

# "Whose Culture? Whose City?"

from *The Cultures of Cities* (1995)

Sharon Zukin

## Editors' introduction

Sharon Zukin's book, *The Cultures of Cities*, from which this excerpt is taken, is appropriately titled in at least two ways. On the one hand, cities are home to countless groups of people who share distinct ways of life. These may be ethnic or racially based, but they may also be occupational, class, age, or sexuality-based cultures. On the other hand, Zukin's analysis relates to several different ways of defining culture. Conceptually, then, there are different cultures that inform different interpretations of cities. As she points out at the opening of the selection, culture in the sense of refined art, literature, theater, dance, and cuisine, has always been a fundamental part of the urban experience. While the upper classes have long been suspicious of the "hedonism" and baseness that often mark urban life, cities have also provided "high culture" as an antidote to this crass vision of the city. But this is just one sense in which culture plays a role in our understanding of urban life.

In addition, Zukin's work examines culture as a instrument of urban governance. Culture, she argues, is also "a powerful means of controlling cities," of regulating spaces of inclusion and exclusion, and of conditioning collective memory by determining what part of the urban landscape gets preserved as heritage or reconstructed as spectacle. This sense of culture echoes Yúdice's approach (see p. 422) to culture as an expedient resource mobilized for specific social objectives. This is not a culture of high art or literature. In fact, as Yúdice argues, the content of this culture ("high" or "low," "refined" or "popular") is far less important than its utility in achieving a certain social goal.

Culture is also a set of images or symbols used to sell the city to outsiders, to encourage them to visit, spend their money, invest, or relocate their residence or business. While this sense of culture also views it as a resource, the broader framework is to see cities developing a "symbolic economy" as a new means of accumulating footloose capital.

Finally, culture in Zukin's analysis is also a terrain of struggle, in the sense originally proposed by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci argued that dominant classes maintained their power not simply by "controlling the means of production," as Marx would have it, but by *controlling culture*, by exerting *cultural hegemony*. Struggles by subalterns against the dominant classes, then, were as much struggles over the cultural field as they were struggles over relations of production. In Zukin's work, this struggle occurs between the dominant crafters of the "symbolic economy" (city governments, boosters, real estate developers, corporations) and local communities, neighborhoods, activists, and other grass-roots groups. The symbolic economy typically entails public-private partnerships. As governments relinquish part of their provision of welfare and other public goods to the private sector, culture is now deployed to help fill in the gaps. The spaces in which

this deployment occurs are often "semi-public" in that they are privately owned or managed. And such spaces are increasingly being substituted for the traditional public spaces in which, according to Zukin, a democratic and grass-roots urban culture thrives.

*The Cultures of Cities* complements a broad swath of work in cultural geography that focuses on the political economy of the culture industries, and of "selling places." See, for instance, Kearns and Philo's *Selling Places: The City as Cultural Capital* (1993) and Allen Scott's *The Cultural Economy of Cities* (2000). Yet, as argued in the introduction to this section of the *Reader*, the cultural economy involves more than bringing a political-economic focus to bear on the production of culture. For Zukin, it also means recognizing that the value of economic goods is increasingly dominated by symbolic or cultural properties, and that Disney is a more appropriate model of economic value chains than Ford. There remains debate, however, over the extent to which there really has been a "symbolic turn" in the economy. Daniel Miller ("The unintended political economy," in P. du Gay and M. Pryke, eds., *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life*, 2002, pp. 166–184), for example, has argued that there is no convincing evidence of such a shift and that the assertion that the economy is now more cultural than before represents "a sleight of hand through which a shift in academic emphasis is presupposed to reflect a shift in the world that these academics are describing."

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Cities are often criticized because they represent the basest instincts of human society. They are built versions of Leviathan and Mammon, mapping the power of the bureaucratic machine or the social pressures of money. We who live in cities like to think of "culture" as the antidote to this crass vision. The Acropolis of the urban art museum or concert hall, the trendy art gallery and café, restaurants that fuse ethnic traditions into culinary logos – cultural activities are supposed to lift us out of the mire of our everyday lives and into the sacred spaces of ritualized pleasures.

