

Avenues of Art and Design. How Design Districts Work

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1. Introduction

This paper is a study of the social basis of semiosis. Design districts have appeared in several cities under various names during the last 20 years. These districts specialize in selling and manufacturing goods whose retail value is based on their semiotic qualities. They are easily distinguishable areas in cities due to their business population: in these areas, most shops specialize in furniture, art, design, and similiar goods, and many people who work there are involved in the art and design industries. Most research has focused on production (for Los Angeles and Paris, see Scott 2000; for London, Evans 2004; and Berlin, Mundelius 2007), and a few on consumption (see Koskinen 2001, 2005). This paper looks at how these areas are organized, that is, how they are created, construed, and maintained by organizations that typically charge a small fee from businesses in these districts, and in exchange take care of branding these districts. How do these associations create these signs? What qualities

do these signs have? How are these signs maintained and designed around the core sign of the "design district"?

This paper builds on two case studies: the Avenues of Art and Design in West Hollywood, Los Angeles, and the Design District Helsinki. Data for this paper is based on interviews, documents gathered in these interviews, Web searches, and a variety of visual materials like brochures and shopping maps of these two areas. These districts are recognized in the public. They are named, there are associations that run them, and for these reasons, both businesses and customers know to get to these areas in search for design and art experiences. They have become signs in themselves, represented in brochures, Web pages, shopping maps, media, and even literature. These differ from entertainment districts in their focus on art and design.

2. Design Districts and the Changing Face of Consumption

Downtown areas have dominated consumption for much of the 20th century (see Johns 2003). Typically catering to the middle-classes, department stores offer a wide range of goods and services, some of higher quality than others, but overall, their business is geared towards the middle-income customer (McCracken 1988; Sennett 1978; Miller 1981). Less mobile classes, with less access to the downtown, consume in neighborhood shopping streets (see Zukin 1999). In contrast, exclusive goods have traditionally been available for the rich in the first type of semiotic neighborhoods. Quality goods with extraordinary prices are available for the traditional upper classes. As they are exclusively upper-class, goods and services in these streets and neighborhoods are far beyond the reach of ordinary consumers, except for window-shopping.

Some of these streets have existed for centuries, and are typically rooted in

royal courts and aristocratic consumption in Europe, and in their capitalist equivalents in North America. The first wave of these streets included such world-famous streets as Rue de la Paix, New Bond Street, Kurfürstendamm, and Madison Avenue (Mumford 1949, 214). Court society has produced less extravagant versions of these streets in more humble cities too. For instance, Copenhagen's *Palae* district (i.e. the Palace district, with the Palace, and old merchant company houses) is still home to the town's most exclusive shops. (Picture 1).



Picture 1. Centuries of Luxury: Kurfürstendamm, Berlin; Place Vendôme, Paris; New Bond Street, London; Omotesando, Tokyo; St.Sulpice, Paris

After post-war reconstruction period, another type of luxury district showed up. Targeted to new upper middle classes rather than traditional upper classes, these districts focused on high-end clothing and fashion, accessories and cosmetics rather than watches and jewelry only. Examples are the *Quadrilatero* in Milan, SoHo in New York, which can be regarded as the prototype of such district, Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles and Post Street in San Francisco (Twitchell 2002). To a large extent, this

market was created by a new type of business organization, international luxury firms.

As Forden notes in her book on Gucci,

Aldo [Gucci] continued the drive to open new stores. He identified Beverly Hills's then sleepy Rodeo Drive as a choice location long before it became a chic shopping avenue, and in October 1968 inaugurated an elegant new store there with a star-studded fashion show and reception (Forden 2000, 35).

In smaller and slightly less luxurious scale, several other districts have followed suit, specializing on if not luxury, on high-end goods anyway. Such streets and neighborhoods flourish throughout Europe, ranging from la Rambla in Barcelona (Narotzky 2000) through Paris' left bank to the SoFo district in Stockholm and the Design District in Helsinki. Most American cities have their own exclusive streets. A good example is Oak Street in Chicago, which connects closely to the high-end luxury emporiums at North Michigan Avenue. The reasons for the growth of these districts vary. Sassen (1991) attributes it to the growth of the FIRE sector in global cities (finance, insurance, and real estate), but political economy and media also play a part in the process. Narotzky (2000) links the growth of the design sector in Barcelona to Catalan opposition to Franco, the Olympics and the subsequent explosion of tourism, while Koskinen (2005) stresses the interaction of consumers demand, production, media, and the public sector as explanations for the growth of the sector in Helsinki. With far less dramatic history than Barcelona, these developments had created a well-off, secure middle class that was well educated in design by early 1980s to that town.

