Shreveport Common

A VISION FOR AN UNCOMMON CULTURAL DISTRICT
Council. He didn’t want the mourners to let the Mayor’s challenge go.

Friends and comrades to find a new home for Shreveport Regional Arts. It was during this critical time…just days after the fire, that the designer…for a true Cultural Economy instigated by the rebirth of…did not seem to see the flames’ destruction; he saw the phoenix…the…set by an arsonist, which destroyed the offices, artists’ rehearsal space,

Mayor Glover’s “edict” was forged in the throes of a devastating fire,…”Create a Cultural Community; propel a Cultural Economy.” Almost 20 years later, with a demonstrated $90 million in annual Economic Impact and the production and presentation of more than several thousand times.

This stanza from “Paint Your Wagon” served as the introduction to the…you wagon and come along!

When will we get there, I ain’t saying; how will we get there, I don’t know…all I know is I am on my way! Got a dream boy, Got a song, Paint your wagon and come along!...
To begin the presentation of the Shreveport Common Vision Plan, a reprise of the goals established by Mayor Cedric Glover for the Shreveport Regional Arts Council is appropriate:

- To restore the historic Central Fire Station as the headquarters of the Shreveport Regional Arts Council
- To provide the facility with expanded public spaces for performance, display, and artistic development
- To leverage this public private partnership into a revitalization of the neighboring blocks as an urban cultural district
- To create a new entrance gateway into downtown Shreveport via Common Street
The Vision Plan would like to acknowledge the leadership, ideas, and commitment of those who served so faithfully during many months of the process.

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Wayne Brown,
SporTran,
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 Salvation Army Apartments,
First United Methodist Church.

**Shreveport Common: A Vision For An Uncommon Culture**

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Vicki & Billy LeBrun, Donor
Valerie McElhose, Roster Artist Representative
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David Nelson, City of Shreveport Community Development
Liz Swaine, Director

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The NEAMayor’s Institute on City Design 25th Anniversary Initiative

**THE EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION OF AMERICA**

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Public Art
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Senator Lydia P. Jackson, Louisiana Senate
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Shreveport Common: A Vision For An Uncommon Cultural District

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**Shreveport Common was conceived after a devastating fire engulfed the Shreveport Regional Arts Council’s (SRAC) headquarters on August 25, 2009. Few would have thought that the senseless act of a homeless person would have spurred the rebuilding of a once-great commercial and institutional neighborhood.**

**The decision to relocate this dynamic arts powerhouse into a strategically positioned new headquarters has the potential, in Mayor Glover’s words, “to change the landscape of downtown Shreveport.” He challenged SRAC, its board, and other supporters to raise the funds necessary to make this dream a reality and the community immediately took up his challenge.**

**For most contributors, this was viewed not only as an arts vision, but a broader heritage preservation and urban revitalization cause.**

**Then, as if a playwright had been hired to draft a script, the National Endowment for the Arts announced its 25th Anniversary, Mayor’s Institute for City Design grants, and SRAC was asked by Mayor Glover to apply for this prestigious funding.**

**Officially, Shreveport Common was borne out of the interdisciplinary efforts of SRAC’s Visioning and grant writing for the 9-block area surrounding the Central Fire Station. SRAC conceived an urban cultural district powered by the forces of the Arts and Humanities – one that would stimulate the physical and economic renewal of this neglected area and identify it as a place where artists and others can live, work, and play.**

**In Shreveport’s case it began with Mayor Cedric B. Glover, City Council members, and department leaders who pledged a “new day” in the glow of the still-raging fire. This was followed closely by parish and state leaders, who independently affirmed the importance of the Arts to the region and committed to their future.**

**Within days, the historic Central Fire Station was identified as a recently surplus building and a potential new headquarters.**

**A much-beloved landmark since its construction in 1922, the Italian Renaissance-style building is a functional work of art itself, and quickly proved it could supply all the needed administrative requirements, while serving the individual artists and arts organizations in dramatically new ways. And it must be noted, the building is totally fireproof.**

**Of greatest importance is the Central Fire Station’s strategic location; sited pivotally on a principal artery and entrance into downtown, the Station is surrounded by a blighted neighborhood filled with architectural treasures. In spite of a concentration of grass roots arts activities nearby, the area has a poor public persona and no shared identity. However, it possesses an amazingly rich history of diversity, tolerance, and creativity.**

**Historians and cultural geographers have identified a typically American urban phenomenon: a cycle of build-neglect-decay-renew, but a disaster seems to miraculously speed up the process. In fortunate circumstances, such a crisis brings with it an opportunity for the creative best to come out from all those involved.**
Defining The District

One of the strengths of the Shreveport Common concept was the recognition and acknowledgement of a large-scaled troubled urban area, but also the deliberate focus on the blocks immediately surrounding the Central Fire Station as they contain the most intact and significant architectural fabric and the longest-term stakeholders and institutions. The “paths” of the study area respond to the precepts set forth by urbanist Kevin Lynch and focus on the major arteries of Common Street, the original west boundary of the City of Shreveport, and Texas Avenue, the early 19th century trail route to and from Texas. The “edges” in Lynch’s terminology, are clearer on the north and south and are defined by Oakland Cemetery and the Union Pacific Railroad respectively, both strong and historic physical boundaries.

On the other hand, the east and west boundaries are somewhat more calculated for a number of reasons: first, to limit the project scope to a workable size; second, to provide sufficient protection to the major paths; to include the principal landmarks and nodes within a reasonable distance from the Central Fire Station; and finally, to “key” the district into both renewed and pre-renewal neighboring areas.

At the request of Mayor Glover, who especially appreciated the “gateway” opportunities presented by Shreveport Common, the 1930s viaduct over the railroad lines was included in the district as part of a well-defined entranceway. After discussions with an important public/private organization, Friends of Oakland Cemetery, the northern boundary was extended to embrace the entirety of Oakland Cemetery instead of ending at the original entrance gates on Milam Street. The inclusion of Oakland Cemetery underscores the importance of its historic 1912 entry gates as a portal into the city’s first public park, and solidly links this community preservation effort and its future programming to the life of the Shreveport Common cultural district.

