Researching the Post-Industrial City: Assessing the Relations Between Space, Markets, and Society in Urban Places

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019841/volumes/v43/NA-43

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ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to understand the relations between markets and urban places. To do so, I elaborate a typology of urban places and analyze research opportunities. I discuss potential contributions to post-structuralist studies in CCT and the possibilities of advancing connections with other social sciences and public policy formulation.

INTRODUCTION

Space is co-constituting of and co-constituted by social life (Castilhos, Dolbec, and Veresiu 2014). Social relations at the same time produce a space (Lefebvre 1991a) and are produced by the determinations, uses and meanings of these spaces (Gieryn 2000). In consumer research, space is usually understood as both the background and place of the consumer experience. However, while a wide literature on consumer research recognizes that the physical space incorporates symbolic properties and acts to shape and induce consumer behavior (Sherry 1998), the emphasis of these studies lies almost exclusively in the phenomenological understanding of the localized coproduction of experiences and consumption of meanings in spatially bounded servicescapes (Joy and Sherry 2003; Kozinets et al. 2004; Maclaran and Brown 2005; Borghini et al. 2009; Varman and Belk 2011; Debenedetti, Oppewal, and Arsel 2013). With few exceptions (Ilkucan and Sandikci 2005; Visconti et al. 2010; Chatzidakis, Maclaran, and Bradshaw 2012; Zwick and Ozalp 2012; Castilhos, Dolbec, and Veresiu 2014) the broader dynamics that take place, depend on, and reflect on space of the contemporary city are rarely discussed. Consequently, questions about mutual influence of markets, space and society remain unanswered. How, then, the logic of the market manifests itself in the production of space in the contemporary city? What places emerge from the relationship between markets and spaces? What research opportunities and theoretical advances are latent in the analysis of these places?

The purpose of this essay is to discuss this set of questions from a post-structuralist perspective. It seeks to overcome dominant consumer-centric forms of analysis on Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), trying to understand beyond the subjectivity of the consumer agent, the “underlying ideological and mythological forces producing these subjectivities.” (Askegaard and Linnet 2011, p. 387). This stream privileges analysis of the “institutional, historical, ideological, and sociological shaping of consumption and the broader market and social systems, which situate consumers’ identity projects and consumption practices” (Thompson, Arnould, and Giesler 2013, p. 4).

The contemporary city is strongly embedded in such market systemic complexity. From housing to retailscapes, from transportation to leisure activities, the development of the cities is increasingly permeated by the logics of value creation that are typical of marketing processes. Moreover, with the hegemony of financial capitalism on a global scale, the city is increasingly conceived at the same time as a space for consumption (Zukin 1998; Miles 2011) and as a product to be managed, governed, and upgraded in the realm of the competition for global resources (Harvey 1989; Harvey 2012). This dynamic leads new urban places, such as renovated ports and historic centers, theme and business parks, shopping malls and planned neighborhoods, among others (Ferreira 2011).

The city’s physical environment is, then, the arena where multiple actors—such as different groups of residents, real-estate businesses, investors, and multiple levels of governments, among others—seek to accomplish their interests and ideologies. It is precisely the interrelationship between these multiplicities of interests at stake that makes the contemporary city a privileged context for the poststructuralist study of markets, consumption, and society. To understand the relationships between the logic of the market and the production of urban places, I first discuss the underlying theoretical rationale behind the notion of the production of urban space. Secondly, I draft a typology of urban places as a function of “intended diversity” and “control/ownership”, and analyze the few research opportunities that arise from understanding the dynamics of production of such places. Lastly, I discuss the potential contributions of this research avenue to the extant post-structuralist literature in consumer research and the possibilities of advancing connections with other social sciences, such as urban studies and economy, and with public policy formulation.

