Representing Cities in Aesthetic Discourse: Semiotic Neighborhoods in Helsinki

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SUMMARY

This paper studies how commercial discourses differentiate space in modern cities. In particular, the focus is on design, whose effect on cities has been remarkable both in terms of the economy and also in terms of discourse. In some places, the sale of « semiotic goods » (including designer furniture, art, and antiques, as well as fashion) has expanded from isolated shops and boutiques to whole neighborhoods, making these areas into « semiotic neighborhoods » – places that live by selling and manufacturing signs. This paper analyzes the geography of semiotic neighborhoods in Helsinki, Finland. It also analyzes how representations – like maps – vary in two aesthetic discourses, those of architecture and design. In conclusion, the paper discusses the relationship between the emergence of semiotic neighborhoods and suburbanization.

INTRODUCTION

Let us define « semiotic goods », be they iconic, indexical, or symbolic in character, as goods people buy because of their meaning rather than because of their function. Typically, they are signed goods: the designer's name is known, the company's brand gives identity to them, or the shop that sells them has a special aura. Eero Aarnio's *Ball* chair, Alessi products, and Asprey's in London are examples.

These goods have become important in the global economy (ESPING-ANDERSEN G 1990, PINE J., GILMORE J. 1999). Unlike flea market goods, semiotic goods are designed, marketed, and sold by professionals for commercial ends. They support a significant portion of the economy. International investment bank estimates of the annual sales of the luxury sector alone range from 60 to 100 billion euros (WWW.MINTEL.COM, WWW.HSBC.COM). This figure includes fragrances and cosmetics, jewelry and watches, accessories, and fashion, but underestimates the total worth of all luxury businesses. If we add furniture, antiques, art, and architecture, the figure rises significantly. Also, these estimates are based on figures from major stock markets, neglecting both local producers and companies listed on stock exchanges other than Milan, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, and New York. Asia accounts for roughly 40% of the customer base for luxury goods, followed by North America and Europe, which comes in a distant third (WWW.MINTEL.COM). Production, on the other hand, is mainly European – to the point where marketing professor and satirist James Twitchell has coined the term « euroluxe » to describe these products (TWITCHELL J. 2002).

Semiotic business is significant enough to be changing the face of at least certain cities and neighborhoods. In fact, these markets have grown so much that they are creating what I have elsewhere called ”semiotic neighborhoods », that is, places that live by manufacturing and selling signs (KOSKINEN I. 2005). These goods have traditionally been sold on a few upmarket/exclusive streets such as Paris's Rue de la Paix, London's New Bond Street, and New York's Madison Avenue (listed as examples of upper-class shopping districts by Lewis Mumford in his *The Culture of Cities,* see MUMFORD L. (1949), p. 214). However, smaller cities have similar places: Hooftstraat in Amsterdam, Strøget in Copenhagen, and the Francis Street antique district in Dublin. Still, to see the whole impact of the development, we must go beyond individual streets and turn our attention to neighborhoods. « Semiotic neighborhoods » can be defined as neighborhoods in which an exceptionally large share of the businesses consists of antique shops, designer furniture stores, and graphic design offices, to mention a few. For example, in the Punavuori district of Helsinki, roughly 17% of the businesses are semiotic in character. If we include fashion, services such as beauty salons, and nightclubs, the figure surpasses 40%. As Punavuori is a typical downtown/urban neighborhood with a complex service economy, this figure is remarkable (KOSKINEN I. 2005).

Although they have historical precursors in guilds and artists' colonies, semiotic neighborhoods are a fairly recent phenomenon, essentially part of the globalizing world. In downtown Las Vegas, London's Soho, and in several places in Manhattan, the process is comprehensive: in the extreme, these areas resemble a Baudrillardian world in which signs refer to other signs. More typically, however, semiotic neighborhoods are multi-functional neighborhoods where people live and work. This paper explores how the growth of semiotic business is reflected in aesthetic discourse, and how this discourse relates to the older aesthetic discourse of architecture.

REPRESENTATIONS, PLACE AND AESTHETICS: RE-URBANIZING THE CITY

Semiotic neighborhoods can perhaps best be found by consulting tourist maps and shopping or art guides. These are practical representations, typically produced for commercial purposes. Figure 1 shows how New York City and Paris are signified in some of these maps. As the figure attests, specialized maps conceptualize cities not only in terms of museums and other traditional sites of aesthetic interest, but also in terms of shopping opportunities and styles.

