

ARTICLE

Discussion of Community Authenticity in the Process of Urban regeneration—Based on Book Review of *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*

Yunzhan Cui*

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, 21500, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 29 November 2024

Revised: 30 November 2024

Accepted: 2 December 2024

Published Online: 16 December 2024

Keywords:

Authenticity

Urban Regeneration

Social Equity

ABSTRACT

In the process of urban regeneration, the maintenance of community authenticity has been a classic topic. Based on the evaluation and reflection of Sharon Zukin's book *Naked City*, this paper explores the significance of authenticity and the relationship between authenticity and social equity in the current context of urban regeneration.

1. Content Description of “*Naked City*”

1.1 Introduction

In her book, “*Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*”, Sharon Zukin meticulously delineates the evolution of New York's urban landscapes from the 1960s until the present day. She delves into the potential for addressing social issues from a cultural perspective by presenting narratives from various authentic case study areas.

The relationship between Zukin's book and Jane

Jacobs's “*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*” transcends the mere similarity of their titles. Jacobs, an advocate for everyday urbanism, firmly positioned herself as a female layperson in opposition to the prevalent modernist urban planning of her time. She expressed unrestrained admiration for idyllic neighborhoods, community activities embodying traditional beauty, and the humanistic community landscape. In contrast, Zukin's intention was to recount an aspect that Jacobs did not address: the destiny of these neighborhoods as they forfeited their origins and uniqueness amidst urban transformation.

*Corresponding Author:

Yunzhan Cui,

Email: liukun0010@163.com

1.2 Research Methods in “*Naked City*”

Through conducting fieldwork in six distinct areas of New York City, Zukin thoroughly examined the ramifications of gentrification and economic transformation on these areas by means of personal observation and interviews with local residents. She gathered firsthand information on the issues discussed in the book. Furthermore, she acquired data from real estate blogs and performed archival research on the histories of the areas to analyze the role of new media and the alterations in community spatial formations and patterns during the process of transformation. The amalgamation of personal experience, documentary research, and historical context significantly bolstered the credibility and comprehensiveness of her argumentation.

1.3 Advocacy of “*Naked City*”

Zukin delineated the process through which neighborhoods undergo decline. Initially, distinctive living environments draw artists and creative professionals, thereby altering the local cultural landscape. Subsequently, escalating rental prices displace the original, lower-income residents. An influx of capital introduces middle-class consumer goods and luxury housing, further augmenting rental prices. Ultimately, the original creative community is supplanted by more affluent individuals. Consequently, the neighborhood transforms into a consumer-oriented area, forfeiting its original character, landscapes, and the essence of its indigenous populace.

By presenting these narratives, Sharon Zukin introduced a fresh perspective for comprehending the transformational process of urban spaces in New York City and numerous other major global cities: the assertions of diverse authenticity by various social groups, as well as the interactions and substitutions among these authenticity claims and the groups that uphold them, constitute the pivotal forces influencing and propelling urban transformation. She advocates for the reinstatement and emphasis on authenticity to safeguard the city from losing its distinctive, identifiable, and recognizable attributes, which she terms as its soul, during the course of urban regeneration. In the context of contemporary urban regeneration practices, Zukin’s book has theorized the rights and legitimacy of different groups to engage in urban regeneration from a cultural perspective, furnishing a theoretical tool for planners who prioritize authenticity to persuade the government to elevate the significance of authenticity. Additionally, it offers a pathway for marginalized groups to advocate for their rights to participation and urban space during the process of urban regeneration.

2. Comparative Analysis of Different Urban Theories

Sharon Zukin’s urban theory exhibits notable distinctions when compared to the exploration of the city’s nature conducted by Allen Scott, Michael Storper, Richard Walker, David Harvey, and James Scott.

Allen Scott and Michael Storper concentrated on the economic and geographic facets of urban areas, asserting: “The comprehension of all cities can be facilitated through a theoretical framework that integrates two primary processes: the dynamics of agglomeration/polarization, and the subsequent emergence of a related network of locations, land usages, and human interactions.” (Scott & Storper, 2014). They emphasized elements such as agglomeration and innovation. Meanwhile, David Harvey and Richard Walker investigated the political economy dimensions that mold the global urban landscape, viewing urbanization as a “spatial concentration of economic surplus” (Walker, 2016). James Scott, on the other hand, focused on the political aspects of cities, even perceiving urban planning as an instrument of governmental administration.

