

The Aesthetic Homogenization of Cities

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I've been noticing, in my life with cities, a steady drift towards aesthetic homogenization. Twenty years ago, if you dropped me at any random spot San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, or Brooklyn, I could have told you which city it was in a split second. The basic look, the feel — the whole aesthetic sensibility — were so different between the cities. Bone-deep different. It showed up in a thousand little ways, from the flow of the space, to the relative neatness or casualness of storefront displays, to the font choices of the signage.

This deep variation seems to be fading. The deep variation is certainly not completely gone — there are still plenty of wonderful holdouts. But more and more often, I have found myself exploring new cities and finding precisely same aesthetic sensibility. The storefronts, the restaurants, the fancy coffee spots, so often have the same look and feel — the same clean modern fonts, the same clean modern seating, the same balance of light and space. You can show up in a hundred different cities and find basically the same clothing boutique. It'll have that Ikea-but-pricier sensibility in its shelving and display units, with crisp geometric lines and subdued colors. There will be large white cubes, functioning as display tables, topped with carefully folded clothing. There will be subtly defocused white lighting, and carefully spaced clothes hanging on a spare number of racks. Sometimes you'll get exposed brick walls, sometimes you won't. But the core sensibility seems to be converging. Privately, I've been calling this the Pinterest Effect. (Seriously, go look up the "Clothes Shop" tag on Pinterest and have a scroll.) I've been quietly chewing away at what could possibly explain it. And Quill Kukla has recently given us an excellent explanation of this aesthetic homogenization in their lovely new book, *City Living*.

One of the central ideas of *City Living* is that rigid, top-down city planning can't accommodate the diversity of needs and interests of the real-world city dwellers. In order for a city to function, it needs to be deeply responsive to its inhabitants' varied needs. But the city can't do this all through top-down pre-planning. So this spatial responsiveness requires, in many cases, that the city is open to being modified by its inhabitants. Some features of the city will certainly demand some top-down city planning (ideally as part of a properly representative and democratic

procedure). But a substantial amount of city design should be bottom-up, should bubble up from a process of particular redesigns, adaptations, and accommodations made by the inhabitants themselves. City dwellers, says Kukla, need a substantial degree of agency and control over the details of their living spaces, so that they can tailor their urban spaces to their own particular needs. Kukla provides a bevy of examples: reconfiguring spaces with graffiti and street art, changing the flow of street traffic with sidewalk tables, repurposing burned-out buildings as communes. And a good city — an accommodating city — makes the space for such bottom-up spatial agency. It permits substantive spatial agency in law, and leaves room for it in the material. When spaces are “preplanned and resist reshaping, this can actually make them difficult to use, because they do not organically adjust to users’ dynamic needs and purposes” (Kukla 2021, 44).

Here, Kukla is developing a key idea from Jane Jacobs. For Jacobs, many of the harms of urban planning came from the attempt to create an entire city from the top down, guided by a singular design sensibility and a singular design perspective. Some single urban planner, or small team of urban planners, thinks that they can rationally plan out an entire city, that they can plan for and accommodate all the various uses and needs of the city’s inhabitants, from their planning desk. In Jacobs’ era, her main target was often urban planners who thought primarily about how a city would look from above — the view from the blueprint, so to speak. These top-down planners cared deeply that a city might be divided into neat zones — all the homes here, all the factories there, all the shopping malls over here — so that it can be legible to the urban planner’s eye-from-above.

The urban planner’s eye-from-above will, thinks Jacobs, always be insensitive to any number of vital, small-scale considerations. People who live in a place, who spend their lives walking and using a space, understand the little details of that space, and the relationship of that space, that are invisible from the urban planner’s eye-from-above perspective. For Jacobs, for example, the eye-from-above misses so many details that are obvious from the ground. The eye-from-above often wants to separate the zones of the city into a residential zone and an entertainment zone, to make for a neater blueprint. But the eye-from-above misses so many of the details: like the fact that late night bars embedded in a residential neighborhood added to the safety of a neighborhood, by guaranteeing a steady stream of pedestrian traffic, and so a steady stream of observers moving through a street at night (Jacobs 1992 [1961], 33-41).

