

# A River Runs Through It

## How Asheville's River Arts District turned disaster into a blueprint for resilient community rebuilding

March 2026 :: Commissioned by RiverLink + UnifiedRAD

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### Chapter 1: Roots of the River Arts District

The French Broad River does things its own way. Widely considered one of the world's oldest rivers, the French Broad traverses 117 miles in North Carolina, flowing stubbornly and uniquely north from its source in Transylvania County through Henderson, Buncombe, and Madison counties before curving west into Tennessee. Like many rivers, it spawned numerous communities seeking to utilize its fertile bottomlands and transportation potential. One of those was Asheville, where railroad expansion along the French Broad River in the late 1800s spurred rapid industrial growth. Development in the French Broad's floodplain would continue to evolve over the next century, despite the inherent risks, as the river's allure drew in first industries, and then artists, all determined to create community along the water's edge.

Asheville's riverfront served as a thriving hub for factories and supply businesses for decades, until the "Great Flood" of 1916 wreaked havoc and brought a pause to the unceasing industrial growth. Floods here were nothing new, but the industrialization of the time meant a new level of destruction. Over the course of eight days, the French Broad was inundated with rain from back-to-back hurricanes, cresting at a record 21 feet. The Flood of 1916 was considered "the flood to end all floods," but it wouldn't be the last or the biggest flood to impact Asheville's riverfront.

It wasn't until the 1970s that serious conversations about revitalization started, as city leaders proposed a central riverfront district to attract businesses and visitors alike. In the mid '80s, the nonprofit RiverLink was founded with a similar vision: to reimagine a neglected industrial riverfront as a cultural, recreational, and economic asset for the city. The broader goal was simple: keep visitors in Asheville for "one more day" beyond a stop at the Biltmore Estate, and RiverLink's founding director, Karen Cragolin, is regarded as one of Asheville's greatest visionaries for seeing what the district could be where others saw only neglect. Around the same time, artists, drawn by creative community and affordable spaces, began moving into the district's abandoned buildings and converting them into art studios. These early adopters thrived in their new creative home, organizing studio strolls that attracted much-needed visitors. Twenty years later, in 2005, a mile-long section along the French Broad River was officially renamed the River Arts District (RAD).

"RiverLink and the River Arts District were truly synonymous in the early days," says Lisa Raleigh, Executive Director of RiverLink. "Karen Cragolin arrived here at a time when Asheville

really had no relationship with the French Broad other than one of neglect, dilapidation, and pollution left over from an industrial day that had come and gone. RiverLink was instrumental with the Chamber of Commerce and others who believed the river could be an asset.”

By 2024, the RAD received a significant investment from the City of Asheville via RADTIP (the RAD Transportation Improvement Project) and was home to more than 700 artists, along with dozens of independent businesses and private residences. The district’s cultural and economic impact was nothing short of profound, bringing in 12.5 million visitors and adding \$300 million to the Asheville economy each year. At the time, artists had support from the River Arts District Artists Foundation (RADA) and small businesses had the River Arts District Business Association (RADBIZ, formerly RADBA), but there was no central district-wide group where everyone—artists, business owners, property owners, and residents—could come together. It would take a disaster of unprecedented scale to make that happen, one that would fundamentally alter not only the physical path of the river, but the way forward for the RAD itself.

## Chapter 2: The Storm

On September 27, 2024, the remnants of Hurricane Helene slammed into western North Carolina. Coming right on the heels of a separate rain event, Helene brought more water than the area’s rivers and streams could handle, oversaturating the landscape and leading to catastrophic flooding and multiple landslides across the entire region. The RAD was particularly hard hit, with floodwaters quickly reaching record levels and submerging historical markers from the Flood of 1916. An estimated 80% of the RAD’s buildings were severely impacted, with water, mud, and debris destroying workspaces and materials and displacing hundreds of artists and businesses. Those whose spaces were spared still faced enormous challenges due to extended water, power, and communication outages. A once-thriving cultural hub found itself in survival mode, focusing on immediate needs like food, water, and shelter. At the same time, despite the chaos and devastation, a new sense of unity was emerging throughout the RAD.

In the early days after the storm, the RAD community stepped up. Businesses like The Radical hotel tackled immediate needs by transforming into hubs for first responders and community supply stations. Nonprofits like RADA Foundation sprang into action, planning pop-up markets and securing alternate studio space for displaced artists while launching fundraising campaigns to support them financially. Meanwhile, other RAD artists and business owners found themselves in a position to step back and look at the district’s long-term recovery. After months of informal meetings, this group decided to form a coalition that brought everyone together, and Unified RAD was born.

“The days and weeks right after the flood were chaotic and scary—but they were also kind of beautiful,” says Joe Balcken, co-founder of Unified RAD and co-owner of Wrong Way River Lodge & Cabins. “Once things settled down a bit, the big question became, ‘Okay... what’s next?’ Not just next week or next month, but next year and beyond. Given how much damage the RAD took and how much uncertainty there was, it quickly became clear that we’d be stronger—and more effective—if we showed up together.”

This new partnership quickly evolved from an emergency coalition into a strategic entity of self-proclaimed “RADvocates,” representing artists, business owners, property owners, and residents. Unified RAD workgroup leads Joe Balcken, Amy Kelly of The Radical, and Kim Hundertmark of the RADA Foundation got to work with other Unified RAD members to draft a funding and recovery request to present to city leaders, which they did in February of 2025.

