The Role of Consumption in the Organization of Urban Space: the Case of Neo-Bohemia

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In our study, we aim to understand the relations between consumption and organization of urban space through acts of legitimization, performative consumption, value dynamics and cultural politics of consumption from a Bourdieudian perspective in the context of a neo-bohemian neighborhood in Toronto. Using ethnographic observations, interviews with the art galleries and residents, marketing material and media coverage, we focus on conversion of capital through strategies used by different actors in this urban scene to create or to contest value, and through struggles over symbolic and social spaces where value is created.

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“Though locals will tell you that West Queen Street West extends all the way down to Gladstone Street, where the oh-so-hip Gladstone Hotel opened in late 2006, walking any farther than the intersection of Ossington and Queen Street West is an exercise in diminishing returns—with appliance stores more numerous than trendy cafes. This part of this street, it seems, is still waiting for its own renaissance.” (New York Times, September 02, 2007)

Although Consumer Culture theoreticians scholars have studied issues of class (Allen 2002; Henry 2005; Holt 1998), gender (Holt and Thompson 2004) and ethnicity (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004) in the socio-historic patterning of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005), urban life and urban space, where consumption is structured by and structures these socio-historic forces, have been left in the background (an exception is a study of gentrification by Ilkucan and Sandikci 2005). Consequently, our understanding of both low involvement everyday consumption choices and practices and high involvement consumption choices (e.g., buying a house) has been isolated from the dynamics of urban life and urban space, including the strategies used by actors in the consumption scene to create or to contest value and their struggles over symbolic and social spaces where value is created. This study follows a Bourdieudian tradition in order to understand acts of legitimation, performative consumption, value dynamics and cultural politics of consumption. We focus on conversion of capital and strategies and struggles in the field that enable and/or impede this conversion, different from other Bourdieudian studies in CCT which have focused on the concepts of capital (Bernthal, Crockett, and Rose 2005; Holt 1998) and habitus (Allen 2002; Henry 2005).

Within the limits of this research, we present a very specific type of neighborhood, often referred to as neo-bohemia. According to (Lloyd 2006), neo-bohemia is the current shelter of the post-modern creative class (Florida 2002), the Bobos (Brooks 2000) and the hipsters (Leland 2004). The most important aspect of both modern bohemia and post-modern neo-bohemia is the non-stable relationship between the mainstream, the market and the commercial on one hand and the alternative, creative and cultural on the other. Tensions in this non-stable relationship are constantly played out in urban life and urban space through both daily mundane consumption activities and momentous consumption choices such as buying a loft.

In order to understand the relations between consumption and the organization of neo-bohemian urban space, we selected the Queen Street West neighborhood in Toronto as our context. It was gentrified by the artists who moved out of an increasingly elite Yorkville neighborhood starting in the 1970s (Caulfield 1994) and now has the highest concentration of art galleries in Toronto. In addition to art galleries, the part declared as the Business Improvement Area (BIA) is occupied by new fashionable stores, restaurants and clubs, loft buildings and new commercial developments. Although the neo-bohemian trend has existed in the neighborhood, it has recently become “hot” after two companies announced and sold their loft developments in the area.

Our investigation of Queen Street West is an ongoing multi-method study. Our data include ethnographic observations conducted since early 2007. In addition, we have conducted interviews with neighborhood residents and art gallery owners. We have also collected two types of archival material: promotional material and media texts. Promotional material includes sales brochures and a bi-weekly publication promoting new condominium developments in Toronto. In addition to advertisements, the publication also has articles on condominium lifestyles, real estate trends, and décor. The media text, comprised of articles from Toronto newspapers and Canadian magazines, addresses not only the changes in the neighborhood, but also the lifestyle promoted by these new developments.

Our analysis addresses how consumption organizes and is organized by urban space, and our current findings involve themes of acts of legitimation, performative consumption, value dynamics and the cultural politics of consumption. Despite a backlash, the acts of legitimation provide a central strategy followed by the developers and which they seek to transfer to their customers. Developers depict the bohemian and hipster lifestyle as being among the “amenities” of their high-rise “lofts” in order to attract the “new urbanites” and invite them to be part of this “scene”. One of these developments has even used the word bohemian in its name, although it has generated negative reactions among the Queen West art community. It also has staged community events such as fashion shows, which was only open to an exclusive crowd of designers and loft buyers. Another developer has purchased art products from local galleries with the intent of...