DEBATES AND DEVELOPMENTS

Changing Landscapes of Power: Opulence and the Urge for Authenticity

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Abstract

Moving beyond two often used constructs that describe recent socio-spatial changes in cities — gentrification and neoliberalism — this discussion suggests working with the aesthetic idea of authenticity to support the right to a diverse city. As an analytic construct, authenticity has several virtues: it directs attention to culture as well as political economy in the development of global urbanism; it connects to the pervasive modern search for sources of ‘real’ identity; and it reflects concern with changes in urban experience, as well as with physical displacement in the built environment. Reviewing the post-second world war history of US cities, as they replaced the ‘urban village’ with the ‘corporate city’, and more recent examples from New York City, I consider capital, the state, the growing power of the media and new middle-class tastes.

Introduction

This is a good moment to take stock of recent changes in both the built environment of cities and the forces, both visible and invisible, that shape the changing urban experience in our time. The economic crisis has already forced a halt to many spectacular building programs that embodied the great wealth of business and the increasingly abstract calculations of banks and brokers that coordinate the temporary resting places of capital. It has deprived many people of modest means of their homes and jobs, forcing them to bear the heavy burden of the ‘credit crunch’ as small-scale investors and borrowers, as well as migrant laborers and corporate employees. In New York City, where I live, people both hope and fear that the present crisis will push back against the strong momentum of the real estate industry, aided and abetted by every mayoral administration, for more than 50 years. During this long half-century, and with a dramatic acceleration during the past 30 years, urban redevelopment has removed the poorest residents from central quarters to distant edges of the metropolitan region, replacing them with tall office towers, luxury housing and large-scale cultural amenities. This ‘upscaleing’ has provided the visual images and programmatic narrative for a nearly universal rhetoric of growth, beginning in New York and rapidly circulating among many other cities, especially those with growing financial centers, from London to Bilbao, Shanghai and Mumbai.

Urban political economists, for the most part, explain this kind of growth as the result of speculation in a neoliberal market system: an increasing volume of investment capital seeking profitable returns, an increasing array of financial instruments to channel
investment into risky deals and an increasing anxiety on the part of city governments to maximize resources so they can compete for the money and prestige that are conferred by deal making in every sector of the symbolic economy, from finance and real estate, to art, media and fashion (Zukin, 1995; Harvey, 2001; 2005). The agents of these changes are transnational investors and a transnational class of corporate consumers, both locals and expatriates (Sklair, 2000), who build spaces that reflect but hardly contain their entrepreneurial pursuits, gradually reproducing — in collaboration with equally entrepreneurial local officials and construction firms — a hegemonic ‘global urbanism’ (King, 2004) of iconic architecture, gentrified residential districts and more or less gated shopping centers. Whether this socio-spatial regime is also shaped by ‘traveling ideas’ disseminated by transnational organizations and journals (Tait and Jensen, 2007) or by simple strategies of competitive emulation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), the net effect is to raise local property values, on the one hand, and to submerge distinctive local character, on the other.

Not enough attention has been paid to cultural forces that create this landscape of power. Certainly, many studies blame gentrification for displacing the poor and ethnic minorities from inner-city areas, with gentrifiers’ tastes for consuming the fixed capital of heritage leading them to bid up property values in the ur-neighborhoods of the urban core (Smith and Williams, 1986), only to be displaced, in turn, by richer ‘super-gentrifiers’ (Lees, 2003). Properly speaking, however, gentrification is an individual action, involving the preservation, restoration and re-use of old houses of some certified architectural quality, which — when broad in scale — produces both a demographic change and a change in a space’s social character. But gentrification excludes — again, properly speaking — new construction. And though it creates a new market for both buildings and spaces, it does not refer either to repeated changes in a single space or the spread of changes on a citywide scale. A block or a neighborhood can be gentrified; a city cannot. To speak of ‘gentrification generalized’ (Smith, 2002) is a brave attempt to create a rubric for hegemonic global urbanism, but it neglects some of the specific cultural features and implications of this mode of socio-spatial production. One suggestive though problematic feature, which has been outlined in different kinds of cultural critique for many years, is a destruction of authenticity — a destruction which harms the marginalized people and cultures that create urban diversity.

A crisis of authenticity?

