Cultural Authenticity and Regional Development

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of "cultural authenticity" and explores its application in regional development and planning. It describes why cultural authenticity is important for a city or region. Cultural authenticity provides a competitive advantage to a region for attracting tourists and residents, it promotes economic and social equity, and it strengthens the sustainability of a region. The paper describes four examples of regional efforts in the U.S. to preserve cultural authenticity. Finally, the paper identifies several problems that arise in the application of cultural authenticity to regional development plans. The paper warns against patronizing attitudes, stereotyping, and illegal discrimination in the application of the concept of cultural authenticity to regional development and planning. The paper also warns that preserving cultural authenticity should not operate as a force against progress and modernity.

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In the recent decade, several U.S. cities have succeeded in attracting new businesses and a yuppy class of residents to their downtowns. Elderly empty-nesters have also been attracted to downtown living. At the same time, economic revitalization in these regions has resulted in displacing many existing small businesses and indigenous communities, and pushing them out of what used to be diverse neighborhoods. "Indigenous communities" refers to groups of people who lived in the region (such as a city) for many years preceding a major regional development effort. For example, the development of many downtowns has resulted in a large number of lower income and moderate income African Americans, who had lived in the region for years, leaving these areas. These groups had small businesses, arts and crafts stores, restaurants, and cultural performance bands, all of which have been dismantled or are in a state of decline. The cultural climate of such downtowns has been drastically altered by recent economic development efforts.

When economic development or revitalization efforts in a region result in a drastic change in the cultural character of the region, such efforts could threaten the cultural capital of the region. Cultural capital is based, in good measure, on a feel of cultural authenticity and stability in the region. One outcome of an erosion in cultural capital is that cultural tourism within the region might suffer. Also, families and individuals who value the attribute of authenticity will not be attracted to locate in such regions.

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The net result of the out-migration and in-migration in revitalized cities and regions has frequently been reduced cultural diversity and a reduced presence of indigenous communities. Regional development plans ought to directly address the issue of cultural diversity and richness, and cultural authenticity because, historically, these characteristics make a region or city unique and popular. Some studies show that cultural diversity is economically beneficial for regions, and regions that have cultural diversity experience rising wages and healthy housing markets (for example, Ottaviano and Peri, 2004).

Authentic flavors of neighborhoods, boutique restaurants, ethnic grocery stores, textile and garment stores, and departmental stores attract residents and tourists to a particular region or city. These businesses provide a unique character to particular neighborhoods. Cultural authenticity can be seen in neighborhoods defined by ethnicity (Chinatowns, Little Italys, etc.), trade or business activity (garment districts, flower markets, financial districts), cultural activity (theater districts, museums and galleries districts), and sexual orientation of residents (gay districts). A nurturing and sustaining environment for indigenous communities, including businesses and residents, is necessary in order to maintain cultural authenticity.

The displacement of indigenous communities is directly detrimental to cultural authenticity—an attribute which by definition cannot be faked. For example, merely having large chain-stores display signage in Chinese language does not maintain the cultural authenticity of a Chinatown if, at the same time, long-standing Chinese businesses in the area have had to shut down and leave.

Authenticity is a valued attribute for tourists as well as residents. According to Benjamin Barber, author of the best-selling book *Jihad vs. McWorld*: "We all know the difference between getting crêpes in Dijon and getting them in a New York place called Les Halles." When an individual or family chooses where to live, they may place a high value on the authentic feel of a place and the availability of authentic products and services. There is a significant proportion of households that is averse to living in a synthetic environment which was created by a real estate developer just a few months ago. The existence of other residents and businesses that seem rooted in the place might be seen as a positive factor. The historical continuity of a place, even as it adapts to on-going changes in a flow, can be seen as lending the place a character of stability, rootedness, comfort, and overall a positive appeal.

According to Deyan Sudjic, one of the most influential urban thinkers in recent decades:

"….people like places that are authentic and unique. The power of authenticity in a city has never been greater than it is today---look at the intense vitality of a city like Mumbai, India. That's not something you can just decide to add artificially." (Szita, 2006, p. 36).

Why is Cultural Authenticity Important?

- **Cultural authenticity provides a competitive advantage to the region or city**

There is a niche market in services and goods provided by indigenous communities, such as crêpes by a Dijon native, hand-wrapped tamales by a Latino food preparer, and hand-made wood furniture by a traditional wood- carpenter. Consumers with high purchasing power seem to have a greater preference for cultural authenticity in services and merchandise and are willing to pay a premium for it. Preserving cultural authenticity promotes cultural tourism, bringing revenue to the city. It also attracts well-off and educated residents to a region, which also raises the revenues for a region.

