a quality of life that would attract top executives. Charlotte was one of the first cities to incorporate cultural development into its municipal and political structure as an economic-development tool. "Being pro-culture is the business environment here," says Tom Gabbard, president of the Blumenthal Center for the Performing Arts, Uptown's largest performing venue.

The boom-and-bust economics of the late '90s provided a chance to test the "Charlotte model" of arts support. Though most arts groups saw a dip in ticket sales and donations after the September 11 terrorist attacks, no major arts organization has gone under or failed to regroup. Most were riding a wave of budget and ticket-sales growth right up to early 2002, when county and city funding to the centralized Charlotte-Mecklenburg Arts & Science Council (ASC) all at once dropped about $2 million—or 13 percent of the council's $15.2 million budget. State funding to the council likewise has been cut from a high of $170,000 in 2000 to $94,000 in 2003.

An October 2003 analysis released by Americans for the Arts found that municipalities using the United Arts Fund model tend to be more durable in tough economic times. This certainly seems the case in Charlotte. "I don't think the corporations can help more than they have," says Regina Smith, ASC vice president of grants and services. "But individuals are stepping up more, and that is the piece that is the bright spot." There's no arguing with the council's success in attracting private money. Since 2001, its United Way-style workplace fundraising campaign has brought in more than $10 million each year in individual donations.

"Being pro-culture is the business environment here."

Tom Gabbard
president
Blumenthal Center for the Performing Arts

The corporate model of hierarchy and efficiency is reflected in all of the city's major cultural institutions, which include the Mint Museum of Art and Mint Museum of Craft + Design, the Charlotte Symphony, North Carolina Dance Theatre and Opera Carolina. Each has major, long-standing corporate sponsorship and is part of the 28 affiliates of the powerful ASC.

The council, which issues approximately $12 million in grants each year, also nurtures both public and private partnerships of the kind that built the Blumenthal Center and the McColl Center for Visual Art. In November 2003, for instance, the council released a 25-year Cultural Facilities Master Plan that laid out $236 million worth of new, renovated or expanded facilities. Among the suggestions were buildings for the Mint Museum, two theater companies, North Carolina Dance Theatre, an African-American Golf Hall of Fame and a modern-art museum. "It's a measure of the council's bullishness for the future," Gabbard says of the plan.

There is a downside to this quantification and coordination of the arts, however. Grassroots and fringe groups have, until recently, tended to be squeezed out. This started to change in 1999 with the appointment of Harriet Sanford as president of the ASC. During her tenure, which ended in February 2004, the ASC instituted a granting program that has funded about 60 emerging groups, among them folk-music collectives and the BareBones experimental theater company.

Still, the city lacks the kind of organic growth in marginal and nontraditional arts that noncentralized funding can produce. "As far as mainstream activities being any more contemporary, or what I'd call 'edgy,' I don't see that happening," says sculptor Paul Sires, co-owner of Center of the Earth Gallery, in the popular former mill neighborhood on North Davidson Street (NoDa). "You'll see contemporary works at North Carolina Dance Theatre, but it's a small section of the normal fare."

Things have improved in some areas, notes John Grooms, editor of Charlotte's alternative weekly, *Creative Loafing*, "while others are dead in the water." Jazz performances are practically nonexistent. Performance art happens in Charlotte, but it's very rare and is treated almost as "a freakish, 'underground' thing." And while art galleries show interesting work, there's still very little activity in visual arts related to some of the city's groups, like that of the burgeoning Latino community. One area where everyone seems to agree the city has dramatically improved is in adventurous theater, with the emergence of eight new small companies in the past five years.


Carolina Living

You can see the doctor now

Ghettopoly outcry seems hypocritical

Next Up at Novello

Now on TV Tonight

The Charlotte Observer

Undercapitalization is a huge issue for Charlotte arts groups. Besides the museum, the Charlotte Symphony and others are also considering, or in the midst of, endowment drives. Even with access to a shared $38 million

endowment fund raised by the ASC, they remain vulnerable to fluctuating ticket sales and donations. But, as is typical for Charlotte groups, there is an air of cautious optimism.

