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Richard E. Ocejo, "Upscaling Downtown. From Bowery Saloons to Cocktail Bars in New York City". Princeton Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, XIII+257 pp.

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Book Review

Richard E. Ocejo, “Upscaling Downtown. From Bowery Saloons to Cocktail Bars in New York City”. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, XIII+257 pp.

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Richard Ocejo’s *Upscaling Downtown* offers a new take on the gentrification process affecting one of the areas that urban scholars have read the most about, Manhattan’s East Side and, more specifically, the East Village, the Lower East Side and the Bowery.

Since its first appearance, the term “gentrification” has been largely used to refer to the production of urban spaces for increasingly more affluent users, within a process of global change of leading economic sectors and of the geography of state power. At the start of the 1960s, the British sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term to identify a new and distinct process of urban change that was beginning to affect Inner London, connecting demographic and residential transformations to economic and architectural ones. Indeed, she described the restoration of old housing stock, a tenure shift from renting to owning, an increase in property price and the displacement of working-class residents by the incoming middle class, with a consequent change in the general social character of the neighbourhood. To affirm that research on gentrification is substantial would be quite an understatement. Over time, the term has become an umbrella concept covering studies that adopt different starting points as well as different ideological and methodological approaches. This frame, however, has been able to draw attention to the intertwining of the material, economic and sociocultural dimensions of the processes of urban changes and, while for few decades scholars have mainly focussed on causality, recent studies increasingly address the social, cultural and economic consequences of these dynamics too.

The beautifully written book by Ocejo stands well in this tradition while distinguishing itself for its specific attention on nighttime entertainment and commercial gentrification. It presents an ethnographically grounded analysis of the changing nightlife scene in Downtown Manhattan, investigating bars and nighttime entertainment businesses as both symbols and catalysts of gentrification. The choice of focus is in itself of great interest. Indeed, while almost fifty years of gentrification studies have mostly addressed the residential aspects of neighbourhood change, only in recent times have scholars started to wonder what role commercial transformations may play in broader dynamics of urban change and social inequalities. Pointing out this gap, the author aims “to raise awareness of the impacts of commercial change on everyday life in today’s postindustrial city” [p. 209], making an argument about “how bars and nightlife scenes structure and influence life in downtown neighbourhoods that have become, through advanced gentrification, upscale destinations for consumers and residents and prime locations for investment” [p. 210]. In developing this issue, the book interestingly builds on different traditions of research, connecting reflections on gentrification with studies on nightlife entertainment and on the role of amenities in the processes of urban growth. Ocejo’s study highlights the relevance of nightlife and urban temporalities, which are often neglected in researches on urban transformations. However, they here emerge as crucial aspects to understand the social and cultural implications of urban changes. In-

deed, as mentioned in the preface, “if downtown Manhattan features a quiet balance of old and new during the day, the nighttime tells a different story” [p. XI]. The famous image of the “frontier,” adopted from Neil Smith onwards to spatially describe the front line of gentrification, affecting district after district, is here developed also temporally, as nighttime becomes increasingly more colonised, tamed and regulated.

Another distinctive characteristic of the book is the attention the author devotes to the regulatory and political aspects of the growth of the nightlife scene. Specifically, Oejo examines the regulations governing the licensing process and, even more interestingly, their concrete, and often controversial, implementation. Indeed, instead of focusing on the analysis of relevant regulations only, the author illustrates how rules are interpreted by different actors, unveiling the asymmetry in the interactions between residents’ community boards, who may give advice on licensing, and the state offices, which are in charge of ruling and taking the final decision. Analysing the meaning each set of actors assigns to the concept of “local interest,” the book shows that local authorities, by adopting an urban growth discourse, give prominence to the economic development, while residents connect it to the prevention of quality of life disturbance and the alteration of the local environment through the growth of nightlife. These different interpretations create a clash over the implementation of the law as well as over the legitimate use of the neighbourhood, resulting in the emergence of forms of resistance and protest.

The book is divided into six chapters, each of them addressing a specific issue related to the growth and transformation of the nightlife scene in Downtown Manhattan. It also comes with a short but interesting methodological appendix that reconstructs the research path behind the book, providing the reader with a sense of the research process, the discoveries and the decisions taken by the author during the four years of fieldwork.

The first chapter introduces the case study and presents a brief social history of the district by discussing the transformations of its bar and nightlife from the late 1970s onwards. It illustrates the roles bars have played over time: safe refuge for homeless people, public gatherings for new residents, artistic hubs and, later on, nighttime destinations for young revellers from all over the city. Along the process, not only has the number of nighttime entertainment businesses increased, but also the offer they provide and the people they cater to have deeply changed. The second chapter continues by examining the growth of the nightlife scene and the role of the local government in influencing its development. The author underlines that “it was not either-or but a combination of market and government” [p. 63] process, in which policies and city growth agenda played however a key role. The rules on the establishment of new bars are illustrated, as well as the tensions between residents and local state offices surrounding their implementation. We get to learn how the New York State Liquor Authority manages retail licenses and rules on the geography of the nightlife, interpreting the law to support the growth of nighttime entertainment businesses. The chapter also investigates the opposing position of the residents and the protests against the increasing proliferation of bars, blamed to negatively affect the quality of life and the neighbourhood’s atmosphere.

