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**Abstract:**

In the recent years we are witnessing a shift regarding the grand narration of the American City. After long years of urban flight by the middle classes and a corresponding neglect for the downtown area, an urban renaissance has gained significance. Driven by rising prices for land, an increasingly unbearable commute and changing demographics, living downtown is gaining attraction for the former suburbanites. Developers and city planners are readily responding towards and actively encouraging this trend by producing a new residential downtown: safe and clean, exciting and lively, convenient and healthy. Considering the implications of such recently produced ‘soft urban’ spaces from a power-aware perspective some additional functions can be pointed out. The new residential downtown evolves as a risk-managed, homogenized and privatized part of the city. Visibly the most different opposite of a Gated Community (commonly imagined as a fenced suburban enclave) these new ‘soft urban’ spaces functionally do have a strong resemblance with GCs. In taking ‘the best of both worlds’, the emerging soft urbanism can be conceived as a sophistication of the privatized city we see in Gated Communities: providing the comforts of a safeguarded environment without missing the excitements of the city.

# Soft Urbanism: Safeguarding the private city

Henning Füller & Nadine Marquardt

## 1 Introduction

In the United States the privatized city is increasingly happening downtown. And it is happening in a way that is not fully grasped by the common denominators like gentrification, segregation, or the ‘fortified city’. These are the two main arguments we are trying to bring forward in the following paper.

### 1.1 Downtown Renaissance as the new privatized city

Given the generally accepted narration of the American city a quite remarkable phenomenon has sprung up the recent years. The downtown area is envisioned as a residential area for people of middle-class and higher income in a number of recent developments throughout the country. This is quite unexpected considering the urban flight of these demographics we were witnessing for so long. The desire for a suburban home has been a cornerstone of the American Dream for many years and it still is. But an array of forces has grown over the last years weakening the attractiveness of living suburban.

Economical shifts are one important driving force. With plenty of empty and cheap land around the cities the master-planned housing developments provided an affordable home-owning option. But as suburbia has built out more and more, cheap land can now be found only far away from the cities. In addition, rising gas prices and a rising volume of traffic make commuting both more expensive and more annoying. In effect, the cost-performance ratio of a suburban home is going down, so to speak.

A second shift concerns changing demographics. The baby-boomer generation, born and raised in the suburbs, now see their children leaving home. Turned to empty-nesters these demographics find it increasingly costly to keep up their large houses and gardens. A downtown condominium provides the possibility of downsizing to a more convenient lifestyle. Besides these empty-nesters there is a second demographic on the rise, attracted by living downtown. The increasing job market polarization produces a growing number of working-poor in the service industries on the one hand as well as an international business elite on the other hand. Analogous

to the globalized firms they are working for, their operating area often stretches around the globe. Well paid they can afford to buy or rent a second or even a third home in different countries and cities. A condominium downtown serves the needs of this nomadic high-potentials. Located near to the office buildings as well as to entertainment like restaurants and concert-halls. Usually there is also an easy access to the airport. Driven by this perceived market developers dare to invest in the inner-city again. Being exclusively office areas and nearly vacated after business hours for a long time, the historical city-centers are being rediscovered as places to live in many American cities. As a result of high land prices and high construction costs, luxury condominiums prospect to be the most profitable product.

### **1.2 Method: analyze postmodern form of segregation through space**

But what is of interest here is not so much the very phenomenon of urban renaissance, its reasons and its visible effects.

The developers' new interest in providing urban residential also comes with a different and more far-reaching approach. (Re-)building downtown today does not end in erecting houses but in addition is about shaping a whole neighborhood. Confronting the public notion of urban decay and dangerous inner-cities, a different counter-narration has to be established and has to be marketed boldly in order to attract buyers. What is envisioned by different stake-holders and what is the outcome of a concurrence of different forces is the production of a new conception of downtown: the production of a 'soft urban' space. The grounding rationality of this Soft Urbanism as we will call it in the following, the visions and strategies behind it are what is of interest here. Making a place consists in envisioning the neighborhood and its subjects, articulating certain modes of being and acting and neglecting others. The production of a hegemonic space therefore is a form power is enacted in society. The discursive field evolving in the context of the urban renaissance is thus one of the mechanisms how the city and its citizens are governed. The production of a new residential downtown also implies a predefinition of the field of possibilities. In its effects on facilitating certain uses and on narrowing the range of possible lifestyles the production of a new downtown also functions as a technology of power.