“The Shreveport Regional Arts Council and the City of Shreveport are making Arts Work. We are using Creative Placemaking to drive a Cultural Economy by starting with a Vision Plan – one that puts the Arts and Artists at the center of energizing a blighted area.”

— Shreveport Mayor Cedric Glover
A PHYSICAL HISTORY OF Shreveport Common

BEGINNINGS

The City of Shreveport was founded in 1836 by the Shreve Town Company, a corporation established to develop a town at the juncture of the newly navigable Red River and the Texas Trail, an overland route into a recently independent Republic of Texas and, prior to that time, into Mexico. Newly named for the westernmost street in the original city survey, Common Street, the area now known as Shreveport Common was for many years unimproved farmland with few formal streets or roads. One of the earliest early representations of the area appears in the 1872 Bird’s Eye View Map of Shreveport, but unfortunately, few maps have been found that depict the area before 1890.

The area is easily recognized as the original city grid ended and the roads meandered among small farms to the west and eventually Texas, just twenty miles away. Since the street now known as Texas Avenue was the actual trail between the now independent Republic of Texas and Shreveport, and was also the most reliable means of transport to and from markets, this trailhead became an important node for immigrants, planters, livestock and land speculators. The open triangle just outside the grid, now framed by Texas Avenue, Common, and Crockett Streets became an important staging area—almost a market place unto itself—as large collections of wagons and herds could prepare either to enter or leave the city from this open, bare expanse of land. It is not surprising that up to and beyond the advent of the railroads in the region and the subsequent reduced emphasis on the riverfront port, this triangle remained undeveloped. It was not until 1900 that a two-story hotel with attached commercial buildings was constructed on this central site.

Westward beyond this site were some few scattered wooden buildings that served as private homes and small entrepreneurial businesses, often all on the same property in the tradition of an earlier America. These small business owners, who supplied services and goods to the trade route, included recently emancipated African-Americans who lived off the land and their agri-industry labors.

For many years the most important land use in the immediate area was the city cemetery, now known as Oakland Cemetery. It was informally used since the 1830s, but was made official by the moving and re-interment of burials from an earlier site in 1847. In addition to its role as the community’s burial ground, away from the noise, smells, and dangers of the riverfront, this 10-acre block served as the City’s principal community’s park, in the 19th century tradition.

“It is the heritage of opportunity, creativity and tolerance that make Shreveport Common a historically and spiritually dynamic place. That spirit lives today, embodied in the stories, landmarks, and people that endure.”

The 1872 Bird’s Eye View Map of Shreveport; detail of the Shreveport Common area ( inset).
It was in the late 19th century that Shreveport’s growth as the distribution center of the Ark-La-Tex region took hold. With its combination of river and rail connections to markets—particularly to New Orleans, one of the nation’s largest ports—and via railroad connection from Vicksburg to Dallas, the city attracted more than its share of both domestic and foreign immigration. Merchants and industrialists flocked to the Red River and soon the original city grid overflowed its 64-block footprint.
Since much of this area was still widely used as residential, sites along the rail lines were the first to transition to commerce, inspiring citizens of all economic levels to venture out from the original city and begin the first suburban neighborhoods. One of these neighborhoods was immediately west of town beyond Common Street, where, in the 1890s some of the largest and finest houses were arranged on newly established streets: Grand Avenue, Christian Street, and the extension of Cotton Street, to name a few. These were the addresses of choice for wealthy merchants, industrialists, and socialites, as well as famous politicians such as former Governor and U.S. Senator Newton Grain Blanchard. Blanchard’s house at the southwest corner of Common and Cotton Streets was perhaps the city’s largest and most extravagant home built up to that time. The African-American community lived on unpaved lanes called REO Quarters, Jones Alley and Gable Court on the outskirts of this district, primarily in rental properties along the railroad. Another African-American neighborhood began along the blocks north and east of the cemetery in areas later known as St. Paul’s Bottoms and Ledbetter Heights, extending further west to near the current line of Interstate 20.

"On The Twentieth Century"
This outward growth paved the way for other construction in the area, notably fine places of worship with a new building for St. Matthew’s AME Church on Grand Avenue, (1896-1899), a new St. Mark’s Episcopal Church (1904), and the Byzantine Temple (1914). Social clubs and other institutions chose the area for their homes as well with the BPOE, Elks, and other lodges ultimately joined by the magnificent Scottish Rite Cathedral in 1917. The Kate P. Nelson Seminary, a girls’ school in an imposing three-story turreted wood frame structure, appeared in the late 1890s and might have been a draw for other institutions. This complex located in the 900 Block of Texas Avenue where a new parking lot is located today, was later converted to a hospital known as the Shreveport Sanitarium.

The new residents created a market for the middle class white, black, and ethnic citizens who could afford the small commercial lots strung along Texas Avenue and Crockett Streets. There they built service-oriented businesses from which they could ply trades and goods with a remarkable breadth and depth. Initially, commerce began to creep across Common Street from the “City” on Texas and Milam Streets to Texas Avenue. The first blocks that began to develop in the 1890s showed a mix of labor services and tenement houses for African-Americans; positioned side-by-side were painters, wheelwrights, woodworking and tin shops, blacksmiths, notions stores, small groceries and a bakery. The many small wood frame dwellings (some we would today describe as sheds or shacks) served double duty as live/work spaces, a trend that would continue as buildings grew in size and quality.

