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Sensing Urban Values

Reassessing Urban Cultures and Histories Amidst Redevelopment Agendas

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Sensing Urban Values: Reassessing Urban Cultures and Histories Amidst Redevelopment Agendas

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Abstract

Introduction to Sensing Urban Values. This special issue assembles a set of papers that respond to a neglected, undertheorized yet crucial question relating to spatial politics and urban renewal: How do economic and non-economic values depend on and co-constitute each other in different urban contexts? In response, the contributors to this special issue build on recent critical reassessments of value; they explore how the spatial and cultural politics of value unfolds in contemporary urban environments globally. They examine cases that traverse Poland, South Africa, Malaysia, Germany, and The Netherlands. The papers demonstrate a theoretical and empirically engaged concern with themes such as the cultural dimensions of place-making processes in contemporary cities; how identity, memory, heritage, and value-making processes may matter for the production of urban spaces today through sensing; aesthetic reorganizations of places, movements, and interactions with urban matters; and through storytelling. Taking up the theme of urban valuation with a multisensory approach has prompted the contributors to explore the multiple and translocal ways through which urban valuations unfold, are performed, and are experienced. This approach reveals the multiple valuations of spaces—not only economic but also symbolic—that inform the struggles for social and spatial justice in cities across the world as well as their scholarly examinations.

Keywords

value-making, sensing, spatial politics, urban cultures, heritage

Introduction

This special issue explores value-making and value assessments in contemporary urban contexts. Its central concern is how particular aspects of contemporary cities are understood as “wanted” or “unwanted” in processes of place-making and amidst redevelopment and regeneration agendas. Most urban researchers agree that place-based identities and histories have become important resources for political and economic elites (e.g., Zukin, 2010) as means of capital accumulation (Peck & Theodore, 2015; Rossi, 2017). Urban redevelopment projects, in particular, demonstrate

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how elite-led attempts to “renew” neighborhoods and infrastructures often operate through a commodification of local cultures and histories. However, a neglected, undertheorized yet crucial question relating to spatial politics and urban renewal remains: How do economic and non-economic values depend on and co-constitute each other in different urban contexts? As John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2009, p. 27) have argued

[E]ven if the transaction of cultural products and practices were entirely reducible to cash, it does not necessarily mean that they would be denuded of all auratic, affective, or social worth: the very fungibility of money lends itself to transformations of value that reinforce difference—and add substance to identity.

In response, this special issue builds on recent critical reassessments of value (Heuts & Mol, 2013; Lee & Helgesson, 2019; Skeggs, 2014). It examines how the spatial and cultural politics of value unfolds in contemporary urban environments globally and calls for critical attention to the sensorial dimensions of value-making to address these key questions: When and how are specific values, such as “heritage,” “multiculturalism,” and “authenticity,” articulated in a contested and/or consensual manner (De Cesari & Herzfeld, 2015); how are values mediated through the senses or experienced as “really real” (Van de Port & Meyer, 2018); and what is the status of particular sites (or events), and the cultural meanings they provoke, in processes of valuation that involve more-than-human presences (DeSilvey, 2006)? Furthermore, and importantly, how do the multiple valuations of spaces involve struggles for social and spatial justice in the city (Marcuse, 2009; Soja, 2010)? In the following, we explore these questions and the diverse responses to them across the various contributions to this special issue.

