

# SAN DIEGO'S CREATIVE ECONOMY PLAYBOOK

December 2024

The City of  
**SAN DIEGO** 





# INTRODUCTION

**San Diego's creative economy is a \$10.8 billion catalyst and should be a pillar of the city's economic development strategy.**

San Diego's creative economy is not just a cultural cornerstone—it's a driving force behind the city's innovation and economic growth. In 2022, the sector contributed \$10.8 billion to the area's Gross Regional Product (GRP) and supported 169,457 jobs across industries like digital media, publishing, visual arts, and architecture. Iconic assets such as Balboa Park's world-class cultural institutions, the thriving independent music scene, and pioneering digital media firms underscore the breadth and vitality of this ecosystem. Digital media alone accounted for over \$3 billion in GRP, cementing its role as a cornerstone of San Diego's creative landscape.

However, with creative industries comprising just 3.7% of the area's economy—a slight decline over the past decade—strategic action is needed to sustain growth and maximize its potential. The path forward lies in strategies that attract new investment, grow and retain creative talent, and empower entrepreneurs to scale their ventures. By prioritizing the creative economy as a key element of its economic development strategy, San Diego can ensure this dynamic sector drives job creation, economic resilience, and global recognition for decades to come.



# CREATIVE ECONOMY PLAYBOOK FOR SAN DIEGO







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The Creative Economy Playbook for San Diego offers a roadmap for growing and positioning the city's creative economy as a leading economic driver.

This playbook presents a series of strategies that build on San Diego's unique assets and potential, from launching workforce sector partnerships to establishing a cultural trust fund. It makes the case for each strategy, emphasizing

their economic and cultural benefits, and includes actionable steps on what's needed to advance each initiative. By embracing the playbook's vision, San Diego can secure its place as a national leader in creativity and innovation.



# 1. Position San Diego as a competitive destination for film and TV production.

San Diego's film industry holds immense potential to become a cornerstone of the city's creative economy. Despite the region's stunning natural landscapes, diverse urban settings, and proximity to major entertainment hubs like Los Angeles, the local film sector remains underdeveloped. A major challenge is the lack of a dedicated film commission to streamline permitting processes, offer production incentives, and market San Diego as a prime location for film and television productions.

The economic benefits of a thriving film industry are well-documented. Each film production can generate significant local revenue through the use of hotels, restaurants, and local vendors while also creating high-paying, skilled jobs in set design, production, and post-production. Comparatively, cities like Atlanta have leveraged their film commissions to generate billions in economic activity and position themselves as global leaders in entertainment.

To realize its potential, San Diego must grow its dedicated film commission focused on attracting productions, fostering partnerships with local creatives, and developing the necessary infrastructure

to support major projects. By doing so, the city can amplify its creative economy while enhancing its cultural identity and national visibility. A vibrant film industry would not only drive economic growth but also promote San Diego as a world-class destination for creativity and innovation.



## WHAT'S NEEDED

Expand resources to improve permitting efficiency, offer competitive incentives, and actively market San Diego to global productions.

Deepen partnerships with the San Diego International Film Festival growing the festival as a platform to promote local talent and attract industry executives to explore San Diego as a filming location.

Enhance studio facilities, post-production resources, and equipment rentals to support larger-scale projects.

Develop a comprehensive digital database highlighting the region's diverse settings to attract location scouts and producers.

Build relationships with streaming platforms and studios like Netflix, Amazon, and Disney+ to promote San Diego as a destination for original content production.

Refine tax credit programs and other financial incentives to attract large-scale productions while supporting local businesses and talent.

## 2. Cultivate a digital media innovation district to drive growth in a high-wage creative sector.

The digital media sector is a standout performer in San Diego’s creative economy, contributing \$3.1 billion to the regional Gross Regional Product (GRP) in 2022. With significant wage growth—average earnings surged from \$87,000 in 2012 to \$156,000 in 2022—this sector represents a high-growth, high-wage opportunity. However, digital media employs just 6,812 workers, signaling untapped potential for expansion. The city’s underperforming IDEA District presents an opportunity to reposition itself as a hub for digital media innovation, aligning with other successful academic-industry partnerships like the SDSU Mission Valley Innovation District.

Innovation districts are proven drivers of economic development, fostering collaboration between academia, industry, and government while concentrating resources and talent in a defined geographic area. Anchoring the IDEA District with a stronger focus on digital media innovation, coupled with UC San Diego’s expertise and influence, could transform the area into a vibrant ecosystem for digital creatives. This district could integrate industry leaders, startups, and academic institutions to catalyze

innovation in special effects, animation, video game design, and other high-demand fields. By fostering collaboration and talent development, the district can help San Diego build a competitive edge and drive job creation in this creative industry.