Zukin may critique their broad, comprehensive, and overarching perspective, akin to observing the city from a helicopter. Unlike their emphasis on elucidating the city’s essence through its origins, Zukin ventured into the city’s neighborhoods and opted to discuss the identity embedded in urban regeneration and development from a more humanitarian standpoint. She initiated her analysis from specific, relatively modestly-sized urban locations, emphasizing the authenticity, diversity, and vitality of these urban spaces. Through the exploration of authenticity, she underscored the importance of social participation in urban regeneration and highlighted the significance of such participation. This approach formed her distinctive perspective on urban studies.

In terms of the core concept of authenticity, the authenticity of a city can be thought of as a combination of feeling of cultural identity, consisting of the unique characteristics and temperament of the city, and the objective features that trigger this feeling. Something that is authentic will make different people, whether locals or first-time tourists, immediately and clearly recognize which city they are staying. Zukin argued that there are two sources of authenticity, features that every generation views as “original” because they have been there throughout their lifetimes, and features that each new generation creates on their own (Zukin, 2010), and she argued that with the occurrence of widespread gentrification, the new middle-class colonist and their tastes disrupt the city’s original lifestyles and social networks, it led to the loss of the city’s soul, namely, its authenticity.

3. Authenticity and Social Participation Equity

3.1 Loss of Authenticity and Social Inequality

Zukin articulated her apprehension regarding the potential loss of a city's essence as follows: an aversion to excessive development, a yearning to slow down rapid transformations, and a dislike for the aesthetic of standardization—a disdain for cities and neighborhoods that resemble any other (Zukin, 2010). Ostensibly, her opposition is directed towards the upscale homogenization of neighborhoods. However, upon a deeper examination of the nature and core of these phenomena, it becomes evident that her concern is rooted in the original social group's preferences being overlooked, marginalized, suppressed, and supplanted by another group's tastes. The urban spaces where these original social groups engage in their distinctive living activities are encroached upon by others, leading to the disruption of established lifestyles and social networks. Consequently, neighborhoods lose their inherent character, all amidst an ongoing urban transformation process. Instances such as Starbucks replacing a locally-owned store, and iron and glass structures supplanting red bricks and cobblestones, are merely superficial and apparent manifestations. The true victims, who remain naked and defenseless, are the people themselves. The process of cities losing their souls is also indicative of unequal social participation in the transformation process.

The perception that the loss of urban authenticity is tied to unequal social participation underscores the importance of discussing authenticity in the context of urban regeneration. In the sphere of modern urban regeneration, the significance of authenticity resides in its linkage to social engagement and social equity, as well as the cultural entitlements of the various groups it represents. Authenticity, irrespective of whether it stems from historical origins or new developments, essentially embodies the sentiments and perspectives of diverse social classes and groups towards the city. The discourse on urban authenticity is concurrently a discourse on the emotions of various social classes and groups, and a discourse on the right of different groups to engage in societal participation. When the opinions and interests of diverse groups are taken into consideration during the process of urban transformation, it inherently fosters social engagement and social fairness.

3.2 Possibilities for Promoting Social Participation by Authenticity

Zukin's most significant contribution in this book is the theorization of the cultural identity and sense of belonging that individuals seek in their residences as "authenticity,"

and her proposal that authenticity can be leveraged to enhance group participation and foster social equity in the context of urban regeneration by "steering this lever towards democracy" (Zukin, 2010). She elucidates the essence of what individuals aspire to feel in their homeland and what connects them to their place of residence. She translates this sentiment, specific to an urban area, into a theoretical framework. People desire their community to embody their existing knowledge or their envisioned ideal, and when this aspiration is sufficiently strong, it can serve as a unifying force. An illustrative example is the redevelopment of Xi'an's central city, where the municipal government intended to convert a dilapidated Muslim neighborhood into a historical commercial street. However, the Muslims were reluctant to relocate from their neighborhood, and in the conflict between the two visions of authenticity, despite their weaker political position, they leveraged their strong cohesion based on ethnic culture and religious beliefs to organize protests and ultimately compelled the government to revise the original transformation plan. They utilized the power of authenticity inherent in their spatial formations to unite and defend their right to occupy urban spaces, which is particularly crucial for groups lacking political and economic power.

