

“Sanctifying Neighborhood Identity”

Andrew Deener, University of California, Los Angeles

Jack Katz, University of California, Los Angeles

Maggie Kusenbach, University of South Florida

Anup Sheth, University of California, Los Angeles

Iddo Tavory, University of California, Los Angeles

We are trying to develop a general theory of the social processes through which urban areas become recognized, by outsiders as well as locals, as having a distinctive socio-cultural character. The public identities of local areas matter, both as part of the phenomenology of urban life and for the political-economic interests of residents and other stakeholders. The cultural labeling of a neighborhood is a kind of sanctification, enabling the making of demands for respect that are readily translated into subsidies and power.

Our cases come from Los Angeles, and they include local areas known for their historic, totemic or commercial character, as well as neighborhoods that are associated with ethnic, religious, homeless, or Bohemian populations. We find that each of seven processes is necessary to explain the current public identity of each neighborhood: macro demographic and social movements; significant shifts in land values; the strategies of local area pioneers; processes of diffusing or marketing the local identity; local mechanisms of institutionalizing the area's character; the evocation of local identity through interaction with other areas; and extra-local agencies that underwrite the production of neighborhood identity on a wholesale basis. Our findings are compatible with a range of prior work in urban sociology, but we find that to understand transformations that in some of our cases span a century, the kind of theory that will fit the data cannot rely on a single dominant cause but must appreciate sequenced processes.

Each of us will describe a given neighborhood or local area. We will not try to give exhaustive social histories but we will emphasize the formative processes that are highlighted in each area. Our cases include “Little India,” an effort to label an area as ethnic that to date has failed; Hollywoodland, a totemic neighborhood whose current character is in several ways inconsistent with the design that developers constructed in the 1920s; La Brea/Beverly/Melrose/Fairfax, an area in which religious leaders, over thirty years, have developed educational institutions as a means to create distinctive residential communities; Spaulding Square, an officially historic neighborhood that emerged as an upshot of an effort to insulate residents from invasive street crime by creating local borders; and Oakwood, an area within Venice, in which an African-American population has maintained control of the area's public identity even as African-Americans have become a minority among local residents.