

Oregon-based arts consultant George Thorne once observed that Charlotte, a New South city that is home to the nation's largest bank, wants one of everything just to boast to the world that it has 'em. In the past decade, the city has spent millions on acquisitions such as an NBA team and an NFL team, as well as a ballet company with Patricia McBride as one of its artistic leaders.

In this buttoned-down town—one eye on the bottom line and the other on the Presbyterian hymnal—the arts are almost always promoted as another of the city's economic development incentives. A study commissioned by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Arts & Science Council recently revealed that the arts add \$55 million a year to the local economy. Even so, no effort has ever been made to evaluate the quality of arts programming. Signs are, however, that Charlotte's arts community might just grow beyond its current dreary assignment by Charlotte boosters.

Charlotte's cultural activities are broadly divided into two geographic areas. The first is the official "Cultural District" along North Tryon Street, uptown's major business corridor. The other is NoDa, short for North Davidson Street, a collection of galleries, bars and artists' residences in North Charlotte, a neighborhood of old textile mills and mill houses.

Although Charlotte is now the largest city between Atlanta and Washington, D.C., it was not even the biggest city in North Carolina in the 1920s and 1930s, when high culture first began with amateur theatrical, music and art collecting groups. But with meteoric growth as a trade and banking center, the city's cultural engines revved into high gear starting in the 1970s, with almost all the activity focused on North Tryon Street. The central force behind this explosion has been the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Arts & Science Council, a powerful non-profit agency founded in 1958 that operates on an annual budget of about \$11 million and also receives millions of dollars from the city, county and state.

The arts council was instituted and empowered by the banking and corporate community, which demands accountability for the millions donated. Although some artists complain that the arts council is too institutionalized in its decision-making, it is hard to argue with the group's success. The \$7.2 million the council raised in 1998 during its annual United Way-style employee-giving campaign makes it the fourth-largest such annual drive in the country, behind Los Angeles, Milwaukee and Cincinnati. When the council

undertook to raise a \$25 million endowment to help fund cultural organizations, the nation's top banker, Bank of America CEO Hugh McColl, took a leadership role and the campaign overshot its goal by \$5 million.

The arts council helps fund about 20 of Charlotte's biggest and most well-entrenched arts organizations. At the top of the list, when it comes to budget size, is the North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, which with a \$12 million budget oversees its own facility (two theaters and 2,440 seats) and Spirit Square Center for Arts and Education (another two theaters and about 1,000 seats). It is followed by Discovery Place science museum, the Mint Museum of Art and the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, all with annual expenditures of \$5 million to \$6 million.

The quality of the funded organizations varies widely and is in flux. North Carolina Dance Theatre has traveled the world and is the only arts organization from the South to have participated in the international Spoleto Festival U.S.A. The Light Factory is one of the best-known photographic galleries in the Southeast. Discovery Place and Children's Theatre of Charlotte are considered in the top 10 of their fields. The Mint Museum of Art recently opened a new \$9 million branch, the Mint Museum of Craft + Design, which instantly became the largest museum of its kind in the country.

The arts council also oversaw an explosion in arts facilities used by these organizations, almost all of them built uptown. Between 1974 and 1992, more than \$100 million in public and private dollars went to build the cornerstones of the Cultural District: Spirit Square, Discovery Place, the Main Library and the Blumenthal. For five years after the Blumenthal opened in 1992, the arts council imposed a moratorium on building, asking that arts organizations focus on bringing their programming up to speed. Now that the waiting period is over, arts organizations have begun or are planning to add an additional \$230 million in cultural facilities over the next 10 years.

Other recent openings of note include the \$8 million Tryon Center for Visual Arts, a colony housed in a former neo-Gothic church to premiere in the spring with studio space for working artists. The Museum of the New South, a history and culture center, has begun an \$8.2 million expansion. Children's Theatre and the county library have announced a plan to build a \$24 million Children's Learning Center. Three groups want to team up and spend up to \$26 million to

restore the 1927 Carolina Theatre. Discovery Place wants to build an aquarium for more than \$60 million. And the Charlotte Symphony, which now plays in the Blumenthal, wants to build its own hall for \$60 million to \$100 million.

Amid all this arts spending on North Tryon, there has also been a mini-revolution by those who think the arts council is too bureaucratic for its own good, or believe their art is too dangerous for the uptown types to buy into. Although this anti-arts council movement has been alive for more than a decade, it flared up after a 1996 production of "Angels in America" by Charlotte Repertory Theatre in the Blumenthal became the center of a two-year debate that shook Charlotte to its core. A nude scene and playwright Tony Kushner's unwincing portrayal of gay life infuriated religious right leaders and conservative politicians, who said it was wrong for cultural groups that receive public funding to create art that some taxpayers might find offensive.

