Tucked just south of Kansas City’s downtown loop is an area brimming with art galleries, unique restaurants, redeveloped urban living spaces, an emerging social scene, and avant-garde merchants. A sort of misshapen trapezoid delineated by man-made physical barriers, this part of downtown is called the Crossroads. Depending upon whom you ask—city planners, economic developers, or community denizens—its boundaries vary. A good working definition is the area bounded by Truman Road on the north, the terminal railroad tracks to the south, Interstate 35 on the west, and Troost Avenue on the east. This definition is sometimes expanded to include portions of the West Side.

This highly diverse, mixed-use area radiates outward from around 20th Street and Baltimore Avenue, where it is anchored by the Crossroads Arts District. It was here where a few courageous artists and gallery owners pioneered to infuse culture into the maw of midwestern urban blight. The ripples of their footsteps lap right up to the foundations of Union Station, the proposed SoLo (Southern Loop)-downtown arena/Performing Arts area, the Southwest Boulevard Hispanic/Mexican-American community, and the 18th & Vine Jazz District. A larger community has now coalesced around this kernel of culture situated between freeways and rails, in the shadow of skyscrapers.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote, "Kansas City was a strange and wonderful place." Perhaps the Nobel laureate would be impressed that his former employer, The Kansas City Star, is now building a state-of-the-art production facility in the Crossroads. The webcam chronicling the construction might overwhelm Papa Hemingway, however. Down the road west a stretch is the plat of land, which has long lain fallow, designated as the site for the new, will-it-ever-really-happen Performing Arts Center. Adjacent to this is the Kansas City Ballet and school. And just to the south sits the former Daniel Webster School, thought to be the oldest standing public school building in Kansas City. Shirley Bush Helzberg has rehabilitated this Romanesque edifice into the Webster House and Restaurant, an upscale antiques purveyor, eatery, and food market.

On the east side of the Crossroads, day labor continues to attract those who cannot secure permanent employment, and Troost Avenue sadly persists as a historically socio-economic and racial boundary. As we move south we encounter brick building after brick building transformed into residential loft space. Many of these inwardly revitalized spaces retain their outer façades, including exterior paint that was used to advertise the businesses of earlier tenants, such as the eponymous Popcorn Lofts that once housed Manley Popcorn in the old Film Row District.
Film Row, on 18th Street was home to numerous motion picture distribution offices in the early part of the 20th century. Along this “row” are embedded sidewalk stars for Ginger Rogers, Joan Crawford, Gene Harlow, Robert Altman, and Walt Disney. Long after Mr. Disney sketched mice in midtown, a 40-foot tall replica of the rocket ship known as the “TWA Moonliner,” which was created as a part of the “Rocket to the Moon” attraction at Disneyland’s Tomorrowland, was placed atop the TWA headquarters at 18th and Baltimore. The model eventually ended up finding a home in a trailer park.

On the northeast corner of 20th and Main the Hereford House cow head juts out like some bovine gargoyle sans downspout. Next-door is the Midwest Hotel, notorious for drugs and prostitution in the past, now nominated to the Missouri Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. Nearby are plenty of haunts for the jaunty homosexual about town: the D B Warehouse Complexx, the soon-to-open Bar Natasha, and around the corner on 19th, In The Life, “Kansas City's Big, Gay Store.” Balanca’s, Tootsie's, and Late Night Theatre are up the street, while Gorilla Theatre Productions’ Apehouse is a few blocks east. If you need threads or kicks, try Michael’s Fine Clothes for Men and Bob Jones Shoes.

Kansas City’s Political boss Thomas Pendergast had his headquarters on the second floor of the building at 1908 Main Street. When Tom’s brother, Jim, died in 1911, the reins of the local Democratic Party were passed to him. In the 1930s, Pendergast controlled the city by dispensing jobs, overseeing numerous civic projects, allowing gambling to flourish, handpicking politicians, and keeping alcohol flowing during Prohibition. While clearly corrupt, Pendergast is credited with helping the city survive the Great Depression by securing government building contracts for his companies, such as the Ready Mixed Concrete Company.
Among other things, some salient issues for urban residents, merchants, and visitors are safety, traffic, parking, green space, grocery, and community. Two events in 2001 made the first of these even more obtrusive: Fire destroyed the “Graffiti Building” at 19th and Wyandotte, and plans by Bannum, Inc. to locate a community corrections center in the Arts District were thwarted. Resilient residents and developers persevered, and continued to improve the area. Population reached a low point in the area in the late ’70s, but is now on the way up. Most crimes reported in the area are property crimes.

Dodie Jacobi, a Crossroads resident and marketing consultant who offices in her home loft, former founding President of the Crossroads Community Association, says she has “developed safety ‘antennae’ and hyper-observation skills to traverse the path from car to door.” She also enjoys seeing the foot traffic that comes through her mixed-use neighborhood. With increased development, both commercial and residential, as well as the continued popularity of nearby galleries and restaurants, parking is at a premium. There are tentative plans for at least one parking structure, and the lease of existing privately-owned surface lots to help alleviate this problem. Building a pedestrian walkway to link the area with Union Station has also been discussed.

Green space is virtually non-existent in the Crossroads. It is, after all, smack in the middle of the city, but Penn Valley Park is only a short distance to the south. Even people who live near dozens of restaurants need groceries on occasion. Accessing Costco and some smaller stores requires only a quick drive to Midtown, and now Heather Hands and Brent Kroh have opened Local Harvest II, an organic produce/grocery, in the Crossroads. The Crossroads Community Association (CCA) is a strong one, with a great, highly-engaged membership interested in enriching and promoting the area, maintaining infrastructure, and preventing crime. It is also the vehicle through which First Fridays is administered.