Authenticity is an ambiguous concept. It represents origins in two quite different senses: on the one hand, an almost mythically primordial rootedness in place and time (Benjamin, 1968 [1936]) and, on the other, a capacity for historically new, creative innovation. Though in the second sense, authenticity nearly always applies to the artistry of exceptional individuals, it represents, in the first sense, the life-situation of a group. Authenticity might be used, then, as a proxy for Lefebvre’s espace vécu — as both a real set of social practices anchored to existing buildings and land, and a metaphorical framework to establish a vulnerable population’s right to make an urban place. Clearly, this is not the same strategy as either decommodifying land or providing the poor with low-interest mortgages. But it does point toward a new understanding of ownership rights, involving a collective rather than an individual right to the city, that could be exercised as stewardship or management of either public or privately owned space, from community gardens and parks to the streets.

Yet authenticity is most often used as an elitist category of aesthetic judgment. Even here there is a muddling of terms, with the ‘objective’ qualities of cultural products evaluated by the subjective abilities of outside authorities — who often have an interest in producing the authenticity of which they speak (Peterson, 1997). If, moreover, authenticity is in the eye of the beholder, it can easily become a weapon for claiming
moral superiority by those who possess or ‘see’ it and excluding those who cannot or do not (Adorno, 2003 [1964]). Despite all of these ambiguities, authenticity has become a widely used term — it resonates with some thematic elements of popular culture, as well as with the aesthetic vocabulary of modernism, referring to the pursuit of identity in ‘real’ places, ‘real’ experiences and a ‘real’ self. Though this existential journey often wends its way through tourism and consumer culture (MacCannell, 1976; Binkley, 2007; Gilmore and Pine, 2007), it can also shape a more radical claim to urban space. Most often used by gentrifiers and historic preservationists, authenticity sometimes, though less successfully, is used by ethnic minorities and ‘social preservationists’ to preserve group solidarity, prevent displacement and ease inter-group tensions (Jackson, 2005; Maly, 2005; Brown-Saracino, forthcoming).

From this point of view, hegemonic global urbanism is not only a source and symptom of economic crisis, it also connects to a crisis of authenticity. This crisis is seen and felt as an undesirable change in urban experience, representing a different regulation of both spaces and people, creating projects and dependencies on a larger scale, eliminating the means by which poor people and ethnic minorities produce their lives, and reducing the social and aesthetic diversity that has been a historical element of city life. Complaints about this sort of undesirable change are not new, and are only rarely politically radical. They tend to surface during property booms, periods of widespread demolition and new construction, and waves of migration, as the mid-nineteenth century novels of Balzac, the travel journals of Henry James from the early 1900s and the work of Henri Lefebvre during the 1960s and 1970s confirm. Generally, these complaints focus on a loss of cultural vitality — an impression of aesthetic sameness, homogenization or even ‘suburbanization’ (Hammett and Hammett, 2007) and a conspicuous display of wealth that the New York writer and film director Woody Allen identifies with ‘opulence’ (Moss, 2008). They share, in short, a perception outlined by the urbanist Jane Jacobs (1961) and, in a different way, by Lefebvre: that upscaling has brought about undesirable change in the urban imaginary, an unsettling feeling that the city is ‘losing its soul’ (Chan, 2007).

We might expect affluent, highly educated elites to express dismay with rapidly changing landscapes even while they enjoy the privilege of their own mobility. But the ‘crisis of authenticity’ speaks to a broader and more metaphysical set of problems that goes beyond one group’s economic and cultural capital. I am speaking of our common inability to grasp the shifting meanings of space and time, as well as the search for sources of our own ‘real’ identity. Though these problems take different forms according to local cultures and institutions, they share a concern with maintaining the historical attachments of place in the face of multiple individual choices.

Using authenticity as a lever of cultural power is an unusual approach to the right to the city. But it speaks to an influential formulation of the urban imaginary that has emerged in cities around the world during the past 50 years, beginning in the United States, with two parallel but contradictory landscape projects: building the corporate city and preserving the urban village.