In global cities, these areas can specialize to a high extent. A particularly good example comes from Southern California, where there is a massive concentration of high-end design shops at the Avenues of Art and Design. The Avenues of Art and Design are located around Robertson Boulevard between Santa Monica and Beverly

Boulevards in West Hollywood (WeHo), which became an independent city in 1984. The areas had been known for designers even before, but when the Pacific Design Center, a huge mall strictly specializing in interior design, was erected, this area became the main shopping area for high-end furniture, interior design, and art within the Los Angeles basin. The area was known as an expensive district aimed at the well-off, and for a long time, only accredited designers were able to shop there. This is still the case in some shops, but the clients have been changing. Customers are increasingly educated about aesthetics and interiors. Although the Pacific Design Center is still there, and even expanding, its dominance as the center of design trade has waned. Since the 1980s, merchants have expanded their businesses also outside the center into the streets in the vicinity of the center. In the 1980s, art galleries started to get in, as the area gained the reputation of being funky and affordable.

In 1996, the Avenues of Art and Design became a BID (Business Improvement District) by the City of West Hollywood decision. The initiative came from the merchants. The Avenues is primarily a marketing tool: its main aim is to promote the district. Today, it has about 300 members. Initially, its budget was 85.000 USD. Today, it is about 250.000 USD. The board of the Avenues consists of merchants who have their shops in the area.

In smaller cities, high-end markets tend to show less specialization. The second example in this paper is Design District Helsinki which, like its Californian counterpart, promotes interiors and furniture, but also fashion, antique trade, art galleries, design jewelry, and restaurants. The District was established as a non-profit association in 2005 as one of the activities of the national Design Year. Its membership fees vary between 120€ for smaller and 550€ for bigger businesses. Originally, the district had about 60 members, but in 2007, it has about 130 members,

all located on the rim of the central business district. The original initiative came from Design Forum Finland that had recently moved to the area from a downtown location. Although the Design District is a non-profit association, its coordinator gets her salary from Design Forum, which is a public organization established to promote design. The Design District has received a measure of success not only in terms of its membership, but also in promoting the four South Helsinki neighborhoods in which it is located as a choice location for a variety of design businesses. The area is in transition in many ways; parts of it have always been business-intensive, but parts have thoroughly gentrified since the 1960s.

The third example is SoFo, South of Folkungagatan, located in Södermalm, Stockholm's southern island, which was established in 2002 into an area that was previously residential. The area begun to change about 10 years ago when it first got a restaurant row, and then became the hub of independent fashion in Stockholm. The name SoFo, an ironic designation by a local graffiti artist, was coined in 2002 (**check with Erik). Today, SoFo has about 90 members, each paying 1000 SEK annually (originally, the fee was 300 SEK), but it is growing rapidly, and has already created a profile as the place to go for independent fashion, art and design in Stockholm. Design District and SoFo are new players in the process in which art and design changes the city, attracting design-intensive businesses to the area slowly. As old shops disappear, new ones tend to have something to do with design or creative occupations.

From a semiotic point of view, these areas have become signs themselves (see Picture 2). When people and media recognize an area as a semiotic neighborhood, the area gets a "character." Circulated in media and folklore, it directs people to these areas to browse goods and services, and to enjoy the atmosphere. These inscriptions

of place guide consumers' actions "from a distance," in the words of the French philosopher Bruno Latour (1991). Shopkeepers' associations may develop to market the exclusive facet of the area (see the Oak Street Council, www.oakstreetchicago.com), as does trend journalism. When such second-order cultural constructs come to shape the city, entrepreneurs' location decisions go beyond economics alone, and are ultimately grounded in cultural processes. These semiotic structures are essential for managing these districts. The Avenues and the District are organizations that have been created to build and run these districts with the aid of these inscriptions.



Picture 2. Design Districts: A Collection of Logos. From left to right: Chelsea, New York; Helsinki; Stockholm; West Hollywood, Los Angeles; Tribeca, New York. Down: Oak Street, Chicago.

