

Academic literature on creative cities has only just recently started to incorporate the experiences of cities outside the roster of relatively large, wealthy cities of the global north (Kanai & Ortega-Alcázar, 2009; Luckman et al., 2009). Much of the critical literature furthermore tends to see the creative city as aggravating class and race inequalities and consequently blames culture-led urban change for leading to gentrification, displacement and exclusion (Catungal & Leslie, 2009; Peck, 2005). However, this short paper will argue that academics, who in turn can influence policy, need to look beyond this group of relatively homogenous cities to fully be able to evaluate the value of the creative cities discourse. Such an attempt will be undertaken here by looking at the Cubao Expo, an arts district in Manila.

The Cubao Expo is a small 'creative space' (Lehtovuori & Havik, 2009: 207) housed in a former shoe exposition. When the Philippine economy underwent drastic liberalisation during the 1990s, the shoe industry was quickly outmatched by cheap East Asian competitors, leaving shoe retailers unable to pay their leases (Sun.Star Manila, 2009). Around the millennium, the vacant shops were instead taken up by nine groups of artists, who became known collectively as Cubao X. In the ensuing years, the area increasingly gentrified with the influx of bars, galleries and shops selling everything from second-hand books to organic groceries, paraphernalia and even hipster Scandinavian furniture. By 2009, as rents had continued to rise, only a couple of the original shoe retailers and one of the Cubao X galleries still remained in the area (Diaz, 2009). In many ways, Cubao Expo thus seems to mimic the trajectory of other arts and culture districts like SoHo (Zukin, 1982) and Hoxton (Pratt, 2009).



Image 1: One of the few surviving shoe retailers in Cubao Expo.  
Source: <http://cubao-x.blogspot.com/>

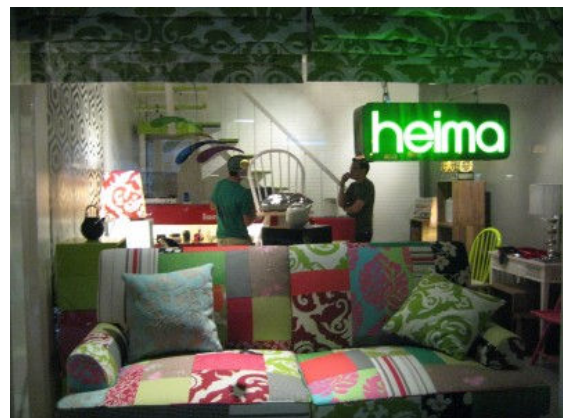


Image 2: Scandinavian designer furniture shop 'heima'.  
Source: <http://www.psfk.com/2009/05/scandinasian-design-shopschool.html>

However, looking beyond an urban economics perspective, it becomes clear that the Cubao Expo shows variances from the 'classic' gentrification script. Like Lower Parel in Mumbai (Harris, 2005) and 798 in Beijing (Currier, 2006), the Cubao Expo has its own



Image 3: A rare sight; middle class Manileños socialising in the streets.  
Source: <http://projectmanila.com/blog/index.php?s=mogwai>

idiosyncrasies which set it apart from its 'Western' counterparts. Situated in a city where public space is not only extremely limited but indeed decreasing (Baguioro, 2002; Connell, 1999), the Cubao Expo has become a new type of public, civic space. Manila is notorious for its stark socio-spatial segregation, where many middle class citizens only seldom engaging with the 'public city' (Shatkin, 2008: 391). The Cubao Expo is a rare example of a mainly middle class space where access isn't restricted by guards and where the streets are used for public and free events. The vital role of the arts in creating this particular type of space is difficult to refute. This is not to say that processes of exclusion do not exist, but rather that these have to be seen relative to the even stronger exclusionary practices in the rest of the city. As Jones and Douglass argue, in Manila '[g]oing to the mall exists in a vacuum of alternatives' (2008: 292). However, the Cubao Expo might just have started to fill this vacuum.

Word count: 500,-

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