The following two chapters focus on two different actors of the neighbourhood’s social life, namely residents and bar owners. The third chapter examines the narratives through which a specific segment of the local residents, the early gentrifiers, frames and reacts to the progressive change of the nightlife scene. Early gentrifiers are those who

moved to the neighbourhood during its early gentrification and remain there today, holding a distinct position between the lifelong working-class residents and the new residents and visitors. The author illustrates how they define themselves as the symbolic owners of the neighbourhood, in opposition to newcomers and visitors, by adopting a “nostalgia narrative,” which represents a “collective memory, a powerful social construction of the past in the present” that is “strongly connected with one’s identity and sense of community” [p. 92]. Such nostalgia narrative, the author underlines, is built on a partial and selective view of the past, hiding as much about the past as it reveals: early gentrifiers often miss to notice the role they themselves have played in the gentrification process, which has had a strong impact on those already living in the neighbourhood. The following chapter focuses on small-business ownership and local nighttime entrepreneurs and it examines their role in the process of change, providing an interesting and innovative contribution to gentrification studies. The author investigates their social, cultural and economic background, their motivation to open and the way they define their role in the neighbourhood. In doing so, he highlights a distinction between commercial pioneers and latecomers. The former are described as social and cultural entrepreneurs who opened their activities during the first wave of gentrification, when they came to live in the neighbourhood and filled a social gap by holding a social gathering for the new community of early gentrifiers. Unlike the residents, however, the commercial entrepreneurs are aware of the role they have played in changing the neighbourhood and supporting the gentrification process. New bar owners often come from the same social backgrounds as the early gentrifiers, the commercial pioneers and the incoming young residents, but usually they do not live in the neighbourhood, and they differ from the pioneers because of the economic conditions they face, the definition they give of the community they serve and the motivation they present for opening and designing their bars.

In the fifth chapter, issues related to the policing of the nightlife scene are discussed. Local politicians and the police are described as mediating figures among other nighttime actors; however, the author underlines that while residents often petition local lawmakers and police departments to help them in their efforts to fight bars and to address quality-of-life complaints, elected officials actually embrace the growth discourse of the nightlife scene. This results in actions targeting single bar owners and demanding auto-regulation by the owners of the interior and immediate surroundings of the bar, not discussing bar density and proliferation levels. Finally, by examining the community board’s meetings where licensing is discussed, the last chapter investigates the (failed) attempts of the residents to stop the proliferation of new bars through this form of local participatory democracy, unveiling its limits. It also addresses the different interpretations of appropriate use of the neighbourhood that residents and bar owners play out in these meetings, underlining the fact that these events quite rarely become an occasion of mediation, but they would rather reinforce the perception and construction each group has about the other.

The book suggests a four-actor game in which residents, entrepreneurs, nighttime revellers and local authorities experience and frame the neighbourhood and its transformations differently, interacting and reacting to each other’s actions. And yet, apart from the differences between early gentrifiers and latecomers, these actors seem way too much internally homogeneous. When talking about the residents’ reactions to the

changing nightlife scene, the focus is almost always on the early gentrifiers, even though references to the existence of lifelong working-class residents, Hispanic and Chinese communities emerge along the book. Not to elaborate the issue further, especially considering the interviews with long-time residents the author has done, appears to be a missed opportunity. The same can be said about long-term commercial owners, most likely belonging to the same background of the long-term population of the neighbourhood, who have been probably put in great difficulty, if not displaced, by the changing nightlife scene too. Another element that would have improved the analytical power of the book and, even more, its generalizability, is a wider examination connecting the changes of Downtown Manhattan night scene with broader city transformations, in terms of policies and urban agenda, on the one side, and of the contemporary transformation of other districts, on the other side. Finally, it is somehow surprising that, in spite of the great attention devoted in the book to issues of policy implementation and regulation of the nightlife scene, references to authors whose works gave a relevant contribution to the debate, such as, for example, Paul Chatterton, Robert Hollands and Laam Hae, who quite recently wrote a book on the gentrification and regulation of nightlife in New York, are quite scarce, if not missing.

To conclude, Richard Ocejo has written an interesting book on the dynamics of change of Manhattan's downtown nightlife scene and on the social and cultural implications of, and reactions to, this transformation. It is an empirically thick and theoretically stimulating analysis, a welcome contribution, useful for students, scholars, and a broader audience, that helps to address the role and relevance that commercial transformations have in the processes of urban change. By using bars as a lens for examining the consequences of the "upscaling process affecting cities like New York during the postindustrial era" [p. 210], he problematizes a "civic agenda of unequal growth and uneven enforcement" [p. 218] that may take different forms of which it is crucial to be aware.

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