Understanding the urban renaissance as a broader phenomenon of 'place-making' allows to point out effects of power within the production of space beyond processes of gentrification and segregation also at play. By critically dissecting this evolving Soft Urbanism, we try to point out to the sophisticated way the private city is shaping itself: providing a risk-managed and context-guided environment for a small range of possible subjects.

### **1.3 Case-study: Los Angeles**

Our empirical observations are mainly focus on the ongoing revitalization of Downtown Los Angeles. In many regards the case of Los Angeles can be conceived as

an enlightening example for the phenomenon at stake due to its high degree of distinctiveness. First, the disparity between the perception of the actually given downtown and the downtown aimed for could hardly be bigger. The downtown blight in Downtown Los Angeles has been to the most extreme in nearly all of the United States. The notorious Skid Row has become a buzzword denominating inner-city decay and wildness. Nevertheless, what is going to be build respectively converted out of the former office buildings at arms length to Skid Row are nearly invariably luxury condominiums. Second, although there have been efforts to revitalize the area for over 20 years, a new impulse of place-making is happening right at this time. The historical city-centers have been rediscovered as places to live in American cities for a while, examples are the re-development of Theater District near Times Square in New York, the waterfront area in Portland or Downtown San Diego. Finally turning to Los Angeles most of the developers already have some best-practice guides at hand. As a latecomer Los Angeles therefore provides a good case to study the recent ideas and visions for a contemporary residential downtown. Although somewhat overused as an example in urban studies, Los Angeles provides an outstanding visualization of the phenomenon of Soft Urbanism we are interested in.

### 2 Soft Urbanism

The process of urban revitalization not only involves regulation and changes of the physical environment but also an understanding of and acting upon spaces of identity and subjectivation. If the concept of Soft Urbanism itself can be comprehended as a political rationality like we suggested above, this also means that it is not simply a term symbolizing a given reality of actors bargaining and stake-holders dividing up markets in the private city. Moreover, Soft Urbanism in itself constitutes an understanding of the urban reality which leads to a variety of agencies, procedures, partnerships and institutions that are intended to enable us to govern the correspondent objects and subjects of the Soft Urbanism as a political rationality (Lemke, 2001, 191). An analytic perspective that takes this into account is thus able to inspect the cohesion between phenomena of governance and processes of subjectivation and to connect problematics of government, politics and administration back to its performative effects in the space of bodies, lives and selves (Dean, 1999, 12).

#### 2.1 'We do neighborhoods'

A first noticeable aspect of how the inner-cities are reshaped is a distinctively different approach of the different stakeholders. Namely the perspective of the developers has broadened away from just building and selling the edifice. Much more emphasis is put on shaping a community. "We do in districts" or "Investing in Urban Communities" is the philosophy proclaimed by the *CIM Group* on their website. "Creating Urban Communities" is the self-proclaimed goal of the

competing *Williams & Dame*. The aim of the creation of a whole neighborhood itself is indeed not remarkable. Hundreds of Master-Planned Developments are surrounding American cities where neighborhoods have been built from the scratch for nearly 60 years. But what can be observed in the context of Soft Urbanism is a different *modus operandi*, a different political technology at work. Whereas building a suburban neighborhood is done by following well proved guidelines, design schemes and architectures an urban community is too complex to be envisioned on a drawing-board. There are too many factors and forces not under the influence of a single developer. Doing urban neighborhoods therefore has to differ from suburban master-planning. Instead of enrolling a pre-given plan in this setting it is essential to interact with and respond to the already given. A successful development in the context of Soft Urbanism is interacting and enhancing the already established environment. To enhance neighborhoods in unique projects is possible due to “the team’s core competencies, which include the ability to understand complex development environments” (Website Williams & Dame). Crucial for a development in an urban setting is to know and influence the area, its demographic, and its retail. It is also to know and to influence the policy processes, the stake-holders and forces of influence within the area. It is about ‘doing a district’. It is the general shift from a modern ordering technology of power towards a different model rather working by alleviating and hindering. Paul Rabinow pointed out the two different ways of ordering space we are distinguishing here quite clearly referring to two paradigmatic city-models.