3. Creating Identities for Design Districts

In both cases analyzed for this paper, the development of the district did not take place in void. Both areas have roots in history. Business population in both

districts was design-intensive even before the naming of the district took place. Thus, these areas were not only marketing inventions (Koskinen 2001, 2005). For example, the neighborhood of Punavuori, Helsinki has not just gentrified over the last four decades, but also attracted a distinctive business population in the process. In the context of Helsinki, Punavuori has become the hub of most creative industries in the country, and also attracted hundreds of small entrepreneurs who live out of selling designer goods and antiques. This is the case of SoFo as well: it has grown into a former working-class neighborhood, and its shops are run by small entrepreneurs.

However, the establishment of an organization to market these areas represents in many ways a decisive shift to previous practice. Once there is an organization that formulates the identity for a design district, it also becomes a sign that can be marketed and promoted for consumers and businesses alike. Importantly, merchants benefit from the reputation of being in the design district. Consumers know to get there to browse, and business know to locate there for this reason, establishing a cycle of development. For individual shops and merchants, it would not be profitable to promote such an identity, which would remain dependent on reputation and media puff. An organization delivers the common good more systematically for a relatively small entry fee.

How organizations deliver the good starts from the identity. They provide Web sites and street presence that make the area recognizable on the street and on the Internet alike. When one gets to the Avenues of Art and Design, one sees banners on lamp posts telling that he currently walks on the Avenues. On the Web, searching design in Los Angeles inevitably leads to the main page of the Avenues. In the case of Helsinki, one sees the design district's round logo in many shops throughout the area. The logo is sometimes integrated into other types of marketing campaigns, including

Helsinki Design Week, the Design Year, and Design Forum campaigns and marketing. In SoFo, the identity is not organized by an organization, which gives free room for shop owners to use the name, provided that they are accepted by the artist who invented the acronym.

In shopfronts, one gets maps and other information about the district. Identity management extends to media, street, and virtual presence alike, but as Picture 3 also shows, not to storefronts and public spaces. In designing the district logos, one of the main drivers has been to make them discreet enough not to disturb the visual face of the shops.

Taking care of the identity is one of the key processes for running the districts. A popular area in which property values and rents rise necessarily attract shops and activities that do not fit to the desired identity. A few rowdy sports bars, porn shops, or even high street retailers like H&M can easily threaten the identity built around classy design. The threats are evident, although different in the two neighborhoods analyzed in this paper. The Avenues exists in a huge city in which a neighborhood that becomes trendy may change its face in few years, and Design District Helsinki is in an old working-class neighborhood adjacent to the city center. It was also the center of crime and organized crime. How to make sure that sports bars and sex shops do not show up in the district, threatening the public good?

None of the districts has any formal control whatsoever on who gets to the area. Instead, they exercise more sophisticated forms of control over entry into the area. In the Avenues, anyone can come to the district, but as soon as the BID learns about them, it educates property owners and merchants about the nature of the district and its value for them. The gist of the argument is that since the area benefits from its reputation, which could be ruined unless it is maintained, one has to participate in the

identity-making (see Picture 4). Stella McCartney's West Coast flagship is welcomed, as is Williams and Sonoma, but Crate and Barrel is already a question mark, and GAP would be out of the question (Picture 4).



Picture 3. The Street and Virtual Presence of the Three Districts. Note that the SoFo logos on the left is not official.

In Helsinki, the process focuses on informing interested businesses about free locations in the district, which is still in the making: out of about 5000 businesses in the four neighborhoods in which the district lies, currently only 2-3% are a part of the association, while a few hundred more are design-intensive. In SoFo, the figure is still smaller. The identities of these two districts are less well-established than the identity of their more mature cousin in West Hollywood. However, in all three cases, art galleries, architects' offices and artists' workshops are welcomed, even though at least the Avenues and the Helsinki district areas are becoming too expensive for artists. Still, all organizations try to influence who gets in the areas through negotiations with property owners, and at least SoFo informs about free business premises on its Web site.



Picture 4. Who Gets In? – Collage from the Avenues of Art and Design

In addition, all districts participate in developing the physical environment of the neighborhood. For example, Design District Helsinki has participated in the City of Helsinki's planning processes in improving the lighting in the area and in