### WHAT’S NEEDED

Reposition the IDEA District as a hub for digital media, attracting companies and entrepreneurs in gaming, animation, and digital design.

Establish UC San Diego as an anchor institution to provide research partnerships, workforce training, and business incubation support.

Develop tax incentives and grants to encourage digital media firms to relocate or expand within the district.

Build state-of-the-art infrastructure, including studio spaces, post-production facilities, and co-working hubs tailored to digital creatives.

Host an annual Digital Media Innovation Summit to showcase the district, attract industry leaders, and foster collaboration.

Partner with local colleges and high schools to create apprenticeships and hands-on learning programs that strengthen the workforce pipeline.

Apply lessons from the SDSU Mission Valley Innovation District to ensure long-term viability and integration with the surrounding community.





### 3. Leverage live entertainment to drive economic development and elevate its creative economy vibrancy.

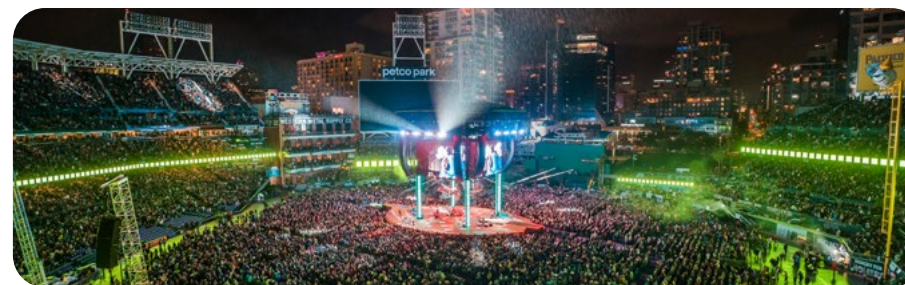
Live entertainment is a proven driver of economic development, attracting visitors who contribute to the local economy through spending on hotels, restaurants, and local businesses. San Diego's favorable weather, thriving tourism industry, and growing population make it an ideal destination for large-scale concerts and live performances. However, the city's potential remains underutilized due to limited partnerships with major entertainment companies and a lack of infrastructure designed for high-profile events.

Research underscores the significant economic impact of live music events. Festivals and concerts generate ticket sales, create jobs, and drive tourism, while also supporting ancillary industries such as hospitality and retail. The study "The Economic Impact of Music Festivals: Cultural Events and Local Commerce" highlights how such events stimulate sustained economic activity and revitalize local commerce.

Other cities have successfully harnessed live entertainment to boost their economies. East Providence partnered with Live Nation to develop a waterfront concert venue, revitalizing the area

and driving foot traffic to nearby businesses. Memphis expanded its live music infrastructure by integrating venues with cultural hubs like Crosstown Concourse, creating synergies between local commerce and entertainment. Additionally, brands like AEG, Ticketmaster, and independent promoters such as Sofar Sounds have demonstrated the capacity to anchor thriving entertainment ecosystems in cities across the country.

By partnering with industry leaders such as Live Nation or AEG, San Diego can establish itself as a premier destination for live music, attracting top-tier artists and fostering a vibrant entertainment economy. This approach would enhance the city's cultural identity while delivering economic benefits to residents, businesses, and visitors alike.



#### WHAT'S NEEDED

Establish partnerships with major entertainment companies like Live Nation, AEG, and Ticketmaster to explore opportunities for developing and programming venues.

Assess potential locations for new or upgraded concert venues, focusing on underutilized spaces and corridors

Streamline permitting and regulatory processes to make San Diego an attractive location for live entertainment investments.

Structure public-private partnerships to balance community interests with private investment and operational efficiencies.

Organize a best-practice tour to cities like East Providence, Memphis, or Toronto to study successful live entertainment models and inform development strategies.

Create a marketing strategy to position San Diego as a top-tier live entertainment destination, targeting both national and international audiences.

## 4. Launch a creative tech accelerator to integrate arts with emerging technologies.

The intersection of creativity and technology is driving innovation across industries, from entertainment and education to healthcare and retail. Emerging fields like augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping how creative work is produced, distributed, and experienced. San Diego's established technology sector, anchored by companies like Qualcomm and its proximity to innovation hubs like Silicon Valley, makes it uniquely positioned to capitalize on this trend.