**Two landscapes of power**

Originating in mid-twentieth century American discourse, the corporate city and the urban village are, in one way or another, the pre-eminent socio-spatial constructs of global urbanism today. As material landscapes, they embody the concentration of wealth in industry; in the service sector that coordinates the investment strategies, professional careers and personal lives of those who manage industrial wealth; and in the workers who migrate from villages in distant regions to create the physical products on which modern life depends. As symbolic landscapes, however, they represent contrasting social worlds. The corporate city represents the high end of growth, the cultural hegemony of finance
and the standardization of individual desire. It is what we understand to be the ultimate landscape of globalization. The urban village, on the other hand, represents the low-key and often low-income neighborhood, the culture of ethnic and social class solidarity, and the dream of restoring a ruptured community. It is in many ways the local response to globalization.

There is, though, an ironic connection between these two landscapes. If the corporate city has developed more or less continuously since the early 1900s, according to, first, modernist and, then, post-modernist designs, the urban village has undergone both a generational and a sociological reinvention, beginning in the 1960s. It has become the visual trope of the authentic city, an aesthetic projection of the interdependence and diversity of the urban social fabric, and a means of contesting ‘the end of history’ as well. The self-awareness or reflexivity of this reinvention reflects the ambivalent self-interest of the ‘new’ urban middle class, who have moved into many of the old neighborhoods that make up the urban village — making it the ultimate landscape of gentrification.

Intimations of these changes, and pressures for them, build up over many years. Though most US cities trace their origins to the industrial economy and massive European immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the ‘soulless’ city that we see today crept into view in the 1920s, was repressed by the Great Depression and second world war, and re-emerged in force in the 1950s, in the last days of the urban village and the first days of the corporate city and the new urban middle class. This threshold period of the 1950s and 1960s was marked by both massive urban renewal projects led by public-sector bureaucrats like Robert Moses in New York, which tore the guts out of the historic core of the city that was built during the early 1900s (Caro, 1974; Berman, 1982), and stirrings of resistance to it by both old and new city dwellers — a resistance both represented and mobilized, also in New York, by the urbanist Jane Jacobs. Not until the 1980s did these changes reach a tipping point — when hipsters, gentrifiers, business improvement districts, creative retail entrepreneurs, community gardeners and new immigrants established niches that reshaped the urban experience in many ways — making the city as a whole cleaner, safer, more interesting and more modern. Their actions, limited to the small scale of individual neighborhoods and blocks, were fleshed out by journalists and politicians, who gave voice and image to their efforts and spread them, first citywide and then around the world. Local transformations were shaped by different kinds of social and cultural capital that greased the wheels of larger political and economic forces: the rise of lifestyle media and blogs; zoning changes, policing strategies and government subsidies; officials’, developers’ and investors’ interest in supporting new construction (Zukin, forthcoming).

Because of a combination of factors — starting with capital and the state but also including in an equal role the cultural power of the media and the tastes of the urban middle class — the city’s landscape changed. It became the corporate city of transnational headquarters, big box stores and business improvement districts — the ‘business class’ city that no longer ‘recognizes the difference between creating and consuming’ (Muschamp, 1995). Though this transformation occurred first in the United States, it is the prototype for hegemonic global urbanism today. To understand the development of this urban imaginary, it is important that we take a closer look at the historical origins of the two landscapes in economic and demographic changes, as well as cultural representations — especially media images and elected officials’ rhetoric of growth. It is also crucial to look at the tastes and lifestyles of the urban middle class, for, in both traditional and new media, these dominate the cultural representations of cities. Let me suggest how such an analysis might proceed in different regions of the world by focusing on the origins of the two landscapes and their effects on an emerging urban imaginary in the United States. While it is important to exhume the spirit of Haussmann and examine how it shaped mid-nineteenth-century Paris, and Robert Moses’ as well as more contemporary plans (Harvey, 2008), it is also important to move on to a critical
consideration of Jane Jacobs’ work and examine how it has shaped the urban imaginary since the 1960s.