As the decade progressed, more and more substantial buildings were constructed directly on the sidewalk frontage with a decidedly commercial form. But by 1899, only one substantial two-story masonry building had been erected on lower Texas Avenue, still surrounded by one-story frame buildings. However, City directories and the Sanborn Maps document that the area had begun its transition from labor- to service-oriented businesses, and now included restaurants, lunch counters, a dressmaker’s shop, a confectioners; and a wallpaper shop. Also by 1899, Texas Avenue was brick-paved, at least for the first few blocks west of Common Street, and was the only paved street in this part of town.
Looking west up Texas Avenue from Common Street, c. 1910.

Looking north up Common Street from Texas Street, c. 1910.
The streetcar lines quickly brought the Shreveport Common area into “the loop”, shown in this c. 1910 postcard, looking east down Texas Avenue as it traveled toward Oakland Cemetery and later the Municipal Auditorium and the early suburbs.

Construction on one of the City’s most noted landmarks, the splendid Gothic Revival Church of the Holy Cross, formerly St. Mark’s Episcopal, was begun in 1904 as the neighborhood continued to grow in prominence.

That same year another promotional piece was created and published by the Shreveport Progressive League. The purpose of Shreveport of To-Day was to “[set] forth the opportunities offered the homeseeker, investor and capitalist because of the agricultural, stock-raising, manufacturing, mineral, climatic, educational and other resources.” This impressive work documents the entire city exceptionally well, and includes a number of listings and views of the Shreveport Common area prior to the boom years that would soon follow.
Within the short span of five years, both sides of the 800 block of Texas Avenue were filled with commercial buildings. Houses were concentrated at the lots near the intersection of Cotton Street. The north side of the block was comprised of a mixture of nearly half two-story masonry buildings and half one-story frame buildings, while the south side featured predominantly one-story frame structures. With the exception of the tiny frame hotel, on "The Triangle" (bounded by Common and Crockett, and Texas Avenue) held a random collection of dwellingsfronting Common and Crockett Streets and small frame offices along Texas Avenue. This cohesive commercial fabric passed for institutional and residential blocks—St. Mark’s Episcopal was completed in 1905—before resuming in a continuous commercial streetscape on the north side of the 1600 block.

The streets intersecting Texas Avenue were all predominantly residential, but it appears the era of the grandest houses had passed. While many large frame houses occupied the surrounding blocks, none were as large as those from the 1890s, even on Grand Avenue. Predictably, corner lots (highly desirable for their visibility, prestige and superior ventilation) attracted the wealthy and their larger houses. In this area, where houses could be situated facing away from the hot western sun, those lots were most desirable. Many of the earliest and largest houses occupied those prime locations. From analysis of maps and city directories, it appears that few large houses were built west of Christian Street (now Austin Place). As a choice residential neighborhood, it is evident that the area had peaked and newer developments had begun to draw the wealthy to the suburbs south of downtown. Even with the planting of important religious and social institutions in the immediate area, the heyday of Shreveport Common as a wealthy residential district was over; almost every lot was filled, and a cohesive, mixed upper- and middle–class neighborhood thrived, sandwiched between what would now be termed “neighborhood business districts.”

Part of the technology that encouraged the growth of the city south and west was the expansion of the trolley, or electric streetcar system. Inaugurated in 1890 and serving the immediate central business district, the lines grew to encompass the new suburbs of Park Place and Holmenville, now better known as Fairfield and Highland.
Shreveport Common literally boomed in the 1920s with the sounds of commerce, industry, jazz and blues "filling" the streets day and night. Remarkably, the Shreveport Fire Insurance Map Company, which had previously recorded the City's physical condition every five years or so, did not return to Shreveport until 1935, thus neglecting the greatest building boom, but the city was ever so anxious. Most American cities experienced the building boom of the 1920s even without the economic infusion that the oil industry brought to Shreveport. Here, in the second largest city in Louisiana, maps were made to inform insurance underwriters on conditions of fire safety, combustible buildings, and water and fire-fighting capacity. Why one of the fastest growing communities in the nation was omitted in this manner will always be a mystery.

Fortunately, most of the important buildings from this era still exist and allow one to glean important historical data from both their stylistic details and other extant archival materials (including aerial photographs which came into being with the advent of air travel). Further, one may look to the maps from 1935 to extrapolate physical and other information still pertinent in the decades following. Due to the Great Depression and in spite of great public works projects, the City shared a period of reduced development with much of the nation.

According to the Sanborn Map information, one of the earliest significant changes to the area began with the clearing of the triangle bounded by Texas Avenue, Common and Crockett Streets, and the construction of a two-story brick and concrete hotel on that property in 1918. Trapezoidal in shape, the Southern Hotel featured a rectangular open space on its rear (east) side facing Crockett Street, presumably a terrace. The sloping topography of the site allowed for a lower basement level to be accessed from Common Street, while the hotel lobby opened at sidewalk level on Texas Avenue. Incorporated into this medium-sized hotel were flanking commercial buildings, the facades of which were chamfered at each end to create shorter east and west end elevations.

The 1920’s

Across the street, the even-number side of the 800 Block of Texas Avenue was fully constructed after 1909, much as it remains today. The National Register of Historic Places nomination for this block employs the date 1907 as the earliest of the extant buildings and states that all of the buildings were completed by c. 1917, but more research is warranted on individual properties. This was the first of two transformational decades for the district, changing the north side of Texas Avenue and parts of the south into a two-story commercial row. Only one new residence seems to have been built during this era, probably in the late 1910s; a plain four-square house at 878 Texas Avenue.

As the economy continued to prosper, Shreveport continued to grow, and people of all socio-economic levels started businesses and built buildings in the Shreveport Common vicinity, but important public works projects were the stars of the show. After a destructive fire of its earlier station at 721 Millin Street in 1920, the City commissioned the new Italian Renaissance-styled Central Fire Station at the southwest corner of Common and Crockett Streets completed in 1922. This site selection heralded the shift of the city to the south and west and the continued prestige of the area as a progressive part of town. The selection of a historical revival style was typical of the early 1920s and was still popular over a decade later, in spite of the influx of the new “modern” styles.