THE LOGICS OF PRODUCTION OF SPACE

Social space is the product of the social relations in a given time; its production, thus, is closely linked to the relations of (re)production of social and material life (Lefebvre 1991a; Ascher 2004). Social space is produced in the social relations of reproduction (between genders, age groups, family organization, etc.) and relations of production (division of labor and its organization) (Lefebvre 1991b).

Such relations involve representations, ideologies and interests of social groups that are cumulatively materialized in the form of factories, houses, roads, shops, etc. This materialization provides new grounds for the very relations that produce it: that space is at the same time a social agent that “[1] stabilizes and gives durability to social structural categories, differences and hierarchies; [2] arranges patterns of face-to-face interaction that constitute network-formation and collective action; and, [3] embodies and secures otherwise intangible cultural norms, identities, memories” (Gieryn, 2000, p. 473).

Particularly in capitalism, space becomes part of the circuits of valorization and accumulation of capital (Piketty 2014), acquiring “exchange value” through the commodification and parceling of the land or through its increasing inclusion in the circuits of financial capital: “the exchange value historically overrides the use value, which means that in order to enjoy certain attributes of the place it is necessary to realize, first of all, its exchange value”. (Botelho 2007, p. 23). Moreover, the production of space is one of the key elements in the capitalist economy, which Lefebvre (1991a) and Harvey (1982) named the secondary circuit of capital, as opposed to the primary circuit, the production and consumption of goods. It is to this second sector the surplus of the primary circuit flows, which also obeys the imperative of the return of investments. In this case, the built environment is increasingly performed as a business. However, in urban space, the logic of production of goods shall conform to a basic imperative: the built environment is, in most cases, fixed. In order to overcome this apparent obstacle and realize return rates, market agents need to ensure: (1) the attractiveness of projects through a series of valorization strategies; and, (2) their economic and financial viability through cycles of appreciation-depreciation-revaluation of the land.

It is this dual and interrelated mechanism that explains much of the changes in the configurations of the cities of the capitalist world in the last 150 years. Put another way, the historical urban transformations are the result of the relationship between the inexorable
macro processes of capitalism and the micro processes of reproduction of social relations. “The transformations of the city are not the passive results of the social globality, of its modifications. The city also depends and not less essentially on the relations of immediacy, the direct relationships between people and groups that compose society” (Lefebvre 1969, p 47). The city and its array of urban places entail, then, diverse and complex relations between multiple market actors seeking to realize their interests and ideologies. The production of urban space, thus, becomes a privileged context to understand a broad range of meaningful research questions to consumer researchers, as I elaborate next.

**TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF URBAN PLACES**

The city is a spatial configuration composed of diverse places. As space, it is an abstract geographic entity, with physical and geographic properties. By their turn, “urban places” are meaningful sites within the urban space, where social interactions occur and where people build collective memories and shared identities (Visconti et al. 2010). On the other hand, places afford the possibility of encounters with different “social others”, who are unknown and strange by nature. These encounters represent potential threats to the established order in more controlled settings (Clarke 1997).

The production of the post-industrial city is embedded in circuits of value creation. In this context of “urban entrepreneurialism”, cities compete against each other for external investments (Harvey 1989). This contributes to the production of places where consumption mediates social relations among people with similar lifestyles (Clarke 1997; Miles 2012). To account for the possibilities that spring from this logic, I elaborate a typology of urban places (Figure 1), which takes into account the basic contradictions between familiarity and strangeness, ownership and sharing, that arise from the conception and experience of such places.

**Figure 1. Typology of Urban Places**

**Pure public places** are characterized by the freedom of access and use for different social groups. These are natural or built places in the geography of cities, such as neighborhoods, parks, beaches, water shores, among others. These places are collective properties by nature. As such, they are subject to the appropriation by different social actors simultaneously or at different times, which can originate conflicts and negotiations over its meanings and uses. The nature of these conflicts and negotiations can dynamically reflect and reproduce established social relations. For example, Freeman (2002) examines how territorial divisions at Ipanema Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, reflect class divisions, age, and sexual orientation. The author contradicts what he called the “myth of democratic beach.” Class differences, especially, originate a system of classification at work in small interactions between classes. Similar analysis of appropriations and interactions in public places are common in urban studies outside of marketing, in contexts such as public parks (Aoustet and Griffet 2004), skate parks (Chiu 2009), and streets (Cook 2011).

