WHOSE CULTURE ? WHOSE CITY ?
in search for an etniCITY

Sam DEVOCHT / 09/12/03


In latter texts, Sharon Zukin looks at the way urban public space in New York is increasingly being appropriated and privatized by corporate and commercial forces. She talks about the phenomenon 'culture' and in what ways it is or could be a powerful means of controlling cities.

First of all, I would like to state that not only the tangible, real-time space gets more and more incorporated by commercial forces, but that commerce also has got a strong effect on the minds of space-consumers. Civilians are becoming consumers. We consume both space and culture. Both in Europe and the United States, and probably also in some developed Asian megacities, the lives of millions of people are (in) directly oriented by multinationals. Advertisements provide a lifestyle and a model that replaces the former religious order. One could state that nowadays, gender or race is not that much of an issue anymore in more liberal and democratic parts of the world, money however all the more.

Sharon Zukin writes about 'the Symbolic Economy', a concept where the building of a city depends as much on land/labor and capital, as it does on the manipulation of the symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement. This symbolic issue is not a recent phenomenon though. The former Symbolic Economy -in Belgium that is- was the Catholic Church, deciding on right and wrong, and thus excluding or entitling certain individuals. Its strong presence is still visible in the center of every town or city in the form of churches and cathedrals. Nowadays however, as Zukin states : « ...traditional institutions (social classes and political parties) have become less relevant mechanisms of expressing identity... » Between the lines, you can read : 'Money can provide the identity you prefer.' ***

Politics stay relevant on another scale though: « people with political and economical power have the greatest opportunity to shape public culture by controlling the building of cities' public spaces. » Economic forces shape towns more than urban designers do or planners do - can do. Amongst the contemporary cathedrals are musea, sports stadia, and universities. Some of them provide you the key to success and knowledge, others provide entertainment.

Ironically, the same economic force that provides us a privatized and appropriated/segregated city, provides us spare time, which makes us able to consume the money earned. Cultural aspirations claim the highest position in Maslov's pyramid concerning human needs. Is the following reasoning correct? The more work provided, the busier people are, the more money they earn, the more comfortable they live, the more importance they attach to their own opinions, the more they respect one another? Atlanta's emergence as the center of the New South, which Mayor William B. Hartsfield liked to call the city "too busy to hate" proves that racism cannot be extinct by securing economic growth only. One can wonder what people do in the weekends not being busy...

The examples Mrs. Zukin looks at -Bryant Park, NY / 125th Street, Harlem, NY / Disney Inc. - all indicate the prime importance corporations attach to the further rise of the economic value of their buildings and firms, and this only. It is the task of the elected policymakers to prevent « a gradual loss of meaningful public life under the control of inclusive, democratic forces ... »

Sharon Zukin talks about « culture as an economic base ». In a world where almost every branch of the society is linked to culture in some way, economy runs rampant. Further on in the text, she continues saying that: « ...a paying public is a public that values public space as an object of visual consumption. » I agree indeed that we are becoming a more and more demanding public that expects to consume a nice visual surrounding. Different virtual media influence the way we experience our everyday life. Television as a foremost economically driven, cultural phenomenon provides us these images in the form of advertisements. The sensational character of news- and information programs provides the
stimuli for a fear-driven society, which already lead to the growth of private police forces and gated communities.

The question I would like to raise is whether some parts of Ann Arbor haven't been gentrificated by the student-population. Who does the city belong to and whose culture does it promote? Is the University of Michigan an example of a symbolic economy and if so, what are the image and product it provides? Is Ann Arbor an ethni-CITY that secures the streets by means of ethnicity?

*** Cultural buildings remain important though. In a not so far past, 'religious and monumental buildings, in particular, were loaded with images and text, located centrally in communities, and designed to serve as foci of social, cultural and spiritual life. At this stage, readers usually came to the information instead of information to the readers.' ("e-topia" William Mitchell) Such communal buildings are and will become more and more important in a dematerializing society. They are expressions of the genie of a time-span, and survive over a longer time period. They are of importance to show what values actors in a society share.