As a result, all the largest arts groups are employing austerity methods to survive and even flourish. "Even during these challenging economic times, we've been able to launch an endowment campaign," says the Mint's executive director, Phil Kline, whose institution has managed to stay about even with its $5.6 million budget, while at the same time increasing attendance from 102,525 in 1998 to around 175,000 at present. And thanks to a Ford Foundation grant, the museum has already doubled its endowment to about $9 million.

Last fall, the Charlotte Repertory Theatre revamped its season and dealt with an accumulated deficit of about $300,000. The Charlotte Symphony, the city's largest performing group, whose budget nearly doubled to $7.5 million between 1997 and 2003, recently logged a $652,000 deficit. It also survived a seven-week musicians' strike in fall 2003. North Carolina Dance Theatre, perhaps the only Charlotte group that regularly tours to New York City and other locales, has been logging deficits since 2000 and had seen attendance dip by 10 percent prior to 2003.

There is a widespread belief among city arts leaders that Charlotte is supporting and producing more art than other similar-size cities precisely because the centralized arts council provides a forum. However, statistics compiled by Americans for the Arts suggest that, compared to other peer cities using the United Arts Fund model, Charlotte actually produces about the same amount of art, or even less. For instance, an October 2003 analysis ranked Charlotte below nearby Raleigh, N.C.—a town with a smaller population—in the number of arts groups per 25,000 residents. Still, the city is clearly in the top 10 arts producers among UAF cities, and is significantly more productive than similar-size locales that don't use centralized funding. The point, perhaps, is that local perception helps spur giving and build civic pride, regardless of what the actual numbers show.

Coordinated public discussion of quality of artistic thought is still almost nonexistent in this numbers-obsessed city. There are, though, significant signs that Charlotte's arts are growing in caliber and content. In 2001 the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra attracted the renowned Christof Perick, director of the Dresden Opera, as its new music director, and beefed up its offerings. Similarly, in 2000, Opera Carolina joined four other co-commissioning companies to stage Carlisle Floyd's new opera *Cold Sassy Tree*, while Charlotte Repertory Theatre in 2003 attempted to launch a production of *The Miracle Worker*, starring Hilary Swank, and send it to Broadway. Ultimately it did not travel to New York, but it represented a milestone nonetheless.

So, while economic hard times have taken their toll on Charlotte's arts, the city's cultural institutions have steadily pushed forward. "You always wonder when we will reach a plateau, but the growth has been extraordinary. We haven't topped out yet," says *The Charlotte Observer*'s visual-arts critic, Richard Maschal. After more than three decades at the paper, Maschal has watched Charlotte's arts community change exponentially. "Once upon a time the question was 'Gee, can we take a next step to professionalize?' Now, I think quality is on the horizon."

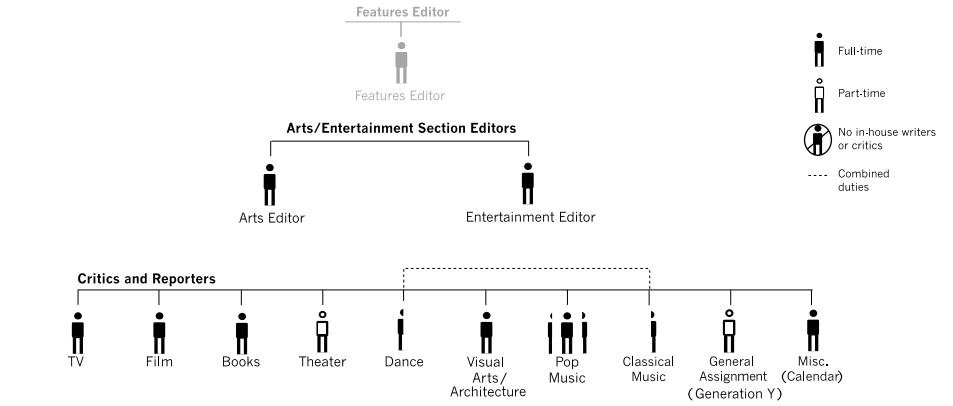
By Willa Conrad

"You always wonder when we will reach a plateau, but the growth has been extraordinary. We haven't topped out yet."