Jacobs’ view is, I think, a deeply ecological one. (Jacobs doesn’t use the term “ecological”, as far as I know, but Kukla does in developing Jacobs.) A city grows organically. A city is an incredibly rich environment that has accreted layered functions over the years. And those accreted functions are complexly networked. A city should be respected, in Jacobs view, as the product of accreted evolution —

as a carefully balanced complex organism, rich in peculiar adaptations to its particular time and place. Each element may participate in a hundred different functions, many of which look like unintended side-consequences. But these “side-effect” interactions deeply structure the way the city works. An example from Jacobs: the lack of stores around a particular park makes the park more insular, since the only people who can use it for any length of time are those who know somebody who lives in one of the surrounding houses. If there was any kind of store there – a café or little grocery store – then there’s usually a semi-accessible restroom and a public phone. But the lack of the semi-public space of a store changes things. Potential park users who don’t know anybody who lives in those houses have no place to use the restroom or make a call. So, for good or ill, that storeless perimeter of the park functions as an invisible filter, supporting local insider use and quietly deterring outsiders (63).

Re-designs from the eye-from-above, which have not taken the time to study the details and organic unity of a city, will trample on many of these subtle interactions. I particularly like Kukla’s summary of Jacobs on this point:

As Jane Jacobs (1961) explored at length, if a space is overplanned, it can strangle the room for creative uses, and no one has the opportunity to participate with agency in niche-building and place-making. The result is an alienating and sterile space — one that doesn’t feel like home territory to anyone, as none of its users participated in its making. (44)

Why does overplanning strangle a space? There are two (deeply interrelated) factors. The first, we might call the *epistemic* factor. That is, the distant perspective is unaware of the way the city works, and so will make poor decisions that don’t respect the particular details of the organism. The distant planner doesn’t have the requisite detailed, place-specific knowledge to accommodate for all the particular needs of local users. The second we might call the *agential* factor. Because the distant perspective is distant, then the people living in the space aren’t in direct control of many of the features of the space. So the changes made to the city won’t reflect the particular details of the inhabitants’ needs or values. Separating out the epistemic and agential factors here is something of an artifice. For one thing, the city is made up in part of its inhabitants and so having good epistemic access to the city involves knowing its inhabitants. And also because exercises of agency from local inhabitants will typically express their contextual epistemic sensitivity. But I think it is somewhat useful to separate our *knowledge of the details of the city’s complex ecosystem* from our *agency in producing changes to that ecosystem*.

With all that in mind, let’s return to the opening question: why does gentrification bring with it aesthetic homogenization? Let’s start with a slightly simplistic story, spinning off from the above analysis. Gentrification, we might say, involves the *invasion of an outside perspective*, in the form of the invasion of urban developers

who aren't city locals. So: such outsider gentrifiers enter a neighborhood with its own particular character and impose their sensibility, which doesn't meet the needs of the actual inhabitants of the neighborhood.

But this can't be the entire explanation, for a few reasons. First, it doesn't explain the *monotony* that comes with gentrification. Different gentrifiers could very plausibly have different sensibilities, and transform spaces in different ways. These transformations may be insensitive to the needs of the people who already live there, but why think they're monotonous? After all, rich people can have wildly different tastes. Some like Wagner, some Warhol, and some like Ikea minimalism. Think, for example, about the incredibly different aesthetic sensibilities on display in the various Las Vegas hotels — many of which are funded from different groups of external investors — from the cutesy faux-realism of Paris, to the overt luxurious classiness of the Bellagio, to the over-the-top baroque ridiculousness of Caesar's Palace, including faux-Roman animatronic statues.