Yet culture is also a powerful means of controlling cities. As a source of images and memories, it symbolizes "who belongs" in specific places. As a set of architectural themes, it plays a leading role in urban redevelopment strategies based on historic preservation or local "heritage." With the disappearance of local manufacturing industries and periodic crises in government and finance, culture is more and more the business of cities – the basis of their tourist attractions and their unique, competitive edge. The growth of cultural consumption (of art, food, fashion, music, tourism) and the industries that cater to it fuels the city's symbolic economy, its visible ability to produce both symbols and space.

In recent years, culture has also become a more explicit site of conflicts over social differences and urban fears. Large numbers of new immigrants and ethnic minorities have put pressure on public institutions, from schools to political parties, to deal with their individual demands. Such high culture institutions as art museums and symphony orchestras have been driven to expand and diversify their offerings to appeal to a broader public. These pressures, broadly speaking, are both ethnic and aesthetic. By creating policies and ideologies of "multiculturalism," they have forced public institutions to change.

On a different level, city boosters increasingly compete for tourist dollars and financial investments by bolstering the city's image as a center of cultural innovation, including restaurants, avant garde performances, and architectural design. These cultural strategies of redevelopment have fewer critics than multiculturalism. But they often pit the self-interest of real estate developers, politicians, and expansion-minded cultural institutions against grassroots pressures from local communities.

At the same time, strangers mingling in public space and fears of violent crime have inspired the growth of private police forces, gated and barred

communities, and a movement to design public spaces for maximum surveillance. These, too, are a source of contemporary urban culture. If one way of dealing with the material inequalities of city life has been to aestheticize diversity, another way has been to aestheticize fear.

Controlling the various cultures of cities suggests the possibility of controlling all sorts of urban ills, from violence and hate crime to economic decline. That this is an illusion has been amply shown by battles over multiculturalism and its warring factions – ethnic politics and urban riots. Yet the cultural power to create an image, to frame a vision, of the city has become more important as publics have become more mobile and diverse, and traditional institutions – both social classes and political parties – have become less relevant mechanisms of expressing identity. Those who create images stamp a collective identity. Whether they are media corporations like the Disney Company, art museums, or politicians, they are developing new spaces for public cultures. Significant public spaces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – such as Central Park, the Broadway theater district, and the top of the Empire State Building – have been joined by Disney World, Bryant Park, and the entertainment-based retail shops of Sony Plaza. By accepting these spaces without questioning their representations of urban life, we risk succumbing to a visually seductive, privatized public culture.

### THE SYMBOLIC ECONOMY

Anyone who walks through midtown Manhattan comes face to face with the symbolic economy (see map of Manhattan). A significant number of new public spaces owe their particular shape and form to the intertwining of cultural symbols and entrepreneurial capital.

■ The AT&T Building, whose Chippendale roof was a much criticized icon of postmodern architecture, has been sold to the Japanese entertainment giant Sony; the formerly open public areas at street level have been enclosed as retail stores and transformed into Sony plaza. Each store sells Sony products: video cameras in one shop, clothes and accessories related to

performers under contract to Sony's music or film division in another. Sony's interactive science museum features the opportunity to get hands-on experience with Sony video equipment. Sony had to get the city government's approval both to enclose these stores and set them up for retail shopping, for the original agreement to build the office tower had depended on providing public space. Critics charged that retail stores are not public space, and even the city planning commissioners admitted they were perplexed by the question. "In return for the retail space," the chairman of the local community board said, "we would like to hold Sony to the original understanding to create a peaceful refuge, which certainly didn't include corporate banners and a television monitor." "We like it," the president of Sony Plaza replied. The banners "are seen as art and bring warmth and color to the space" (*New York Times*, January 30, 1994).