Residents of China's urban villages and older neighborhoods appear to be particularly powerless. Their communities do not receive special consideration from the government. The land they inhabit is owned by the government, which ultimately determines its commercialization, land use type, and desired visual appearance. Often, the transformation of this land is entrusted to developers who prioritize solely financial gain. The Chinese government seemingly has the discretion to dictate the city's new beginnings, which may explain the rapid pace of urbanization in China over the past forty years. Especially amidst the current economic downturn in China, this exacerbates researchers' concerns that the government may be overly eager to stimulate the economy at the expense of authenticity, promoting upscale consumerization of urban spaces, ultimately resulting in cities losing their identity and soul during the regeneration process. The concern is not merely about the loss of unique neighborhood memories, such as vistas and distinctive social activities, but also about the injustice and inequality stemming from the marginalization of disadvantaged groups. However, if residents can recognize the unique value of their neighborhoods, which holds significance in their lives, and uncover their own authenticity, this authenticity can unite them, fostering a synergy that compensates for their vulnerabilities and advocates for their rights to participate in the urban transformation process, thereby achieving a more equitable

distribution of urban space from the grassroots level up.

4. Issues and Reflections to “*Naked City*”

Certain sections of the book necessitate careful consideration. Zukin perceives herself as a member of New York’s middle class, acknowledging, consciously or unconsciously, that this class contributes to the erosion of New York’s cultural essence. With a sense of guilt, she elevates the authenticity of working-class origins to a position of great importance. The ultimate objective planners aspire to attain is the recognition and equal consideration of authenticity of all the groups they represent, alongside an equal respect for their rights to participate in urban regeneration. It should not be implied that one group possesses greater authenticity than another, thereby granting them a superior right to occupy urban space. The displacement of lower-income, socially disadvantaged groups by those with higher consumption levels and greater political and economic power should be avoided. However, the aspiration of the middle class, or any other group, to establish a presence in urban space should not be lightly rejected.

Furthermore, in the introduction, Zukin noted the transformations occurring in numerous major cities globally, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and other Chinese cities that are eliminating the narrow... Liverpool and Bilbao... as well as London and Paris... (Zukin, 2010). Her statements seem to suggest that other regions of the world are undergoing a process akin to that of New York. However, it is important to acknowledge that different cities possess varied backgrounds in terms of history, culture, and political systems. Therefore, we must thoughtfully consider the applicability of Zukin’s findings concerning New York to our own urban regeneration initiatives.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Zukin’s book has successfully attempted

to delve into the interpretation and resolution of economic and social issues from a cultural standpoint. She underscores the importance of the participation rights of diverse groups in the process of urban transformation and revitalization through an exploration of authenticity. The genuine essence of urban spaces stems from the activities of numerous individuals belonging to varied socioeconomic classes. Furthermore, the true vibrancy of a city can only be fully realized when the value of comprehensive social group participation is genuinely recognized.

References

- [1] Dicks, B., Millington, G. and Savage, M. (2012) ‘Book Review Symposium: Sharon Zukin “*Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*”’, *Sociology*, 46(6), p. 1216.
- [2] Goodman, A. and Harvey, D. (2009) ‘David Harvey: The Financial Crash and the Right to the City’, *Race, Poverty & the Environment*, 16(1), pp. 12–14.
- [3] Routledge, C. (1997) ‘The *Naked City* (book review)’, *European Journal of English Studies*, 1(1), p. 113.
- [4] Scott, A.J. and Storper, M. (2015) ‘The nature of cities: The scope and limits of urban theory’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 39(1), pp. 1-15–15. doi:10.1111/1468-2427.12134.
- [5] Scott, J.C. (2008) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale University Press (The Institution for Social and Policy Studies).
- [6] Walker, R.A. (2016) ‘Why Cities? A Response’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 40(1), pp. 164-180–180. doi:10.1111/1468-2427.12335.
- [7] Zukin, S. (2010) *Naked city: the death and life of authentic urban places*. Oxford University Press.