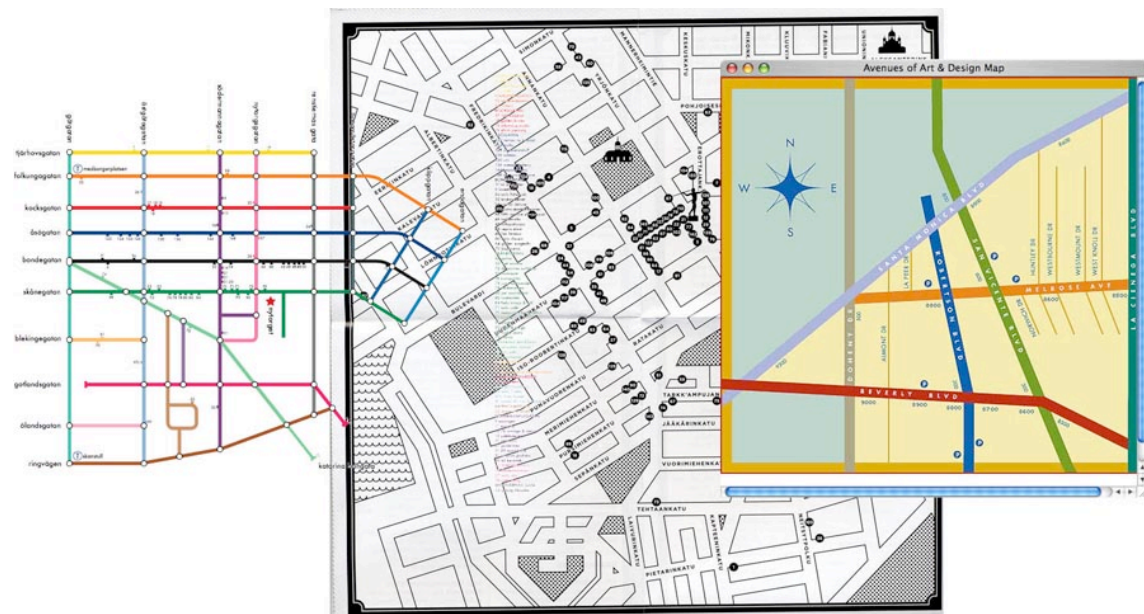
developing plans for the Diana Park quarter in the heart of the district. In West Hollywood, the Avenues pushes a pedestrian-friendly policy promoting wide sidewalks, parking away from the streets. In the context of L.A., in what is perhaps the ultimate car culture in the world, this is a radical policy. Although neither the Avenues nor the District have financial and material resources to improve the environment by themselves, both organizations push their improvement plans to their respective cities. Lacking the stable, well-off membership of the Avenues and semi-government backing of the District, SoFo is still in the process of creating an identity for the area and growing its membership base.

4. Running the Districts: Performing the Identity

The functioning of the districts naturally extend beyond just establishing a marketable sign, giving it a visual identity, and educating the business population of the specific value of the district. This education has to go on continuously for several reasons. If the basis of the business is in creativity, one has to constantly maintain the identity. With the exception of classics, art and design products are always new. There is a constant need to get them better into the public eye. Even though art and design industries live out of publicity, advertising is not a traditional method of keeping these industries in the customers' minds (the exception is international luxury brands). Rather, the basis of business is based on reputation that spreads mouth-to-mouth through personal contacts and networks of taste elites such as interior designers.

Several techniques are used to push the areas better into public imagination. In particular, shopping maps provide detailed help for consumers interested in navigating the districts and. On the Web, the web sites provide directories of shops

and other businesses, making searching for specific types of shops easy (Picture 5). Brochures provide information about activities and participation in what is going on within these districts. For example, Design District Helsinki produces a new shopping map twice a year, and updates the Web site constantly in terms of activities. At present, SoFo aims to publish a map four times a year, and updates the Web once in a while when a need shows up.



Picture 5. Shopping Maps. From left to right: SoFo, Stockholm; Design District Helsinki; and the Avenues of Art and Design, West Hollywood

Also, both districts organize several activities to increase awareness of what is in these districts. For example, they educate journalists by organizing tours into the districts and giving promotion material to them. Similarly, walking tours are organized for the public (Picture 6). The Avenues of Art and Design, for example, organize an Art and Design Walk in June. During the Walk, the Avenues become a big open house in which about 100-150 businesses participate. During the walk, the Avenues BID arranges exhibits and other social activities outside the stores, while the stores provide wine and food, and organize other program to entertain the

participants. Some activities in L.A. are more upscale, familiar from upper-class society and art, fashion, and media world, including charity auctions, Art Walk VIP tents, and help in organizing such media events as Vanity Fair's and Elton John's Oscar parties.