Redevelopment Agendas, Spatial Politics, and Urban Cultures

Before directing our attention to the sensorial dimension of the valuation of urban spaces, we first turn to the place of local histories and cultures in the context of redevelopment agendas. Urban redevelopment focuses on the revitalization of city areas by renovating or replacing dilapidated buildings with new housing and public infrastructures. Today, urban redevelopment programs across the world signal important elements of a contemporary “neoliberal urbanism” (Peck et al., 2009; Smith, 2002) through a focus on entrepreneurial policies and increasing commodification of urban spaces, which is indicated by the contributions to this special issue. The analysis of urban redevelopment usually points to material and economic restructuring of working-class, sometimes vacant, areas into middle-class or commercial-use neighborhoods (e.g., Harvey, 2006; Lees et al., 2008), with the state and large-scale capital representing key actors (Hackworth & Smith, 2001; Sassen, 2014). While a focus on economic value and valorization offers a powerful lens to understand the multiple workings of urban development today, it is necessary to acknowledge that this material transformation interlocks with and relies on a symbolic transformation. In other words, following Glucksberg (2014, p. 97), the “symbolic devaluation of specific areas and their inhabitants are necessary precursors of the physical demolition and removal that characterize regeneration processes.”

Thinking with the interplay between symbolic and material dimensions of recent urban redevelopment projects drives the conceptualization of this special issue and its contributions. It is crucial, we suggest, to pay attention to the aspects of the selection, presentation, and appropriation of cultures and histories. Doing so acknowledges their vital relation to shared pasts, identities, and cultural objects and how these are shaped by heritagization, liberalization, nationalism, and (post)colonial rule (Herzfeld, 2009; Larkham, 2002, p. 13; Muehlebach, 2017). With this in mind, it is not enough to only examine the specific role of urban planners, project developers, and investors in emerging spatial formations, but we also need to consider the growing role of

public–private partnerships, social movements, various contingents of urban dwellers, and the urban built environment itself, all of which contribute to the continuous re-inscription of places with new meanings (see also De Cesari & Dimova, 2019). Different actors, groups, and materialities mobilize and embody these histories and cultures, impacting how cultural-historical legacies and futures are fixed and defined as “essential,” “authentic,” “multicultural,” and constitutive of the urban fabric at any given moment.

Thinking with the symbolic dimension is even more pertinent considering how “culture” and “heritage” have been approached as important drivers of urban redevelopment in the past decades (Florida, 2002; Miles & Paddison, 2005; Yúdice, 2003). For example, many local governments have invested in culture-led development by trying to attract (upper) middle classes and creative professionals to city areas designated as needing renewal (Peck, 2012; Shaw, 2014). Moreover, increasingly powerful public discourses frame urban cultures in narrow understandings of ethnic and religious backgrounds, designating culture as a problematic field in (super)diverse urban redevelopment areas (Hoekstra & Pinkster, 2019; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). Representations of diversity, such as blackness and social class, are promoted as authentic features of particular city areas and turn into lucrative aesthetics that can exclude particular groups of residents and contribute to inequality (Summers, 2019; Van Gent & Jaffe, 2017; in this issue, see also Fiore & Plate, 2021; Muzaini, 2021 and Van de Kamp, 2021). Therefore, in this special issue, we contribute to advancing theories of culture, history, and heritage in urban spaces, which demonstrate a sensitivity to a diversity of cultural resources, and seek to incorporate the interplay and power relations between various groups and actors, including “top-down” and “bottom-up” initiatives and the urban built environment itself.

To grasp the dynamics of such culture-led developments, the contributors examine the dynamic(s) between local and global processes of value-making in urban spaces. Extending Soja’s (2010) argument that the production of urban spaces links local struggles to wider processes, we see each contribution to this special issue as offering a “local” example of global dynamics; for instance, the case of drought and water shortages in Cape Town, South Africa, opens a window into the specter of climate change in a specific sociopolitical and spatial setting (Shepherd, this issue). Instead of following a well-rehearsed critique of redevelopment within the conceptual framework of neoliberal governance, the contributors of this issue pay attention to the particular constellations of histories, cultures, and policies that have shaped and shape urban space today, treating their case studies as “ordinary” (Robinson, 2006). Approaching the cases as “ordinary” does not result in an ignorance of the afterlives of colonial, socialist, classed, or conflictual pasts. On the contrary, it offers each contributor a keen sensitivity that “signif[ies] a critical standpoint, in several senses: critical of the [. . .] past and of possible [. . .] futures; critical of the present as neoliberal verities about transition, markets, and democracy were being imposed” (Chari & Verdery, 2009, p. 11). In that vein, post-socialist and (post)colonial legacies, and those of war and conflict, play an important role in how redevelopment rebrands national and urban identities by staging particular urban aesthetics (Baloji & de Boeck, 2018; Dimova, 2013; Sezneva, 2013) and in “shap[ing] the emotional life of all members of the national community” (Koshar, 2000, p. 9). Thus, considering the complexity of material and symbolic settings of contemporary urban redevelopments, we propose to move the analysis of valuation of urban spaces and practices beyond its economic valorization. Such analysis allows the contributors of the special issue to illuminate how various versions of urbanity are tried out, qualified and disqualified, and, in turn, materialized, stabilized, or contested.