Creative tech accelerators have shown transformative potential in cities around the world. For example, New York City's Digital Media Zone connects startups with resources to develop groundbreaking digital content and experiences. Montreal has become a global leader in interactive media, integrating gaming, film, and tech through initiatives like the Montreal International Game Summit and XR:MTL. These examples illustrate how targeted investments in creative tech can foster economic growth, attract global talent, and position a city as a hub of innovation.

For San Diego, launching a creative tech accelerator could serve as a catalyst for new collaborations between

technologists and creatives, enabling the development of world-class products in gaming, digital design, and immersive experiences. Such an initiative would not only drive local economic development but also strengthen San Diego's reputation as a global leader in creative and technological innovation.



### WHAT'S NEEDED

Partner with major tech firms like Qualcomm or Google to provide funding, mentorship, and resources for the accelerator.

Collaborate with local universities like UC San Diego and San Diego State University to develop curricula and workshops focused on creative tech applications.

Offer grants or seed funding for startups that integrate creative disciplines with emerging technologies, such as AR, VR, and AI.

Host an annual showcase event where creative tech startups present their innovations to investors and industry leaders.

Develop a public-private partnership framework to support the long-term growth of the accelerator program.

Create partnerships with global organizations, such as Montreal's XR:MTL or New York's Digital Media Zone, to foster cross-city collaboration and knowledge sharing.



## 5. Grow and scale a creative business support program to help small creative enterprises thrive.

San Diego is home to nearly 43,000 self-employed creatives, including writers, musicians, visual artists, and designers, who represent the backbone of the city’s creative economy. However, many of these individuals face significant challenges, such as limited access to affordable workspaces, lack of business training, and difficulty navigating city regulations. These challenges highlight the precarious nature of freelance creative work and the need for targeted support.

Cities that have successfully nurtured creative industries demonstrate the power of tailored programs. For example, Toronto’s Artscape provides subsidized coworking spaces and development programs for creative entrepreneurs, while New York City’s Made in NY initiative supports local artists with grants and workshops. By adopting similar models, San Diego can create a thriving ecosystem where creative businesses grow, innovate, and contribute to the broader economy.

A dedicated creative business support program would not only empower local creatives but also generate ripple effects across San Diego’s economy by fostering entrepreneurship, boosting cultural tourism, and

attracting investment. This approach aligns with the city’s ongoing efforts to support small businesses and ensures that the unique contributions of the creative sector are sustained and amplified.



### WHAT’S NEEDED

Launch a creative business grant and loan program to provide financial support for small creative enterprises.

Develop a centralized resource hub offering legal, financial, and marketing services tailored to the needs of creative businesses.

Create a city-funded entrepreneurship bootcamp to train creatives in essential business skills such as financial management, intellectual property protection, and digital marketing.

Partner with local chambers of commerce and business organizations to expand networking and mentorship opportunities for creative professionals.

Subsidize coworking spaces and studio rentals to provide affordable, accessible venues for creative work.

Streamline permitting processes for pop-up galleries, events, and temporary installations to make it easier for creatives to showcase their work.

Organize annual “Creative Entrepreneurship Week” to celebrate local talent, provide workshops, and connect creatives with potential investors and collaborators.



## 6. Establish a creative cultural trust fund to protect and grow venues and spaces for creatives.

San Diego’s high cost of living and working disproportionately affects creatives and the spaces they rely on for their work. Survey respondents in the creative sector consistently cite affordability as a major barrier, with small businesses (85% of which have fewer than 20 employees) particularly vulnerable. Without dedicated interventions, the city risks losing creative talent and cultural spaces to more affordable regions, eroding its cultural identity and economic potential.

Creative cultural trust funds have proven effective in other cities, offering a blueprint for success. Austin’s Cultural Trust preserves critical cultural spaces through property acquisitions and partnerships, helping ensure affordability for creative organizations and artists. Seattle’s Cultural Space Agency directly engages with communities to secure cultural spaces, leveraging public and private investments. San Francisco’s Community Arts Stabilization Trust and Washington D.C.’s CulturalDC focus on stabilizing and expanding creative real estate for long-term use. Internationally, London’s Creative Land Trust has successfully secured affordable spaces for creatives by working with developers and the government.

By establishing a creative cultural trust fund, San Diego can tailor these proven models to its unique needs, protecting its cultural assets while fostering new opportunities for growth. This initiative would help retain local talent, attract cultural investments, and ensure the city’s creative vibrancy thrives for decades to come.