More specific guides link certain types of activities to particular neighborhoods. The best examples are again from New York, with Chelsea gaining a reputation as an art district, Tribeca as an art, design, and antiques district, and Soho and NoLIta as fashion shopping districts.[1] Representations like these do many kinds of work. They reflect and map commercial development. However, they also mark out certain neighborhoods as having a specific character. These representations may be seen as Latourian actors (LATOUR B. 1991) in at least in two senses. First, they encourage people and consumers to seek semiotic goods in these places. Second, they guide businesses to these areas by showing entrepreneurs and business planners that people

[1] Tribeca stands for Triangle Below Canal Street, NoLIta North of Little Italy, and SoHo South of Houston Street.

look for semiotic goods in these areas. Ultimately, they may be treated as Durkheimian social facts of the economy (DURKHEIM É. 1977).

Figure 1. Representing Cities. From left to right: SoHo fashion map in Fodor's Guide, Where to Wear in New York, Style City: Paris

Because representations mark space, they make more complex attitudes towards the city possible as well. For instance, these areas are sometimes celebrated for revitalizing inner cities (New York's SoHo, ZUKIN S. 1999). Sometimes they are abhorred/regretted, as when neighborhoods destroyed by development are referred in nostalgic terms (for example the « Meatpacking District » in Manhattan). Some of these places have been labeled "creative neighborhoods », "bohemian neighborhoods », or "bobo areas » (BROOKS D. 2000), depending on their qualities. As an example, a specific « design district » is planned in Lisbon near the river Tejo (CORTE-REAL E. 2004). Such development often becomes the object of theorizing: this has happened to « hyperreal » areas/sites in Las Vegas (HANNIGAN J. 1998). These neighborhoods may also inspire the artistic imagination, counter-cultural movements, science fiction, or parody – as in the case of Greenwich Village.

Figure 2. Representations of New York Neighborhoods. From left to right. Chelsea Art District, Tribeca Art Design & Antique District, *SoHo/Nolita pratique*, sold at Museum of Modern Art stores.

Interestingly, semiotic businesses typically locate close to downtown in areas where people still live. In fact, they go against suburbanization by revitalizing city areas that were often in industrial use or inhabited by the poor. Of course, there are good reasons for semiotic businesses to choose such locations: they need the masses of passers-by in downtown areas and they benefit from the lower rents there. The objects sold in such stores are typically so expensive that for those who buy them, transportation costs are not an issue (GOODALL B. (1974), p. 133-145, SCHILLER R. 1971). The process whereby a place comes to be defined as a semiotic neighborhood may become self-fulfilling: for example, antique dealers typically locate next to each other. They do not compete with each other but rather benefit from the reputation these places have developed over time.[2]

However, from a cultural standpoint, the economics of location is not the most interesting feature of these places. Consequently, this paper looks at what the semiotization process does to cities. I will look at how a few neighborhoods in South Helsinki have been represented in two aesthetic discourses, those of architecture and design. These representations organize perceptions and points of view, providing people with a means of understanding the city in order to make choices about where to consume products and services. It goes without saying that representations do not program people to behave in certain ways. However, they are constituent elements for understanding cities, which are typically too complex to be comprehensible without them. The question, then, is how does aesthetic discourse differentiate areas in cities?

DATA

The data for this article comes from three types of sources. (1) Data on shops (1952, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000) is from the yellow pages, supplemented by information from design organizations' catalogues. (2) Population statistics are from Statistics Finland and the cities of Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa. (3) As examples of aesthetic discourses, I have used tourist maps and architectural maps.[3] The maps and guides selected are aimed at tourists rather than experts: guides intended for the general public evaluate space, unlike more academic sources which, after developing a definition, typically produce comprehensive lists of objects and things to be seen.

The term « semiotic business » is the main unit of data gathering. Semiotic businesses include shops selling designer goods, art, antiques, and related services (such as interior design), but not knowledge-based services such as research or legal advising. They additionally comprise producers such as interior decorators, industrial designers, and architects, as well as TV, video, and sound producers, new media companies, and advertising agencies. This paper focuses on goods, rather than on services or live entertainment (such as luxury/upscale beauty salons or music, theater, and other cultural events), and on distribution rather than production.