Historical origins: United States, 1950s–80s

At the start of the threshold period, in the 1950s, the economic base of the old urban village was dying. Manufacturers of heavy goods in the United States were migrating to the West Coast, lured by both tax laws and federal government support for national highways, as well as by an emerging market of new consumers who were themselves migrating from the East and Middle West. Smaller manufacturers were moving to the suburbs or rural areas, where land was for sale at reasonable prices, wages for even skilled workers were lower than in the city, and employees tended to be more obedient to authority. Factory owners and investors were also tired of dealing with city government’s bureaucracy and political machines, aging streets and buildings, and traffic congestion. Industries, moreover, capitalized on the local state’s autonomy by playing one town or city against another. Suburban voters and town councils often passed bills to subsidize the costs of opening plants and changed zoning laws to suit their needs. New industries were reluctant to locate inside cities because they needed large amounts of open floor space, which would be either too expensive to assemble or just not available. Because they depended on frequent deliveries by truck, they preferred locations near highways and, eventually, near airports. They formed their own new clusters — sometimes around transportation hubs like airports or highway interchanges, or around universities. With jobs already gone or drying up, the urban village of white, Latino and African-American workers lost its livelihood.

Its culture survived in the streets where people continued to live and shop, and in popular dramas, television shows and movies. Even today, the urban village is familiar to young Americans who have watched Jackie Gleason and Art Carney in old episodes of The Honeymooners (1950s–60s) on television or seen Spike Lee’s films Do the Right Thing (1989) and Crooklyn (1994). This is a vibrant culture. When the theaters of social life are the home and the block, passions run deep over who owns every crack in the sidewalk. Housing — mostly in small tenement apartments and modest, single-family homes — is poor, but everyone is well fed, and married children tend to settle down close to their parents. The strong ties between people are both a form of repression and a source of pride — represented partly by the film Goodfellas and partly by the TV series Everybody Loves Raymond. Without new jobs, though, and without fresh investment in housing, these working-class neighborhoods become rundown and are stigmatized as ‘blighted’ (Gans, 1962). Powerful people in the city see them as a deviant space, looking down on their mean streets as on a slum. The strong web of reciprocity among residents is regarded as a trap even by those who grow up there and now yearn for respectability. Outsiders often blame the bad reputation of a neighborhood like this on residents’ lack of organization, but its ‘problem’, says the sociologist William Foote Whyte (1943: 273), who studied the Italian working-class North End of Boston at the end of the 1930s, is not that the neighborhood is disorganized, but that its own kind of organization — intensely family oriented, suspicious of outsiders and distrustful of achievement — fails ‘to mesh with the structure of the society around it’.

Redeveloping these old neighborhoods in the 1950s was only a small part of the nearly worldwide campaign to modernize cities by driving out factories, ports and wholesale food markets, and expanding financial and government districts. Though cities with the biggest financial players and strongest base of national elites — New York, London and Paris — created redevelopment projects on the largest scale, smaller cities also eagerly tore down and remade their centers. ‘Visionary’ urban planners who knew how to juggle the demands of federal bureaucracies and local business leaders removed the bars and low-rent rooming houses of each city’s Skid Row and nearby working-class
neighborhoods, replacing them with office towers, hotels, apartment houses for the middle class and other prestige-bearing projects. They built urban extensions — and the ubiquitous interchange — to the expanding national highway system. Some urban renewal money even paid for renovating ‘historic’ tenements for tenants who would pay higher rents and built new housing for the teaching staff of private universities. New York’s Robert Moses was one of these public-sector autocrats who built the post-war corporate city, but every city had a similar figure who coordinated public funding and private development: urban planners, they were called, by a disgusted Jane Jacobs (1961), but really they were public-sector capitalists (Ballon and Jackson, 2007).

Elected officials in different cities marched to the same drum. Though they did not admit it, they were chiefly motivated, suggests the urban sociologist Herbert Gans (1962), who studied the demise of Boston’s Italian North End in the 1950s, by the desire to attract affluent residents who would pay higher rents and spend more money in downtown stores. Officials wanted to clear out the ethnic neighborhoods, which had grown so close to downtown financial districts that they threatened to overrun them. But they were also desperate to compensate for the city’s declining tax base, which reflected in Boston, as elsewhere, decades of movement out of the city by both old manufacturing firms and high-income residents, and the gradual loss of appeal of shopping in the downtown core. Politicians wanted to please local real estate developers by subsidizing the cost of acquiring inner-city land and providing incentives to start new construction. Caught up in the universal desire for growth, for visible signs of progress that would attract new investment, and for money to finance the police and fire fighters, public schools, streets and all the other things that local governments provide, mayors and city council members sealed the old neighborhoods’ doom. The urban village had few powerful defenders — certainly not among mayors and urban planning czars like Robert Moses who proved to be adept at bridging the needs of federal government agencies and local real estate developers.