Richard Maschal
visual-arts critic
Charlotte Observer

Owner: Knight Ridder **Daily Circulation:** 231,369 **Sunday Circulation:** 282,215

In-house Arts Staff (does not include features staff, copy desk and freelancers)



The Charlotte Observer

1998-2003

Daily circulation:

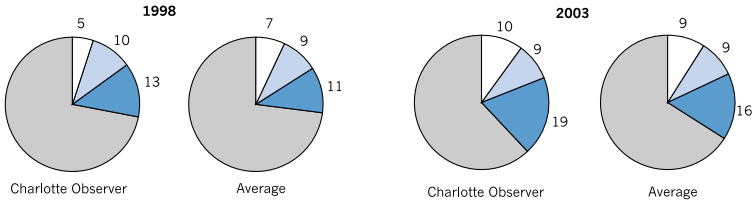
Arts-and-culture newshole:

Number of arts-and-culture articles:

In-house arts staff:

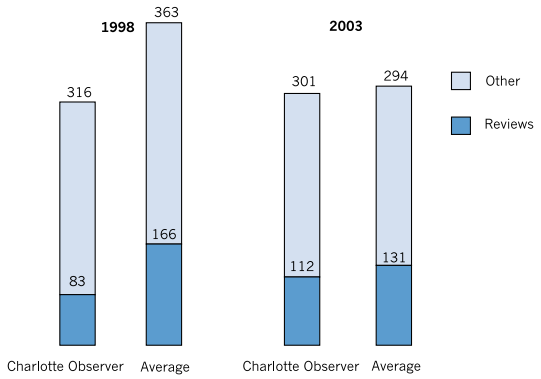
Prominence of Daily Sections

percentage of overall pagination assigned to A&L, business and sports sections



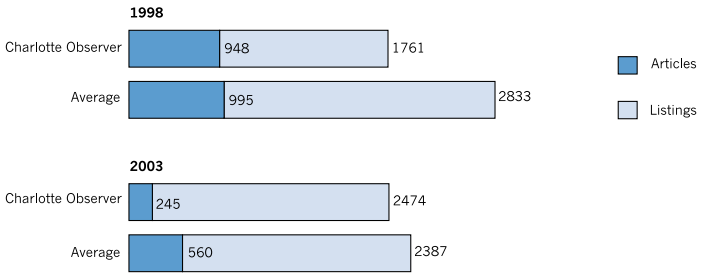
Story Count

number of arts-and-culture articles (listings exluded)



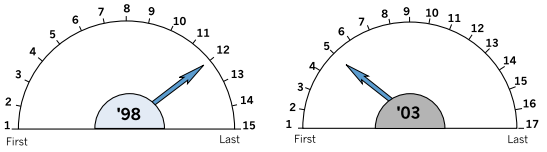
Television Newshole

space (in column inches) devoted to television articles and listings grid



Books Journalism

ranking among all newspapers studied for space (in column inches) devoted to books articles (listings exluded)



Five years ago *The Charlotte Observer*'s daily Living section accounted for a mere 5 percent of the newspaper's overall pagination. By October 2003 it doubled its share to 10 percent. The *Observer* also had the distinction of being one of only two seven-day-a-week metropolitan newspapers to devote more pages to its daily arts-and-lifestyles section than to its weekend arts supplements Entertainment & Things to Do and Arts & Books. Yet when compared with other papers in *Reporting the Arts II*, the arts and culture newshole in the *Observer*'s Living had only increased from minuscule to below average.

Since 1998 the *Observer* both expanded and contracted its arts and culture coverage. It did this by increasing its story count and shrinking its average article length from 14 column inches to 10, an amount shorter than at any other metropolitan newspaper in our study.

Five years ago we noted that the *Observer* devoted a higher-than-average 20 percent of its arts and culture journalism newshole to books. The paper continued to concentrate on books, now giving them 25 percent of the space. It doubled its review count, especially of non-fiction works, and in October 2003 gave extensive coverage to the public library's Novello Festival of Reading as well as the sensational trial of Michael Peterson, a North Carolina novelist, who was convicted of killing his wife. Other areas to receive added attention were classical music and local theater. Both increased their space from almost nonexistent to slightly above average.

