

Naked City: the death and life of authentic urban places

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Sharon Zukin is a sociologist and professor at Brooklyn College. Her books explore the most recent urban transformations that have been developed by deindustrialization, gentrification and immigration, as well as the important role that new urban elements have played related to cultural production, symbolic economy and consumption.

In her most recent book – Naked City - Sharon Zukin builds a provocative criticism around urban revitalization processes that the big cities in the western capitalist world have been engaged in since the 1980's. According to the author, urban space while promoting culture and social diversity is being destroyed with the help of different powers: the economic power of private investors, that move away the lower social classes from the urban centres in order to build houses for upper social classes; the political power through regeneration/revitalization processes, which becomes complicit with the gentrification and segregation effects triggered by private investors; the power of the media that transform neighbourhood identities into "brands" and "experiences" just for the requirements and consumption of a certain social class.

Focusing on the example of New York City and some of its neighbourhoods, Zukin tries to draw attention to the perverse side of the most recent transformations in these places, known for its diversity and authenticity. On the one hand, the combination of difficult powers resulted in promoting rapid measures to regenerate certain areas in the city, making it more modern and interesting. But on the other hand, many of these places ended up losing their original character, either by replacing the residents and stores, either by cultural performances. Thus, the current demand for the "soul" and authenticity of some urban neighbourhoods by these new residents and consumers has become not only a tool used by economic elites to drive up real estate values, but also turned it into a tension between new and old residents, coercing them to leave and take with them what truly gave authenticity to the place.

Spatial authenticity in which Zukin reflects upon is shared with a sense of complicity



among the people, buildings, streets, small stores and all the social diversity that gives an identity to places in the long run. To some extent, this authenticity presumes timeless places, with typical and distinctive known traits. However, the new urban dynamics that seek to take advantage of this original diversity eventually turn them into homogeneous scenarios and adapted to the new consumers. According to the author, the concept of authenticity migrated from the quality of people to the quality of things, and, more recently, to the quality of experiences. And so, we run the risk of confusing what cities truly have of original and their own with what is “made”, manipulated and consumed as such.

In short, Zukin (2010) advocates that authenticity has become a cultural form of power over space, that can both serve gentrification purposes as well as fighting those same purposes. This means that the original dwellers may, by claiming authenticity, withstand more extreme changes and keep their distinctive cultural identity. However, the combination of the economic power with the cultural has shown that the most common tendency is to replace the old with the new: residents, stores, life styles. But don't the changing dynamics of these new spaces end up giving them their own authenticity? Despite the new reorganization that the consumer culture imposed on the cities, they remain an area of ongoing experiences and learning, as well as multiple and controversial authenticities.

Bibliography

ZUKIN, Sharon - Naked City: the death and life of authentic urban places. Ney York: Oxford University Press, 2010.