

CULTURAL AND HERITAGE DISTRICTS

Cultural and heritage districts are defined geographic areas to promote and preserve the cultural and historical resources of the area. The goals of these districts can be broad ranging and may be coupled with a focus on marketing local artists, attracting tourists, community revitalization, or community stabilization. Unlike local historic districts, a cultural or heritage district designation does not create any legal protections for the structures within the district.

1 City-designated cultural and heritage districts

City councils can adopt an ordinance creating a local cultural or heritage district designation along with the goals of the designation and procedures for qualifying for the designation.

In Houston, a heritage district is a new designation available to foster nonprofit organizations' ability to protect, restore, or install culturally and historically significant elements within the city's public right-of-way in the district, such as brick-paved streets, sidewalks, signage and markers, public art, and vegetation.²⁵ The designation does not apply to private property. To be eligible for the designation, an area must be distinguished by a unique community identity and history.



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Austin - East Austin: Charles E. Urdy Plaza

The City's first local heritage district, the Freedmen's Town Heritage District, was created in 2021. Within the district, the Freedmen's Town Conservancy plans to raise funds to repair and restore the brick roadways, which were originally laid by hand in the district when the city refused to pave the neighborhood's streets, and to line the streets with benches and public art, among other improvements in the city's right-of-way.

2 State-designated cultural districts

In 2005, the Texas Legislature gave the Texas Commission on the Arts (TCA) authority to designate cultural districts across the state.²⁶ As of 2021, more than 47 cultural districts had been designated by the TCA. A list and map of the districts is available on the TCA's [website](#). To qualify as a cultural district with the Commission, an organization or collaboration of organizations must first submit a letter of intent with a one-page description of the plans for the cultural district, followed by an orientation meeting with Commission staff. The staff will work closely with the applicant in developing the application. Recertification is required every ten years, along with an annual report.²⁷

TCA-designated cultural districts, along with arts organizations and agencies in the district, are eligible for the Commission's Arts Respond Cultural District Project grants of up to 50% of a project's budget, with grant amounts ranging from \$3,000 to \$250,000.²⁸ Grant applications are available on TCA's website.²⁹ The grant applicants are reviewed based on artistic quality (e.g., the quality of artists and works of art in the proposed district), capability (e.g., administrative capability, personnel, demonstrated history, budget, planning), and impact (e.g., audience, education, public service).³⁰

Examples of TCA-designated cultural districts

- **Six Square, Austin:** Six Square is a nonprofit organization and cultural district that celebrates and preserves the arts, culture, and history within a six-square mile area of Central East Austin that birthed the rich heritage and cultural contributions of Austin's African American community. Six Square was designated as a local cultural district by the City of Austin in 2007, followed by a designation from the Texas Commission on the Arts. Six Square receives funding through the City of Austin's Economic Development Department and the National Endowment for the Arts, among other funders.
- **Third Ward Cultural District (The Tre), Houston:** The district—located at the epicenter of Black art, culture, and history in Houston—was formed to preserve, protect, inspire, and share the artistic and cultural legacy of the historic Third Ward. The district, which is overseen by the nonprofit organization Project Row Houses, was designated as a cultural district by the Texas Commission on the Arts in 2020.
- **Fifth Ward Cultural Arts District, Houston:** The district, located in one of Houston's oldest Black neighborhoods, is overseen by the Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation, with the support of numerous community partners. The district is guided by a Cultural Arts District Plan and was designated as a cultural district by the Texas Commission on the Arts in 2020.