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The visible city

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I introduce the idea of “the visible city,” which foregrounds the central role played by the urban built environment in cities’ quest for recognition. In the visible city, the urban built environment becomes a medium of communication and a form of currency in its own right for the acquisition of symbolic capital. I specifically discuss two concepts that underpin my understanding of the visible city, namely *distinction* and *aesthetics*. Overall, I highlight the relationship between these two widely used concepts to ask questions about the relationship between visual-material communication and urban transformation.

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Introduction

In this article, I introduce the idea of “the visible city” to promote a visual-material understanding of urban communication, which foregrounds the central role played by the urban built environment in cities’ quest for recognition. As Andrea Mubi Brighenti explains, visibility is very much about “thresholds”: it entails gaze management, or the act of demarcating relational boundaries by separating what is observable from what is not observable.¹ The visible city relies on material interventions on and changes to the built environment as a way to establish relational boundaries that enable it to acquire visual appeal (and therefore also visibility) in the mediatized arenas of urban planning and public communication. In doing so, the visible city is also key to understanding the relationship between communication and urban transformation.

Stemming from an early interest in the relationship between visual communication and urban space,² my urban communication research has eminently focused on how cities communicate and promote themselves as internationally or globally appealing, and on the ways in which the urban built environment is visually mobilized and thus also materially transformed in this process. Underlying these foci, there is a concern for what may be lost and who may be excluded in top-down processes of urban transformation, which are driven by globalizing if not globalist aspirations. Ultimately, changes in the urban built environment may be shaped by and lead to the furthering of inequalities in how city dwellers and urban communities can access, experience, and use different spaces.³

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Over the last few years, the role of urban digital technologies in shaping the material realities of cities has been increasingly foregrounded in urban research, and rightly so. Big data, social media platforms, and algorithmic infrastructures have all become central to how cities are both mediated and materialized.⁴ While I do recognize the key role played by multiple digital layers in constituting the urban built environment as we see and experience it, the approach I propose here centres the urban built environment as an important medium of communication in its own right. In doing so, I move away—if only temporarily—from the more overtly critical aims of my previous individual and collaborative research to focus on articulating some of the key principles underlying the ways in which the visible city “works.”

To do so, I specifically discuss two concepts that underpin my understanding of the visible city, namely *distinction* and *aesthetics*. Both concepts are widely used in urban research, but here I focus on these concepts as fundamental to asking and answering specific questions about the communicative role and potential of the urban built environment. In linking these two concepts under the umbrella of the visible city, I aim to highlight the significance of their relationship and of the urban built environment as a major form of currency in the pursuit of visibility. It is in this sense that this approach is neither solely focused on questions pertaining to the mechanics and implications of urban branding and competitiveness nor specifically concerned with aesthetic urbanism, or examining the ways in which urban form can and ought to be designed in order to promote or even produce particular types of lived experiences and urban lives.

Before I turn to a discussion of aesthetics, to be understood both as a set of visual-material resources and as a metadiscursive framework, I engage with the notion of distinction as a way to examine how cities mobilize the urban built environment as visual currency. In doing so, I focus mainly on how second-tier “European” cities with “world-class” aspirations communicate distinction in urban space. Cities that are less visible than more “global cities” offer a particularly fertile ground for an investigation of how the urban built environment is used to gain recognition. In addition, and as we will see in a moment, a focus on Europe as a geographical region and as a cultural sphere contributes a unique lens on the promotion of a city’s distinctive identity as a combination of multiple characteristics and layers that may work together as well as compete in the service of visibility.

Distinction and the city: ways of seeing and of being seen

The relationship between distinction and the urban built environment has been examined both through research on iconic architecture and urban redevelopment in global or “alpha” cities, and on urban planning policies aiming to boost particular industries and lifestyle consumption in second-tier and mid-sized cities.⁵ As a whole, the rising strategic significance of the creative and cultural industries in planning has been recognized as a major driving factor in urban regeneration processes centred on the preservation and reconversion of industrial heritage buildings alongside the introduction of new infrastructure and modern architecture. As Richard J. Williams states, this is “a global tendency so thorough that by the end of the twentieth century, the brick and terracotta warehouse palazzo of the kind found anywhere from Manhattan to Manchester had come to signify contemporary art.”⁶ Across Europe, this is also an approach that has often resulted in a focus on redeveloping run-down, semi-vacant areas into flagship

“cultural districts” or “urban villages.” In addition, the implementation of these urban regeneration schemes has been often, though not always, tied to city branding initiatives focused on improving a city’s image—for example, by hosting major art festivals or international events that can both capitalize on and promote changes in the urban built environment’s appearance.