Jane Jacobs saw the urban village on the cusp of these changes. By the time she moved to the West Village, though, many of the old Irish and Italian families had moved on and the port that had provided them with a livelihood was finished. She also witnessed the changing of the political guard — with the election, first, of a reformist mayor who ran against the machine and fired Robert Moses, and, then, of another reformist mayor who opened the era of New York as ‘Fun City’ and personified the ideal of New York as both a corporate and a cultural capital. In The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961), Jacobs described cities on the threshold of these momentous changes — though she was unaware of both the influence she herself would have on responses to them and the impact of an intensified market economy.

Idealizing the urban village

The urban imaginary that became dominant during the 1980s reflects, in part, Jane Jacobs’ influence on the way North Americans see the physical landscape. Mixing old and new buildings, limiting many streets to a mainly small scale, assuring a diversity of uses that attracts people 24/7, these are the building blocks of the vibrant city that Jacobs proposed. Most of all, though, Jacobs’ elegant description of interdependence and social control — the ballet of the street that involves store owners, housewives, neighborhood workers and children — created an ideal to which many new city dwellers aspire. This is the landscape of the urban village.

But Jacobs romanticized social conditions that were already becoming obsolete when she wrote about them in 1960. By the 1980s and 1990s, second-generation immigrant shopkeepers were replaced by chain stores; housewives who had time to look out the window to see what was happening in the street entered, or returned to, the work force. A mix of machine shops and small factories, butcher shops and dry
cleaners, and homeowners and tenants was crushed by new waves of boutiques, condos, high-rise development and gentrifiers. Underneath it all, the rootedness that connects people to place was made weak by new forms of mobility. Though Jacobs blamed urban planners for making neighborhoods into slums, and building high-rise business centers and housing projects that alienated their users, she was too smart a journalist, and too experienced a community activist, to ignore the forces that structured, and structure still, what is built and how: the force of money and state power. Yet, she did not realize then — or acknowledge later — that gradual investments by highly educated, higher income people like herself might, over time, grease the wheels of developers’ high-stakes, large-scale projects, even without concerted planning by the state.

Despite her good intentions, Jacobs’ ideal vision of urban life shaped two important vehicles that enable developers to pursue their goals: elected officials’ rhetoric of growth and media representations of cultural consumption. Skeptics may scoff that these are only words and images; both together and alone, they lack the power to make material changes in the city’s built environment. These words and images, though, create a language that embodies our desire for a good place to live. In time, this language persuades us, or just confirms our belief, that the good life depends on building more cultural attractions to draw tourists to the city, opening more sidewalk cafés and boutiques, and restoring more old houses. These images of the urban good life camouflage a basic conflict. Dependent on both private developers to invest and build, and voters to keep them in office, officials walk a fine line between promising support for housing rights that will help to preserve communities and redevelopment projects that will eliminate or change them. Their rhetoric of growth takes direction from market-oriented administrations in national government and the unanticipated success of gentrification. The new priority is ‘making markets’, as an entrepreneurial slogan says, rather than helping poor people and small businesses to stay in place, or permitting local communities to veto developers’ plans (Angotti, 2008).

Media, tastes and power

Media representations both drive and reflect this vision. In the old days of print media, when local newspapers and magazines thrived on paid subscriptions and advertisements, they needed a growing population. In our time — the age of lifestyle magazines and similar websites and blogs — the media’s hunger for content leads them to support the generic goal of growth, as well as specific processes of revitalization. More often than not, they support replacing poorer residents with richer ones who renovate houses and gardens, hiring famous architects to design spectacular buildings and opening more stores, restaurants, art museums and themed districts, all of which provide them with things to write about. The media do not cause neighborhoods to be upscaled, but they capitalize on it. Alternately mourning, glorifying and dramatizing the city’s gritty past, the media help that image to recede into social obsolescence, while recycling it into the aesthetic code of a new urban lifestyle. Loft dwellers and historic townhouse owners, hipsters and gentrifiers lay claim to the bricks and mortar of the historic city, while the media either romanticize or form a collective amnesia about who, and what, has been displaced (Crinson, 2005).