A last-minute court victory allowed the play to go on. But the real battle would not start until more than a year later, when the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners voted 5-4 to withhold \$2.5 million in annual funding to the arts council. All but one of the commissioners voting for the cut have since been removed from office, and the money has been restored. But the experience was enough to convince many of the city's more daring artists to avoid public funding and uptown venues.

The hotbed of this activity is NoDa, home to a handful of private galleries such as Center of the Earth, the Blue Pony and 23 Studio. It is also the neighborhood of choice for artists to live. In 1998, NoDa got a big boost when an entrepreneur bought and renovated a decrepit old cinema into the Neighborhood Theatre, a refuge for those outside Charlotte's official cultural channels. Most notably, a group staged Terrence McNally's "Love! Valour! Compassion!" openly touting its gay themes and its nudity. Unlike Kushner's "Angels in America," it went on without incident.

Charlotte, thanks to the efforts of the arts council and in spite of them, is on the brink of becoming a place where people dare to create art. Creating art is often dangerous. It makes people think, question and occasionally rant and rave—verbs not usually associated with guys in business suits thinking about economic development. But audience demand for serious art continues to grow. Before long, the city just may become a place where one of everything is not necessarily enough.

CHARLOTTE
METROPOLITAN AREA
POPULATION: 1,321,068

TOP FIVE CULTURAL
INSTITUTIONS
(BASED ON ATTENDANCE)

1. Blumenthal Performing Arts Center and Spirit Square Center for Arts and Education
2. Discovery Place Science Museum
3. The Mint Museum of Art
4. Carolina Raptor Center
5. The Light Factory

The Charlotte Observer

"If you say something in the *Charlotte Observer*," notes theater critic Tony Brown, "it's like pointing a loaded gun at somebody." Not surprisingly, the paper which watches over this booming southern city from its fortress-like offices in downtown Charlotte is nicknamed "The Disturber." It is an appellation members of the Knight-Ridder paper are proud of.

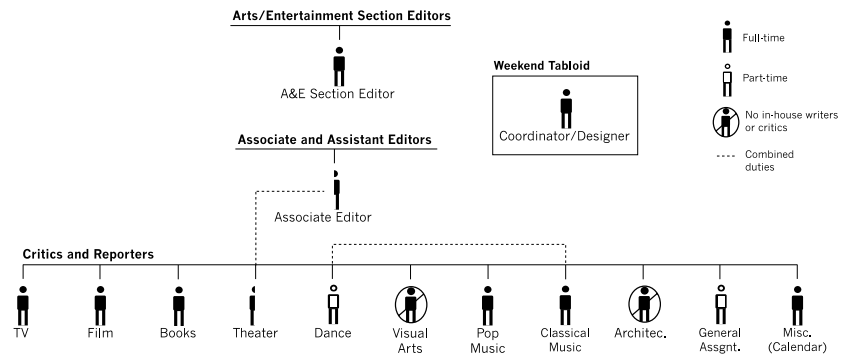
The *Observer's* interest in the arts was sparked years ago by its former publisher, Rolfe Neill, who was active in the then-small arts community. Both Charlotte and its arts have grown since then, yet the town still lacks the sort of arts infrastructure that older cities like Cleveland or San Francisco can boast of. Even so, Charlotte draws a lot of artists and a lot of controversy, from architect Cesar Pelli, who built the new performing arts center, to a staging of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America," which instigated evangelical boycotts.

The paper's culture and entertainment staff put out various arts sections which have won newspaper design awards. The Friday "E&T" entertainment section runs a number of pages devoted solely to the arts and contains mostly reviews and features. Arts stories likewise appear in the "Etc." and the "Family" section. On Sunday the "Arts" section runs long features, interviews as well as trend pieces, and there is a "Books" section containing reviews. Writers also get occasional art news stories on the front page and on the op-ed page. Currently there is a movement afoot to start a daily arts page. In the meantime, writers place their weekday stories in the daily features section or at the back of the local section.