### WHAT’S NEEDED

Launch a creative cultural trust fund to acquire and preserve critical cultural spaces, such as performance venues, galleries, and creative studios.

Partner with private developers to include affordable creative spaces in new projects, using tax incentives to encourage participation.

Repurpose underutilized city-owned properties into permanent creative hubs with flexible workspaces, event spaces, and rehearsal rooms.

Leverage successful models like Austin’s Cultural Trust and Seattle’s Cultural Space Agency to develop a tailored framework for San Diego.

Develop a public-private partnership framework that includes philanthropic contributions, corporate sponsorships, and local government support to grow the fund.

Provide grants or low-interest loans to support creative businesses seeking long-term leases or renovations of their spaces.

Establish a “Cultural Spaces Task Force” to prioritize investments, engage stakeholders, and assess ongoing needs for cultural infrastructure.

Host study tours to cities like Austin, Seattle, San Francisco, and London to learn from their trust models and incorporate best practices.

Allocate a portion of the fund for community-driven projects, ensuring diverse voices shape the cultural spaces preserved or developed.

Provide regular public reporting and adapt strategies based on feedback to ensure the fund’s long-term sustainability and relevance.



## 7. Launch workforce sector partnerships to strengthen San Diego's creative economy.

San Diego's creative economy faces significant workforce challenges, including persistent talent shortages and limited opportunities for emerging creatives to access high-demand roles. Surveys indicate that 60% of creative workers struggle to find suitable job opportunities, while 59% express dissatisfaction with their earnings—challenges that are further exacerbated by the region's high cost of living. Key production-related roles, including digital media and design, have seen a 4% decline in recent years, underscoring the need for focused workforce development initiatives.

Workforce sector partnerships have proven to be effective models for addressing industry-specific challenges. By bringing together employers, workforce providers, and educational institutions, these partnerships align training programs with industry needs, helping to build pipelines of talent for emerging creative roles. Local institutions such as UC San Diego, San Diego State University, and community colleges like Mesa College and Palomar College already provide strong educational foundations and can expand their offerings to include more robust creative workforce programs. Through collaboration, these partnerships

can align training and job placement efforts with high-growth sectors like digital media, gaming, and design, ensuring the creative economy remains competitive and inclusive.

### WHAT'S NEEDED

Develop workforce sector partnerships in digital media, visual arts, performing arts, and design, bringing together employers, industry leaders, and workforce providers to identify gaps and build solutions.

Collaborate with local colleges and universities, including UC San Diego, San Diego State University, Mesa College, and Palomar College, to create tailored curricula for emerging creative roles in high-demand sectors.

Launch internship and apprenticeship programs in creative industries to provide hands-on experience and a direct path to employment for students.

Provide scholarships and training stipends for underrepresented groups to increase equity and access within the creative workforce.

Establish job-matching platforms to connect creative workers with employers and freelance opportunities in the region.

Partner with major creative employers in San Diego to co-design workforce programs that meet real-time industry needs, including training in digital tools, special effects, and production technologies.

Establish a "Cultural Spaces Task Force" to prioritize investments, engage stakeholders, and assess ongoing needs for cultural infrastructure.

Conduct an annual "Creative Workforce Summit" to assess industry trends, refine programs, and strengthen partnerships between educational institutions and employers.

Invest in affordable housing initiatives targeted at creatives, reducing economic barriers for workers entering or remaining in the industry.



## 8. Position San Diego and Tijuana as a leading bi-national creative economy in the world.

San Diego’s proximity to Tijuana offers a rare and unparalleled opportunity to create a bi-national creative economy that few other regions in the world can replicate. This cross-border relationship uniquely blends two cultural identities, fostering an innovative and vibrant ecosystem that has the potential to drive significant economic and cultural growth. The 2024 World Design Capital designation, shared by San Diego and Tijuana, underscores this potential, showcasing the region’s creative assets to a global audience while setting the stage for long-term collaboration.

This kind of cross-border collaboration is already thriving in industries like life sciences, advanced manufacturing, and IT, proving that shared initiatives can generate substantial economic returns. Through creative exchange programs, joint cultural projects, and binational arts festivals, the San Diego-Tijuana region can position itself as a leading global destination for creativity and innovation. Building a bi-national creative economy would amplify the region’s global visibility, create a stronger unified identity, and attract international visitors and investments—all while celebrating the rich cultural diversity on both sides of the border.