“In this [Nantes] scheme, space was not taken as a neutral medium to be ordered *ex nihilo*, as was the case in Richelieu. Rather – and here the specific components of bio-power enter in – space was continually analyzed and manipulated as something to be known and used. It had to be considered in its empirical relation to a specific site; to the demographic, commercial, and social characteristics of the already existing population; and, most importantly, to the potential future development of those diverse human and geographical particularities, now understood as resources to be known, regulated, and maximized.” (Rabinow, 2003 [1982], 359f)

Following Rabinow’s reading of Foucault, space can be used as a tool to understand power-relations. The recently build Soft Urbanism then is indicative for the functioning of an evolving urban governance. Noticeable the new downtown is not a master-planned environment but rather a milieu to be analyzed with resources that can be maximized.

An important political technology in line with this paradigmatic shift is the BID, a privately organized body of marketing and community services. The Los Angeles Downtown Area is covered by a range of distinct Business Improvement Districts, the Central City East Association (CCEA) and the Downtown Central Business Improvement District (DCBID) formed in 1997 being the most important. Financed by an additional obligatory tax paid by all business owners in the area, BIDs are

entitled to provide better conditions for commercial activities in the specific area. The DCBID for example is directing an annual budget of approximately 1.7 Million Dollar. In the recent years the focus of the work of the BID has changed. In the beginning the activities focused mainly on direct business related activities as marketing the area or cleaning the streets. Today the BID has significantly broadened its range of activities. Two activities are of special interest here: First, the DCBID has worked out a detailed demographic survey published this February.<sup>1</sup> Discontent with the regular demographic surveys done by the American Census Bureau the stake-holders felt the need of more recent and more detailed data. They therefore mandated their very private executive body to “quantify the magnitude of Downtown’s renaissance, [and] to gather business, economic and demographic data that are of interest to corporate, retail and restaurant tenants, investors, developers, bankers, residents and the community.” (Schatz/et al., 2007)

In addition to this accurate statistical analyzation of the area, a second activity of the BIDs in Downtown L.A. is in line with the milieu oriented bio-power Rabinow predicted. A special and private ‘quality of life’-police has been established in form of a privately organized so called ‘Safety Team’. As a private organization the employes of the ‘Safety Team’ do not have any actual power as in arresting people or issuing a caution. As the ‘Safety Team’ is in no way prepared to fulfill traditional police functions its role has to be described differently. It opens up a new form of policing not directed towards criminal individuals but towards safeguarding a stable environment. Being visible on the streets dressed in distinctive purple shirts the ‘Purple Patrol’ acts as a professionalized neighborhood watch. Its main goal is not to prevent crimes even if reporting crimes to the regular police may be a means to its end. The ‘Safety Team’ rather was established to ensure that Downtown is safe, clean and vibrant. In 2006 “it fulfilled over 61,000 calls for service and provided security and customer service to thousands of Downtown visitors”. (DCBID Annual Report) The ‘Safety Team’ therefore is the second tool employed in line with the general thesis of a new milieu-oriented bio-power. Using tools like site-specific demographic surveys besides the bureau of census and professionalized ears and eyes on the street besides the police, the space of the new Downtown L.A. is “continually analyzed and manipulated” (Rabinow, 2003 [1982], 359f) as a precondition for the establishment of Soft Urbanism.

### **2.2 Security as Risk-Management**

Like Ash Amin pointed out, the urban “remains a significant formative arena, not only as the daily space of half of the world’s population, but also as the supremely visible manifestation of difference and heterogeneity placed together. Urbanism highlights the challenges of negotiating class, gender and ethnic or racial differences placed in close proximity. It also profiles the newness that arises from spatial juxtaposition and global flow and connectivity, forever forcing responses of varying

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<sup>1</sup>online at: ([http://www.downtownla.com/pdfs/econ\\_demo/DTLA\\_DemoSurvey022007.pdf](http://www.downtownla.com/pdfs/econ_demo/DTLA_DemoSurvey022007.pdf))