In consumer research, few studies focus on the negotiations that take place in public places. Analyzing the context of street art in multiple cities, Visconti et al. (2010) discuss how collectivistic and individualistic ideologies of public space consumption coexist and frame appropriations of public places. By their turn, Chatzidakis, Maclaran, and Bradshaw (2012) discuss how a group of consumers deliberately appropriate a place and impose a localized alternative consumerist ethic. Both studies highlight the oppositions between private and public and the limits of the increasing commoditization of different dimensions of life. As the contemporary city becomes more and more embedded in market dynamics, other opportunities emerge for consumer researchers. What are the roles, interests, and practices of consumers, developers, and regulators in the production of public places? How do real estate offers meeting, for instance, the aspirations for quality of life and safety of middle classes relate to public places? How does the logic of the market make itself present in appropriations of public spaces? Such questions have the potential to contribute to further advance the debates on public space consumption and to bring a less celebratory perspective on sharing (Belk 2010; Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012).

**Urban territories** are public places transformed by the logic of “urban entrepreneurialism” (Harvey 1989). Territories are places in which the access, purposes, or meanings are shaped and/or controlled by specific individuals or groups (Sack 1986). Urban territories include branded areas, gentrifying neighborhoods, revitalized ports, historic and industrial districts, among others that are part of the landscape of post-industrial city. Although public by right, such places are usually conceived and/or maintained by public-private partnerships, where private companies envision direct commercial or indirect institutional gains. The experience in such places is strongly mediated by consumption. As Miles (2005; 2011) points out, the production of an attractive city requires an urban governance that aims to facilitate the consumption flows in space, often silencing the inherent contradictions of urban life, such as poverty and crime.

An interesting stream of research on urban geography seeks to uncover these contradictions. Such studies analyze the dynamics of gentrification (Zukin 1998; Smith 2007) and of renovation of parks, waterfronts, and historical areas towards more controlled and safe places, reflecting the interests of certain elite groups (Rotenberg and McDonogh 1993). However, despite generating important insights on the logics and intentions behind processes of urban renovations, studies on urban geography are mainly focused on the description of the material (architectural) realities before and after renovations, not uncovering the forces behind the dynamics of change. How are these places legitimated in the city? How do developers, in alliance with regulators, convey brand narratives of such places? How exclusionary are these processes? How would excluded consumers resist? These questions seem worthwhile to be answered through the lenses of consumer research. However, scant attention is given to the context of urban territories in the extant literature. Specifically, two studies analyze how localized negotiations and the active work of consumers (Ilkucan and Sandikci 2005) versus the power
of market forces (Zwick and Ozalp 2012) take place in processes of gentrification. As cities in developed and developing countries keep transforming at a rapid pace, further analysis of different contexts and forms of gentrification may contribute to the debate on urban development and social equality, for instance. Also, the analysis of the production of branded places might shed new lights on the ongoing debates on the legitimation of new products (Giesler 2012) and consumption practices (Sandikci and Ger 2010), as well as contribute to the already established debate on interagency, co-production, and social construction of markets (Penaloza and Venkatesh 2006; Cova, Dalli, and Zwick 2011).