The lots immediately to the west of the new fire station remained in residential use with four earlier frame houses remaining through the post-war period. At the intersection of Cotton Street and Texas Avenue, the two-story commercial buildings noted above remained intact, flanked by lower-scaled commercial buildings and enterprises that apparently changed forms and uses often, but did not produce any large-scale constructions.

Around 1923, the Yorke Hotel, now known as the McAdoo, was constructed on the northwest corner of Texas Avenue and Christian Street, (now Austen Place). This plain red brick three-story building most likely served traveling salesman and other businessmen in the white community going to and from the west.
By contrast, that same year across the Avenue, an elite group of African-American local men developed a handsome professional building at the behest of the Court of Calanthe, a black women’s organization which located its district headquarters here. Designed by the local architectural firm of Somdal Associates, the Calanthean Temple is a four-story, well-detailed Colonial Revival office building in red brick with limestone detailing. Its facade features a stone veened first floor with a pedimented entrance accessing the café, cigar store and other retail spaces within listed in the City directories of the period. Other architectural features like the colossal pilasters, entablature, balustrade and cornice provide details as richly designed and executed as contemporary buildings in the central business district, including the Strand Theatre. At the top of the Temple was the Roof Garden where important African-American musicians from around the country frequently performed. This, the finest building built on upper Texas Avenue, was both a physical and social landmark from its inception and denotes that economic growth of the era had extended well into the minority community.

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The most significant public building investment in the area during this time was the construction of the Municipal Memorial Auditorium on the Grand Avenue site of St. Matthew’s AME Church, in whose shadow famed evangelist Billy Sunday preached in 1924. Since Sunday most often drew large crowds to tent revivals, it is not known if St. Matthew’s Church still existed at the time or if the site was vacant in anticipation of the auditorium’s construction, but it is evident that Grand Avenue leading to the city’s historic cemetery was still considered a prosperous address for this magnificent memorial building.

The “Modernist” Municipal Memorial Auditorium building was designed by the architecture firm of Jones, Roessle, Olschner & Wiener, with hometown architect Samuel Wiener the principal designer. Wiener had grown up on Christian in the former Olgivie Mansion. His new building dwarfed and outshone all its neighbors, and gave the entire area a new visual focus. The old Shreveport Sanitarium had long since been demolished on the south end of the block, and much of that site had been left as open space.

An important aspect of Modernistic architecture was the achievement of a modern look through the application of stylized decorative details to a traditional building form. The decorative motifs used were often derived from historical periods, but they were stylized beyond easy recognition. The point was to create an up-to-date, lively, and geometrically rich composition, which could be applied to the requirements of a particular building design.

There are probably about fifty or so noteworthy Modernistic buildings in Louisiana. Of these, the Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium is one of five or six examples which stand as landmarks of the style. It is one of the very largest, and, more importantly, it is one of the most intensively styled. While most examples feature ornamentation applied here and there, the exterior of the Shreveport Auditorium is almost all ornamentation, with hardly a square yard not treated in some way or other, on all elevations. From decorative brick bands and spindled panels, to multiple chevrons, to limestone arabesque panels, to brick fluting, Modernistic ornamentation makes a statement in the Shreveport Auditorium. It makes all but a very few examples in the state pallid by comparison.

Roland Hayes (1887-1977)

Tenor and composer Roland Hayes was born in Garyville, Georgia, on June 1887. His parents were ex-slaves who worked as tenant farmers. He left home in 1905 to study at Fisk University in Nashville. Hayes later relocated to Boston, believing he had a better chance as a professional musician in the north. In April 1920, Hayes sailed for London, where he performed regularly, but found little financial success. Finally, he gave a critically successful recital of Negro folk music and was commissioned to perform before British royalty, which led to engagements across Europe. He returned to the United States in 1923 and began touring. Southern venues would not engage him initially, but he soon sang to integrated audiences in Atlanta and other southern cities. Hayes spent most of the next two decades giving vocal recitals and performing with orchestras throughout the United States and Europe. He was grandly welcomed in the Soviet Union in 1928, but stopped touring Europe in the 1930’s due to changes in the political and racial climate. At the peak of his career, he was one of the first international singers to perform at the new Shreveport Municipal Auditorium. From the 1930’s until his retirement in 1957, Hayes performed sporadically, including several recitals at Carnegie Hall. He purchased and retired on the Georgia farm where his parents had been tenant farmers. Hayes’ life reveals a remarkable story of a man who went from the plantation to the palace, performing before kings and queens, with the finest international and American orchestras, in segregated communities before blacks and whites alike.
Another significant addition to the area was made in the 1920s. The Art Deco-styled Hemenway-Johnson Furniture Store and Warehouse was completed in 1927 on Texas Avenue facing west toward the auditorium. This six-story structure, the second largest building built in the 1920s, is the tallest commercial building ever built in Shreveport Common. Appliqués of Art Deco ornament and strong vertical ribs with stone caps dress up the building’s boxy urban warehouse form.

For the most part, the 1920s were stable years for Shreveport Common’s physical appearance, but the changes brought by city sprawl and the automobile were to have a marked effect on the population and urban fabric in the area. Notably, two buildings were constructed for the sole purpose of auto storage: the elegant terra cotta façade at 723 Milam and the simple brick building behind it at 718 Crockett. The finest of the extant automotive buildings is the former Andress Motor Company at 717 Crockett, (1929) with its dazzling Art Deco imagery of speed, sophistication and progress that would soon attract buyers to the latest automobile models.

This two-story brick and concrete structure was essentially a parking garage over a showroom with open lots to the east and across the street. Its façade is simply organized, but effectively employs stained glass transoms, stucco spandrels and cast terra cotta ornament to enrich an otherwise functional building.

Elsewhere in the neighborhood, residential blocks began to see the addition of domestic garages in single and double sizes, usually located at the rear of each lot. But a change to the pivotal property at the corner of Christian Street (Austen Place) and Milam was to sound the first warning of decline for the neighborhood. After the 1927 construction of an industrial building, an auto body shop and later a bottling plant, the once prestigious block would never be the same again.