The creation of a new imaginary for Harlem, New York’s celebrated African-American community, began in the 1980s with media promotion of a ‘new Harlem Renaissance’, which glamorized the illustrious artistic and literary personalities who lived in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s but muted the racial segregation, poverty and political radicalism of that time (Zukin, forthcoming). Despite continued poverty, this re-imagining of the area facilitated the marketing of an upscale Harlem with luxury housing, cafés and boutiques. It featured both the architectural and social rehabilitation of nineteenth-century
brownstone houses and the construction of new, high-rise apartment buildings. The image of a new Harlem Renaissance appealed to upper-middle-class whites, expats and recent college graduates, as well as to black professionals, investors and entrepreneurs, and was marketed to all of these groups simultaneously in articles about townhouse purchases and renovations in mainstream media, in architectural and home-design magazines, and on their affiliated websites. The marketing campaign accelerated with the establishment of a state-sponsored ‘empowerment zone’ in the 1990s and an increase in private developers’ interest in Harlem when land values in higher-status, and thus less risky, areas rose. Today, the new imaginary of the Harlem Renaissance seeps into national, and via satellite even global, popular culture, with a ‘reality’ television series, *Harlem Heights*, ‘which will follow eight, young, good-looking, ambitious African-Americans as they manage their professional and emotional lives in glamour spots north of 110th Street’ (Bellafante, 2009; emphasis added). With a rich history of resistance to state policies and suspicious of outside investment, community groups in Harlem have consistently and vehemently opposed upscaling (literally, in the rezoning of the area’s major shopping street) and both residential and commercial displacement. Local development corporations have sponsored low- and middle-income housing, organizations have devised alternative plans; there is even an annual march against gentrification. But residents’ opposition is hard to sustain against both state redevelopment agencies and media power — as well as against more affluent black homeowners, some of whom are recent gentrifiers, and local politicians (Hyra, 2008).

In Harlem, as elsewhere, mainstream print medialike lifestyle magazines and nontraditional, self-referential new medialike blogs stimulate an appetite for consuming the local, the past, the edgy, the different — tastes for different genres of authenticity that take spatial form in loft living, hipster neighborhoods and gentrified houses in low-rent, previously ghettoized districts. The media do not cause individuals to take these actions. Gentrifiers and new retail entrepreneurs respond to both their own needs and their perceptions of needs in their community (Zukin et al., 2009). They would not become agents of change without necessary actions by the local state, starting with more dynamic — and more repressive — policing, which drives down crime rates and removes young men perceived to be troublesome from the streets. They also require capital: high salaries in finance, media and culture industries; bank loans, some provided by overseas institutions; and occasionally loans from publicly funded programs and charitable donations from the same investment banks that fell so swiftly in the recent global financial crisis.

A small but suggestive counter-example to the effect of media power and middle-class tastes on upscaling Harlem emerged during the same period at a public park in Red Hook, a declining industrial neighborhood on the Brooklyn waterfront (Zukin, forthcoming). Since the 1970s, about a dozen immigrant vendors from Latin America had cooked and sold the foods of their countries on weekends at the ball fields where their friends and family members play soccer. None of these vendors have ever lived in Red Hook. Working outside formal institutions, and without attracting notice from either non-Latinos or most of Red Hook’s residential population — which includes aging, white, working-class homeowners and a much larger number of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans living in public housing — the food vendors built up a steady clientele for their Salvadoran pupusas, Mexican huaraches and Ecuadorean ceviches. Food critics for *The New York Times* began to write about the vendors in the mid-1990s, praising the ‘authenticity’ of their freshly prepared dishes and, even more, the authenticity of the informal, out-of-doors *mercado*. Despite these glowing notices, and the fetishization of the Global South that they expressed, the vendors remained under the radar of most non-Latino consumers until the emergence of locally based blogs, especially food blogs, around 2003. At that point, bloggers who emphasized the vendors’ authenticity caused an explosion of interest. The Red Hook food vendors began to attract Brooklyn politicians and gentrifiers, as well as out-of-town tourists, which swelled demand for their products and tilted their customer base from Latino to ‘white’.
In 2007, when the city government agencies that regulate the sale of food in public parks — the parks and health departments — imposed severe new restrictions on the vendors, which threatened to drive them out of business, the bloggers and politicians rallied to the vendors’ support. Unlike other vendors in the city, who are also predominantly immigrants and subject to continuous harassment by the police and immigration authorities, the Red Hook food vendors had already formed a non-profit organization, led by a savvy, part-time director who is the stepson of one of the vendors. The organization, together with food bloggers’ support, was crucial to the vendors’ ability to keep their place in the park. In this case, an urban middle-class taste for consuming authenticity enabled a vulnerable social group of immigrant street vendors to defend their right to the city.