Valuing and Sensing

To advance the debate on the relationships between economic and non-economic values in the context of urban spatial politics, this interdisciplinary special issue draws on the concept

of valuation, which, in recent years, has been revived by cultural geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, and science and technology studies (STS) scholars (Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013). These scholars have sought to capture different modes of valuing by looking not only at the role of money and markets but also that of taste, norms, care, objects, and practices (e.g., Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Hennion, 2001; Lamont, 2012; Mol et al., 2010) with theoretical arguments that offer an important foundation for this special volume's emphasis on "sensing urban values."

What the scholars in the field of valuation and science and technology studies have suggested is that valuation can be seen as both production and performance of values. This statement helps to shed light on how various urban stakeholders and publics produce, assess, and perform the values of particular urban spaces, artefacts, and practices. As such, the special issue not only incorporates rich empirical observations as to how values are co-constructed but also recognizes how value assessments are often articulated through performative means, with particular modes of storytelling or creative expression often adopted to contest and overwrite dominant valuations or chosen as research methods intended to elicit or ascertain values (Campkin & Duijzings, 2016).

Second, the contributors of the special issue analyze valuation as an activity rather than a product, and this activity involves an inherent fluidity to assessments of what is deemed as "wanted" or "unwanted." As Frank Heuts and Annemarie Mol (2013, p. 136) have suggested, "[T]hat qualities are not fixed characteristics of the object qualified does not imply that they depend on the eyes of the beholder. Instead, they rather depend on the active contributions of the experts." Extending this assertion further, we argue that contributions made by urban inhabitants themselves have to be taken seriously: their active role in urban valuation can be ascertained in across a variety of initiatives, interventions, and everyday practices—a crucial aspect that contributions to this special issue will illustrate in detail.

Third, urban valuation involves process of mutual attunement between human and non-human participants and creation of attachments between different actors and things where the agency and subjectivity of those who value and who or what is valued may shift. Such processes may also create situations of vulnerability because values can not only be created but also disrupted or destroyed. The acknowledgment of shifting agencies between those evaluating and those being evaluated opens up new possible pathways: "rather than thinking of values as belonging to different domains—price as economic value, fairness as an ethical principle, efficiency as an organizational ideal—we study them in connection with each other" (Dussauge et al., 2015, p. 6). Indeed, the entangled character of these valuations transforms the object, space, or person being valued. In treating valuation as a mutual attunement and test of objects or practices evaluated, we seek to "play outside of the linguistic dualism between active and the passive and between subject and the object, which is best expressed by words such as pleasure or passion" (Hennion, 2017, p. 118).

In building on these recent theoretical developments, we seek to demonstrate the importance of multisensory dynamics in urban value-making (Degen & Rose, 2012). Understood as a multisensory practice, urban valuation involves concrete acts of moving in, relating to, designing, and experiencing urban spaces. While we do not deny the fact that urban development agendas are increasingly based on forms of calculation, for instance, by professional actors, both private and public, who rank and rate neighborhoods and property values, we also attend to other types of knowledge and practice at play in urban governmentality, such as embodied and emplaced forms of knowledge. Recent work in performance studies, anthropology, and in architecture (e.g., Edensor & Sumartojo, 2015; Ingold, 2004; Massumi, 2002) instigate us to focus on *how* urban spaces are known, lived, and valued, creating multiple, entangled agendas and governmentalities. This "polysense" (Sather-Wagstaff, 2017) of urban redevelopment is rarely a straightforward, successful process, but one ridden with paradoxes, doubts, and tensions. *We contend that a focus*