Second, as Kukla points out, gentrification is a complex phenomenon that involves both top-down and bottom-up gentrification. Top-down gentrification involves, say, distant developers coming and imposing development plans on a city, without particular knowledge of the city's details. Top-down gentrification is clearly problematic, on Kukla's analysis, because it misses out substantially on both the epistemic factor and the agential factors. Bottom-up gentrification, on the other hand, involves what is often enacted by locals — sometimes from other parts of the city, but sometimes from the very same neighborhood in which they're building their boutique coffeeshop. Consider a case of fully local, bottom-up gentrification, where the inhabitants of a particular neighborhood create boutiques and coffee shops in their own neighborhood to serve a hopefully increasingly gentrifying customer base. And I know that fully local bottom-up gentrification can yield the aesthetic homogenization. In my own (rapidly gentrifying) neighborhood, I know many of the store-owners. They live around the block — but they look to Pinterest when they design their stores.

Kukla suggests that “top-down gentrification tends to lead to a familiar constellation of chain stores, loft condos, pedestrian plazas, and the like, whereas bottom-up gentrification leads to ‘quirky’, ‘hip’ independent businesses and specialty stores” (96). But what's important to me is that both forms of gentrification often lead to a homogenization, albeit homogenization of slightly different kinds. Top-down gentrification leads to large sprawling mega-malls with the same Cheese-cake Factories and PF Changs and Urban Outfitters. Bottom-up gentrification, on the other hand, may be the product of individual exercises of agency by a city's inhabitants, but it still seems highly subject to the Pinterest Effect. At least in my own (non-rigorous and untrained, but very interested) observations from city-wandering, though bottom-up gentrification doesn't lead to the kind of aggressively monotonous corporate chain-store effect, we still get something of a close

cousin: a thousand independent coffee stores in a thousand cities owned by a thousand different owners, all city locals — but all with that same post-Ikea clean look. We also get a thousand clothing boutiques whose shelves and spacing and lighting could have been cut-n-pasted from the same Pinterest photo gallery. (Kukla may be sympathetic to this observation. They did put scare quotes around ‘quirky’ and ‘hip’ independent businesses.)

And, if that’s right, then our simple explanation is inadequate. The simple explanation was that the aesthetic homogenization resulted from gentrification in the form of invading outsiders. But we’re also seeing aesthetic homogenization via bottom-up gentrification. If our indie coffee shops and clothing boutiques are the creations of people who live in the neighborhood and those shops qualify as exercises of the locals’ agency, where does the aesthetic homogenization come from?

Kukla’s analysis gives us a very good lead. Here is one of my favorite passages from *City Living*:

In the aptly named *How to Kill a City*, Peter Moskowitz argues that top-down gentrification of living neighborhoods disrupts their living ecology and the networks that allow citizens to participate in building the. “Gentrification is a void... a trauma, one caused by the influx of massive amounts of capital into a city and the consequent destruction following in its wake” (2017, 5). The problem with this kind of gentrification, from the point of view of its ecological integrity and flourishing, is that it *redesigns a space, not for the people who are already using it, but for a hypothesized set of users who have more money*, with the goal of maximizing the ability of the space to attract these rich users and then extract capital from them. Because this profit-maximizing goal has no particular connection or responsiveness to the ecology as it is found, such spatial repurposing with the goal of gentrification often end up killing a place in the act of trying to pretty it up and make it ‘appealing.’ (45) [emphasis mine]

Here, now, is our explanation for how both top-down gentrification and bottom-up gentrification can both yield aesthetic homogenization. Even if the gentrification is bottom-up — even if a hundred different local business owners open their own independent boutiques and coffeeshops and vinyl stores — the *aesthetic target* has been homogenized. This is because the local gentrifiers are not trying to express their own aesthetic sensibility or meet the local aesthetic sensibility. Rather, they are trying to satisfy a “hypothesized set of users” — some imaginary set of rich folks. And I take Kukla’s suggestion to be that catering to a hypothesized set of users will involve catering to a *generic* taste. Even if you have your own aesthetic sensibility, if you’re trying to catch the globetrotting rich, you better adapt your aesthetic target to what you imagine they want

This is something we know in our hearts. A tourist trap looks like a tourist trap. A tourist trap made out of independent local businesses might be a little more

aesthetically varied than one planned from the ground up by a global development company, but it still smells of tourist trap. Because, I take it, a *tourist* is another hypothesized user, not somebody well-known to the local inhabitants. The tourist customer is a kind of abstracted and aesthetically generic target.