Lisa Raleigh saw an opportunity with the emergence of Unified RAD. RiverLink, which is based in the RAD and suffered massive losses during Helene, was in the middle of a post-storm evolution that included the creation of a Recovery, Resilience, and Planning Program. Teaming up with Unified RAD co-founder Joe Balcken felt like a return to the organization’s roots and a chance to once again play a pivotal role in the future of the RAD, even if the partnership seemed unlikely.

“Should we be doing this?” she asked him at one point. “I work for a river organization, and you own a business outside the formal boundaries of the River Arts District.’ But we agreed that with so many people focused on their own recovery, we were as equipped as anybody. If not us, who?” On top of that, it became clear after speaking with city staff and council members that a long-term plan from the city was still more than a year away. In the meantime, RAD property and business owners would have to decide on their own whether and how to rebuild. Without a coordinated district-wide plan, some of these choices could limit or prevent a cohesive and resilient future for the community from being fully realized.

Raleigh and Balcken began meeting regularly to discuss the best approach for a community-led, long-term planning project in the RAD. At the same time, Etsy’s Senior Director for Sustainability and Impact, an Asheville resident, was looking for a way to pilot a grant that could support a craft community dealing with the impacts of climate-related disasters. An introduction was made, and the grant quickly came together, with Unified RAD and RiverLink partnering to put the funding to use.

“We started by creating a clear project charter and forming a steering committee of local leaders and district representatives to guide the work,” says Balcken. “From there, we interviewed several really strong urban design firms to help lead a community-driven visioning and planning process. Out of five great candidates, the steering committee chose Sasaki Associates—and once that decision was made, we were off to the races.”

In January of 2026, after months of site analysis, research, charrettes with various RAD community members, and an online survey completed by almost 1,200 stakeholders throughout the broader Asheville region, the Sasaki group completed its RAD Resilience report. The report broke down results from the listening sessions and survey into six guiding principles, laying out a community-led vision for the long-term recovery of the River Arts District that honors the district’s unique history and character while recognizing the need for flood-resilient design.

“As we started listening to people, one thing came through loud and clear—flood resilience had to be front and center,” says Balcken. “One of our six core principles is what we call ‘Live With the River,’ designing places that can handle flooding and restoring the river’s ecology, so the

district can thrive even as water conditions keep changing. The vision is for the RAD to be a model for how you can build in a floodplain responsibly, design beautiful, human-scale places, and prepare for future challenges, without losing what makes the district special in the first place.”

“The RAD Resilience report basically provides a map in the forest where there are no trails,” says Raleigh. “It’s a way to start thinking about how to put this place back together by identifying projects that have artists at the heart while taking the inevitability of future floods into consideration. So we have this incredible map, and now the real work starts.”

## Chapter 3: Living with the River

The River Arts District sits directly in the French Broad River’s floodplain. Living with the river—building a business and a life there—means taking a calculated risk. Yet the spirit of the RAD continues to draw people back every time floodwaters threaten to wash it away. For that reason, recovery can’t be about rebuilding alone...but about preparing for the inevitable through adaptive design and agile development. What started as a loose group of stakeholders committed to the RAD’s post-storm recovery is today a powerful coalition with a vision to do just that.

“The real gift of all of this is that we are a coalition that never existed before the storm, and now we’re united as colleagues working together towards the advancement and recovery of the RAD,” says Raleigh. “This group of people has built something that will live on, something that holds us together in a really meaningful way.”

“People say in the aftermath of a storm, ‘We’re going to come back stronger than ever,’” says Amy Kelly with Unified RAD. “That is 100% true, but the thing that’s most rewarding to me personally is that we’re coming back closer than ever. These people that I work with day-to-day on this, they get me up in the morning.”

The work of putting the RAD Resilience plan’s ideas into action is underway. Examples include:

- The recent launch of fundraising for the RADA Foundation’s Creative Campus—a permanent home for artists that was identified as a priority project in the report. This 4+ acre property will provide studios for emerging artists with mission-aligned pricing, safe facilities for capital-intensive artist equipment, teaching classrooms, and new small-scale performance venues—all outside the floodplain.
- The creation of RADA’s ARTSEEN program which provides a full year of studio space to support professional development, creative production, and client growth—empowering artists to build sustainable practices and, ultimately, mentor the next cohort with an emphasis on BIPOC creatives.
- The transition of a former paper recycling facility into a new location for the beloved Salvage Station music venue. After more than 80 years as a family-owned business, Asheville Waste Paper was destroyed by flooding from Hurricane Helene. Post-flood, the

owners reimagined the property's use, creating a long-term partnership with the Salvage Station for a new, resilient music venue in the heart of the RAD.

- Stream restoration projects throughout the RAD. RiverLink is seeing this emerging spirit of collaboration translate into a new willingness from multiple RAD property owners to work together on conservation projects, like the riparian restoration of Nasty Branch, an urban stream long considered one of the county's most polluted waterways.

These projects tackle different priorities, but all share a common vision outlined in the report: recovery in the RAD is not about returning to what once was, but about intentionally shaping what comes next—a district that lives with the river, centers artists and culture, and adapts to a changing climate while remaining unmistakably Asheville. For Unified RAD and RiverLink, this vision brings optimism for local recovery, along with the hope that it can serve as a national model for other creative communities affected by natural disasters.

“This Etsy grant and the report it funded are going to fundamentally shape the way we all move forward in the RAD,” says Raleigh. “But I think the biggest gift is this coalition of incredible people who have come together to execute the vision. This is the part that’s replicable in other communities; this can be done anywhere. And we’re just getting warmed up over here.”

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