on valuation is crucial for gaining a better grasp on the appeal of specific urban values, on their successes or failures, and the contestations they provoke. This asks for a methodology that is not only formulated by abstract theoretical concerns but also rooted in daily, bodily, sensory experience (Drozdowski & Birdsall, 2019; Pink, 2009), as the contributions in this special issue demonstrate. A redefined approach to urban valuation helps us to critically attend to the bodies that interact with the urban artefacts being managed, curated, and maintained as “heritage,” “modern,” or “hip,” and how they are, in turn, affected by particular “aesthetic formations” (Meyer & de Witte, 2013).

Sensory Methodologies

What does it mean to think of valuation as a multisensorial practice? In his work *Art as Experience*, the pragmatist philosopher Dewey (1934/1980, p. 5) wrote:

In order to understand the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens: the sights that hold the crowd.

Similar to his understanding of aesthetic experience, we too propose to begin the examination of pragmatics of valuing and devaluing spaces, and by casting an “attentive eye and ear” to our objects of study. In other words, we propose to approach valuation as an establishment of relationships between the evaluator and the evaluated as demanding a constant hands-on, feet-on, and eyes-on engagement (Heuts & Mol, 2013).

To engage with the “performative, embodied and haptic knowledge” that is produced in the act of deeming spaces as wanted or unwanted (Crang, 2003), the contributors of the special issue attuned established qualitative methodologies to capture the sensorial dimensions that valuation relies on. For valuation to open up its objects of evaluation to instabilities, fragmentations, and contestations, it requires an understanding that the knowledge produced through sensory methodologies is highly context-specific and even fragmentary. The methodology of accounting for the sensorial dimension of valuation as a performative activity, thus, allows one “to understand the experience of space as a decentered and partially connected experience of the performing (and performed) body” (Hetherington, 2003, p. 1935).

In this regard, the go-along, visual analysis, and autoethnography are offered here as crucial epistemological tools for building up the grounded theorization of valuation as a sensorial practice. The go-along, for example, offers a “hybrid between participant observation and interviewing [that] carry certain advantages when it comes to exploring the role of place in everyday lived experience” (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 463). Taken up by several contributors to this special issue, this method was situationally sharpened to thicken the analysis of the interplay between valuation as based on measuring, calculation, and reflexive knowledge and valuation as tacit and unreflexive attunement to the urban material setting (Pink, 2009). The go-along, as a sensory urban method, focuses on how vision, smell, touch, and auditory senses coalesce and transform the experiences of people in the spaces undergoing redevelopment, and by that affecting, in the end, the selfhood of inhabitants and the attachments and belongings constructed during the processes of valuations and valorizations. For example, during her study of the redevelopment of the main railway station in Wrocław, Poland, the go-along method sensitized Anastasiya Halauniova (this issue) to how buildings affect a range of users and experts and allowed her to follow the materiality and form of the building as she engaged with it, so as to unpack the assumptions and practices of the renovation practitioners. For the contribution by Hamzah Muzaini (this issue), the go-along method was a crucial tool in learning more about heritage-making “from below” in diverse valuations of urban environments in Perak, Malaysia. Similarly, the position of Linda van

de Kamp (this issue), as both an insider and outsider in the neighborhoods of Amsterdam-North where she conducted fieldwork, provided her with important insights into the multilayered sensorial dimensions to housing, value, and inequality in a gentrifying working-class neighborhood. By focusing on the performative qualities of aesthetics, Hanna Katharina Göbel (this issue) addresses ruins as “artefacts of aesthetic inquiry” rather than simple leftovers of spatial politics, and it allows her to trace how “atmospheres from the past” are reenacted by teams of urban experts from various disciplines in the case of urban redevelopment in Berlin.