Both the new Harlem Renaissance and the Red Hook food vendors are more complex situations than I can analyze here. Each case points, nonetheless, to the importance of consumers’ tastes for an ‘authentic’ urban experience, whether these tastes are a literal appetite for ‘real’ ethnic food or a hunger to identify with history. It is no accident that so much of hegemonic global urbanism is connected to consumption. Consumer culture has helped many men and women to make their peace with the city and, for better or worse, it has pacified spaces in the city to prepare them for growth. The cultural synthesis of the early twenty-first century offers boutique gourmet cheese stores side by side with the bazaar, small-scale agricultural production in community gardens across the street from branches of Whole Foods supermarkets, street vendors of tortillas and dosas next to IKEA and H&M. If post-war US mayors thought their cities could have it all, so, too, does a global urban middle class. Despite different forms of state power and different degrees of autonomy of market institutions, a similar dynamic is building a corporate city, and re-commodifying the urban village, in Shanghai, Tokyo, London, New York and many other cities around the world.

The aesthetic challenge

During the past 30 years, media images of ‘good’ cities have forged an increasingly important connection between capital, state and the new urban middle class — between the interests of investors, officials and consumers. The sociologist Leslie Sklair (1995) calls culture the ‘glue’ that connects state power and financial capital. It is clear that media images and consumer tastes grease the wheels of global urbanism, anchoring the power of both capital and the state in the spaces of our individual desires, persuading us that consuming the authentic city has everything to do with aesthetics and nothing to do with power.

As researchers, we face a challenge in helping city dwellers to understand the dynamics of global urbanism and to resist the pacifying effects of its aesthetic appeal, which reflects that of consumer culture. In some ways, this forces us to confront the contradictions of our own social location as middle-class academics and media producers. We also confront the intellectual problem of combining culture, especially consumer culture, and political economy, which I have signaled by suggesting that a model of contemporary urban changes must focus not only on capital and the state but also on media power and tastes, and not only on transnational elites and marginalized social groups, but on local cultural entrepreneurs who transform a taste for consuming authenticity into material products and spaces. Of course, the economic crisis may reduce the chances that more shopping malls will be built soon in New Delhi and more hotels will rise in Dubai. But this should not prevent us from transforming the aesthetics of global urbanism into support for a just and diverse city.

The claim to see or embody authenticity is not only a claim of moral superiority; it is a cultural lever for claiming space. When this claim coincides with the politicians’ rhetoric of growth, it becomes a powerful means of displacement. If it could join, though,
with a new rhetoric of authenticity that avoids any sort of fundamentalism, it would offer a platform for broad coalitions to prevent continued up-scaling and displacement. To achieve this, we must politicize the meaning of authenticity to include the right to put down roots, a moral right to live and work in a space, not just to consume it.

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References


Résumé

Dépassant deux notions fréquemment utilisées pour décrire les récentes évolutions socio-spatiales urbaines (gentrification et néolibéralisme), cette discussion propose de recourir à l’idée esthétique d’authenticité pour défendre le droit à une ville diversifiée. Comme concept analytique, l’authenticité revêt plusieurs vertus : elle oriente l’intérêt vers la culture et l’économie politique dans l’élaboration d’un urbanisme globalisé ; elle rejoint l’incessante quête moderne de sources d’identité ‘réelle’ ; elle traduit une préoccupation des transformations de l’expérience urbaine, ainsi que du déplacement physique dans un environnement bâti. En reprenant l’histoire des villes américaines après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, lesquelles ont remplacé le ‘village urbain’ par la ‘ville économique’, avec des cas new-yorkais plus récents, ce travail s’intéresse aux capitaux, à l’État, au pouvoir des médias et aux goûts des classes moyennes.