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Branded Space; Branded Consumers: Spaces for Consumption and the Uncomfortable Consequences of Complicit Communality

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The branding of spaces for consumption can only be fully understood in the context of a broader sociological process in which the very cities in which we live have themselves become branded entities. In this article I will consider the suggestion that the contemporary city is best understood as what is primarily a space for consumption. I will argue that the cultural sphere, and specifically galleries and museums, play a key role in the maintenance of cities as branded spaces, whilst pointing out that this process frames the everyday experience of the city as an experience filtered primarily through the processes that consumption implies. The concern here then is with the role of consumption in framing residents' everyday relationship with the city and how this relationship inevitably involves a degree of what might usefully be described as a 'moral compromise'. The suggestion is that in such circumstances the individual may give up some everyday freedoms in order to take advantage of the other that a consumer lifestyle implies.

Consumption and Identity

Consumption has had a profound impact upon the cultural landscape over a period of decades and if not centuries. However, it wasn't until the 1990s that a concerted discourse emerged in the social sciences around the role of consumption in the construction of social change (see Featherstone 1990). This discourse was at least partially tied up to notions of the post-modern and the suggestion that in a world of apparently limitless choice an individual's relationship to consumption was potentially as significant as his or her relationship to the means of production. Some commentators addressed this issue in the context of identity, arguing that consumption played an increasingly prominent role in who or what the individual is or aspires to be (e.g. Beck 1992).

Bourdieu's (1979) work on the cultural capital of consumption has of course been especially influential in the above regard in drawing attention to the role of cultural capital in creating differences between social groups; differences that were manifested through forms of consumption that either were or were not available to you depending largely on the nature of your educational experience. Equally significant in this regard is the work of Zygmunt Bauman (1998) who suggests that what emerged from the above process was a new kind of citizenship, where the extent to which you belong is defined by your ability or your lack of ability to consume. As Bauman (1998: 1) puts it in his discussion of the 'flawed consumer',

"it is one thing to be poor in a society of producers and universal employment; it is quite a different thing to be poor in a society of consumers, in which life-projects are built around consumer choice rather than work, professional skills, or jobs. If 'being poor' once derived its meaning from the condition of being unemployed, today it draws its meaning primarily from the plight of a flawed consumer".

For Bauman a new 'self-culture' has apparently emerged in which the individual makes of his or her life what he or she wants to be as part of a broader lifestyle orientation. In addition, any consciousness of freedom is internalized; we become self-authored. As consumers we are effectively the products of a society that lauds the ethic of self-fulfilment and achievement. Unfortunately this kind of a society has its winners and its losers. In some senses the society it creates is an increasingly divided one. Your ability to belong is defined by your ability to consume, so without consumption you are effectively disenfranchised. And yet everywhere you go consumption rules. You may not be able to partake in this society fully, but you still have to live by its rules. As the geographer Robert David Sack (1998: 658) suggests,

"the tensions in the structure of consumption point to a world that is becoming more homogenous overall, with fewer cultures, religions, languages, etc., but in which most individuals have far more variety at their fingertips. In other words, for the world, variety has diminished. For the individual, variety has increased".

Cities for Consumption

This apparent contradiction lies at the heart of what it means to experience city life in contemporary consumer society insofar as the contemporary city has apparently become defined through the cultural capital of consumption. However, the tools with which commentators have sought to understand such

processes have tended to be rather blunt in nature. Such bluntness is the product of a set of circumstances in the political perspective of such commentators insofar as they are reluctant to be seen to criticise consumers for making conscious decisions about the role of consumption in their lives.

We can certainly identify a long and ongoing discussion around the construction of the neoliberal city within the social sciences. Authors such as Ward (2003) have described the changing nature of urban governance and the increasingly high profile that consumption has played in the emergence of the neoliberal city, to the extent that the consumption of the spectacle has apparently encroached into the very fabric of the public realm (see Gotham 2005). Authors such as Harvey (1989) have furthermore recognised that beyond the desire to improve conditions in specific territories, through housing and education for instance, there is a broader (more speculative) commitment to the image of a place, which it is hoped, will have a trickle-down effect for the city as a whole. The contention of this chapter is that consumption lies at the heart of a strategy, in which the added value of a city competing in an increasingly global market becomes defined by its branding, by the cultural capital that consumption permits it. Moreover, I will argue that we should not assume that consumers are the powerless victims of this process. In other words, the residents of the contemporary consumer city are, at least to some degree, complicit in the emergence of a city that is defined through commodification.