The choice of go-along method, autoethnography or visual analysis does not mean, however, that our contributors persist in an epistemological distinction between the mind and the body, between thinking and sensing. On the contrary, as our contributors illustrate, valuation and devaluation relies on the complex mingling of both, and such interplay gives socio-material and affective power to urban values of “historicity,” “authenticity,” “multiculturalism,” “progressivism,” and so on. “Sensing urban values,” therefore, does not invoke the focus on the mundane experiences of urban inhabitants in contrast to experts, city officials and other stakeholders involved in the projects of urban redevelopment. As the contributors of the special issue emphasize, sensing urban values takes place in various material settings, be they professional or in the everyday, and this activity heavily relies on the knowledge practices of making spaces and people governable and calculable. This and other theoretical and methodological reflections are further explored in each of the contributions.

Overview

Formulated within the framework of “Sensing Urban Values,” the papers in this special issue share a strong commitment to key concepts and themes within the multidisciplinary field of urban research, as evidenced by their theoretical and empirically-engaged concern with themes such as: the cultural dimensions of place-making processes in contemporary cities; how identity, memory, heritage, and value-making processes may matter for the production of urban spaces today through sensing; aesthetic reorganizations of places, movements and interactions with urban matters, and through storytelling.

The six papers respond to the theoretical impulse of valuation, while developing innovative approaches and rich analyses of contemporary urban contexts that traverse Poland, South Africa, Malaysia, Germany, and The Netherlands. In bringing a variety of contexts to the fore, we attempt to create a space for the study of valuing in and of cities in a properly global sense, reflecting on urban epistemologies of the so-called Global North and South (Peake, 2011; Robinson, 2016). Our decision to take up the theme of urban valuation with a multisensory approach allowed us to explore the multiple and translocal ways through which urban valuations unfold, are performed and experienced, including but emphatically not limited to the large-scale abstractions produced by capital-driven “planetary urbanism” (Brenner & Schmid, 2011).

The first article, by Nick Shepherd, investigates the urban values and meaning of water, as prompted by the threat of a “Day Zero” water crisis during early 2018 in Cape Town, South Africa. Using field notes made during the city’s “Anthropocene moment,” Shepherd unpacks the politics and poetics of resource scarcity in Cape Town, and how this visibility of water offers as a complex object for thinking through how large-scale climate change meets urban life and everyday consumption behaviors. While acknowledging how the crisis highlighted existing infrastructural inequalities, Shepherd seeks out how an embodied sense of shared experience in Cape Town also signaled the potential for new understandings of urban dwelling, relationalities, and citizenship. This approach to sensing urban values, then, asks whether the collective experience of reckoning with environmental stress in Cape Town, including the current Covid-19 pandemic, can serve as a prompt for re-imagining a common future in which the precarious

nature of many of our urban infrastructures and social and political situations stretch well beyond Cape Town.

Hamzah Muzaini argues for the necessity to develop a more differentiated view on myriad forms of heritage-making from below in urban environments. He emphasizes how “sensing” the informal valuations of the past may identify those that have survived in more performative capacities than those bounded forms such as storytelling, or that were located within more private or communal urban spaces. This analysis focuses on the ways in which non-state actors endeavored to create war heritages “in the shadows” in the context of Perak, Malaysia, whose regional focus is predominated by tourism and development agendas. Drawing on the idea of “critical heritage from below,” Muzaini demonstrates that valuations of urban environments will remain selective or incomplete when either formal or informal forms of heritage-making take center stage and remain separated from each other. He emphasizes that the commemoration of private memories should not replace but rather enrich the generalized official memory narratives.