Overall, then, the notion of urban distinction is related to the acquisition of what Pierre Bourdieu defines as symbolic capital,⁷ namely all those resources and characteristics that confer clout and prestige to cities in contemporary arenas of urban visibility. In the pursuit of distinction and what Ivan Turok calls “differential advantage,”⁸ many cities have however adopted the same planning and policy formulas. In this process, aesthetic qualities, rather than functional traits or community needs, become a focus in their own right. In the next section, I turn to some of the key implications of this emphasis on aesthetics. Before I do so, however, I want to examine how cities communicate distinction through the urban built environment. In other words, what does distinction “look” like in urban space? This is an important question because the way cities “look” is intertwined with how they “feel.” Major changes in a city’s visual appearance are naturally also deeply material. When such changes are made in the service of external competitiveness, we need to ask how gains in visibility may affect the everyday lives of urban communities.⁹

This said, for cities, communicating distinction may not be as simple as erecting striking buildings or, on the other hand, subscribing to global trends in urban regeneration. From my research on the European Capital of Culture (ECoC), I have learnt that cities participating in this competitive scheme most often balance claims of sameness and difference in their promotional campaigns while also attempting to communicate multiple layers of identity through their cityscapes.

Well over a decade ago, for example, I researched Istanbul’s promotional communication in sight of the Turkish metropolis’ participation in the year-long ECoC programme as a “third host,” that is, a city from a non-member state, alongside Essen for the Ruhr (Germany) and Pécs (Hungary). I interviewed Arhan Kayar, one of the main designers involved in the creation of bid materials for Istanbul 2010, who explained that ECoC communication must show “something different from Europe and something similar to Europe.” In saying this, Kayar pointed to images of aspects of Istanbul—such as the Byzantine churches—that more clearly recalled a European heritage. In addition, he talked about how other visual resources such as colour and font can be used to evoke a distinctive local character while also performing a more “modern,” global identity. Kayar explained that the pastel blue used for the cover of Istanbul 2010’s short-version bid book was a “turquoise colour which is said to be a Turkish colour,” whereas the colour used for the long-version bid book was a metallic silver which, in his words, “puts technology and modernity on the cover” of a book that was otherwise very much about local history and heritage. He also added that the font used was “modern”—its lowercase, sans-serif style recalled popular trends in branding derived from “the impact of internet and other technologically-motivated typographies.”¹⁰ However, Kayar continued, the font also “has curves; Istanbul is a curvy city, all the mosques and even Byzantine churches are curved. Even in our music you can hear the curves, our dance is also a curvy dance.”

Kayar’s points about what a city, even a global metropolis such as Istanbul, ought to look like, both in promotional imagery and in physical form, for the ECoC stage highlight the importance of making multiple, overlapping identity claims when attempting to

communicate a city as distinctive and therefore also worthy of being seen. In turn, then, cities are shaped by ways of seeing that privilege certain types of materiality over others, insofar as the urban built environment can be mobilized both to foreground a preferred version of local heritage and to promote an overarching narrative of the city as being both unique and in line with the achievements of other (European, modern) cities. In other words, distinction is both about difference and sameness, and to be distinctive, a city ought to stand out while also being recognizable.

Ultimately, for a city to gain visibility—or to be “seen”—it must also adopt ways of seeing rooted in formats that balance claims of authenticity with evidence that the urban environment is both safe and up to standard. When I researched the urban regeneration of the neighbourhood where I grew up, it became immediately clear that the newly renovated and rebranded “Manifattura delle Arti” cultural district was designed to look both like “old-time” Bologna, with its traditional stucco colours and references to medieval architecture, but also strikingly different from the post-war architectural imprint of the neighbourhood in which this regenerated area was actually located.¹¹ In addition, Manifattura delle Arti’s combination of restored industrial heritage buildings and modern materials and styles was also meant to make this cultural district look like other similar flagship urban regeneration projects in Europe and the Global North—through a combination of architectural and design features which is increasingly also found in other parts of the world.¹²