- **Cultural authenticity promotes economic and social equity**

When regional development plans address the need to preserve indigenous communities, to prevent their being forced to move out, they achieve economic and social equity. Such conscious efforts will discourage a gentrification that makes local housing unaffordable to indigenous communities. They will result in economic opportunities for the indigenous communities; opportunities arising directly from the development efforts. Economic development that results in successful indigenous businesses and flourishing indigenous families empowers the local community. Such empowerment of the people is the essence of democratic government. On the other hand, development plans that result in displacing or pushing out local communities are the antithesis of the notion of a government for the people.

- **Cultural authenticity strengthens the sustainability of the region or city**

A region with strong and sizable indigenous communities is more resilient than a region with mostly new businesses and residents. A region can overcome external shocks (whether in the form of natural disasters, economic downturns, or terrorism attacks) much better and faster if it has a vibrant indigenous community that can provide social support based on long-standing social networks. Residents and businesses with long-term and deep associations with the region and its neighborhoods are more likely to stay and overcome problems than newcomers. Lately-arrived chain-store businesses, while important for economic development, are likely to leave faster than they arrived in the face of a disaster.

Local Efforts to Preserve Cultural Authenticity

Many U.S. cities have made conscious efforts to foster their indigenous communities in order to achieve the three desirable outcomes discussed above—of competitive advantage, economic and social equity, and sustainability. Following are four examples of such efforts, aimed at preserving cultural authenticity in cities:

1.   Midtown Global Market, Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Neighborhood Development Center (NDC) planned a public market to anchor the ground floor of a large redevelopment, the 1.2 million square foot former Sears building. This building is located in the city's largest immigrant neighborhood. The City of Minneapolis was persuaded to forgo a large chain grocery store as the anchor tenant. Instead, it provided the space to the Global Market—a marketplace for local merchants. It is an example of an effort to integrate place-based commercial redevelopment with people-based microenterprise.

The idea for the Midtown Global Market (MGM) was developed by NDC, the Latino Economic Development Center (LEDC), the African Development Center (ADC), and the Powderhorn Philips Cultural Wellness Center. It provides 60,000-plus square-feet for 62 permanent ethnic food, crafts and related small businesses in stalls and shops situated around a sky-lit atrium. Instead of attracting national chains like Subway, Taco Bell, and McDonald's, tenants include Holy Land Grocery, Manny's Tortas, West Indies Soul, Golden Thyme Cafe and Taqueria La Hacienda. (Reid, 2006; and Project for Public Spaces, 2005)

An outdoor farmers' market is also planned with live music, cooking demonstrations, and other activities. The development team adopted the slogan "Many tastes, One place" to reflect the confluence of many cultures in South Minneapolis.

The NDC and LEDC have provided business training to vendors, many of whom are Latino immigrants. The NDC provides ethnic-based microenterprise training and loans in low-income neighborhoods of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Since 1993, NDC has helped to open more than 300 businesses in at least eleven Twin Cities neighborhoods.

NDC's approach of linking small business training with commercial real estate development has proven to be an effective strategy for both the community and its residents. MGM is built from the ground up by the community; it is not just a market outlet for well-established ethnic businesses, but also a viable start-up and expansion location for low-income entrepreneurs from South Minneapolis. (Reid, 2006; and Project for Public Spaces, 2005). Thus, the Global Market supports indigenous communities and provides a sense of authenticity for shoppers and residents of this area.

2.   District del Sol, St. Paul, Minnesota

This district is located on the West Side of St. Paul, a short distance across the Mississippi River from downtown St. Paul. The business community here is mostly Latino in ownership and products. There are many Mexican restaurants and stores specializing in Mexican and Latino food, clothing, gifts, and other products.

The Riverview Economic Development Association (REDA) launched a public awareness program in 1999 called "The West Side of What" to generate awareness and interest in the revitalization efforts in this district. In 2000, the district was renamed

District del Sol to reflect the Hispanic character of businesses and to create an attractive, positive image. A new logo was also created to go with the new name, and was displayed prominently in advertisements, facades and signs. The marketing of District del Sol is also strongly connected with the annual Cinco de Mayo festival, which draws more than 85,000 people to the neighborhood. The REDA has implemented efforts to make the district seem more hospitable to new shoppers and developers. Thus, the cultural richness of the district was preserved and strengthened, and used as a positive attribute in the development of the region. (Seidman, 2004)

3.   Athens Farmers Market, Athens, Ohio

Athens is a city in the Appalachian region, and is surrounded by towns with high unemployment and poverty rates. The Appalachian Center for Economic Networks, or ACEnet, runs incubator programs to help local businesses. It has promoted the hugely successful Athens Farmers' Market which provides retail outlets for small local businesses. Start-up food businesses often use the Athens Farmers' Market as the first outlet for their product, before graduating to supplying for large grocery stores and to regional markets. The combination of local food vendors and artisans at the market reflects Southeastern Ohio's unique local culture and helps create a vibrant and self-sustaining economy. (Project for Public Spaces, 2005)