In the following article, Elisa Fiore and Liedeke Plate theorize how the revaluation of so-called multicultural neighborhoods via urban commercial regeneration depends on a racial aesthetics as its underlying principle. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted on the Javastraat shopping street in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, the authors critically assess how a multicultural valorization took place in the Javastraat using the vehicle of so-called ethnic food; at the same time, however, this diversity branding was accompanied by measures that threatened local immigrant business with an enforced removal or aesthetic upgrading. An aesthetic upgrading, as the authors demonstrate, took the form of transforming two local businesses with two opposing strategies of “ethnic enhancement” versus “de-ethnicization.” Fiore and Plate pinpoint how an urban sensory politics structured the process of revaluation, whereby sensory and aesthetic norms were key devices in the redevelopment of the Indische Buurt neighborhood, and its preparation for projected White residents and consumers.

The fourth article, by Hanna Katharina Göbel, investigates how urban ruins are revalued by means of reenacting “atmospheres from the past” through her examination of a post-socialist architectural site, namely the former East German (GDR) Palace of the Republic. In this case, she identifies a distinct contrast between a performative approach to valuing aesthetics—originating in the performance arts—and the more conventional approach that is common in the fields of architecture, planning, and conservation, which envisions Berlin as a “whole” in need of architecture that unproblematically contributes to urban “coherence.” The article demonstrates how curators and artists involved in the temporary transformation of the building enacted former users’ narratives and memories of the architecture and how such an approach enabled local historical imaginations to become tangible for visitors of the site. Göbel, thus, identifies and differentiates between, on the one hand, valuing practices that are performatively oriented and that prioritize memories and memory-making processes, and, on the other hand, valuation activities that are grounded in document analysis and that epistemically favor the archive. In this critical reassessment, a call is made for heritage institutions to develop an embodied notion of past aesthetics and performative reuse rather than engender a conventional paradigm of reconstruction.

Anastasiya Halauniova studies an urban renovation project at the main train station in Wrocław, Poland and how the “historical color” chosen for the building’s facade prompted controversy among a variety of experts and city inhabitants. Offering an ethnography of the color transformation—from light grey to ochre—during the renovation in the period from 2010 to 2012, Halauniova critically treats the valuation, devaluation, and crafting of different historicities of the building. In the analysis, several contrasting understandings of the color are explored, with the “scientifically accurate” opposed to the “unfamiliar and too bright” and a concern with

achieving a “coherent” rather than “patchworked” historicity among those involved in the renovation. A crucial intervention in this article, therefore, is not only to unpack the symbolic makings of ochre, and the reception of this color, but to also reveal the knowledge production, aesthetic attachments, and lived experiences that contribute to various versions of historicity. Halauniova shows how color has a strong possibility to intervene in embodied experiences and ways of relating to this building and reveals historicity-in-practice as situated and dynamic but also as contested, especially in a city like Wrocław that has undergone significant sociopolitical change and spatial restructuring.

In the final contribution, Linda van de Kamp analyzes the redevelopment of working-class garden villages in Amsterdam North, The Netherlands, by demonstrating how the upgrading of social housing units challenges residents’ understanding of who they are and how they are perceived. The affective connections that residents maintain with their neighborhood and the houses inform long-term tenants’ experiences of regeneration and gentrification and feelings of social and spatial (in)justice. Long-term residents, and their children, increasingly demand that the ongoing spatial improvement of their everyday urban spaces needs to do justice to the deeply embodied history of social emancipation in Amsterdam’s garden villages. The central claim made by the author, therefore, is to highlight valuation as a critical tool in tracing these historical sensorial relations with the built environment, and in better understanding their significance for a critical reassessment of redevelopment processes. Her position foregrounds how urban spaces are social locations that shape and are shaped by visions, knowledge, and experiences.

Ultimately, this special issue explores urban valuation in contemporary cities from a multisensory approach. Presenting the multiple and translocal forms through which urban valuations develop, are performed and experienced, captured in terms such as “multiculturalism,” “heritage,” “culture,” or “memory,” we examine how a diversity of values that involve resources and experiences from the local to the transnational scale level are articulated and lived by various actors that together shape current urban redevelopment processes. It is the multiple valuations of spaces—not only economic but also symbolic—that inform the struggles for social and spatial justice in cities across the world, as well as their scholarly examinations.

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