Early views of the Andress Motors and Hemenway-Johnson Furniture buildings.

The 1930’s

Nationwide, general construction dropped significantly after the stock market crash of 1929, but Shreveport’s strong economy prevailed better than most parts of the country, especially with the discovery of large local oil and gas fields in 1930. This otherwise lean decade saw the completion of several projects in the Shreveport Common area, in both traditional and modern styles. Around 1929-30, the corner of Louisiana and Cotton Streets was an important node on the route from downtown to the Union Depot. Those years saw the completion of the three-story red brick and terra cotta Arlington Hotel on the northeast corner, which incorporated several small retail bays on its east side along Louisiana Street. Across Cotton, a one-story ornamental brick and stone Art Deco commercial row was completed and soon housed the city’s oldest extant bar, along with restaurants, offices, and small businesses leading down to the train station.

Even with the growth of private businesses in the vicinity, it is significant that an important social services organization located in the area and built one of the city’s most endearing buildings. East of Common Street on Crockett Street in the original city grid, stands the Salvation Army Building, completed in 1932 and for its small size, one of the best detailed Art Deco buildings in the community. Its composition emphasizes the verticality of the early Art Deco movement with its dynamic façade divided into five bays by brick piers capped in stone. The building combines the popular zigzag and stylized floral motifs with neo-classical fluting and exceptional brickwork. Perhaps this small tour-de-force was inspired by the local Mercury dealership across Crockett Street a few years before.

Another building in the Shreveport Common area that speaks to the changing nature of the City is the large private home at 814 Cotton Street, now the headquarters of Providence House. Built before 1900, this Victorian house was completely remodeled in the 1950s in the Colonial Revival style and was converted into a handsome rooming house, another indication of the transition the neighborhood was undergoing.

The urbane Art Deco-styled Salvation Army Building built in 1932.

It was not long after this remodeling that city directories list the building as a boarding house for young business-women, responding to the need to properly house the new class of single working women coming into the city.
(Above) The Crystal Gasoline Company’s pavilion-like main building was located on Texas Avenue and one of two polygonal station designs in the neighborhood.

(left) The McFaddin Service Station, at the intersection of Cotton Street and Texas Avenue, was built in the 1930s using a surplus airplane as its office and canopy.

Providence House was originally a Victorian mansion, but was remodeled in the 1930s into the Colonial Revival style.

Sadly, the decade of the 1930s signaled the beginning of the end for some of the early mansions, particularly the Blanchard House across Cotton Street. Following the former Governor’s death, it was rented for use as a funeral home and then demolished in 1935. Loss of the city’s grandest mansion signaled the slow demise of this once elegant neighborhood.

The automotive movement was to have a profound and lasting effect on the physical appearance of the Shreveport Common area. As the market for automobiles steadily grew, dealerships sought locations near the central business district and accessible to the suburbs to sell their products. At first new autos were sold in storefront buildings as noted above, but by 1935 the first of the used auto lots appeared in the neighborhood on the large site vacated by the Shreveport Sanitarium and the former residential sites.

Other physical examples of the growing automobile culture were “filling” stations and auto repair businesses, which seem to flock to less densely built areas outside the central business district.

By the mid-1930s, auto body, tire and repair shops dotted the neighborhood, especially the properties across from St. Mark’s Church between Texas Avenue and Cotton Street. There were also two architecturally distinct “filling” stations in that block, one of which was an inspired creation using a recycled airplane fuselage, and the other a Colonial Revival pavilion. At least four other “filling” stations appeared at various corners in the area, replacing earlier residential and commercial buildings with this important new use. None of the stations have survived and their sites are used today as parking lots.
Little if any construction is known to have taken place in the district during the war years, but afterwards the trends continued as in the previous decade with an increase in auto sales and service facilities replacing earlier retail and residential sites. The most significant building constructed was a large auto dealership complex built on the site once occupied by the Shreveport Sanitarium. Occupying the entire property between Grand Avenue and Baker Street, the concrete Moderne–style showroom fronted on Texas Avenue with a very large roofed service building attached at the north; the remainder of the site was an open auto sales lot with assorted service buildings.

During this decade, the city extended Milam Street across Common to relieve some of the traffic congestion on Texas Avenue. While this decision made access to the Municipal Auditorium much easier, it necessitated the demolition of several important buildings on Common Street and significantly changed the approach to Texas Avenue. At this point in time, the Sanborn fire insurance maps ceased their routine mapping of most cities and relied on other data gathering for underwriting purposes. As a result, Shreveport’s final map collections cover the years from 1935-1963, making it difficult to use them to document the physical change to the area with the same accuracy of earlier eras.

The post-war decade saw the beginning of residential demolition and replacement with commercial and institutional uses, now into the streets intersecting Texas Avenue, like Christian Street (by this time re-named Jones Place for a local family) and Grand Avenue. In 1946 the Municipal Auditorium began its most famous period as it started hosting the popular radio show, the Louisiana Hayride. It is assumed that during those years, the newly vacant properties in the area were used for parking lots as the weekly show attracted large live audiences from far and wide. Around 1948 the most significant change to the neighborhood occurred with the demolition of the upper portion of the Southern Hotel complex in the 800 block of Texas Avenue, leaving the elevated concrete platform of the furniture store basement in place. Further deterioration and demolition along the south side of the Avenue continued until only two buildings remained.

The 1940s

The community spirit of the war years resulted in public awareness activities and volunteerism in the late 1940s. Clean-up campaigns as we experience today were a vital part of keeping Shreveport beautiful and a source of pride. Note the hexagonal brick “filling” station across Common Street from the Central Fire Station.

(Above)  The community spirit of the war years resulted in public awareness activities and volunteerism in the late 1940s. Clean-up campaigns as we experience today were a vital part of keeping Shreveport beautiful and a source of pride. Note the hexagonal brick “filling” station across Common Street from the Central Fire Station.