The contemporary city is very much the product of the so-called experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1989). Cities are no longer the fundamentally productive environments they were in the past and as such policy-makers have had to ascertain a viable economic alternative for the evolving city. The end-product of this process is a city that is designed to be an exciting place to live and visit, and above all, in which to consume, so that urban governance, as Harvey put it in 1989 is increasingly about how best to lure consumption flows into its space. This creates a divided city in which the symbolic enhancement of place is given disproportionate attention (Jessop and Sum 2000). From this point of view the new 'urban glamour zones' of the neoliberal city are the product of a highly selective and discriminating urban renaissance in which perception becomes more of a priority than the lived reality of city life (MacLeod 2002).

The contemporary city is thus constructed by city boosters, the product of a process in which several different visions of local culture are diluted into a single orthodox stereotyped vision that reflects the aspirations of a powerful elite (Broudehoux 2007). In effect, the contemporary city is constructed around what Corner (1994) describes as a 'consumptional identity', a sort of urban impression management in which invocation of authenticity is the ultimate ambition (Prentice 2001). This precipitates an environment in which consumption,

whether you can afford to engage actively in it or not, sits at the forefront of what is effectively a new kind of public realm (Goldberger 1996, Hayward 2004, Swyngeouw 1989). The move towards a neoliberal city represents a move away from urban planning that prioritises medium over message and image over substance (Harvey 1989: 13). The neoliberal city is grounded in a sense of place built around a conception of prosperity, rather than the more uncomfortable reality that lies beneath. It is in this context that Goldberger (1996: 27) laments the rise of the 'private city', a quasi-urban environment that does all it can to promote the energising, stimulating immediacy of city life whilst shutting out the less acceptable unequal face of the city of poverty and crime. Such a contention quite rightly draws attention to the potential social problems caused by the so-called neoliberal city. Consumption, in effect, becomes an agent of neo-liberalism; a key 'mediating phenomena' (Holland 1976) between the individual and the social structures in which he or she is implied, so that an individual's sense of citizenship can be said to have been reconfigured around their experience as consumer to the extent that social and civic disconnectedness is a product of the consumer society. This is an overwhelmingly negative picture and one that smacks of seduction. It implies a kind of empty soullessness in which the pervasiveness of the branded city becomes more important than everyday life in that city.

The kind of city described above is post-industrial and homogenized. We live in a global market in which cities are increasingly obliged to compete. As Zukin (1998) puts it, the more cities compete the more intense become the claims of uniqueness and yet the more standardised those cities become. This fosters a new kind of engagement with the public realm which constitutes what Mullins et al. (1999) have described as a 'third space' other than that of home and work that brings people together for sociability and other forms of social contact. This realm is primarily defined by retail or at least by the selling of the retail experience. But the problem here is that the retail experience has for many people become *the* urban experience. The broader impact of a market mentality and the increasingly speculative nature of the city creates a situation in which for developers, elected officials, financial institutions, and architectural designers the only possible response seems to be to merge public and private markets (Zukin 1993). As such, spaces for consumption such as hotels, department stores and museums have morphed into disorienting liminal and yet ideological spaces in which consumption of all kinds can take place (Zukin 1993) so that the city itself becomes branded as a symbolic entity whose messages are easily consumed. In a consumer society public space is increasingly tightly controlled and highly policed. Such space is often increasingly subject to private rules of access and as such symbolises the partial nature of the public sphere.

Galleries and Museums

In considering the above processes I want to suggest that museums and galleries play a key role as frontline vehicles for the promotion of the branded city. Commentators like Richard Florida (2002) talk about the role of creativity in constructing an economically vibrant city. But not far beneath the surface of the argument is the need to present a branded city in which opportunities to consume are maximised for the economic good and in which culture provides a means to a collective end.

Galleries and museums are often deemed to be of particular strategic import and provide a very visible means of maximising a city's geographical and historical location. Ward (2003) describes this as the construction of an 'animated' urban landscape. In other words, and from this point of view, as Landy (2006) puts it, galleries and museums become part of the city's 'sensory experience'. They are marketing statements first, entertainment centres second, and arguably cultural centres last of all. Or to put it another less generous way museums and galleries have become both the pawn and the porn of the post-industrial city. They are carefully exploited not only as branded spaces in their own right, but as spaces that symbolise a city committed to an outward looking future in which cultural consumption is a primary signifier of cultural capital and excellence. From another point of view this process effectively involves the exploitation of the cultural sphere as a form of urban pornography.

