

The Making of Places in the City. Gentrification and Globalization in the City Center of Cluj

Annemarie Matthies

Martin Luther Universität Halle Wittenberg

In this work I examine the issue of gentrification of a city centre and its effects on the relations between spaces and places, using my own observations in Cluj's city centre. There have been numerous discussions about the transformations of eastern (or in my case more precisely south-eastern European) cities and the alleged shift from specific places to 'globalized', market-cultural spaces, transforming a unique city centre into an anonymous copy of other spaces. I will first discuss established ideas about the interrelations between these notions and, in a second part, illustrate these in consideration of my own observation.

Before the actual observation, while reflecting upon theoretical assumptions of the relation between spaces and places in a gentrified environment, my focus has been on the transformation from *place to space*, on the globalising effects of a city centres' gentrification and the evolvement of a space in which, as Richard Sennett puts it, "everyone is alien to any other one, but they are all alien in the same way".

The first allegation made by me, keeping in mind what is assumed to be 'common-knowledge'¹ about socialist city structures was, that today's centre had not served as the cities' centre during the communist regime and had, as for example many eastern-German city centres, been completely abandoned. Based upon this allegation I assumed that the centres' gentrification had entirely changed its function from an abandoned place to the midpoint of the city. In fact, as newer research upon this issue show, faraway from the socialist rhetoric the centre of Cluj had always been the cities centre - well before 1989. As Petrovici (2007) shows, the centre was, during the communist era, in the majority occupied by citizens working for the state, serving as a centre for people in charge of control by means of bureaucratically controlling others, as well as easily being controlled by the state at the same time. The centre was in its function as the bureaucratic midpoint, vital for workers.

Subsequently, the change in fact did not occur essentially regarding the city centres *function*, but regarding its specific way of *use*, which naturally had changed to a large extent. While before '89 - and quite a while after that as well - the centre of Cluj had been a place of people representing the *state control*, it nowadays is - at least from its outward appearance - a place orientated towards consumerism, a *market* oriented consumerism at any rate, be it leisure-time offers, shopping opportunities or travel agencies, tourist offices and the like.

My second allegation, based upon on the first one, was that the groups using the city centre in any possible way would be quite homogeneous - a consumer-oriented clientele owning enough money to use the centre in its newly defined meaning. According to the change recently taken place, I supposed there would be a lot of people rather excluded from the city centre, simply because by no means they would be able to use the centre in its supposed way.

¹ What I refer to here is the rhetoric of equality, the well-known idioms of brotherhood and indifference, which led to the allegation that in socialist cities the -still existent- classes would live door to door with each other, preferably in newly constructed satellite towns.

However, the observation showed some interesting opposites of our first allegations; while gentrification might, in an indistinct way, destroy specific *places*, it does not necessarily create *spaces*. What exactly do I mean when I speak about the transformation of a place to a space? The idea connected to the common-knowledge about eastern European cities would be, that gentrification takes away the characteristics of a place (being a *place* to the people using it), creating a somehow globalized space, being one of many, a tourist-magnet, sheltering the same shops all over whichever of these spaces. This kind of shift from places to spaces might have occurred in some places; however, in Cluj it did not. My focus shifted at the first day of my observation, when I experienced that there is of course a shift from place to space, but there also is a “way back”.

The Logic of the Centre and the Excluded

When speaking about *gentrification* of city centres, in the sense in which Ruth Glass introduced this subject in the 1960's, first images to appear are gentrified historical sites, a consumer-oriented environment, fashion stores belonging to international chains, fast-food places and fancy cafés as the places to consume food and drinks, – and, as anticipated, the clientele according to these places.

The Unesco, by defining places worth being a heritage and therefore being places having to be restored (going hand in hand with gentrification) and kept for the future, defines gentrification as a “phenomenon that came about with sections of society who had little capital but were rich in the cultural sphere (professions to do with teaching, the arts, culture, etc.). The very term gentrification in the minds of those who used it had a premonitory feeling to it – the opening up of social paths that the phenomenon would help put in place. Gentrification – a socio-spatial process – can be of two different kinds: the one that proceeds through exclusion of working-class categories in districts that are already very bourgeois, and the other that works through more wealthy strata of society arriving in an area which until then has been sociologically mixed or more working-class”.²

Following this definition, dealing with gentrification indicates two major issues: First the implications gentrification has on different social groups and their relations towards the space and towards each other. And second, the transformation of a specific local place into a global space, hardly distinguishable from any other one. These are the issues I, too, will pursue in the following.