It is also important for me to disclose that at the time of my field research on Manifattura delle Arti I was torn between a sense of relief and a feeling of loss linked to the radical transformation that the area had undergone since its designation as Bologna’s new “citadel of culture” in the early 2000s. Why did I feel nostalgic for what was undoubtedly a flawed urban environment which needed to be changed and improved? And why had I come to miss some of the very characteristics, such as dirt and messiness, that used to make me feel uncomfortable and unsafe in my own neighbourhood? As a former resident with elderly parents still living in the same social housing complex where I was raised, I worried about the recent acquisition of their home by a privately owned property management business with clear plans to sell each apartment in their building at market rates. As a researcher, I was critical of the non-participatory, image-driven approach that was adopted to regenerate the area. And, finally, as a regular visitor to the area, I was both drawn to Manifattura delle Arti’s newly available facilities and attractive spaces—such as libraries, green areas, and outdoor cafés—and put off by its homogeneous “look” and sanitized “feel.”

The ambivalent nature of my relationship with Manifattura delle Arti points to the delicate balance between difference and sameness in ongoing processes of urban transformation related to many cities’ perceived need to acquire greater visibility, as the vernacular characteristics of the urban built environment can both fulfil or undermine this agenda, given their ability to both convey a city’s local identity while also threatening its ability to look “world-class.” For this reason, aesthetics is what is often invoked both as a reason and a means for material transformation in the pursuit of distinction and thus also visibility. This is what I turn to in the next section.

Aesthetics and the urban built environment: resource and meta-discourse

Perhaps counterintuitively, then, urban distinction presupposes a certain degree of sameness, not so much in relation to the local availability of particular “contents,” but rather

with regards to a city's ability to deploy styles or formats of urban design that have come to be recognized as key to performing "world-class" urban identities. And while locally sourced identity traits—like Bologna's medieval heritage or Istanbul's mosques and Byzantine churches—are crucial semiotic resources for the purposes of differentiation, the successful adoption of an overarching, both recognized and recognizable, aesthetic regime is what enables cities to gain symbolic capital. Much has been written about the aestheticization of urban space in the wake of globalization and creativity and culture-led urban regeneration,¹³ but more can and ought to be said about aesthetics both as a resource and as a meta-discourse in the communication of the city—particularly in relation to its status as distinctive, or as both similar to and different from other "successful" cities.

First, it is important to point out that aesthetics is actively mobilized as a resource to communicate urban distinction. Urban regeneration formats like the ones I have just described are frequently framed as having been imposed from above or as being caused by external forces such as global capitalism—even in those cases where urban design has been explicitly deployed in the name of communitarian principles and what David Harvey has called "a utopianism of spatial form."¹⁴ While there is no doubt that major interventions on the urban built environment are typically driven by the aspirational logics of global capitalism, it is also important to highlight the potential for certain visual-material choices to be actively used to cater to different goals and narratives. As Jane Jacobs stated now over 20 years ago, aestheticization—or "the self-conscious exploitation of what might be thought of as cultural capital"¹⁵—is not simply used as "an instrumental mechanism in legitimating capital accumulation and deactivating politics."¹⁶

Rather, aesthetics is part and parcel of a city's social fabric and politics, and as such it may be used to communicate and materialize aspects of a city that do not fit neatly into a logic of capital accumulation. The potential for aesthetics to be used as a communicative resource rather than a merely instrumental means for the legitimization of top-down urban transformation becomes especially clear in cases where aesthetic practices and artefacts are deployed temporarily to signpost the ongoing or imminent economic redevelopment of particular urban areas. For example, while hosting the ECoC in 2011, Turku (Finland) and Tallinn (Estonia) used community and installation arts, respectively, to "populate" areas of the city that would subsequently be transformed through private investment. During the two cities' ECoC year, both the sculptures and painted electrical boxes that lined the Aura river in Turku ([Figure 1](#)) and the contemporary art installations that appeared in Tallinn's previously off-limits waterfront functioned as "placeholders" for the current uses of these urban areas as a revitalized business district and an upscale neighbourhood with luxury real estate, respectively. In doing so, however, these aesthetic artefacts also contributed to making less profitable aspects of the city visible and in fact also "seen" through highly mediatized images of both cities as ECoC titleholders.