[2] Often, these developments are linked to gentrification – but wrongly so. Although semiotization and gentrification sometimes go hand in hand (as in SoHo in New York and Punavuori in Helsinki), the processes are not necessarily related. For instance, in Helsinki, districts that have long been solidly middle class such as Ullanlinna and Kruununhaka are becoming semiotic neighborhoods.

[3] For architecture: THE FINNISH ASSOCIATION OF ARCHITECTS SAFA, 2000. For design: CHARPENTIER AND DOWNING (n.d.). For general representations: MICHELIN TRAVEL PUBLICATIONS 2001; EDITION TEMMEN 2003); PANTZAR, K. 2003, HELSINKI THIS WEEK, HELSINKI YOUR WAY.

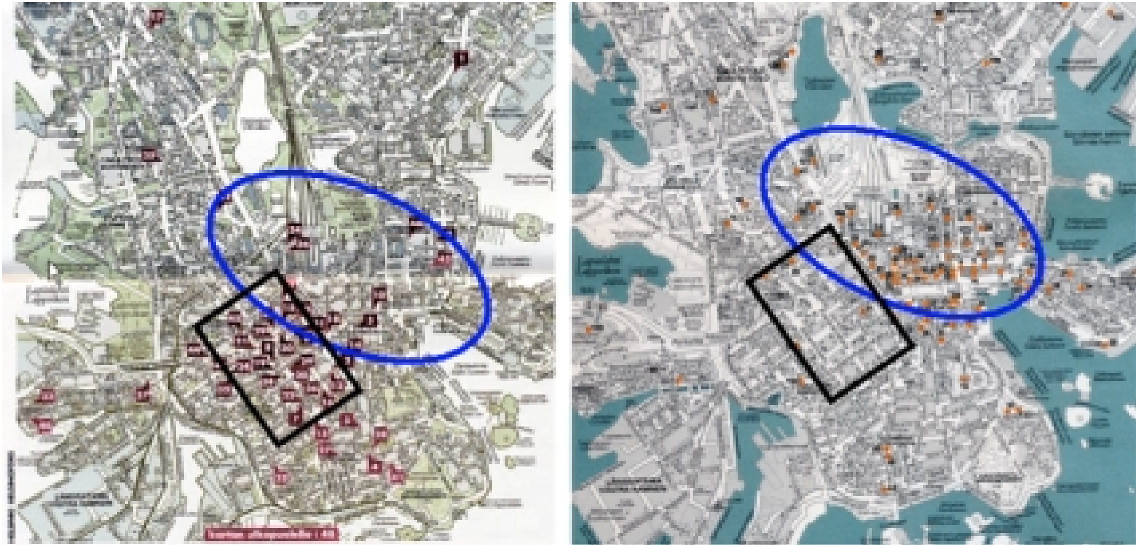
Several additional restrictions should be mentioned. First, the article focuses on market development, not on places like Civic Centers that were built because of city or state government policy. Second, semiotic neighborhoods are distinguished both from entertainment districts centered on nightlife and also from the shopping malls typical of suburbs. Finally, my figures on business do not take into account the fashion business, which is too large and volatile for a proper study (SANTASALO T., HEUSALA H. 2002).

MAPS AS AESTHETICS MANUALS FOR UNDERSTANDING CITY SPACE

As a residential area, South Helsinki has lost its central position in the Helsinki region. Whereas in 1960, around 35% of city residents lived in South Helsinki, this figure had dropped to less than 8% by 2000. In terms of semiotic business, there has been a noticeable counter-trend over the same period of time. The number of interior decoration, kitchen design, and bathroom shops, art galleries, and antique shops has increased significantly during this period, in South Helsinki in particular. While only 8% of the inhabitants of the metropolitan area live in South Helsinki, the area contains more than 50% of the city's semiotic businesses. To some extent, semiotic business does follow inhabitants into the wealthier suburbs, but it is only in South Helsinki that it is changing the look and feel of the cityscape. The area of South Helsinki close to downtown (AARIO L. 1952, SIIPI J. 1957, ÅSTRÖM S-E. 1957) gathers semiotic businesses regardless of how the figures are calculated.