Servicescapes include private places directed to consumption activities, such as flagship stores, shopping malls, shops, theaters, stadiums, among others. The recognition of the centrality of the physical environment in the context of services produced a wide range of studies analyzing the systematic effects of managed service scenarios (servicescapes) on consumer experiences (Sherry 1998). This stream shows how servicescapes materialize ideals and cultural narratives and how consumers interpret and experience these spaces. “Servicescapes have a narrative design that also directs the course of consumers’ mental attention, experiences, and related practices of self-narration.” (Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 875). The relationship between the managed materiality of space and consumption experiences is analyzed in a wide range of places, such as themed shops (Peñaloza 1998a; Kozinets et al. 2004; Borghini et al. 2009), museums (Joy and Sherry 2003), shopping centers (Maclaran and Brown 2005; Varman and Belk 2011), and festivals (Kozinets 2003), among others.

In sum, the literature on servicescapes prioritizes analyzes of (1) the more or less agentic experiences of consumers in relation to previous arrangement of material elements, and (2) the multiplicity of meanings emerging from these experiences. Therefore, some space to contribution is still left, specifically on the analysis of the ways that different social groups appropriate such places, especially in the context of developing countries (Varman and Belk 2011; Pinheiro-Machado 2014). How do popular groups use consumption spaces, such as shopping centers? How do self-proclaimed legitimate users react? How does management act to protect and repress one or another social group? What are the consequences? Such questions allow to illuminate the inherent tensions to the production and contestation of symbolic barriers of class in places of consumption, contributing to a truly new way to map some market dynamics behind the so called socio-historic patterning of consumption (Arnold & Thompson, 2005) as well as to highlight the exclusionary dimension of class-based identity projects (Ustuner & Thompson, 2012).

Urban enclaves are the private spaces where the access is restricted and controlled, such as gated communities, condominiums, and clubs. With a vast literature in Geography, gated communities are accounted as a global phenomenon (Tanulku 2012). This particular type of enclave is characterized by its highly monitored and securitized privatized areas (Caldeira 1996). The growth of such enclaves relates with the development of a “fear culture” within middle-classes and their search for places where people with similar backgrounds will live in isolation from potentially dangerous “social others” (Caldeira 2000; Low 2001; Le Goix 2005). Such places establish an ordered counterpoint to the chaotic city (Tanulku 2012). Gated communities are not the only enclaves that meet these aspirations of middle-classes. Recently, large cities are experiencing a rise in the constructions of condominiums, which are usually located in central areas across the developed and developing world (Caldeira 1996; Pereira 2002; Zwick and Ozalp 2012).

These places are service-intensive in ways that daily experiences of citizenship are reduced to relations of consumption, which permeates much of the social and political interactions of these agents (Canclini 2001). The analysis of the relationship between consumers and the brand narratives of real estate products towards the production of “lifestyle communities” (Zwick & Ozalp, 2012) can contribute to the discussions on the performativity of marketing practices (Araujo 2007; Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007) and on the dynamics of production of consumer’s subjectivities (Karababa and Ger 2011; Giesler and Veresiu 2014). Following the example of urban studies, the analysis of the positive (Salcedo and Torres 2004; Sabatini and Salcedo 2007; Roitman and Phelps 2011) or negative (Caldeira 2000; Le Goix 2005; Breetzke and Cohn 2013) impacts of these places in its surroundings can contribute to the debates on transformative consumer research, especially in the context of emerging countries.

**POSSIBLE RELATIONS BETWEEN TYPES OF URBAN PLACES**

There are possible transitions and exchanges between the four types of places. The arrows in Figure 1 represent the two factors that contribute to it.

The nexus of marketization represents the confluence of different forces towards the gradual production of more homogeneous and private places, increasingly embedded in the logic of the market. Several agents benefit from the commoditization of portions of the post-industrial city. As this pattern of development becomes an economic panacea among city planners, particularly in periods of crisis (Engelen et al. 2014), it fosters the marketization of the city. Exemplars of such places include the many branded neighborhoods in the city of New York and the renovated waterfronts of Toronto and Boston (Cooper 1993; Sieber 1993). Arguably, these places have been subtly transformed from pure public places to, perhaps, urban territories.