4.   Stockyards City, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Stockyards City is located three miles west of downtown Oklahoma City. It emerged in the early 20th century to serve the employees and customers of the livestock market and two meatpacking plants. After the meatpacking plants closed in the late 1960s, the district declined. There is an "old western" character to the core district, reflected in building facades and the western wear and ranch supply stores. The Oklahoma National Stockyards includes cattle pens, a cattle auction house, and other buildings. (Seidman, 2004)

Stockyards City was designated the first urban Oklahoma Main Street district. Stockyards City Main Street (SCMS), an independent corporation, has implemented activities here based on Main Street planning principles. SCMS tried to create a visual focal point for the district with a sculpture that celebrated the district's western heritage. The sculpture of a cowboy on horseback, titled *Headin' to Market*, was installed at the central intersection. SCMS has strengthened Stockyards City as a regional shopping and tourist destination through events, advertising and public relations that use a western heritage theme to promote the district. The theme is reinforced in the SCMS steer-head gate logo, brochures and the public sculpture. Each year, SCMS has sponsored two large events to attract people to the district—events that include bull riding and country and western music. It has worked with the city transportation department to install 16 signs at major intersections to direct people to the district. Marketing and promotion efforts have expanded the district's customer base beyond farmers and ranchers to include people from the metropolitan area and tourists. (Seidman, 2004)

Authenticity Certification for Culturally Authentic Businesses

Just as art has authenticity certification (Newstead, 1999), businesses such as restaurants, arts and crafts stores, and personal service providers could be certified as authentic by regional authorities. Such certification would help prevent mass-produced fakes or corporate franchisees from claiming market share and threatening the businesses of the indigenous communities. For example, soul food restaurants in U.S. cities that have been serving such food for decades can be certified as authentic provided they meet certain conditions such as style of food served, and ownership and management by African Americans who have been in that business for a long time.

Problems and Caveats with the Concept of Cultural Authenticity and its Use in Regional Development

Cultural authenticity is not an easy concept to define or to use as a guide for regional development and planning. Three types of problems arise in applying this concept to economic development:

1. Threat to progress and modernity.

2. Value-judgments involving cultural stereotyping and patronizing attitudes

3. Illegal discrimination against racial or ethnic groups

1. Threat to Progress or Modernity

There is a danger that arguments in favor of preserving cultural authenticity of a place could also be arguments against change and modernity. Plans to preserve cultural authenticity should not obstruct modern progress—they should not result in a region not accepting modern inventions and innovations, modern methods of marketing, or modern products. One can imagine a cultural authenticity enthusiast in an earlier era stalling the advent of automobiles and allowing only the "culturally authentic" horse-drawn carriages as modes of transportation in a region.

Tyler Cowen, author of *Creative Destruction: How Globalization Is Changing the World's Cultures*, argues that there is no such thing as authenticity because even what we see as authentic foods, for example, have evolved from several foreign or artificial influences. He argues that modernity, represented by globalization, has made it possible for people all over the world today to savor better quality and more diverse foods than at any time in history. Hence, resisting modernity and change in the name of preserving cultural authenticity would reduce the economic welfare for a region's residents.

2. Value-Judgments involving Cultural Stereotyping and Patronizing Attitudes

The concept of "cultural authenticity" raises the question of "*whose culture?*" To take a group that Howard Dean infamously identified during his Presidential nomination campaign in the U.S.—the pick-up truck driving, white males, who display the Confederate flag on their trucks (CNN, 2003): Should regional planning authorities take steps to preserve the authenticity of this culture? Should such flags and trucks be subsidized so that the region retains an authentic flavor provided by the presence of these individuals in the region? None can deny the authenticity of the culture represented by this group that Howard Dean identified. Hence, the question of whose culture is worthy of being preserved and supported raises value judgments.

Value judgments can be seen as patronizing, and carry with them a flavor of colonialism, as a dominant culture classifies another culture as "vernacular." Financial industry professionals in Manhattan, New York, (with their unique jargon and dress style) also represent a certain "vernacular culture," as do government workers in Washington, D.C. (with their language style, dog tag identity cards, and time-logging office experience). But often, planners tend to view only racial minorities as "vernacular," and programs aimed at preserving "cultural authenticity" become a patronizing of racial minority groups by a majority group, or by planners greatly conditioned by the dominant culture of the majority group.