Picture 6. Activities in Design Districts: Art and Design Walks and SoFo Nights (transl. “SoFo Evening: All Sofo shops are open until 9pm the last Thursday of the month”)

Design District Helsinki and SoFo organize similar activities, but with important differences to Los Angeles. The Helsinki District organizes design walks twice a week in the summer, and on order in winter, and promotes the district for journalists just as its cousin in L.A. In addition, the District also participates in

organizing the district in the larger ecology of art and design related activities in the city. For instance, the District participates in the Night of the Arts, organized annually in August, when the city center and its neighboring districts become a fora for hundreds of art-related activities and performances. Also, the District participates in Helsinki Design Week, organized annually. The association also promotes the district whenever there are public events within the boundaries of the district, such as the opening of the renewed Diana Park. Unlike its Western counterpart, the Design District Helsinki has less to do with elites that convene around Helsinki Opera and the town's two main symphony orchestras rather than art and design. SoFo in its turn organizes monthly shopping nights, when the shops are to be open until 9 pm. (Picture 6).

6. Design Districts in the City

Above, it has been shown how certain areas in cities become “signed” as art and design districts, and how the identity is reaffirmed. When these areas have become signs, they stand out not just in these areas and the Web, but even more importantly, they mark these areas as somehow specific in the larger semiotic network of the city, and also beyond its limits. When successfully established, the identity of these areas provides many benefits for the district: consumers, businesses, businesses' need to advertise gets smaller; small businesses do not have to invest in marketing, and so forth. But there are snakes in the paradise. If these areas are successfully transformed into signs, other areas in the city may come to compete with them. The legitimacy of the sign may be at stake, either periodically, or more or less constantly.

In particular, this is the case in the Avenues of Art and Design, which exists in the middle of a huge, growing metropolis in which branding is the talk of the town.

West Hollywood, for instance, has to create a profile that is distinctive in the larger city ecology of Los Angeles. In this process, art and design are handy devices. Picture 7 shows how Weho creates a profile by advertising three attractions, Sunset Strip, The Boulevard, and the Avenues of Art and Design. Internationally, its most famous area is Sunset Strip, L.A.'s traditional nightspot. "The Boulevard" refers to Santa Monica Boulevard. Driving west through West Hollywood, one first encounters a Russian community, and then the center of gay and lesbian culture in Los Angeles. In shopping, focus on The Avenues provides WeHo a way differ from its western neighbor, posh Beverly Hills, but also its eastern neighbor, Melrose Avenue, with its youthful, hip and quirky shops. Within WeHo, the Avenues stand out as a more sophisticated area than the Strip or the hedonistic nightlife around The Boulevard.



Picture 7. Snapshots of the Environment of the Design Districts: Travel Guide for the City of West Hollywood; Design policy and Travel Guides in Helsinki

The Avenues of Art and Design may not face competition in West Hollywood, but it certainly does in metro L.A. In interior design, the Avenues is still the undeniable leader of high-end shopping in the city. Even though a few areas like Pasadena's old town have a few interior design shops, they are fewer and far cheaper than in the Avenues. In terms of art galleries, art galleries started to get into the Avenues in the 1980s, when the area was funky and affordable compared to traditional art gallery locations in downtown and Beverly Hills. Today, the Avenues is still strong with dozens of high-end galleries, but there is considerable competition, and the art world of L.A. has in fact already moved away from the Avenues. In particular, Culver City, Downtown L.A., and Santa Monica have attracted a significant number of galleries. The Los Feliz/Silver Lake/Echo Park corridor around Sunset Boulevard, and the Long Beach/South Bay area are also upcoming. Finally, smaller concentrations of galleries exist outside L.A.'s Westside in Pasadena and North Hollywood. Even Beverly Hills has a communal art center in its old Post Office.

However, even though the Avenues may have most ground in the art world, it is winning in another design front, fashion. The Avenues of Art and Design are attracting companies that earlier located to Beverly Hills to and around Rodeo Drive and Wilshire Boulevard's boutique and upscale department stores, and younger designers around Melrose Avenue. The Avenues welcomes high-end fashion shops not just for their design qualities, but also for the fact that fashion shops attract pedestrians – or foot traffic in L.A. terminology – into the area, making it a specific flair.