The above named issues cannot be strictly separated from each other but interfere. “Gentrification – a process that seems to reassert a purely local identity – represents downtown’s social transformation in terms of an international market culture” (Zukin 187: 1991). ‘Global Spaces’ attract certain groups of people, and they exclude other groups, namely those lacking the essential capital to take part in the social life these spaces permit.

“The social exclusions and hierarchies constructed in space by means of property rights and rents, zoning laws, transportation systems, and other, more symbolic forms of control, imply, that central positions are not mere artefacts. No less than the suburbs, they are carefully crafted landscapes” (Zukin, 183). Abstractly speaking, it is a society’s dominant entities occupying the city centre, and in the case of Cluj, without doubt, it is banks that dominate the centre, followed by cloth-stores far more expensive than the average stores, and finally, but in our case quite importantly, fancy bars and fashionable cafés.

The Unesco follows the stressing of exclusion and inequality, stating that “Gentrification now provides urban structures that can “consume” the middle and upper

² http://portal.unesco.org/shs/en/ev.php-URL_ID=8192&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

classes – the homeless are swiftly removed – and it adds to the idea of class identity, through a spectrum of significant classes, although in very different ways: in this apparently democratized structure, the extraordinary inequality of consumerism expresses the increased power of the classes that have pushed “gentrification” into prime position.”

As might be assumed, the dominance of banks and expensive, consumer-oriented localities in the place we observed attracts certain groups of a society. In my case it was

- above all, young people with a high economic, but rather less cultural capital, sitting in the cafés and spending time in the fashion-stores
- people using the cash-machines, mobile-phone shops and kiosks
- people working in the banks, cafés and stores
- people working for the state in order to keep the city centre attractive, e.g. cleaners and parking-lot guards
- beggars, old people, roma and groups of young people gathering in certain places
- pedestrians passing the centre to get from one point to another

Interestingly, the only groups of people actually being able to use the centre in its supposed way of consuming and spending money are the first two groups. But does that really mean the others are excluded? As I observed it does not - and actually some of the other groups were very well able to use the centre in their own means. Apart from that, the different groups are not to be as strictly separated from each other as might be assumed at first sight.

From Place to Space – and vice versa

There have been numerous works on which impacts ‘globalisation’ has on the transformation from places to spaces (see Zukin, 2002, Low, 1996, Peck & Tickle, 2002). However, the relation between place and space is not a one-way road. As places are transforming into spaces, the actors involved contribute to this process. Many works on this issue, especially concerned with the transformation of eastern European cities, have been dealing with the usage of leek ways; as for example in eastern Berlin a huge community of artists and freestylers evolved in the eastern parts of the city during the transition period, the literature on this subject is considerably vast (see for example Brenner, 2002). By now, in the year 2006, a lot of these parts in Berlin have become highly expensive places, as the unintended gentrification by artists and young people, creating resources of cultural capital, has made these parts of the city very desirable and the liberal in-between status that allowed for the creation of places has vanished rapidly.

But does that mean that the creation of places is only possible in those places yet untouched by a ‘globally’ (that is, neo-liberally) oriented gentrification? To a certain degree this might be the case, especially as formal and informal options for the utilisation of spaces differ from each other. As scholars from the ecological perspective argue, place is a limited good (e.g. Rex and Moore in their study of race relations in Birmingham, 1967). Those being able to define the function of a space differ; while in Agape (our point of observation, the city centre of Cluj), it once had been the logic of the central distribution of places to live, its logic is now: those being able to consume this place are those supposed to use it. As Pahl observed, inequality between people in the city is, to a certain degree, made and re-made by the city itself. As states of property change, as work-opportunities appear and disappear, as the usage of certain places changes, inequality inevitably changes with these processes. Still, inequality is not an attribute exclusively owned by market-based states. And, in our case of more significance, inequality in the place we observed was actually of some profit for those usually suffering from their status. In fact, we observed that there are far more relations in ‘our’ place than simply those of consumerism. There are not only mechanisms of using the

spaces in-between, but actually turning spaces back into places, explicitly *using* the existence of 'global' spaces.