Cutbacks did occur at the *Observer*. Television journalism almost disappeared, swallowed by a mushrooming daily grid in an overall TV newshole that remained constant. In 1998 articles on TV accounted for 17 percent of the journalism arts and culture newshole. That shrank to 6 percent, an amount lower than at any other metropolitan newspaper in *Reporting the Arts II*. Back in October 1998, pieces on the decorative arts and furniture, interior design, fashion and crafts routinely appeared in the *Observer*'s non-arts feature sections. The newspaper has since consolidated its arts and culture reporting within its specialist arts sections, and decorative arts coverage has been virtually eliminated. **Andrew Tyndall**

Arts Coverage in Charlotte: A Critical View

Media coverage of the arts in Charlotte has retained the same basic contours over the past five years. The city's daily newspaper, *The Charlotte Observer*, continues to be the dominating source, informing the public of both the long view and the minutiae of the town's cultural life. The alternative weekly newspaper, *Creative Loafing*, has gained prestige in its arts coverage yet remains a distant second. Smaller papers—ranging from such relative newcomers as the *South Charlotte Weekly* and several Spanish-language newspapers to established ones like *The Charlotte Post*—continue to include arts coverage and even occasional critical reviews. And while *Charlotte Theatre* magazine recently appeared on the market, *The Leader*, a longtime local weekly that regularly covered the arts, has gone out of business.

When it comes to breaking news in the arts, though, the *Observer* still functions virtually without competition. During the fall of 2003 it was the *Observer* that broke the news, and did the most complete coverage, of a musicians' strike at the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra; a finance-driven reduction of the Charlotte Repertory Theatre's season; and the release of a new, 25-year facilities plan by the powerful Arts & Science Council of Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

The *Observer*'s dominance warrants a closer look. Like many U.S. newspapers, it hit the peak of go-go '90s ad revenues in early to mid-2001, and has since trimmed 20 full-time newsroom employees, or about 10 percent of its staff. In the past five years, its daily circulation has slipped to 231,369 in 2003, down from 243,990 in 1998, and to 282,215, down from 298,114, on its Sunday edition, though its news hole has grown by 7.5 percent.

Interestingly, the arts and business staff—both small divisions in the newsroom—were spared the reductions and actually grew. "Essentially, we felt that, because they were not really huge departments, any losses there would be tough," says Jennie Buckner, who resigned as the *Observer*'s top editor in May 2004. Back in 1998, arts staff positions included nine full-time and one part-time. By fall 2003 that roster had grown to 11 full-time, four staffers who do part-time arts coverage, three freelance and one new full-time arts editor.

While the *Observer*'s staff has grown, the city's art scene has exploded, with more than eight new theater companies, various smaller dance and music groups, and the emergence of programming during the normally dormant summer months. Keeping up is a constant battle. "We've dramatically increased the freelance money we spend," says features editor Mike Weinstein, "but there's a lot more to cover, a lot more to decide whether to review or not cover."

The arts haven't escaped the editorial and budget grind. While the *Observer* did hire a new theater critic in early 2004, dance is still covered by freelancers, a shift that has been noted both within and from outside the *Observer*. "Something gets lost in the shuffle," says longtime movie critic Lawrence Toppman. "It's like we try to cover the mountaintops, the peaks, but don't pay as much attention to what's in the range." As a result, Toppman says, the paper is not thinking "philosophically about the big picture." Travel budgets have also been cut, forcing the paper to rely more heavily on wire stories. Long-standing coverage of regional events like Charleston's Spoleto Festival U.S.A. and Durham's American Dance Festival has been pared down, and trips to keep current with national trends have been eliminated.

The *Observer*'s primary space for arts coverage continues to be a weekend tabloid section and Sunday arts section, though arts stories now regularly make their way to the front of the daily features sections. Recent cover stories included a profile of Broadway composer Jim Wann, pieces on Omimeo Mime and symphony write-ups. Overnight reviews continue to run haphazardly in the news section, and a daily page dedicated to arts and entertainment, launched in 2000, survived the budget cuts as a half-page.