■ Two blocks away, André Emmerich, a leading contemporary art dealer, rented an empty storefront in a former bank branch to show three huge abstract canvases by the painter Al Held. Entitled *Harry, If I Told You, Would You Know?* the group of paintings was exhibited in raw space, amid falling plaster, peeling paint, exposed wires, and unfinished floors, and passersby viewed the exhibit from the street through large plate glass windows. The work of art was certainly for sale, yet it was displayed as if it were a free, public good; and it would never have been there had the storefront been rented by a more usual commercial tenant.

■ On 42nd Street, across from my office, Bryant Park is considered one of the most successful public spaces to be created in New York City in recent years. After a period of decline, disuse, and daily occupation by vagrants and drug dealers, the park was taken over by a not-for-profit business association of local property owners and their major corporate tenants, called the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation. This group redesigned the park and organized daylong programs of cultural events; they renovated the kiosks and installed new food services; they hired a phalanx of private security guards. All this attracted nearby office workers, both women and men, who make the park a lively midday gathering place, as it had been prior

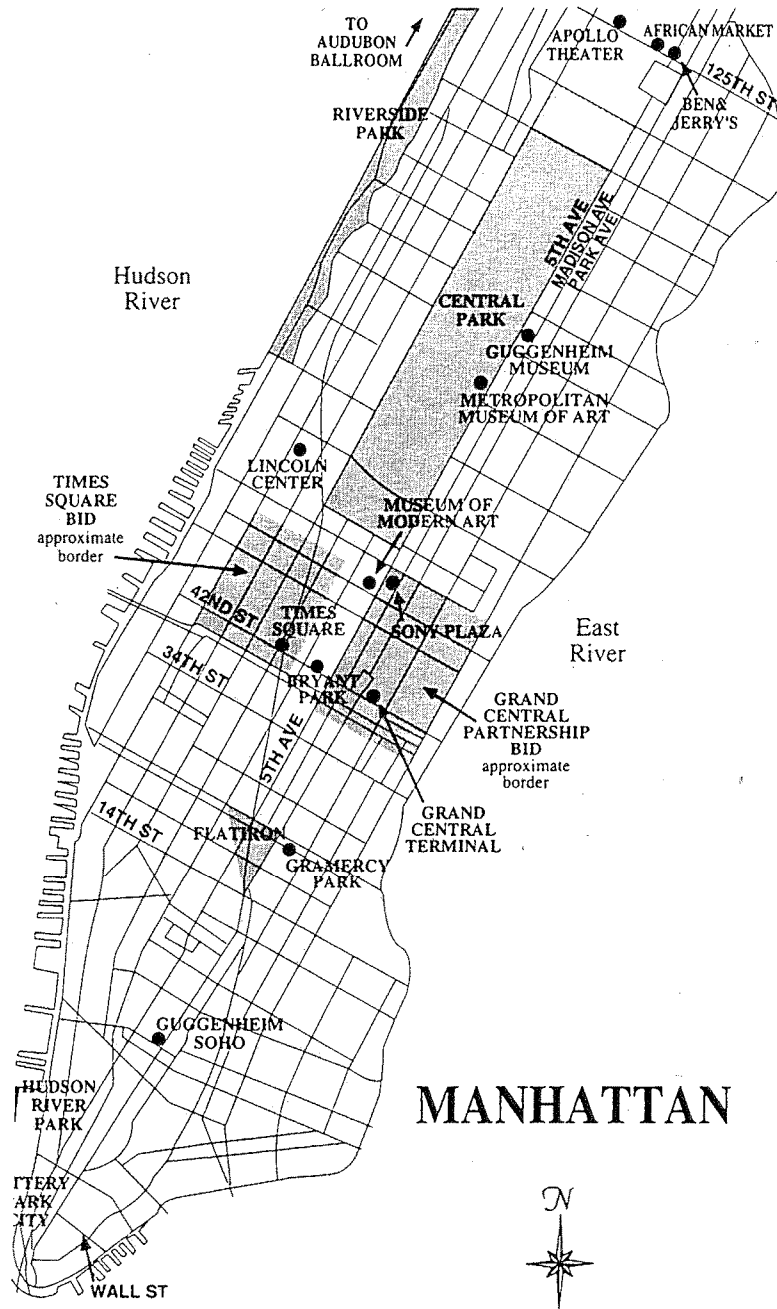


Figure 1 Manhattan

to the mid 1970s – a public park under private control.