(Opposite Page)  An aerial view of the district, c. 1940, with Texas Avenue prominently at its center.
As documented in the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of 1963, few new structures filled the sites vacated by residential flight to the suburbs. On Grand Avenue, a new church was constructed facing the Municipal Auditorium, which still exists as the Lakeside Baptist Church. Auto sales lots had finally encompassed the remaining residential properties on Grand Avenue. In fact, most of the beautiful residential block on Cotton Street as well as all the residential properties up through the 1000 block of Texas Avenue had become auto sales lots. It was only a matter of time before the B’nai Zion congregation would both outgrow their 1914 site as well as desire a more convenient and modern location nearer the residential areas of town. They relocated in 1953 and the building was sold to the Knights of Columbus.

The beautiful St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, now surrounded by auto sales lots, repair shops and “filling” stations, was an island in a commercial sea. Its congregation felt it could no longer sustain itself in such an environment and voted to move to a new site in the southern suburbs, taking a majority of the congregation to their new location. Those who stayed reestablished themselves as The Church of the Holy Cross and have maintained a strong presence in their landmark building ever since.

On Austen Place, the 1890s Wiener Mansion was converted in 1951 into the Florentine, a private club and restaurant for many years. The neighboring Logan Mansion became a boarding house for teachers, a youth center and later a radio station, while the balance of Austen Place remained in residential use, mostly rental properties.

The most significant private investment in the Shreveport Common area during this era was the construction of the 15-story Town House Apartment tower, (1952-1954) on the northeast corner of Cotton and Common Streets, now known as the Fairmont. This fully air-conditioned modern tower featured elevators, a restaurant and two shops on the first floor, convenient parking and wonderful views of the city and the Red River valley. By the 1950s and ‘60s, the historic 800 Block of Texas Avenue had lost much of its diverse retail and service businesses and much of its upper-level residential nature, with stores having become almost entirely devoted to new and used furniture sales.

One of the most dramatic changes to the Shreveport Common area and the entire downtown was the construction of the Common Street Viaduct in 1955-56. This massive concrete and steel overpass was designed to ease traffic into downtown from the major growth areas to the south. All of the daily major inter-city vehicular traffic from the city’s principal residential suburbs had to cross the dangerous railroad tracks at some point along the south edge of the central business district, many of which terminated at the nearby Union and Central railroad stations. Railroad traffic in the region peaked in the early post-war years prior to highway improvements and the growth of national trucking. These tracks would have been constantly busy and a daily hindrance to traveling across town. The viaduct not only cut this congestion and frustration, it also made the area much safer for citizens and the neighborhood. One adverse consequence of the new overpass was the isolation of the two large railroad stations from the principal traffic patterns in the city, so much so that stairways were incorporated into landings stop the viaduct for pedestrian access to the railroad stations.

The greatest change in this era was the introduction of the national interstate highway network. The resulting Spring/Market/Common Street entrance and exit ramps from I-20 destroyed the entire connective neighborhood between downtown and the suburbs, creating a barren valley of ramps and elevated roadways. These changes furthered the perception that the Shreveport Common district had evolved from a vital center to a marginal and neglected edge of downtown.
As the area became more and more sparse, the city initiated some community development programs to heighten the appeal of the area. The largest and most successful of these was the construction of the Municipal Plaza in 1982 at the intersection of Milam and Common Streets, and Texas Avenue. Having been neglected for a number of years, this plaza was adopted by a small group of citizens and is now known as Aseana Gardens.

During this long period there have been some significant positive events in the physical life of the Shreveport Common area. They include the arrival of Providence House on Cotton Street in the 1990s, the acquisition of a major portion of the 800 block of Texas Avenue, and the purchase of the Logan Mansion by local preservationists. However, this period also saw the abandonment of the B’nai Zion Temple, the loss or partial collapse of a number of historic buildings, and the introduction of several social services organizations such as halfway houses and homeless shelters that further contributed to the perception of the area as blighted and dangerous. In the 1990s the Fairmont Apartment tower was sold and repurposed as a Section 8 housing project which has had limited success as a wholesome inner city residential location. As businesses and residents continued to leave the areas, incidences of crime and homelessness rose. Finally, the stalwart and secure presence of the Fire Department was lost when it built and relocated to a new Central Fire Station on North Common Street.

The 1970s-2000s

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In summary, the area now known as Shreveport Common has been perhaps the most dynamic section of downtown during the course of the city’s history, with dramatic evolutions in functional, social, economic and political status occurring over its first 175 years. No one place in the city can claim to have been such a crucible of change: from the cotton and cattle days, through wars and depressions, from social and technological advances, to railroads and automobiles all the way into the digital age. This area was historically the district within the city and, for the most part, in Northeast Louisiana where hard-working Anglo-Americans, disenfranchised African-Americans and newly arrived immigrants could realize the American dream. The microcosm that is the Shreveport Common is truly pivotal to the story of Shreveport. History proves from its earliest days that the area nurtured new faith communities and organizations of social service from the early 1900s Community Relief Center to the 1932 Salvation Army headquarters to Providence House and Philadelphia Center. Beginning in the early 20th century music teachers, theatrical and choral groups convened at the Scottish Rite Cathedral, B’Nai Zion Temple and St. Mark’s (Holy Cross) Church, later to be joined by the grand 1929 Municipal Auditorium and its unique cultural contributions like the Louisiana Hayride. This transitional district between economic and ethnic communities provided a safe, creative haven for those artists emerging or on the edge, like Huddie Ledbetter, Kitty Wells, Hank Williams Sr., Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley and James Burton. In addition to the creative service industries like dressmakers and milliners, there were “Art Parlors”, forerunners of galleries, photographic studios and stone carvers located throughout these blocks. The birthplace of local public art associations occurred on Cotton Street in the Louisiana Art Gallery in the 1940s. From before 1900 through the 1930s, the district attracted investors who commissioned notable architects to produce monuments of lasting beauty that – despite economic and social change which have isolated them – remain today as permanent and functional works of art, invaluable assets of which any city would be proud.