From 7 to 9 PM on the first Friday of every month, over thirty Crossroads District galleries open their doors to all comers. According to Jacobi, “First Fridays started organically after years of periodic postcard mailings cooperatively assembled and mailed by several galleries and masterminded by Dolphin Gallery owner John O’Brien. CCA was a venue through which galleries ‘formalized’ their invitation and activities for First Fridays.” In addition to viewing and enjoying art, visitors to the area can shop, eat, catch the occasional street performance artist or troupe, and sometimes even catch an outdoor movie.

Trolleys ferry visitors around the Crossroads in two circuits. Marilyn Block, CCA Treasurer, says “the Crossroads Arts District gallery crawl had been in existence for a number of years but was an inconsistent event. With thousands of mailers to prepare, the process became taxing for the few participant galleries. It was in late 2001 that Crossroads Community Association was asked to assume this responsibility.” Under the direction of Robyn Nichols, Suzie Aron, and Dodie Jacobi, the Crossroads Arts District First Fridays came into being in earnest. Besides her work with CCA, Nichols, a noted metal smith, owns Personal Works of Art where she sells silver and gold jewelry and tableware. She is known for two decades of annual bashes thrown to promote her work, and she is also the owner of The Pearl, a special events destination.
The Arts Council of Metropolitan Kansas City and the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce recently sponsored an Economic Activity Study of 78 metropolitan Kansas City not-for-profit arts and cultural organizations. The study concluded that the arts have a significant social and economic impact on the metropolitan Kansas City area. A 2003 Arts Map is available through the Arts Council. Funded by the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, and distributed to hotels and corporate offices, it provides a guide to over 250 theatres, museums, cultural centers, galleries, and other lieux d'art.

Walking through the Arts District itself is an exercise in the eclectic. Diverse architecture abounds: art deco to brick, Victorian to cinder block. Wild morning glories cling to fences, while ivy is trained to stretch up an outer gallery wall. An auto shop sports an ichthus on its exterior, and law firms dot the diverse area. One can find high-end galleries or first-time exhibitors. Grab a burger, or feast on lobster. If you find a good vista, and hold your head just so, you can see the Battle Hall sky stations, Liberty Memorial, the Power and Light Building and One Kansas City Place flanking Baltimore, as well as the landmark sign that tops the Western Auto Building, consisting of 2500 light bulbs and 1000 feet of neon. Along Broadway and on the east side of the district one can find manufacturers, warehouses, distributors, and other light industrial ventures.

Urban developers and entrepreneurs must have a keen knowledge of zoning, financing, and the complex nature of mixed-use areas before plunking down money and blueprints. Designing places meant for living, working, eating out, and clubbing in such an intimate environment does present certain challenges. Several incentives available to investors include Tax Increment Financing (TIF), Real Property Tax Abatements, Historic Tax Credits, Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), and the Brownfield Redevelopment Program.

Some examples of successful endeavors are the loft conversion at 1819 Baltimore of an art deco building that once housed Kansas City White Goods Manufacturing Company, and the ornery-shaped Western Auto Lofts, which was originally the Coca-Cola Building. Nicholas Abnos, who owns the Firestone Building that currently houses his Abdiana Futon Company hopes to follow a similar path to greater fortune.

A subset of the Crossroads is an area referred to as the Freight House District. This small area just north of the terminal tracks behind Union Station enjoys a listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Within the Freight House itself reside Lidia’s Italy, City Tavern with its oyster bar, and Fiorella’s Jack Stack Barbecue. Across the street the Safeway Building has been made into The Lofts at the Freighthouse, and the former Marietta Chair Building now houses Birch Telecom. Soon the Stuart Hall Building, originally a NaBisCo bakery complete with ovens, will be transformed, as well.
If you round the corner at 22nd Street, and head up Baltimore you'll see Twenty 20 Restaurant, Crossroads Blues Gallery, Byron C. Cohen Gallery for Contemporary Art, Society for Contemporary Photography, Leedy-Voulkos Art Center and Opie Gallery, and Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art. Manny's Restaurante Mexicano and Architectural Salvage are around another highly acute corner. Fan out north, east, and west, and you'll find chez b, Smokin' Joe's Barbecue, Zin, Shiraz, Lulu's Thai Noodle Shop and Satay Bar, Opal's Kitchen, and La Bodega. Kansas City Magazine, Light Box Gallery, Derek Porter Studio, Arts Incubator, blue gallery, Joseph Nease Gallery, The Morgan Gallery, Dolphin Gallery, Art from the Heart, Grand Arts, and The Cube at Beco are also nearby.

For a truly unique experience try shopping for some fragrant soaps or linens at The Curious Sofa. Need a quality Eastern floor covering? Try Smith & Burstert Oriental Rugs. Pick up some home décor or a gift at Aesthetica, and if you’re not claustrophobic, drop by Town Topic for a cholesterol fix. Or relax with a cup of joe while hanging with the locals at Y J’ Snack Bar.

In sum, the folks in the Crossroads are a good lot. Each fall this community of artists and gallery owners along with their supporters, friends, and guests come together, to raise HIV/AIDS awareness with a night of food, beverage, live entertainment, and auction by artists for the Foundation for Hope, the fundraising arm for the Hope Care Center, a long-term-care nursing facility for persons challenged by HIV/AIDS located in Waldo.

Culture, eats, hangouts, and the best of urban living—what more do you need? Check out the Crossroads; you’re bound to find something you like there.