Local business development groups that apply the concept of cultural authenticity could limit the growth of local businesses and the people running these businesses as a result of a narrow view of them as only "cultural capital" or because of cultural stereotyping. For example, an African American entrepreneur, with relevant training in an European school and who wants to set up an authentic European-style bakery, might be steered by local planners into what they may view as a more "customary" or "culturally consistent" business for him such as selling artifacts from Africa (a region the entrepreneur may have never visited; and he may have little knowledge of such artifacts). Similarly, expecting lower income Latina women to only wrap tamales and sell them at a local Farmers' Market might prevent local planners from even having a vision of training these women to be bus drivers or computer professionals working in the growing field of medical information systems.

3. Illegal Discrimination Against Racial or Ethnic Groups

The concept of cultural authenticity might be applied in ways that involve stereotyping or pigeon-holing ethnic groups. This can be seen as discrimination, and even illegal discrimination. For example, with the above example of soul food restaurants, there is a thin line between promoting African Americans who have been in the business for many decades and *excluding* people of other ethnicities who might be just as capable of delivering an authentic soul food experience for customers.

Café Tirolo in Ballston, Virginia (Ballston is accepted as a leading model for planned development in contemporary U.S., and is frequently cited for best practices in planning), is a well-reputed Austrian restaurant that was owned and managed by people of Austrian

origin for many years. Around 2006, the owners sold the business to persons who are Korean Americans. The restaurant continues to be an excellent and well-reputed Austrian restaurant. One interpretation of "cultural authenticity" might have encouraged passing on this business to only persons of Austrian origin. It is important to guard against exclusion or discrimination against any ethnic group when the concept of cultural authenticity is applied in regional development.

"An Ersatz Facsimile"

Although tourists and resident consumers alike value authenticity, in reality, the opposite of authenticity—kitsch and fake—is quite popular in terms of revenues generated. The mega-success of destinations like Disneyland and Disneyworld, with their fake cultures, such as the cultures of the world in Epcot Center, is a testimony to the appeal of the obviously inauthentic. George Orwell (around 1949) said: "We have a hunger for something like authenticity, but are easily satisfied by an ersatz facsimile."

EuroDisney, which is outside Paris, now gets more visitors each year than Paris, which is still seen as a culturally authentic experience. Hence, while the tourism argument for supporting cultural authenticity has some merit, there is equally a tourism argument for supporting the kitsch and inauthentic. The buying public out there is, indeed, satisfied with an ersatz facsimile or a convenient canned culture. Regional authorities might well be chasing an ersatz facsimile when they promote certain neighborhood markets and what they see as culturally authentic businesses.

It is worth remembering that New Orleans jazz and New Orleans cuisine did not emerge as a result of patronizing by planning authorities. These authentic cultural forms evolved through a unique circumstance of pain, poverty, community-ties, faith, and spiritual quest that racked and churned many individuals and groups who expressed themselves through creating these cultural forms. Many of the cuisines that developed in this region were an invention of the scarcity of resources. To argue that these authentic cultures should be supported through the government allocating economic resources to these communities is absurd. Public resources, however, could help simply reproduce such music and cuisines, and thereby generate tourism revenues for the city.

Conclusion

There is merit in planners being aware of cultural authenticity as a valuable resource of a region. Planners can improve the sustainability of a region, attract tourism revenues, retain indigenous communities, and attract a desirable group of new residents by preserving the cultural authenticity of neighborhoods in the region. At the same time, planners should be aware of the pitfalls surrounding an application of this concept.

 Planning authorities might directly pursue inclusive development and equitable development, without reference to cultural authenticity, in order to prevent displacement

of indigenous communities and to provide opportunities for these communities to reap the economic benefits of the development effort. An American non-profit organization named PolicyLink has outlined certain principles of equitable development that are aimed at seeking full racial/ethnic inclusion and participation at all levels of planning and development. These principles include the integration of physical planning with planning for people who live and work in the region; reduction of regional disparities; and including meaningful community participation and leadership within the planning process (PolicyLink, 2008).

Many city-regions across the U.S. are developing sports stadia as a part of their economic development plans. If a region develops a baseball stadium, the physical planning for the stadium construction should include a plan for adequately resettling any displaced families, a plan for employing indigenous communities in the construction phase of the project, and a plan to employ members of these communities in the baseball stadium by providing jobs and vendor franchises to them on a priority basis. Members of indigenous communities should be represented in the planning and management of the stadium. A city-region can exploit its local cultural capital by including cultural themes in the design of the stadium and in the retail facilities at and near the stadium.

Thus, indigenous communities in a region can receive meaningful avenues for full-participation in the development of their region. Such a strategy will also maintain the cultural authenticity of a region and strengthen this unique regional asset. Cultural authenticity can serve as a useful concept in certain situations if applied with care and concern for the problems discussed above.

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