### WHAT’S NEEDED

Create a San Diego-Tijuana creative exchange program to support cross-border collaboration for artists, designers, and makers, fostering partnerships and innovation.

Establish a dedicated fund for cross-border creative projects, supported by government agencies and private sponsors, to ensure sustained collaboration and impact.

Leverage the 2024 World Design Capital designation to launch flagship projects that highlight the region’s creative and cultural assets, drawing attention from global audiences.

Develop a regional branding campaign, positioning San Diego and Tijuana as a single, interconnected creative hub for the world.

Partner with organizations like Tijuana Innovadora to co-develop cultural programming and enhance ties between creative communities on both sides of the border.

Establish artist residencies that rotate between San Diego and Tijuana, creating opportunities for cultural exchange and knowledge sharing.

Expand cross-border partnerships in creative sectors to mirror existing collaborations in life sciences, IT, and advanced manufacturing.

Collaborate with international cultural organizations and design bodies to establish the region as a thought leader in cross-border creativity.

Advocate for streamlined cross-border mobility for creatives, making it easier to share ideas, resources, and projects seamlessly between San Diego and Tijuana.

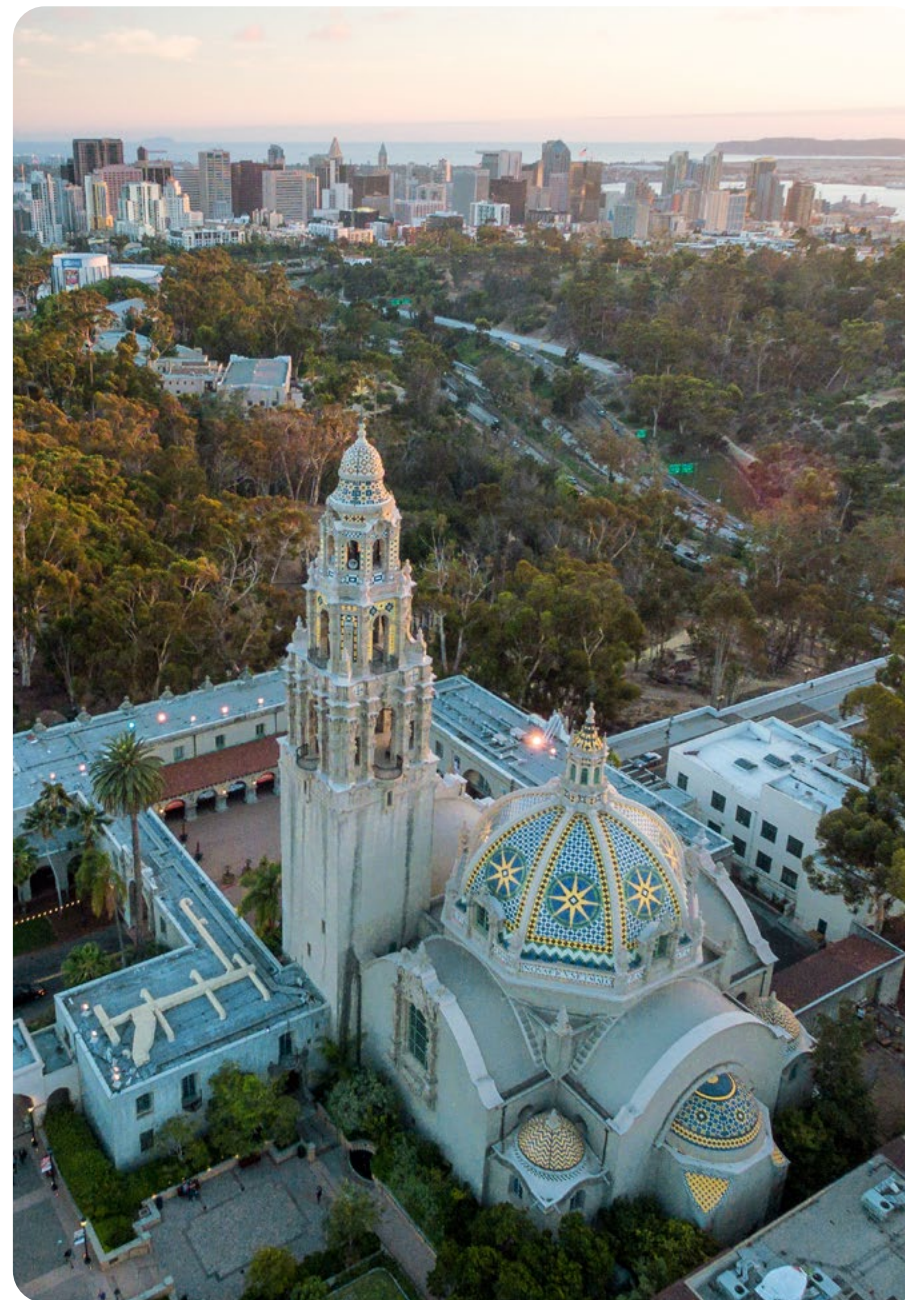




## 9. Utilize creative tourism to showcase culture and grow San Diego's creative industries.

San Diego has long attracted visitors with its beaches, climate, and iconic attractions like Balboa Park. However, the city's creative and cultural sector offers untapped potential to position San Diego as a global destination for cultural tourism. Arts and culture already play a role in driving visitation, with 15% of paid arts events attracting out-of-county visitors and certain events reaching over 50% national and international audiences. By leveraging events like the 2024 World Design Capital designation, San Diego can build a reputation akin to Charleston's arts-driven tourism model or international creative destinations like Art Basel in Miami and Switzerland.

Charleston's Spoleto Festival highlights how creative tourism can generate both cultural impact and significant economic benefits. Similarly, Art Basel Cities initiatives demonstrate how strategic partnerships elevate a city's global profile. For San Diego, expanding creative tourism could foster year-round visitation, integrate local talent into tourism campaigns, and diversify the visitor economy. Furthermore, developing self-guided tours, signature arts events, and pop-up cultural experiences could embed San Diego's creative identity into the city's brand, driving economic activity and showcasing its unique cultural assets.



### WHAT'S NEEDED

Develop partnerships with global arts organizations, such as Art Basel, the Sundance Institute, or UNESCO Creative Cities, to host a signature event or festival.

Collaborate with the San Diego Tourism Authority to highlight arts and cultural landmarks in destination marketing campaigns.

Build creative tourism experiences, such as artist-led tours, immersive art installations, and neighborhood-specific cultural trails