Different types of urban places can import or export references of management from each other as part of the process of marketization. For instance, in the examples above, both waterfronts have been branded in a similar fashion of theme stores (Borghini et al. 2009), seeking to frame consumer’s experiences and actively conveying brand meanings to a specific target. In another vein, urban enclaves might import modes of governance and representation from the public sphere, which are inflected through the prism of consumerism (Canclini 2001). Systems of security and surveillance might flow in both directions. In emerging countries, there is documentation of cooperation between private and public forces to exert control over the inside and the surroundings of servicescapes (Pinheiro-Machado 2014).

The transitions and exchanges above are not exhaustive of all possibilities. However, they provide some insights to imagine a variety of research questions. For instance, the analysis of the gradual transformation of public spaces across the world (Rotenberg and McDonogh 1993; Lago 2000; Ferreira 2011) allows to deduct some regularities: (1) city boosters and local authorities engage in partnerships to either redevelop a declining area or push the urban frontier; (2) developers employ market research, targeting, design, among other techniques to conceive a consumption-mediated place; (3) branding and public relations create a benign discourse to legitimize the new place; (4) developers enforce and consumers either embrace or resist the intended narratives in daily spatial practices; (5) over time, the place gets legitimacy and actively and performs its narratives. As they instantiate the complexity of the institutional, ideological, and sociological forces shaping consumption and mar-
CONCLUSION

In their critique of the emphasis to the “one-sided attention to the self-realizing individual” of CCT, Askegaard and Linnet (2011) call for a more socially embedded CCT research agenda. Once space is co-constituting of and co-constituted by social life (Castilhos, Dolbec, and Veresiu 2014), researching the city provide interesting alternatives to fulfill such agenda. Urban places are evident instantiations of historical and contemporary arrangement of social forces. As such, they provide compelling contexts to understand consumption as embedded in social and marketplace structures. From a post-structuralist perspective, researching urban places may help CCT researchers to map consumption fields, to clearly identify homologies (Bourdieu 2000) between agents occupying different positions in the field, and to uncover the subtle relations of domination hidden behind the notion of progress and development. Ultimately, it might foster new understandings of how spatialized and markets perform modes of lives aligned with hegemonic groups of age, class, gender, ethnicity, lifestyle, among others, contributing to the reproduction of social hierarchies and distinctions.

Advancing connections with other social sciences, a consumer culture perspective on the study of the city can foster a fruitful dialog notably with urban studies and economy. In general, urban studies seem to give preference to the macro dynamics that foster new material configurations and the aggregate consequences of such configurations (Ascher 2004; Smith 2007). At the same time that such analysis enhance our understanding of the “context of context” (Askegaard and Linnet 2011), consumer culture theorists are equipped to provide empirical evidences of how those macro dynamics instantiate in different settings in different parts of the world through localized historical, documental, and ethnographic accounts.

The preference for aggregate analyzes is also found in economy. Piketty’s (2014) recent best seller gave a new dimension to the heated debate over social protectionism x market liberalism (Giesler and Veresiu 2014). Among other things, Piketty shows how a set of micro dy-namics is co-constituting of and co-constituted by social life (Castilhos, Dolbec, and Veresiu 2014). Among other things, Piketty shows how a set of macro variables contribute to perpetuating inequalities in “perfect markets” and tries to provide a set of also macro remedies to correct this trend. To contribute to this debate, CCT theorists can provide understandings of the nexus of practices of different agents in free and unregulated markets, in particular, the land and real estate markets in the city. These understandings might contribute to generating insights to the urban instantiations of inequality, such as urban segregation and exclusion.

Lastly, these connections might contribute to providing further insights to public policy formulations. CCT researchers can unveil the specific forces behind the commoditization of the city and its exclusionary features as it performs hierarchical differences. This helps to (1) clarify which solutions are in and outside of the market logic and (2) to design sometimes simple solutions to produce a more democratic and inclusive city for all.

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