Building a city depends on how people combine the traditional economic factors of land, labor, and

capital. But it also depends on how they manipulate symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement. The look and feel of cities reflect decisions about what – and who – should be visible and what should not, on concepts of order and disorder, and

on uses of aesthetic power. In this primal sense, the city has always had a symbolic economy. Modern cities also owe their existence to a second, more abstract symbolic economy devised by [what Molotch called] "place entrepreneurs," officials and investors whose ability to deal with the symbols of growth yields "real" results in real estate development, new businesses, and jobs.

Related to this entrepreneurial activity is a third, traditional symbolic economy of city advocates and business elites who, through a combination of philanthropy, civic pride, and desire to establish their identity as a patrician class, build the majestic art museums, parks, and architectural complexes that represent a world-class city. What is new about the symbolic economy since the 1970s is its symbiosis of image and product, the scope and scale of selling images on a national and even a global level, and the role of the symbolic economy in speaking for, or representing, the city.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the symbolic economy rose to prominence against a background of industrial decline and financial speculation. The metamorphosis of American-made products into Mexican blue jeans, Japanese autos, and East Asian computers emptied the factories where those goods had been made. Companies that were the largest employers in their communities went out of business or were bought and restructured by takeover artists.

The entrepreneurial edge of the economy shifted toward deal making and selling investments and toward those creative products that could not easily be reproduced elsewhere. Product design – creating the look of a thing – was said to show economic genius. Hollywood film studios and media empires were bought and sold and bought again. In the 1990s, with the harnessing of new computer-based technologies to marketing campaigns, the "information superhighway" promised to join companies to consumers in a Manichean embrace of technology and entertainment. "The entertainment industry is now the driving force for new technology, as defense used to be," the CEO of a U.S. software company said.

The growth of the symbolic economy in finance, media, and entertainment may not change the way entrepreneurs do business. But it has already forced the growth of towns and cities, created a vast new work force, and changed the way consumers

and employees think. In the early 1990s, employment in "entertainment and recreation" in the United States grew slightly more than in health care and six times more than in the auto industry. The facilities where these employees work – hotels, restaurants, expanses of new construction and undeveloped land – are more than just workplaces. They reshape geography and ecology; they are places of creation and transformation.

The Disney Company, for example, makes films and distributes them from Hollywood. It runs a television channel and sells commercial spinoffs, such as toys, books, and videos, from a national network of stores. Disney is also a real estate developer in Anaheim, Orlando, France, and Japan and the proposed developer of a theme park in Virginia and a hotel and theme park in Times Square. Moreover, as an employer, Disney has redefined work roles. Proposing a model for change in the emerging service economy, Disney has shifted from the white-collar worker described by C. Wright Mills in the 1950s to a new chameleon of "flexible" tasks. The planners at its corporate headquarters are "imagineers"; the costumed crowd-handlers at its theme parks are "cast members." Disney suggests that the symbolic economy is more than just the sum of the services it provides. The symbolic economy unifies material practices of finance, labor, art, performance, and design.

The prominence of culture industries also inspires a new language dealing with difference. It offers a coded means of discrimination, an undertone to the dominant discourse of democratization. Styles that develop on the streets are cycled through mass media, especially fashion and "urban music" magazines and MTV, where, divorced from their social context, they become images of cool. On urban billboards advertising designer perfumes or jeans, they are recycled to the streets, where they become a provocation, breeding imitation and even violence. The beachheads of designer stores, from Armani to A/X, from Ralph Lauren to Polo, are fiercely parodied for the "props" of fashion-conscious teenagers in inner city ghettos. The cacophony of demands for justice is translated into a coherent demand for jeans. Claims for public space by culture industries inspire the counterpolitics of display in late twentieth century urban riots.