type and intensity in the face of negotiating strangers, strangeness and continuous change” (Amin, 2006, 1009). The efforts of organizing space following a Soft Urbanism rationality have to deal with these aforementioned characteristics of the urban, because the production of safe and clean, exciting and lively, convenient and healthy spaces for the former suburbanites does not always get along easily with the so called ‘edgy urban experience’. The production of security therefore is one obviously indispensable layer of all urban revitalization efforts. Whereas the political rationalities that were connected with phenomena like urban blight and suburban lifestyles imagined spaces completely free of any disturbance associated with the urban, the promotion of the new urban lifestyle now believes that the visibility of what often is identified as ‘disturbingly urban’ (homelessness, loitering, crime, dirt, social decay) can never be fully displaced and thus a political rationality should not even aim to erase it completely. Instead, what can be achieved is the maintenance and the management of the not all in all positive diversity that is ‘the urban’. Unlike concepts like the Fortress City suggest, from a Soft Urbanism rationality’s point of view it is therefore neither urgently needed nor gratifying to achieve the uniformity and homogeneity that used to represent and still stand for ‘the suburban lifestyle’. Quite the reverse, Soft Urbanism as a distinctive form of ‘governing through contingency” actively seeks to obtain a certain degree of friction and capitalizes it quite beneficially (see Dillon, 2007). What formerly was considered as unacceptably disturbing is now treated and thus maintained and managed as the excitement of a theme-park: Driving the metro, seeing homeless people on the street, getting in contact with the cities ethnical, social and cultural diversity is conceptualized and promoted as part of an edgy spatial experience that can be enjoyed from a small but safe distance. The visibility of inequalities is neither considered as a sign for societal dysfunction that need to be solved, nor as part of the urban impertinence that needs to be avoided by going suburban into a gated community, but rather treated as a natural appearance and indicator to define what is ‘urban space’. Even if most of the highly affluent new residents of Downtown L.A. surely have at least one car and will therefore never need public transportation, part of their efforts to realize the desirable urban lifestyle should be to nevertheless use the metro “at least once a month, just for the kicks of it” – as the marketing campaign for one of the new highrise lofts suggests, because there is “something so distinctively urban” about using public transportation (The South Group advertisement). Following the idea of actively managing and maintaining urban phenomena that are considered a tad bit more disturbing like the issue of homelessness, the new formed Business Improvement District was keen on finding a smart concept to ‘soften’ this extremely edgy urban experience: While homeless people are still allowed to camp on the sidewalks of certain parts of Downtown, they now are obliged to remove their camps very early in the morning – the result is a temporally layered usage of the area that ensures a ‘tolerable’ amount of encounters between the diverse inhabitants.

### 2.3 Providing lifestyles

The risks that come with the edgy and exciting urban experience have to be held at a distance – and this is only possible with the active help of the individual and a matching built environment that in turn has the potential to support the individuals' efforts of risk-management. One major concern closely linked to the issue of security is the achievement of health. The aforementioned cohesion between phenomena of governance and processes of subjectivation and their effects on lives and bodies can be reconsidered in this context of interpellation, where the future residents of Downtown L.A. are expected to actively take part in creating a healthy and sustainable environment through attention to lifestyle and are expected to participate in collective efforts to manage risk (Petersen/Lupton, 1996, 146f). The prime target of this “participatory imperative” is the idea of an autonomous individual and its' interests in productively optimizing its potentials to be the most fully efficient (ibid.). This has implications for concepts of the self, modes of embodiment and the ways of distinguishing between the self and the other. The strategy of rendering individual subjects (and families, neighborhood communities) “responsible” shifts societal risks like illness, unemployment, poverty, etc. and for life in society into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transforms it into a question of which actions of “self-care” can be considered as smart (Lemke, 2001, 201). The choice of options for these actions is conceptualized as the expression of a rational free will. The advertisements for the luxury apartments drafted according to this promote an almost indefinite range of options when they claim that “this home is all about making choices” or living in Downtown means to have a distance of only “20 minutes to all the opportunity in the world”. The Individuals are encouraged and demanded to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form. In this regard, ‘work and play’ are no longer opposites in the optimized life of a successful individual, but must be conceptualized to supplement each other. Amenities in the new residences like pools, spas and fitness studios (which are standard in almost all of the development projects in Downtown L.A.) are promoted with slogans like “Play as hard as you work”. Leisure time must be used to “Escape the ordinary”, “Live like you mean it”, “Celebrate your extra time” and “Create memories beyond your expectations” (*Lennar Group* advertisement). While this concept of leisure often sounds like dauntingly challenging hard work under conditions where “unfun is unacceptable” (*Standard Pacific Homes* advertisement), it also highlights a political rationality that not only expects subjects to flexibly shape labour but also to use leisure time in a preferably profitable and efficient way.