Here and Now

It is this heritage of opportunity, creativity and tolerance that make Shreveport Common a historically and spiritually dynamic place. That spirit lives today, embodied in the stories, landmarks, and people that endure. Without any improvements, investments, or plans, this area is naturally a cultural district. Now, with the imminent location of the Shreveport Regional Arts Council at its center, in the handsome 1922 landmarks Central Fire Station, this 2011 neighborhood renewal effort will truly reshape the landscape of downtown Shreveport. By attracting investors, residents and the creative community to this gateway district, Shreveport invites the world to enter its newest/oldest place for an authentic uncommon experience.

When we talk about Creative Placemaking… the way that the Arts can transform communities, can be an engine for economic development and urban renewal… we’re talking about Shreveport.

--Rocco Landesman, Chairman National for the Arts, Chairman Strand Theatre – March, 2011
Shreveport Common:

A Summary of Existing Conditions and Infrastructure
The conditions of the buildings and properties in the study area have been addressed in the inventory accompanying this Vision Plan, but the remaining physical and social infrastructure must be identified and discussed to fully understand the present state of the Shreveport Common district. This will be provided in the following summaries.

**VACANT PROPERTY**

As noted in the inventory, and obvious upon touring the area, there is a disproportionate percentage of vacant land giving much of the district an abandoned and desolate appearance. Few blocks have a sense of coherence or continuous built fabric, be it residential, commercial or institutional. The great exception is the integrity of the 800 Block of Texas Avenue. However, even in this architecturally and historically significant block, one principal building has collapsed entirely and another large building is roofless, with only the façade and perimeter walls remaining. These losses constitute a major interruption in the streetscape. Fortunately, plans have been made to restore these buildings to this most important context. A secondary area of integrity is Austen Place, where seven residential structures valiantly preserve the authentic character of that street, in spite of the vast empty four-acre concrete lots across the street.

Many empty lots on Texas and Grand Avenues, Cotton, Crockett and Louisiana Streets were vacated due to the demolition of structures to create auto dealership lots beginning in the 1920s. Other sites became rental properties, later were abandoned, then decayed, and demolished. Very few became adjunct parking or service lots for new development, most notably lots around Fairmont Tower. With few exceptions—most of which were wood frame buildings—the finest landmarks have prevailed and still remain, but the connective fabric that once produced an urban ensemble has been lost. The result is a district of disparate, but important parts floating in a sea of concrete and asphalt.

**Summary of Existing Conditions and Infrastructure**

Historic photographs indicate that the maintenance of these vacant properties has seriously declined in the last five years, with more litter, weeds, and general debris than ever before. This suggests further owner disconnection to the area, and reflects the general economic downturn’s reduced property management trends.

Oddly, the isolation of these landmarks has produced a new experience of resulting angles and vistas that were never possible before. As open as the blocks are, they do provide a perverse visual pleasure in the surrounding wasteland. Many who have become accustomed to this openness would like it to be maintained, even in the light of the calls for increased density and services. Striking a balance between these wide-open spaces and new infill development poses a creative challenge to the renewal process.

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The district’s two primary arteries, Common Street and Texas Avenue are both very different in nature today. Over time, their relative importance to the City has changed, due in part to the creation of new destinations, and new connections to the greater metropolitan highway network. Common Street, originally the western boundary of town, ended at the railroad lines and did not lead south to the new suburbs. Until the completion of the railroad viaduct in 1956, the main connection southward to Line Avenue and the adjacent residential neighborhoods was Louisiana Street. This was to be even more enhanced with the advent of the interstate highway system, which capitalized on Common Street’s direct route to downtown. As a result, this now major thoroughfare is highly improved and heavily trafficked, with periodic signals to control the fast moving flow in and out of downtown. Its fast pace and constant use almost make it an edge in the district; crossing must be carefully timed and considered. Healing this divide is another creative challenge to the Visioning Process.

As Common Street grew in importance as a new north/south route to and from downtown, Texas Avenue shifted more to “perimeter-city” commercial uses, such as auto dealerships, motels, restaurants, local retail, and service industries that would benefit from the extra-city highway traffic. Perhaps most important, since the 1910s, Texas Avenue had been the “Mainstreet” of the African-American business community. In the 1940s, Texas Avenue was still an important east/west artery, as the main highway connection west toward Texas, but with the construction of the viaduct (1956), and the City’s growth south, Common Street became the inner city route of choice for a large part of the population. The changing uses in the area, the movement to the suburbs, and the addition of I-20, led to the decline of Texas Avenue (state highway) as an artery.

Yet, it still played an important urban role. Just two years after the new viaduct was completed, the City of Shreveport constructed a “new” City Hall building on Texas Avenue, once again attracting urban traffic in great numbers. This back and forth of importance shifted again when the City Hall was relocated to a new government center downtown, and its former building became the Police headquarters.

Today, Texas Avenue is moderately traveled, but not enough to necessitate regular traffic signals within the study area. It is maintained for two-way traffic, with the exception of a short section of the 800 Block at Common Street. This frequently results in some fast “straight-a-way” driving, and can make crossing the avenue a challenge. Side streets can also present tentative ingress onto Texas Avenue since signage, parking lines, corner setback standards, and other precautionary measures are either below City standards or are not enforced.