South Helsinki contrasts strongly with other parts of the city. Whereas in 1960, a passer-by could have expected to encounter seven shops per square kilometer of the neighborhood, in 2000 the figure is closer to 30. In other parts of town, finding even one semiotic shop in 1960 would have taken considerably more time: one would have had to explore 10 square kilometers to hit a semiotic business. To understand how extensively the process of semiotization has changed the inner city, we can look at the neighborhoods of East Kamppi and North Punavuori, located west of downtown in (KOSKINEN I. 2001). Walking in this area, we would encounter a semiotic shop every 75 meters. If we take into account producers, we would encounter some kind of semiotic establishment every 15 meters (assuming these businesses are located on the first floor). It is also important to keep in mind that these figures do not include fashion or jewelry shops.

How are these changes reflected in representations of the city space? To some extent, they follow actual development. In particular, design maps place design shops in a small area of the city (Figure 3). However, the design shops are located mainly at the edges of the downtown area rather than in the heart of it. Only 12 shops (32%) are situated in the city center, while 37 are outside of it, in other parts of South Helsinki, especially Kamppi and Punavuori. In contrast, another aesthetic discourse – that of architecture – focuses on the downtown. In all, 62 points of interest are located in the downtown area on the most important architectural map, with only 21 outside the city center. Sixty-nine percent of the objects of architectural interest in the South are downtown. Other parts of South Helsinki contain only occasional sites (Figure 4). Thus, reading the city visually using maps offers two different visions of what is taking place in Helsinki. The city center is characterized by noteworthy architecture, whereas the neighborhoods bordering on downtown contain the design shops. Architecture is downtown-centered, but design is downtown-aversive, with the main design cluster located southwest of the center.



Figures 3-4. Left: Design in spatial representations (b-guided.net). **Right:** Architectural map guide. The Finnish Association of Architects, 2000. The ellipse denotes the downtown area. The box shows an area with the highest concentration of semiotic business. (KOSKINEN I. 2001).

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE VISUAL SEMIOTICS OF PLACE: ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

The aesthetic discourse that dominates descriptions of Helsinki is without doubt architecture. In every general guide aimed at tourists, the city is characterized primarily in terms of architecture. For example, *The Michelin Green Guide to Scandinavia and Finland* focuses mainly on significant architectural features in the southern part of Helsinki. In contract, Michelin organizes its advice on Stockholm and Copenhagen according to neighborhood. In Helsinki, districts and city life appear only as incidental elements within the master discourse of architecture, which suppresses these alternative discursive possibilities. More specifically, the guide conceptualizes Helsinki in terms of three architectural styles. There is the « neo-classical » Senate Square area, the more widespread Jugend (or Art Nouveau) style, and finally « modern architecture », which is represented as the legacy of Alvar Aalto and his heirs (Figure 5). Visually, the *Michelin Guide* follows the traditional genre of architectural photography, offering the reader images of buildings bathed in sunlight but with neither people nor commercial signs visible. In this representational style, the absence of information about variations in neighborhood and city life, hinted at in the margins of the discourse, are lost.

Contrast this with the case of design discourse. When we look at how design discourse represents the cityscape, we find a style that is both similar to, and radically different from that of architectural discourse. Again, design discourse only indirectly marks space in the sense that it is not used to characterize neighborhoods or life in them. The genre typically focuses on design objects and interiors, following the traditional object-centered conventions of art, architecture, and design photography. The main difference is that design is photographed in the studio, architecture on the street.

Figure 5. Helsinki Pictured in *The Michelin Green Guide to Scandinavia and Finland* (Sample). Left to right: Neo-classical Helsinki: Cathedral (Tuomiokirkko); Outside the City Center: Art Nouveau; Museums in the immediate vicinity (of downtown): Kiasma, the Museum of Contemporary Art.

We see this style at work in the publication *b-guided.net*, which was initially intended to direct people away from downtown Helsinki.[4] The basic version of *b-guided.net* situates design shops on a map of the city that is not organized by neighborhood. However, the guide hints at what is to be found in each neighborhood through visual means. The map uses the conventions of commercial photography to show the objects sold in the shops, with the text on the map usually only listing what the shop has to offer. But certain metaphoric elements on the map serve as signs of style for those who know. For example, pictures may show German kitchens and bathroom designs by Alessi, which the text describes in culinary terms as « delicious » (Figure 6). The vocabularies of madness and addiction are also used to describe bathrooms and kitchens.