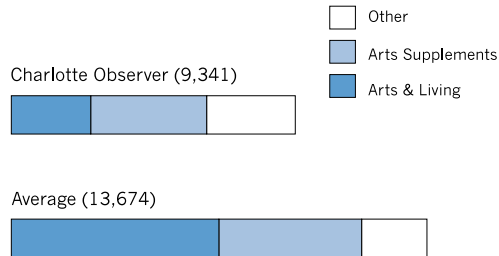
As one of the smaller cities in our study, the town has fewer arts activities than places like Philadelphia and San Francisco. Overall, the *Observer* devoted the fewest column inches of all 15 newspapers in our study to arts and culture stories, and to stories and listings combined. Much of the shortfall derives from the lack of a daily arts and living section. Performing arts suffered the most from this lack of space, while the paper ran a lot of television and books as a proportion of all its coverage. Overall, the paper ran the fewest number of reviews of any of the newspapers in the study, and only rarely hired freelancers to supplement its staff reviewers.

Owner: Knight Ridder Daily Circulation: 239,016 Sunday Circulation: 302,188

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



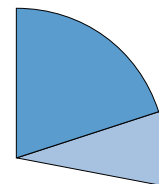
1. Sections



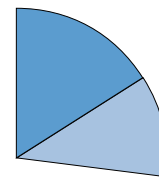
2. Books and Performing Arts

Books (20% vs. 16% avg.)
Performing Arts (8% vs. 11% avg.)

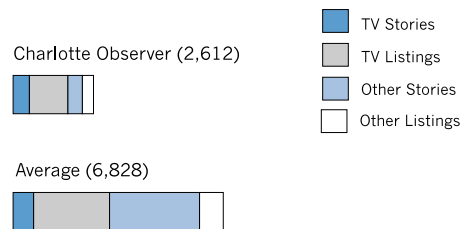
Charlotte Observer



Average

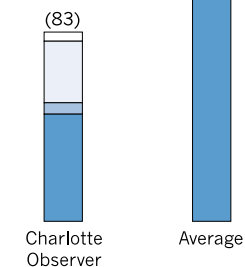


3. Daily Arts and Living Section



4. Reviews

Other
Synd.
Freelance
By Staff



Notes (All data for October 1998. Comprehensive data available at www.najp.org.)

- Volume of coverage devoted to all arts and culture stories and listings by type of section compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating total coverage in column inches
- Proportion of editorial space assigned to all arts and culture stories, listings excluded, devoted to books and performing arts compared with the 15-newspaper average
- Volume of coverage devoted to arts and culture in the daily Arts & Living section compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating total coverage in column inches
- Number of reviews written by in-house staff, freelancers and syndicated wire services compared with the 15-newspaper average, with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of articles

ARTS COVERAGE IN CHARLOTTE: A CRITICAL VIEW

The only serious, ongoing coverage of the arts in Charlotte is done by the city's daily newspaper, *The Charlotte Observer*. It is unfortunate, because without competition the newspaper and its parent corporation, Knight Ridder, feel no compulsion to put more resources into its coverage.

The Observer does a conscientious job, considering the limitations under which its arts staff operates. For years the paper had a reputation as a well-written and edited paper, and it is quickly becoming known for its photography, design and visual presentation as well. Nowhere is this truer than in the two sections of the paper with significant arts content. Both regularly win state and national newspaper prizes, and both tend to be sections of the paper that take more risks and have more fun than any other.

Despite phenomenal growth in almost every area of the arts, as well as surveys that show readers spend as much money on arts and entertainment offerings as sports, the arts staff has not increased. Meanwhile, several new positions have been created in the sports section to cover the addition of major league basketball and football teams.

The arts community simultaneously acknowledges *The Observer's* preeminence and criticizes its faults. "I do think *The Observer* does a good job, but it could do better," says Carol May, director of the Marketing Services Organization, a centralized advertising and PR agency for several of uptown Charlotte's biggest performing arts organizations. "Although the arts have grown in Charlotte, the arts coverage is basically two critics. I think it's difficult for two critics to cover the amount of product that is now in the Charlotte market."

George Gray, director of a small theater company in the NoDa gallery section, is more vehement in his criticism. "It's the responsibility of the daily newspaper to print what's important, and not just what sells advertising," says Gray. "The arts have to pay money to get the word out by buying ads. Sports just gets covered."

The Observer publishes two sections that contain significant arts-related content. The Friday "E&T" entertainment section is approximately 40 to 48 tabloid pages. Three to four of the pages are purely arts, although arts often crop up in the section's "Etc." and "Family" sub-sections. This Friday section is primarily reviews

and advancers along with shorter commentaries. The Sunday "Arts" section, usually eight to ten broadsheet pages, is reserved for the longer, more thoughtful and thought-provoking profiles, feature and trend stories, informed commentaries and in-depth looks at issues. It also contains a two-page "Books" section.

When possible, arts critics try to get their reviews in the Friday or Sunday sections, but occasionally they run in the daily paper. Because almost all of the daily features sections go to press a day or two in advance, deadline arts reviews often wind up on an inside page in the local news section, where space and display are often less than optimal.