Methodology: The Observation's Place and Time

In the following, I will describe how, when and where I did the observation and what I observed in these places. I chose to do a non-involved observation, though I did not hide, but stayed with a friend, who had a camera, 'disguised' as tourists, about 20 meters from the place I observed. Looking like tourists, watching the buildings and taking pictures, allowed us to participate in the overall action without being noticed as people observing other people.

The place of observation was in the more or less exact centre of the city, the street corner between Strada Memorandumului and Strada Universitatii, on the Piata Unirii. This part of the city, is a place undergoing radical changes in the past years from a place of living to a place of consumerism. The Strada Universitatii is occupied by cloth-stores, an art-store, a pharmacy, a gifts-store, a tourist-agency, several book kiosks, two banks and a fancy café (during the day) and bar (during the night-time). I mainly observed this café, the fashion-store to the right, a mobile-phone-store to its left and a cash-machine next to the mobile-store. As I stayed next to the big Catedrala Ortodoxa Romana, being the actual centre of Piata Unirii, I could also watch the big parking-space opposite the church as well as the whole of Strada Memorandumului, an equally fashionable street as Strada Universitatii, and also one of the inner-city connections from the east to the west of the city. The observation took place three days in mid-December, twice during the week and once during the weekend. I observed the place three times a day, in the morning between 9 and 10 o'clock, from noon until one o'clock, and from 5 until 6 o'clock in the afternoon. Twice I did an extra observation at night-time, during 10:30 and 11:30.

Most interesting in my opinion was the fact, that I not only saw the same "kind of people" every time I did the observation, as described before, but actually saw the same persons every day. That was why I shifted from my initial ideas about "place to space" to the idea about "space to place". What primarily surprised me became clearer with every observation I did. The café serves as a meeting-point for a group of young men who use this café - and in fact the whole part of the street - as a trade-point for clothes, mobile phones and cars. This group was not only integrated in the space but themselves integrated other people as well as the surrounding shops.

To structure my observation, I will subdivide my observation into three major sections: ways of occupying a space, interactions between people and space, and making a space a place.

Ways of occupying a Space

Erving Goffman did in his micro-structural research on places and spaces a very detailed analysis of how territory is defined by people. In his work „Das Individuum im öffentlichen Austausch. Mikrostudien zur öffentlichen Ordnung“³ he explicitly describes mechanisms of occupying spaces by means of informally accepted behaviour. These mechanisms, especially those of violation of territory, were what we also found in our place of observation. „Eine

³ Unfortunately I only had the German version to work with. Whenever citing from this work, I will give a rough translation.

Form des Übergriffs ist das Eindringen, eine häufigere ist die Aufdringlichkeit“ (Goffman, 1982, 83).⁴

The mentioned group of young men occupied the whole part of the street by usage of several mechanisms of intrusive place-taking. Above all, they extended the 'normal' usage of space a group of people takes in public spaces. Instead of letting passers-by go by, this group just stood in the middle of the pavement, discussing loudly, taking no notice at all of other people. Whereas passers-by spoke in the usual loudness, this group was quite ignorantly yelling at each other, speaking above the average loudly on their mobile phones and making clear with gestures of dominance whose place it is. Instead of parking their cars in the parking space just opposite the road, their cars are placed central on the street, sometimes even on the pavement. Beggars were 'replaced' by them and forced to change the side of the street, not by use of violence but by paying them money and therefore paying them for vanishing from their place. Women's outward appearance was watched carefully and commented on loudly. I was quite surprised to find that such behaviour was accepted in a public space.

The longer I observed the space, the less surprised we were by this group, because what was actually happening was not just an acceptance of this behaviour, but rather a harmonious relationship between the people and the space. At first sight there were groups of people with completely different reasons to be in that place at that time, more or less annoyed by a group of young men. At second sight, I observed how the different groups in fact interacted, with each other, and with the space. The group of young men is not merely an annoyance in the place. They are well known by 1. the parking-lot guards, who 'oversaw' the parking of the cars in the middle of the street and on the pavement, 2. the owners of the café, in which most men entered between several deals they made, 3. the girls working in the fashion store who spent a cigarette-break together, 4. young people passing by, obviously knowing about the clothes to be sold.