Figure 6. Sample of Images in *b-guided.net.* Caption, left (two interiors, reorganized from original for this paper): « The complete selection for those mad about design kitchens and bathrooms. Latest European design and a variety of delicious bric-a-brac ». ((product and contact information)). **Caption, right (one object): «** Space Light specializes in lightning design and imports Belgian Delta Light products. The range includes models for indoors and outdoors ». ((product and contact information))

This discursive style differs from that of architecture in one crucial respect. It provides information about what is to be found in the shops in these neighborhoods:

[4] Interview with Päivi Charpentier of the Charpentier-Downing ad agency, which produces *b-guided.net*, Uudenmaankatu, Helsinki, 2002.

designer objects and highly stylized interiors. Indirectly, this helps people see city space and whole neighborhoods in terms of stylistic choices. As the New York maps cited at the beginning of this article demonstrate, such perceptive frameworks can be made explicit, and can be connected to neighborhoods. Indirectly, these maps provide a visual index of special kinds of places that provide sophisticated objects and services. These places contrast with less exclusive places that display ordinary objects and spaces that lack the aura provided by designer objects and services (LEHTONEN T-K., MÄENPÄÄ P. (1997), p. 22-23).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Semiotic neighborhoods are a fairly recent phenomenon in the cityscape. They have their origins in globalization and in the emergence of the new middle classes that have concentrated in large cities around the world (SASSEN S. 1991). Such neighborhoods have developed at the same time in smaller cities, although on a smaller scale and for different reasons (NAROTZKY V. 2000, KOSKINEN I. 2005). Semiotic neighborhoods offer students of city life the opportunity to raise questions about how the aesthetics of city space develops in representations, and how these representations simultaneously function to direct the development of cities. Semiotic neighborhoods have become signs in discourse of the city. Commercial art, design, antiques, and fashion have become signifiers that mark neighborhoods, making them something to be signified in aesthetic discourse.

In this paper, I have explored how semiotic neighborhoods have become signs in the aesthetic discourses used to represent Helsinki. As semiotic neighborhoods have developed, the discourse identified with them has contested the older, heretofore dominant, aesthetic of the city, architecture. Architectural discourse is downtown-centric, whereas that of design is downtown-aversive. Architectural discourse largely follows the major works of major architects and consequently, revolves around major national and municipal buildings such as art museums, concert halls, opera houses, company headquarters, and administrative buildings. Other elements, if present at all, are mere ornaments gracing this master discourse. Design discourse works on different premises: it is mapped primarily onto old working-class neighborhoods, hidden in shops housed in buildings that are not recognized for their architectural qualities.

However, representations – like maps – can not be separated from what takes place in cities. How representations relate to city space is of course ultimately an empirical question. It makes no sense to ask which came first because the relationship may change over time. In the case of Helsinki, maps by and large reflect changes in the city: old neighborhood names are still key markers of space, even though their reputations are evolving. However, in places like New York, the situation may be different: signs produce space. SoHo was the first acronym that successfully effaced slum-like associations from a formerly industrial neighborhood, easing its transformation into a fashionable art district, residential area, and later a place for exclusive shopping (ZUKIN S. 1999). Other neighborhood names soon followed suit, from the East Village to Tribeca to increasingly ingenious acronyms such as NoLIta in Manhattan and DUMBO in Brooklyn. As these names have been absorbed into the discourses about the city, they have become key markers for shops and commercial enterprises.

Semiotic neighborhoods are interesting finally in terms of post-urbanism. For example, since 1960, the Helsinki region has grown considerably. However, with the

exception of the mid-1990s, the growth has taken place in the cities of Espoo and Vantaa. First industrial, and later service workplaces have followed the population. For example, the number of shops tripled in the suburbs, but dropped by 25% in Helsinki proper between 1964 and 2000 (AHTIAINEN P., TERVONEN J. 2002, LAAKSO S. 2002). Today growth mainly takes place outside traditional suburban areas. Although downtown areas are losing their dominant position in city life (JONES M. 2003), they are also developing new roles. Semiotic neighborhoods make central city areas interesting and attractive residential areas with an appealing cultural undercurrent. They provide an antidote to the shapeless postwar cities, dominated by a web of suburbs connected by railroads, metro lines, boulevards, and highways. However, city planners' ability to use the phenomenon of semiotization as a development tool appears to be limited. Only fairly large cites are able to create enough demand to maintain such neighborhoods. Also, at least in Europe, public investment in visible culture typically focuses on prestigious surroundings, for example, sites next to major parks in the city center. It is difficult to create a living, cultural neighborhood by placing an opera house in a formerly quiet corner of the city. Semiotic neighborhoods are market creations and as such, remain part of the evolving city space.

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