Here's a similar observation from my days of scouting restaurants and food-writing. In LA, there was a lot of variance between the decor of different particular Mexican restaurants catering to the local Mexican community, and between different particular Chinese restaurants catering to the local Chinese community. But the ones that served Americanized food often looked much more similar, because they tended to use the same small cluster of outward-facing cultural signifiers (sombros, chili peppers, and donkeys, in the case of Americanized Mexican restaurants; dragons, pandas, paper lanterns, and latticed wood, in the case of Americanized Chinese restaurants.)

Local gentrifiers aren't subject to the epistemic problems of top-down planning. They live there, and they know the ground. What seems to be lacking is full spatial agency. This all suggests a quite robust notion of spatial agency. Kukla defines *spatial agency* thus:

Spatial agency, as I use the term, is our ability to autonomously occupy, move through, and use space, as well as our ability to mark and transform it *in accordance with our needs and desires*. (15) [final emphasis mine]

I take Kukla's analysis of the bottom-up gentrification to really fill out what the last part of that definition means. The demand here is not simply that inhabitants have some minimal degree of autonomous control, but that they exercise their powers in response to *their own* particular needs and desires. In bottom-up gentrification, city inhabitants are exercising their agency while aiming at servicing an external set of needs and desires.

Kukla's concern here runs interestingly into something I've been thinking about, from an entirely different angle. I've written about our demand for *aesthetic sincerity*. My analysis is trying to understand how we trust artists, and why we might feel betrayed by artists. In the normal moral analysis, philosophers have tended to think that we trust people when we think they have *goodwill and are thus responsive to our needs*. But, I suggested, something very different happens with artists. We trust artists, but not in the usual moral manner. That is, we don't trust them to be kind to us, or to take our interests at heart. Instead, we trust them to be *aesthetically sincere* — to be true to their own aesthetic sensibilities. In fact, if they were trying too hard to be responsive to our interests, we would be disappointed. In aesthetic life, we often don't want our artists to just give us what we want. We call that pandering. And I have suggested that one of the reasons we want that

aesthetic sincerity is precisely because it fosters aesthetic diversity across an aesthetic community (Nguyen, 2021). Kukla's analysis though, suggests an important amendment to my analysis: what matters often is not loyalty to *one's own* sensibility, but to at least some known, lived, particular sensibility. The store-owners who expresses their own aesthetic sensibility, and the store-owner who is satisfying their neighborhood's particular aesthetic sensibility, both partake in a kind of aesthetic sincerity. It's the store-owner who tries to service that vague, generic target, that might seem aesthetically insincere.

So if you put Kukla's analysis and mine together, you get a picture of the complex aesthetic downside of gentrification. Gentrification remodels a neighborhood, sometimes from the top-down and sometimes from the bottom-up. Bottom-up gentrification doesn't generate the usual goods of spatial agency because it isn't aesthetically sincere (and, we might think, insincere in some non-aesthetic dimensions too). It doesn't seek to express the genuine sensibility and answers the particular needs and desires of the inhabitants. Instead, in bottom-up gentrification, locals aim to satisfy a generic eye. Even if the gentrification isn't imposed from the top-down, the eye of the outsider is modeled in bottom-up gentrification. And, crucially, it isn't a particular outsider's particular tastes, but some hypothesized outsider's taste, that gentrification tries to meet. And this creates two problems. Locally, gentrification no longer serves the particular interests of the local community. And globally, it generates a profound lack of aesthetic diversity, as neighborhoods are reshaped — or reshape themselves — to satisfy some generic hypothetical eye.

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