Covering or previewing arts events rather than providing an in-depth evaluation of a show is a longstanding editorial compromise at the *Observer*. In our 1998 report, the paper logged the smallest number of reviews, in part, argues Buckner, because Charlotte was one of the smallest cities studied. Back then, the *Observer*'s daily arts and leisure section made up a mere 4 percent of its overall pagination. This policy grates on the paper's few longtime staff. "You do a lot of educating within," says visual-arts critic and former editor Richard Maschal. "You don't get a lot of feedback on pieces more in the critical vein." By 2003 the paper increased the amount of its coverage to 10 percent of its pagination. This increase, though, only gave the *Observer* an aver-

"We've dramatically increased the freelance money we spend, but there's a lot more to cover, a lot more to decide whether to review or not cover."

Mike Weinstein
features editor
Charlotte Observer

age pagination when compared to the other papers studied in *Reporting the Arts II*.

The scarcity of in-depth articles has been hard on the arts community. During the time when the paper was using a freelance theater critic, many noted that there wasn't enough thorough coverage of that field. "We've had some problems with the theater coverage in particular," says Tom Gabbard, president of the Blumenthal Center for the Performing Arts, who perceived enough of an *Observer* bias against Broadway shows that he felt compelled to buy ads in the paper in order to publish "preview reviews." Even those satisfied with their coverage express frustration that population growth, along with the increase in the number of performing-arts groups in Charlotte, has left a serious knowledge gap for the reader. "I don't believe there is a culture in Charlotte media that fully recognizes or appreciates the arts as a huge factor in community life," says the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra's president and executive director, Richard Early. "There is tremendous coverage of NASCAR and of the [NFL] Panthers," he says, "and I recognize there is a TV audience associated with that. But far more people than the 70,000 regular Panther season-ticket holders interface with the arts community."

At *Creative Loafing*, the city's primary alternative voice for the arts, a generational shift in its family ownership has resulted in a notable expansion. With a circulation of 62,000, *Creative Loafing* in 2003 doubled its length to between 96 and 112 pages. And in a bid to position itself as the critical medium of choice, the paper also increased by 50 percent the space devoted to arts coverage. It currently produces about three reviews for every one preview. At the same time, *Creative Loafing* added two freelance visual-arts writers.

Charlotte's TV and radio stations continue to cover the arts with event-driven features, steering clear of critical or discerning editorials. The advantage of immediacy in key moments—such as the orchestra strike—is counterbalanced by a lack of the perspective that print media's specialized writers can offer. Celebrity-driven happenings, though, can be live-media bonanzas for local arts groups, as was Debbie Allen's visit to the Afro-American Cultural Arts Center in December 2003 for a master class, when she was featured on several TV stations as well as in the papers.

The city's strength in arts-broadcast media continues to be based in four public-radio and three public-TV stations. Radio includes WDAV-FM, with classical programming; WFAE-FM, blues, jazz and Celtic; WNSC-FM, all jazz; and WNCW-FM, eclectic contemporary. WTVI, the Charlotte-based public TV station, is supplemented by Raleigh's WUNC-TV, which broadcasts occasional dance programs statewide, and WNSC-TV, an affiliate of South Carolina public television.

The Internet, a marginal force in 1998, has matured into a legitimate arts-information source, particularly for event listings and offbeat features. The *Observer*'s Web site, Charlotte.com, now gets 1 million hits a month. And while a new Charlotte-oriented Web site, Artsavant.com, has appeared, it is not seen as a serious competitor since it only rounds out the niche market.

The biggest change in Charlotte's media is to be found on Internet sites, while print and broadcast influence remains about the same. There is a perceivable qualitative uptick in arts writing at the *Observer* and *Creative Loafing*. There is also the hope that continued population growth and an increase in the number of arts groups might soon force an equivalent expansion of space.

By Willa Conrad

"I don't believe there is a culture in Charlotte media that fully recognizes or appreciates the arts as a huge factor in community life."

Richard Earl
president and
executive director
Charlotte Symphony Orchestra