“With the creation of this primary link to Interstate 20, the former sleepy Common Street was to permanently become the dominant artery in the district.
Currently, Texas Avenue serves four different bus routes to and from the central terminal downtown, crossing Common Street multiple times in the course of a day. The following illustration, prepared with the assistance of SporTran (the transit system for Shreveport-Bossier City), diagrams all public transportation lines and active bus stops related to the district. While signs on the streets indicate more stops than are shown, ridership and funding have reduced the actual stops. Only one bus line, #20, has an active stop in the district (per the current website information), on Common Street at the NE corner of Cotton Street at the Fairmont Tower Apartments. This line serves the southern suburbs on a long and circuitous route. Multiple routes but no active stops currently serve the core of the district. Thus, as is indicated, buses pass through and around the district, but with few opportunities to engage potential riders. There are no bus routes and times to serve patrons for Municipal Auditorium and Oakland Cemetery, two of Shreveport’s principal cultural and tourist attractions.

As a part of this Vision Plan, the Design Team extended the dialogue on transportation issues to the public in the context of the vision for revitalization. In Listening Sessions, the stakeholders noted the current conditions, needs, and potential impact of enhanced public transportation on the area, especially as it becomes a cultural district.

As part of this Vision Plan, the Design Team extended the dialogue on transportation issues to the public in the context of the vision for revitalization. In Listening Sessions, the stakeholders noted the current conditions, needs, and potential impact of enhanced public transportation on the area, especially as it becomes a cultural district. The planners at SporTran and the Northwest Louisiana Council of Governments (NLCOG) have confirmed the need for a new transportation study of the City and it is exciting that they foresee such a plan including the Shreveport Common Cultural District as an important destination within the near future.
On the whole, the principal arteries of the area are maintained in much the same standard as other areas in urban Shreveport, with curbs and gutters, asphalt, and other surfaces in relatively good condition. Exceptions are the secondary roads, including dead-end streets, and shorter blocks, which are often treated as alleys with few improvements or maintenance. These latter examples have intermittent curbs, if any, and the right-of-way is ragged, crumbling, and overgrown, contributing to the marginal, underserved appearance of the area. There are few traffic lights within the district, but generally adequate street signage to indicate directions and other traffic information.

Almost every street in the district is provided with a public sidewalk of varying width, elevation, and surface. In general, the sidewalks of the district are all sub-standard, certainly in comparison to the improvement elsewhere in the central business district, but also in contrast with other commercial areas throughout the City. The exception is the 700 block of Milam Street, which benefited from the City’s streetscape redevelopment program over the last decade. Some sidewalks are actually original to the 1910s-20s, with improvements and adaptation could remain in part. But there are far more cracks, level changes, deteriorated surfaces, exposed edges, and totally missing sections than any urban area should suffer. These conditions add greatly to the bleak, neglected appearance of the district, and certainly signal to citizens, residents and investors that this is not an area of importance to the community. Further, the walking surfaces create a serious risk of injury and liability, and compliance with the Standards of the Americans With Disabilities Act is uneven at best.

**Streets and Sidewalks**
Currently there is one improved off-street public parking lot in the Shreveport Common district, the recently opened Municipal Auditorium lot at Texas and Grand Avenues. A small off-street lot was created in the 1980s on the south side of the 800 Block of Texas Avenue. The balance of the extant public parking is along the streets, some few and others metered. Private lots, both improved or unpaved, exist in relation to business and institutional uses. To best represent the existing parking statistics, an inventory of all parking spaces was conducted as a part of this study. The inventory, attended, followed established methodology and models, with guidance from regional parking consultants with whom the Design Team has experience. This inventory technique is not fully included herein, but does not preclude to a formal commissioned parking study for the district and or the entire downtown area.

Event Parking: A Case Study “Discover Shreveport Common”

Parking during the June 18, 2011 “Discover Shreveport Common” event held primarily at “The Triangle” in the 800 Block of Texas Avenue. The balance of the extant public parking is along the streets, some free and others metered. Private lots, both improved or unpaved, exist in relation to business and institutional uses. To best represent the existing parking statistics, an inventory of all parking spaces was conducted as a part of this study. The inventory, attended, followed established methodology and models, with guidance from regional parking consultants with whom the Design Team has experience. This inventory technique is not fully included herein, but does not preclude to a formal commissioned parking study for the district and or the entire downtown area. The majority of the attendees parked on Texas Avenue or chose to street park their vehicles, moved to the Municipal Auditorium lot or the lot at Mill Street to allow for guest parking and Trolley bar access. The event attracted an estimated 600 people to this concentrated area. It was observed that either of the above lots held more than 15 vehicles each throughout the five-hour event.

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Next in the line of social concerns is the problematic presence of inordinate numbers of homeless people living within and on the outskirts of the district, just blocks from several exceptional social service agencies that provide live-in programs. For example, on one small plot of overgrown railroad frontage at Talley and Lake Streets, approximately 35 men and women can be found during the year, living in settlements constructed of borrowed and recycled materials, and in plain sight of auto traffic arriving in the City via I-20 and Common Street. Many others live in the rear of buildings within 50 feet of the Municipal Auditorium, and spend their days on the streets, in the alleys, in Oakland Cemetery, and in abandoned or accessible buildings. Their activity is seldom criminal or dangerous, and many of these individuals are unknown in the area by name and personality. Studies suggest a high percentage of mental illness in homeless communities, but no such negative incidents have come to light locally.

These individuals’ plight is serious, and desperately in need of attention, a great deal of which has already been shown by the ministry of local faith groups, including day service centers like Hope House sponsored by Church of the Holy Cross and other faith groups. Other highly successful homeless-to-home programs like those provided by Providence House and Rescue Mission only receive patrons who are substance free. Unfortunately, the generous and valuable gifts of so many participating organizations cannot be a solution to a potentially life-long and dangerous pattern, as many in the social services fields have come to realize and initiate new strategies.

The scope and purpose of this Vision Plan is not to presume to address or solve the problems of drug use, homelessness, or crime in urban Shreveport. It can only call attention to their impact on the perception, vitality, and potential revitalization of this area as a cultural district, and encourage concerned citizens and officials to take action on these serious urban issues in a comprehensive, inclusive, and decisive manner. Recently the City and experts in homelessness have formed a coalition to discuss better strategies.