In many ways the reinvention of the post-industrial city is about presenting the city as a place in which the opportunities to consume culture in this way are prevalent so much so that any form of culture is deemed fair game in an effort to carve out some kind of a new economic future for the city. Thus according to Prentice (2001) the job of cultural tourism is not to present authenticity but to invoke it. Critics such as Richards and Wilson (2006: 1212) have thus argued that, "the effect is to produce a growing series of relatively sterile, inflexible cultural tourism spaces, dominated by passive consumption and the use of familiar historical references". The need to present the 'authentic' is of course not new for museums, but the pressures for museums to compete with other organisations presenting the authentic is new to the extent that, "museums are today immersed in a wider commodification of culture: the extensive profiting of place as a means of attaining the 'real'" (Prentice 2001: 7). Museums are often increasingly associated with the themed and the interactive or, in other words, with the immediate experience rather than with an in-depth interaction with meaning. This could be said to reflect the existence of a depthless society in which cultural tourism offers a means of searching for meaning in a society in which that meaning is arguably otherwise bereft. In effect, heritage sites, for

example, act as an emotional stimulus for people's nostalgic cultural and in particular their thirst for heritage. Museums sell that pre-meditated experience to the consumer, they are, from this point of view, ideally situated institutions for the marketing of cultural capital (Wallace 2009).

For Podesta and Addis (2007) entertainment is a vehicle through which consumers' learning is maximised so that the consumer feels more involved in the 'product' that the museum provides. In this context McCracken (2005) suggests that a preference model of the museum in which the role of the museum is to advance and civilise the individual through culture, has gradually been superseded, so that the visitor to the gallery and museum are no longer looking for experiences that pull them upward in the hierarchy, as may have been the case in the past, but rather outwards into a world of experience. Even where the interactive is not so evident museums operate as sites of heritage providing an emotional stimulus for people's nostalgic thirst for the past. They sell that experience and the apparent fulfilment of that emotion to the individual consumer, in the UK at least, as the product of government policy that has obliged museums to do all they can to seek 'diverse' audiences. In short, at least superficially, and as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) argues, museums appear no longer to be defined by their relationship to objects but rather by their relationship to their visitors or at least to their potential visitors.

Ideological Spaces?

The concern here is whether this process enables the consumer of the interpretive museum experience or inevitably results in the emptying out of place through the superficial consumption of the city. Spaces for touristic consumption are often subject to a highly staged experience or escape that privatises the nature of social experience and in doing so appears to reject the very social nature of that experience. As branded spaces, galleries and museums are complex and contradictory spaces being pulled in a variety of ideological directions. On the one hand they have effectively become politically obliged to be at the centre of social inclusion agenda, as defined by the UK government under Tony Blair's New Labour for example. On the other, they are bastions of cultural excellence and capital (Arnold 1965). In this context, the question is how far does the consumer ethic allow museums and galleries to square this circle? Galleries and museums are inevitably infused by notions of cultural capital and this is perhaps no better demonstrated than in the case of the starchitecture phenomenon: a process whereby a world famous architect is commissioned to produce an iconic building that is branded by the name and reputation and thus the celebrity of the architect

— the cult of the architectural personality. Fein (2007) thus describes 'starchitects' such as Frank Gehry or Richard Meier and their work as 'brandable'. They are branded for the benefit of global buyers of high-end luxury goods, in the form of very high-end envy-inducing real estate.

The Imperial War Museum of the North in Salford, England is a typical example of the starchitectural project because this is a museum that endeavours to recreate the unsettling experience of war through the 'personal' experience of an entirely disorienting building. Museums are public-private enterprises and often constitute part of a bigger picture of 'designscapes': an ensemble of buildings and cultural amenities that produces a consumer experience bigger than its concomitant parts (Julier 2005). In this case, the Daniel Libeskind designed museum sits on the other side of the river to the Lowry Centre designed by James Stirling and Michael Wilford. In juxtaposition the two cultural institutions create a critical mass of spectacular architectural consumption.

Complicit Communality

The end result of all this for the consumer is that museums and galleries appear to have what in effect are split personalities so that the branding of space as a symbol of cutting edge culture is less than partially successful. Branded spaces are sophisticated entities that appear to maximise an individual's control over the consuming experience (through his or her relationship to technology for example) whilst arguably simultaneously reducing his or her control over space and place in the more generic sense. Crucially however, a lack of control should not lead us to conclude that the individual consumer is powerless simply because he or she is escaping into the moment. Rather the consumer is engaged with a culture that privileges notions of choice and freedom, whilst framing those choices in very specific ways.

The point here of course is that however active the consumer may or may not be in this context there is no escaping the fact that such mindful experiences are made possible within the parameters laid down for the individual by the space for consumption in which he or she consumes (Miles 2010). In other words consumption ties us to the society in which we live through a sense of pseudo-belonging and citizenship and hence of 'complicit communality'. To put this another way, consumption effectively offers a sense of communality that is otherwise absent in western culture. The ways in which the consumer acts upon the sense of freedom that consumption engenders is not purely a demonstration of some kind of a dominant ideology. It could indeed be argued that consumers

are willing to concede to this ideology for the immediacy of the freedoms that such an action would provide.