The theater critic and classical music and dance critic often write news stories related to Charlotte's exploding cultural scene and attendant controversies for the front page, the local front page and the op-ed pages. "The other media in town rarely cover the news of the arts unless it's a controversy *The Observer* has broken first that they follow up on," says Scott Belford, public relations director of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Arts & Science Council. In the past three years, 256 stories have appeared in *The Observer* about a controversial local production of "Angels in America," the vast majority of the stories in the news sections of the paper.

The theater critic and classical music and dance critics have been on their beats for more than a decade and have national and (in the case of the classical music critic) international sources. Their regular beats extend well beyond Charlotte; Charleston, South Carolina's Spoleto Festival U.S.A. and Durham, North Carolina's American Dance Festival are both considered hometown events although both are hours away. Both critics travel every year to New York and other national and international arts centers to report and enrich their critical palettes.

Although *The Observer* leads the way, other media in town do have an impact on the arts. Here's a rundown:

Creative Loafing: The city's free alternative weekly, which generally publishes 50 to 70 tabloid pages, has one part-time freelancer who covers the performing arts and one part-time freelance visual arts critic. Each critic writes a one- to two-page piece per week. Occasionally, a news reporter from "*The Loaf*" will write about a controversial arts-related topic. "*Creative Loafing* covers arts issues," Belford says, "but they sometimes tend to come at it from a one-

"Sometimes it doesn't appear as if we're supporting the arts. Sometimes we're writing negative criticism and investigative pieces. But just by giving it attention we are giving more support than if we just reprinted press releases."

Tony Brown, Theater Critic
The Charlotte Observer

sided perspective.” The only cultural area where *Creative Loafing* seriously competes with *The Observer* is in the literary arts. The weekly periodically devotes special sections to books and helps sponsor major literary conferences and other events every year.

Public radio and television: Although their journalistic staffs are not large, Charlotte’s wealth of public radio and television stations enriches the city’s cultural awareness. The city is served by four public radio stations: WFAE-FM, jazz and NPR, based at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; WDAV-FM, classical, based at Davidson College; WNSC-FM, jazz, classical and NPR, part of the centralized South Carolina public radio network; and WNCW-FM, eclectic contemporary folk and rock, based at Isothermal Community College in Spindale, North Carolina. There are also three public television stations:

the independent WTVI; WUNG-TV, part of the centralized North Carolina public television network; and WNSC-TV, part of the centralized South Carolina public television network.

Commercial television and radio: No ongoing coverage of the arts. Occasional interviews with stars of touring Broadway shows and attention paid to controversial stories broken by *The Observer*.

Charlotte’s Best and *Charlotte Magazine*: Monthly features.

Various zines, poetry journals, literary magazines: Sundry and niche-oriented.

The Leader: A community weekly with one freelancer who covers mostly movies but occasionally theater. Attention paid to controversial stories.

The Business Journal: Weekly with occasional items and mentions of the arts and arts leaders, usually from the standpoint of corporate contributors.

“We work like hell. Sometimes we miss stuff, but not very often. We don’t like learning stuff at press conferences.”

Tony Brown, Theater Critic
The Charlotte Observer

VOICES FROM THE STAFF

If I had the resources, I would have an arts section every day. But we don’t have those kinds of resources. When you can’t do broad stroke coverage every day, you try to aggregate it for maximum impact for times when most of the readers are likely to be thinking about arts and culture.

I don’t know whether we have ever had a discussion about separating pop and high culture into specific packaging. What we have ended up with has been an evolution about what kind of components we could put together to make the strongest sections. I would also say that it makes complete intellectual sense to put pop and high culture together in the same way we report NFL and high school scores in the sports section.

Frank Barrows, Managing Editor, *The Charlotte Observer*

We are forever making improvements to our arts and entertainment sections. A few years ago we totally redid the Friday section and made it a tabloid. I keep getting calls on how great it is, but the fact is, it’s smoke and mirrors. Despite how good our coverage is, we do not have enough resources to cover the arts in this community. There is constant stress on the human resources around here. The work has increased and the staff has stayed about the same. We haven’t had a visual arts staff person since about 1993, and we’ve been doing it with a freelancer. As a result we’re missing a lot of news. We try to fill it in with general assignment people, but we are spread thin. In a word, we run very lean and mean, and when somebody goes on a vacation or a fellowship, we’re hobbled. We patch it together because of the quality of people we have here and the passion people have to put out a good product. But it’s hard as hell.

Tony Brown, Theater Critic, *The Charlotte Observer*