Establish a task force of local cultural leaders, tourism stakeholders, and global creative partners to develop San Diego's creative tourism roadmap.

Organize best-practice tours to cities like Charleston and Basel to refine San Diego's approach to integrating arts and culture into tourism strategies.

Invest in expanding infrastructure, such as venues, public art, and creative districts, to support large-scale creative events and attract international visitors.



# 10. Invest in creative placemaking and public art as catalysts for community and economic growth.

Public art and creative placemaking are powerful tools for economic development and community building. By activating underutilized spaces and fostering cultural expression, these initiatives enhance neighborhoods, attract foot traffic, and reflect the identity of the community. San Diego’s Cultural Plan emphasizes equitable arts access and the importance of integrating cultural assets into public spaces, creating a strong foundation for expanding these efforts.

Cities like Austin, Miami, and Brooklyn offer exemplary models for leveraging public art and creative placemaking. Austin’s Art in Public Places program allocates a percentage of capital improvement project budgets to public art, ensuring local artists and businesses are involved in city development. Miami’s Wynwood Walls transformed an industrial area into a vibrant tourist destination through curated murals by international artists. Similarly, Brooklyn’s Bushwick Collective has turned the neighborhood into a living art gallery, drawing visitors, supporting local businesses, and amplifying the voices of local creatives.

By adopting these practices, San Diego can align with its Cultural Plan goals to enhance public spaces, support local artists, and foster economic vibrancy through creative placemaking. This approach ensures public art reflects community values while driving cultural tourism and investment.

## WHAT’S NEEDED

Expand the Public Art Program to dedicate a percentage of all capital improvement project budgets to public art, modeled after Austin’s Art in Public Places.

Focus on creative placemaking projects that activate underutilized spaces, such as vacant lots, waterfronts, and transit corridors, with public art and cultural programming.

Partner with local artists and creative businesses to ensure public art projects reflect San Diego’s diverse communities and cultural heritage.

Develop signature creative placemaking projects inspired by Wynwood Walls and Bushwick Collective to create vibrant cultural destinations.

Establish a competitive grant program for neighborhoods to propose and lead their own creative placemaking initiatives.

Collaborate with community stakeholders and urban planners to identify priority areas for public art and placemaking projects.

Leverage private sector partnerships to fund large-scale installations and placemaking efforts while ensuring alignment with community goals.

Create an annual “Creative Placemaking Festival” to celebrate new public art projects, engage residents, and attract tourists.



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