The above creates a problem for sociologists reluctant to appear to blame consumers for their own demise. The traditions of critical social science tend to be more adept at describing, indeed of condemning the deficiencies of the capitalist system than they are of understanding the complex interplay of structure and agency such a system can often imply, as if to do any differently would undermine their own political credentials. The recognition that consumers actively engage in the consumer experience and are able to put up with its limitations for the freedoms that experience provides is not a comfortable thought for an approach that is intent on blaming the system rather than the individuals who live through and interpret that system on an everyday basis. The process of implicit communality implies a connection with the public realm and establishes that connection through individual engagement so that the communal experience is defined by the ideology of consumption rather than according to any kind of a discernible community. This is not so much about sensory overload as about a context in which the individual gamers control over the consumer images which he or she comes across in commodified space. The consumer uses branded space for his own ends, but there is apparently a price to be paid in the way in which the ideology of consumerism is reinforced along the way.

Conclusion

Perhaps the real challenge facing museums and galleries is actually to de-individualise the experience they offer; to aspire to a world in which the mere *sense* of communality, or of belonging, is simply not enough. Perhaps the narratives of space being deployed in museums are simply too individualised, they are arguably *too* visitor-centred so the only narrative that the visitor is left with is a narrative in which he or she sits at the centre of a much broader process of regeneration. Such narratives serve to promote the notion of the museum as nothing more than a space for consumption, as an empty symbol of the city, a symbol so ubiquitous that any effort by one city to brand itself becomes indistinguishable from any other.

The role of culture in promoting the city as a branded space is, as Richard Williams (2004) puts it, all about creating a visual tableau to be touristically and vicariously consumed. From this point of view the city is rhetorical and picturesque. Thus, in discussing Liverpool's Albert Dock whose declined mercantile spaces have been regenerated into spaces for eating, drinking, and

shopping as well as proving a home for the Tate Liverpool, Williams describes what is essentially a process of 'aestheticization'. In effect, the Albert Dock is rhetorical and indeed branded. It symbolises something important about Liverpool's mercantile past, about Liverpool as a brand, but it commodifies that brand in such a way to nullify any possibility of pleasure beyond that defined for the consumer and by consumption. This, for Williams is also a process of the picturesque, a response to an urban problem through the aestheticization of that problem.

Simmel's pupil Siegfried Kracauer (1995) observed the rise of 'surface culture' in all facets of the city, but particularly through the development of a shop window culture emerging over a hundred years ago now that enticed consumers into a world to which they had not previously been exposed, at least not in such a direct fashion. As a means of demonstrating the everyday ideological significance of everyday manifestations of the consumer ethic I quote Kracauer (1995: 75) directly,

...the position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself... The surface-level expressions... by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things'.

Another way to put this in an urban context might be to say that the branding of cities is less about the construction of predictable environments and more about a profound effort to sweep away alternative ways of being in the city (Sorkin 1992). The machinations of individual city's and their marketing campaigns are incidental in an environment in which the consumer experience is all pervasive. For this reason the consumer city constitutes an extraordinarily limited public realm and yet one that from this perspective is not as depthless as orthodox analyses suggest.

Consumers unconsciously engage with a set of meanings that have in effect been allocated some of kind of privileged status. Visitors are not 'duped' by the excessive sense of escape offered by the branded city. Rather the consumer operationalises a degree of control that is not otherwise available to him or her and in doing so is complicit in a world of consumption in which he or she partakes so that consumption becomes a privileged site for citizenship. Branded space is from this point of view more than a commercial branding opportunity. It is a space, a physical and an emotional space that consumers engage with in a self-conscious fashion. This reflects a decline in the value placed on 'abstract principles of citizenship' in favour of a world in which poles of identity are more immediate and particularist in their form (Canciani 2001). A reinvention of

citizenship in which politics is left behind in favour of the more immediate freedoms provided by the material world.

To belong to contemporary society and to demonstrate our belonging to that society is to be a consumer; the political arena is rendered inadequate, wieldy and inconsequential when measured against the dazzling, though partial freedoms offered by the consumer society. Perhaps public space has been parochialized and branded so that spaces for consumption are merely *occupied* rather than activated in any kind of animated fashion. The consumer has a degree of freedom, but the nature of that freedom is decided for him or her. From this point of view branded spaces symbolise a particular kind of citizenship and a partial sense of belonging in which the individual consumer gladly dances to the tune that the consumer society has chosen.

The potential for maximising economic value through branded spaces is apparently limitless, but such spaces do more than simply fabricate retail experiences. The frustration here is with a world in which the subtleties of the experience of branded space are not yet fully understood. Consumers are implicated in what could be described as a process of moral compromise, but the conceptual tools with which social scientists seek to understand such processes are equally as compromised. Consumers of branded spaces should not be condemned, nor can they be celebrated. These spaces actively redefine how it is consumers relate to the public realm. The ultimate concern here then is that while branded spaces have social power, they do not have social responsibility. The challenge now is to ensure that the methods used for developing a more sophisticated understanding of such complexities are both powerful and responsible.

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