Overall, this kind of aestheticized intervention is "light touch" insofar as it is transitory in the face of the "heavy capital" that is set to change the face of these urban areas.¹⁷ It is, of course, also problematic in its own right, as local arts and vernacular urban cultures are never a level playing field. However, it is in the cracks of globalist urban transformation that aesthetics may work as a visual-material resource for communicating aspects of a city's identity that are not immediately available for the purposes of capital accumulation. In a similar fashion, urban regeneration formats such as cultural districts and urban villages are reliant on markers of local heritage and authenticity, and this is something



Figure 1 Aesthetics as a communicative resource for urban distinction: community arts in Turku, Finland, during the 2011 European Capital of Culture.

which in turn can offer opportunities for aesthetics to be mobilized as a resource for the communication of forms of urban distinction that move beyond simple logics of symbolic or economic profit.

At the same time, aesthetics can be and is used as a powerful metadiscursive instrument to set in motion top-down processes of urban transformation. In previous work, I have advanced the argument that an “aesthetic trope” has come to dominate debates on urban regeneration, particularly in European and North-American contexts where there has been a focus on redeveloping and revitalizing so-called “brownfield sites” or, more generally, “run-down” areas.¹⁸ Material interventions on the urban built environment are often requested, approved and made on the basis of widely shared views about certain parts of a city being “eyesores,” or, again, in need of “beautification.”

To formulate this position, I drew from research by Timothy Gibson pointing out that an “organic trope” has been often used in debates on redevelopment to frame the city as a living organism which can be “wounded” or otherwise “healed” through urban transformation.¹⁹ Most notably, Gibson explains that organic metaphors are “multiaccental” and can be deployed both in support of and in opposition to redevelopment plans. As he states: “Signs like vitality and decay are therefore open to struggle, as dominant groups attempt to suppress alternative accents that might express competing social perspectives.”²⁰ In foregrounding the physical appearance of cities as a source of social (dis)order or global appeal, the “aesthetic trope” that sets apart much of the current discourse on urban regeneration is instead usually only mobilized by those who support the reconversion of “problematic” urban areas into more profitable urban “formats.” Aesthetic judgements on the unattractiveness or lack of beauty of a particular urban area are typically framed as an objective issue, and the social effects of urban “ugliness” as substantial and direct. In other words, the aesthetic trope does not seem to allow for multiple accents or competing definitions in the same way as organic metaphors focusing on the “health” and “life” of cities do. And while the “beauty” of otherwise contested places may be highlighted by some in the course of redevelopment debates, this is usually done in a selective and nostalgic way that privileges the past while acknowledging the unbecoming nature of a place’s current state.²¹

Ultimately, this use of aesthetics has significant social implications. This is a metadiscourse that may contribute to the production of “aesthetic consent,”²² or a relatively

apathetic acceptance of the “look” and “feel” of a limited range of ways of communicating urban distinction, rather than sustained debate on the contributions that given visual-material dimensions of the urban landscape may make to social life. This in turn may play a significant role in the profiling of particular “types” of spatial and environmental contexts as inherently problematic and in need of intervention.

Conclusion: what’s next for the visible city?

In sum, cities communicate distinction by balancing difference and sameness, often in ways that engender multiple identity claims catering to overlapping local, regional and/or global reputational arenas. In this process, aesthetics is used both as a communicative resource and as a metadiscursive framework driving urban transformation. Overall, then, there is a tension between vernacular and globalist, if not neoliberal,²³ aspects of urban communication in the choices and changes that underlie aspirations of visibility. It is in this sense that the relationship between the “look” and “feel” of cities—or the visual-material dimensions of urban space—cannot be but ambivalent.

And while this is a tension that has been most easily observed in some of the typical creativity and culture-led approaches to urban regeneration of the past 30 years or so, in post-pandemic times the ways in which cities communicate distinction and the role of aesthetics in urban planning are deemed to change. First, outdoor and green spaces are likely to become a major form of visual-material currency in urban competitiveness. Increasingly widespread urban design projects such as urban meadows and “highlines” carved out of disused viaducts and railway tracks may soon come to take over the stylized public spaces of the cultural districts and urban villages that we now see everywhere in Europe. In summer 2020, for example, the city of Bologna placed 300 square metres’ worth of grass in Piazza Rossini, in the historic centre, to the horror of some urban conservationists and the delight of many city dwellers.²⁴ Second, as others have pointed out, the urban built environment is also always intertwined with media practices and materialities, but screens and digital communication are set to become even more central to the ways in which cities are both seen and experienced.²⁵

As a whole, however, cities will continue to rely on “proper” and “beautiful” markers of identity to gain symbolic capital and therefore also visibility, while also letting us take a glimpse at some of their less sleek aesthetics and materialities as these slip through the cracks of urban distinction.

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