Above all, what is most striking, the owners of the café and the fashion-store not only knew these young men, but seem to have a quite harmonious symbiosis with each other. As 'space-taking' as the young men are, as 'space-taking' is the café, and not only by chance chose the young men exactly this space for their business. While any other shop was more or less inconspicuous, the café plays loud music, to be heard on the street, it is illuminated during night time like a Christmas tree, and waiters are moving from inside to outside, standing on the pavement, looking for customers and talking with the young men. The fashion-store is also illuminated during the night time, with blinking lights, changing in colour. The logic of the space, that is: consuming while spending free-time, showing-off and being seen, was used on purpose by the group of young men, and only in this special space they could have been that successful. Whether their 'trade-business' was illegal or not we don't know, but definitely there are very few spaces in Cluj where they would have found customers willing to spend money in their luxurious goods, and in any other space they would have been rather ridiculously 'in the wrong place' simply from their outward appearance.

Some people are sitting inside, male customers are in the majority. In front of the bar, some people are passing by. If we begin by the left, we see a girl who seems to be a student; she hurries on and is merely using the space as transit-space, getting from one point to another. It is important to notice the man with the green coat, staying on the sidewalk. This man is handicapped and asks for money. Later on he receives money in order to leave the place. We have seen the three men in front of him with their luxurious cars every time we did

⁴ "One form (of violation) is the penetration of space, the more common is the intrusive place-taking."

an observation during the day, with the exception of one time. Interestingly, they haven't been on the bar at night-time, when other people use this place.

There are three types of people using this place: People just passing by, people asking for money and people doing 'business'. I also observed how the function of the space varies, depending on different times of the day. While in the morning lots of people passed by on their way to work, the café was still closed and none of the young men was gathering in front of the café. In fact, hardly anyone stayed in the place we observed but mainly hurried on, hardly looking around. Some cleaners were finishing cleaning the parking lot, though most of this 'dirty work' is, as we observed, done during the night.

Around noon the group of young men was complete, the café, the mobile shop and the fashion-store is opened, hardly anyone is on the way to work but possibly some people spend their break in one of the bordering café's on Strada Memorandumului. 'My' café was nearly solemnly used by the young men and one girl from the fashion-store.

At four o'clock, the place was at its busiest point. Countless people passed by, and this time is the high-time for the fashion-store. While there aren't many people actually buying anything, nonetheless lots of people - in fact only girls, sometimes accompanied by their boyfriends - enter the shop just to have a look around or simply do window-shopping. The mobile phone shop and the cash-machine were also more frequented than in the morning or around noon.

In the night-time, the picture changed. Hardly anyone is simply passing by, and those who do seem to be either on their way home or on their way to meet friends, certainly not on their way to work. Taxis are more frequented than during the day, and the bar is now occupied not only by young men but by groups or couples. The music can be heard on the street and the big windows fulfil their reason: to be looked in, watching the people, all dressed even more stylish than during the day. Although the fashion-store is closed during the night, the window is illuminated, and so is the window of the mobile phone store, though not as demanding to be looked at. The place seems to fulfil its strict logic during the night-time: A place to consume and pass spare time at.

While there are a lot of differences in the usage of the space, one thing was the same at all times: People, to be more precise, groups of people, use this place as a gathering-point. We saw lots of people standing in front of one of the shops, waiting for someone else. So, without using the offers of one of the shops in any kind, this place is simply so well known and its central position is so convenient for moving on to any other point, that lots of people use it in their own means. Places to meet usually are places of significance, be it a church, a statue or any other monument. This may sound like a common-sense observation, but it still is interesting, thinking about the fact that people wouldn't have been meeting in this point before the shops moved in and Strada Universitatii simply was a place to live.

Making a space a place

At the beginning, I cited Sharon Zukin, stating that "symbolic forms of control imply that central positions are not mere artefacts. No less than the suburbs, they are carefully crafted landscapes" (Zukin, 183). But no less than there exist the symbolic forms of the 'global space' in the shape of consumer-oriented localities, state-control by the constant presence of guards and a generally 'attractive' appearance of any vicinity, there are ways of using these "carefully crafted landscapes" quite innovatively. We watched how the logic of the space was transformed back into the logic of a certain place, very specific in its function, but also compatible with the sense of the space.

Zukin also wrote that "Gentrification – a process that seems to reassert a purely local identity – represents downtown's social transformation in terms of an international market culture" (Zukin, 187). While this might be the case, it doesn't mean that places of international market culture couldn't possibly be places with an "identity". And what kind of identity would be "a purely local" one anyway?