Ten times smaller than Los Angeles, Helsinki has no areas that could compete directly with the District. If there is competition, it comes from shopping malls and

department stores in the Central Business District rather than from the city's other neighborhoods. In antique trade, the neighborhood of Kruununka has attracted shops increasingly since early 1990s, but in art, there are only a handful of high-end galleries outside the District's borders. Most of them are located in the wealthy northwestern neighborhoods, but in terms of sheer numbers, they cannot compete with the District. In interior design and furniture, the business mainstream is in the ring roads, but the expensive high-end goods are in the District. Either is there significant international competition. Also, the history plays a role. The difference to SoFo is illustrative in this regard. Though not much larger than Helsinki, Stockholm has an upper-class shopping district in the Östermalm neighborhood that caters for the city's rich. This district, located slightly over two kilometers north of SoFo, centers around Biblioteksgatan and NK, Stockholm's upscale department store. In contrast to Östermalm, SoFo attracts alternative, hip culture rather than international brands and luxury goods.

However, competition in Helsinki takes place against other structures and programs set up to promote design (see Picture 7). Design District Helsinki is integrated into a lively, constantly evolving design culture that is partly based on private, partly on public demand and promotion. That the district is parented by Design Forum Finland keeps the District anchored partly in the commercial world of its home neighborhood, partly in public design programs. In West Hollywood, the Avenues is accountable to its members rather than to a major player in the national design agenda. The District is networked with Helsinki Design Week, Design Year 2005 and, naturally, its host, Design Forum Finland. Still, this is quasi-competition. Since the District is only partially funded by membership fees, the control of the District is in the hands of Design Forum.

6. Discussion

Over the last few decades, most big cities have given rise to new types of city areas. When the aesthetic economy has grown, it has increasingly changed the face of some neighborhoods in many cities. There are specific cultural blocks and neighborhoods in many cities. Perhaps the best study of such blocks is from Berlin (Mundelius 2007), but among other cities that have been analyzed are London (Evans 2004) and Helsinki (Koskinen 2001, 2005). A good deal of production of culture, as well as its consumption, concentrates in these neighborhoods, making them stand out in cities. In this paper, my focus has been on how this semiotic economy is organized and made visible in the cityscape by formal organizations. In this paper, I have analyzed the Avenues of Art and Design in West Hollywood, a business improvement district functioning in Los Angeles, Design District of Helsinki, a non-profit association in Helsinki, and SoFo, South of Folkungagatan in Stockholm. The Avenues of Art and Design has currently about 300 members, while the Design District Helsinki has currently close to 150 members, and SoFo about 90 members.

Specifically, the focus of this paper has been on the devices these organizations use to organize the semiotic economy. They are partly familiar from branding more generally. Although culture blocks have had a prior reputation, these organizations formulate it into a more systematic set of signs. Both districts analyzed in this paper have specific logos that give an identity for both places. It is seeable in the cityscape and in the cyberspace alike. For instance, the Avenues run a banner campaign in the streets, and the District gives its members a right to use a specific sign that shows that the company participates in the District. With such identity formulated, it is possible to coordinate several means of signification for more

specific purposes. They consists of business directories, search engines, and a series of activities meant to prove that the identity projected for the districts is legitimate. These activities are familiar from fashion and movie business and traditional upper-class society rather than the world of advertising, including auctions, programs, and galas. These organizations also organize walks and other educational activities for both lay customers and journalists and other semi-professionals.

All three districts try to educate the business population about the value of maintaining the district. Once the district exists, and it is able to organize activities, Web sites, and shopping maps, these districts attract certain types of customers and businesses, setting in place a development into an increasingly more artistic and design-oriented direction. If successful, the districts are self-fulfilling prophecies. In West Hollywood, the trick is to make sure that non-wanted businesses do not enter the area. In Helsinki, the trick is to attract design-oriented businesses into the area when business premises open for rent.

Similarities in functioning aside, there are significant differences in these two districts. They are attributable not just to the history of the districts, but also to their place in the urban environment. West Hollywood is a small enclave in the vast L.A. metropolitan region and more specifically in its highly urban Westside. The Avenues is the center of high-end interior design and furniture trade in Los Angeles, but it has lost ground in the city's art world. However, it has recently attracted high-end fashion design shops recently, and has been able to renew itself. In Helsinki, no competing areas exist. If SoFo competes with another area, it is the traditional luxury districts of the town, and to a degree, also with the main fashion shopping areas in the town's center. Still, the Design District Helsinki functions in a complex national design policy process, in which the District is but one player.

There is a growing literature that focuses on how the growth of aesthetic economy (Lash and Urry 1994) changes the face of cities. This paper has focused on one of its more recent developments, namely how formal organizations have been created to organize this economy into signs that transform the cityscape. The analysis has been descriptive rather than analytic. However, this paper shows that this is a real phenomenon in the semiotics of the city, and contributes not just to the economy of the city, but also its look and feel – at least in certain areas of the city.

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