### 2.4 Depoliticized space

Although the political itself is surprisingly absent in this imagination of the urban, the described rationalities are indeed political and not limited to the individual or private sphere, as they indeed are leading to a new urban order. While the lifestyle of the affluent residents that are now supposed to inhabit the core of the city

contains a lot of adapted hard work, optimized leisure time, shopping possibilities and border-less mobility, ideas of citizenship and engagement with society as a whole don't show up. Even if this was already characteristic for the imagination of a suburban lifestyle, it now adds a new quality to the way the city is conceptualized and thought of.

While it is possible to discuss issues like security, health and sustainability within the discursive framework a rationality like the Soft Urbanism provides, other ways to frame thinking about the city and the urban like the concept of the Just City, the question like what exactly in a 'public benefit', who has the Rights to the City and for whom exactly the 'safer city' is being made safe are rendered discursively powerless. Because 'the society' which was so far considered as becoming visible in the urban sphere is – unlike concepts like 'the neighborhood' or 'the community' – dismissed from its discursive position of being a wider conceptual framework of imagining the city, formerly controversial political issues that gained attention in the urban context now often experience an unsettling abstraction.

The effects of this changed vision came up strikingly during a meeting of the downtown neighborhood council we took part in on May 8th 2007. As a body of public participation the neighborhood council is a voluntary meeting of residents and the general public interested in the development of an area and is, among others, entitled to approve planned development projects. At the meeting the *Medaillon Project* on between 3rd and 4th Street went through this approval process when one of the board-members pointed towards the missing of affordable housing in the project with over 300 units in total. A question even more relevant considering that the project is to be build in the still rather poor eastern part of Downtown. During the discussion a representative of the city planning council explained the reason why the developer had been released from the usual obligation of providing affordable housing assigned through state law: By adding a small park at the corner of the project the developer already had fulfilled his obligation to provide a community benefit. A walkable space has replaced the low-cost housing as the preferred public good the city tries to provide. Here the changing rationality accompanying the Soft Urbanism becomes clear. The goal to appeal for is not a 'just city' in terms of welfare or participation. More and more the effort goes towards the surface and the look-and-feel of the city. A process already introduced via the localization of crime policies, most prominently the more and more influential broken-windows theory. The rationality behind the Soft Urbanism is closely tied to this way of localizing society and imagining social problems as if they were connected to the place they are happening in. A walkable and clean city – supported by the city for example in its requirements in the *Medaillon Project* – depicts a society without conflicts. A superficial but functional quasi-solution. The people who could raise justified counter-claims are simply drawn out by rent prices as participants in this Soft Urban city.

### 3 Conclusion

Spaces in the city increasingly are the object of regeneration strategies to develop safe and clean and yet thrilling and ‘edgy’ urban experiences. The city is actively being promoted as a desirable place to celebrate the ‘urban lifestyle’. Developers and city planners seem eager to produce new exciting and lively, healthy and sustainable environments. On the other hand urban space is privatized, accessibility is dependent on restrictions and without restrictions only enjoyable for a very small group of affluent people. Like we tried to show above, the concept of the soft urbanism comes together with a range of implications for the usage of urban space - not only for those who do not fit into the new conception (which often happen to be the most vulnerable) - but also for the new residents. Furthermore, Soft Urbanism challenges the potential of the city to be an arena of political importance.

We are by far not the first to point out this development. The city and urban development are once again on both social sciences and policy agendas. Especially L.A. has gained attention and is frequently pulled up as the paradigmatic example for a city under postmodern conditions (see Dear/Flusty, 1998), the place where “all comes together” as prominently claimed by Ed Soja in *Postmodern Geographies* (Soja, 1989, 190). Having been to L.A. for several times to do our interviews and having experienced its high degree of distinctiveness, this seems all too convincing. But there is also critique: Like Ash Amin and Stephen Graham point out, within this new trend to focus on urban development again, there is still a lot of disorientation about what the city actually is and on which economic, social, cultural and institutional assets urban life should be founded (Amin/Graham, 1997, 411). According to these scholars, a hasty presumption that characterizes many approaches to urban development is that “too often, single cities - most recently, Los Angeles - are wheeled out as paradigmatic cases, alleged to conveniently encompass all urban trends everywhere” (ibid.). As we would like to avoid running into this shortcoming-trap, we are very interested in the case studies of other cities that will be presented at the conference. We hope to gain new perspectives to understand how the urban varies between different cities and to thereby avoid the foreseeable perils that arise from generalizing one particular city.

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