This is not to say that the gentrification of the centre wouldn't exclude groups of people. As the beggars have been sent away by the group of young men (and interestingly not via state-control), as hardly anyone spent time in the place we observed without consuming or at least doing 'window-shopping', and as those people not being able to be in the city centre for consuming are those who do the cleaning, it is obvious that the city centre does create great inequality between people. But just as well it does, as a specific place, include people and integrate different groups otherwise not being connected with each other, e.g. people working and people consuming, people doing informal deals and passers-by, people working in one place and people working in another place and, not at last, people having a very high economic capital and people having none at all.

They were in the place we observed for their own specific reasons, precisely because it is a *place* for them, unlike any other one. This integration is not without conflict, as I saw that beggars and passers-by, or passers-by and the group of young men, are not always in good terms with each other. Still, a lot of interaction takes place and the conflict arises *because* this place has an identity and actors do not generally agree on how to act according to it.

To summarize what I have written it might be useful to make clear what I *not* wanted to say: The observation does not at all lead to the conclusion that the gentrification of city centres would not create inequality between people. But as a city's centre merely reflects a society's state, it is not simply the centre that *creates* inequality. Furthermore, people without the capital to use the city centre in its prior logic of consumerism are not necessarily excluded from this place but can, in their means, profit from those being able to use it. This also does not mean that the interaction between the different kinds of people would be without conflict – but, what is more significant, there is interaction.

Second, what I certainly not wanted to say is that the place-making by groups of young men claiming the entire place available for themselves is a very desirable or nice method. But, above all, it is a mechanism of making a space a place, and in fact a very effective one. The making of places does in some cases undermine the actual logic of the place, as in the case of the 'traders-group', who used the place of consuming and trade for doing trade in their own way while consuming.

In other cases, as in the case of using the place as a meeting-point, the prior function of the place is simply ignored and another function is added: That of being a symbolic place in the sense that 'everyone knows it', therefore giving it a higher status than any living-area could have. As in the case of the people working in the place I observed, the profit they gained was rather a side-effect of the necessary outward appearance of the place. And last, as in the case of the beggars, the function of the place can be used in a much intended way – knowing that this is the place in which money can be given.

Looking back upon the broad initial question – *how does the gentrification of the city centre affect the relations between different groups of people in it and in which way did it change the manners of use* – I can say that, unlike my first expectations, the city centre of Cluj is not (yet) heading towards a 'typical' western consumer oriented centre but rather serves as a market place with a connotation on individual business. In fact, the opposite of what I had expected had turned out to have taken place: The city centre is not converting into a more and more homogenous space, but still is a heterogeneous place, moving from a

nationalised homogenous centre to a centre in which the focus is on heterogenic, individual actions between the most different kinds of groups.

Of course it is to be expected how long this condition will last; until now, one of the groups involved in the trade is the state authority. In case of a change in formal circumstances, e.g. charging of the cars parked on the pavement, removing beggars, prohibiting business, removing groups of people gathering in the place who are merely using it as a meeting point etc., there will only be one group left to use the centre, those, who actually buy anything. And as this group is small, the centre would be considerably empty.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank, above all, my friend Marie Philippot who stayed with me during all those long observations, who took pictures and discussed with me what we saw. Secondly, I want to thank Norbert Petrovici and Professor Rudolf Poledna from the sociological faculty of Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj, during whose seminar on Urban Sociology I found many valuable ideas and who took the time to discuss my work critically.

References

- Brenner, Neil. (2002). Berlin's Transformations: Postmodern, Postfordist ... or Neoliberal? *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 26, 3, 635-642.
- Goffman, Erving. (1974). *Das Individuum im öffentlichen Austausch*. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt/Main.
- Low, Setha (1996). Spatializing Culture: The Social Production and Social Construction of Public Space. *American Ethnologist*, 23, 41, 861-879.
- Pahl, Raymond Edward. (1975). *Whose City?* Middlesex, UK: Penguin.
- Peck, Jamie & Tickell, Adam. (2002). Neoliberalizing Space. *Antipode*, 34, 3, 380-404.
- Petrovici, Norbert. (2007). Excluderea muncitorilor din centrul Clujului. Gentrificare într-un oraş central-european. *Sociologie Românească*, V, 3, 23-42.
- Rex, John & R. Moore. (1967). *Race, Community and Conflict: A Study of Sparbrook*. London: Institute of Race Relations and Oxford University Press.
- Zukin, Sharon. (1991). Gentrification, Cuisine, and the Critical Infrastructure: Power and Centrality Downtown. In: *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Edited by Sharon Zukin.