The symbolic economy recycles real estate as it does designer clothes. Visual display matters in

American and European cities today, because the identities of places are established by sites of delectation. The sensual display of fruit at an urban farmers' market or gourmet food store puts a neighborhood "on the map" of visual delights and reclaims it for gentrification. A sidewalk cafe takes back the street from casual workers and homeless people. In Bryant Park, enormous white tents and a canopied walkway set the scene for spring and fall showings of New York fashion designers. Twice a year, the park is filled by the fashion media, paparazzi, store buyers, and supermodels doing the business of culture and reclaiming Bryant Park as a vital, important place. We New Yorkers become willing participants in the drama of the fashion business. As cultural consumers, we are drawn into the interrelated production of symbols and space.

Mass suburbanization since the 1950s has made it unreasonable to expect that most middle-class men and women will want to live in cities. But developing small places within the city as sites of visual delectation creates urban oases where everyone *appears* to be middle-class. In the fronts of the restaurants or stores, at least, consumers are strolling, looking, eating, drinking, sometimes speaking English and sometimes not. In the back regions, an ethnic division of labor guarantees that immigrant workers are preparing food and cleaning up.

This is not just a game of representations: developing the city's symbolic economy involves recycling workers, sorting people in housing markets, luring investment, and negotiating political claims for public goods and ethnic promotion. Cities from New York to Los Angeles and Miami seem to thrive by developing small districts around specific themes. Whether it is Times Square or el Calle Ocho, a commercial or an "ethnic" district, the narrative web spun by the symbolic economy around a specific place relies on a vision of cultural consumption and a social and an ethnic division of labor.

As cities and societies place greater emphasis on visualization, the Disney Company and art museums play more prominent roles in defining public culture. I am speaking, first, of public culture as a process of negotiating images that are accepted by large numbers of people. In this sense, culture industries and cultural institutions have stepped into the vacuum left by government. At least since the 1970s debacles of Watergate and the Vietnam War, through Irangate in the 1980s and the

confessions of politicians in the 1990s, government has lacked the basic credibility to define the core values of a common culture. On the local level, most mayors and other elected officials have been too busy clearing budget deficits and dealing with constituents' complaints about crime and schools to project a common image. The "vision thing," as George Bush called it, has been supplied by religious leaders from Jerry Falwell to Jesse Jackson and by those institutions whose visual resources permit or even require them to capitalize on culture.

I also see public culture as socially constructed on the micro-level. It is produced by the many social encounters that make up daily life in the streets, shops, and parks – the spaces in which we experience public life in cities. The right to be in these spaces, to use them in certain ways, to invest them with a sense of our selves and our communities – to claim them as ours and to be claimed in turn by them – make up a constantly changing public culture. People with economic and political power have the greatest opportunity to shape public culture by controlling the building of the city's public spaces in stone and concrete. Yet public space is inherently democratic. The question of who can occupy public space, and so define an image of the city, is open-ended.

Talking about the cultures of cities in purely visual terms does not do justice to the material practices of politics and economics that create a symbolic economy. But neither does a strictly political-economic approach suggest the subtle powers of visual and spatial strategies of social differentiation. As I suggested in *Landscapes of Power* (1991), the rise of the cities' symbolic economy is rooted in two long-term changes – the economic decline of cities compared to suburban and nonurban spaces and the expansion of abstract financial speculation – and in such short-term factors, dating from the 1970s and 1980s, as new mass immigration, the growth of cultural consumption, and the marketing of identity politics. This is an inclusive, structural, and materialist view. If I am right, we cannot speak about cities today without understanding:

- how cities use culture as an economic base,
- how capitalizing on culture spills over into the privatization and militarization of public space, and
- how the power of culture is related to the aesthetics of fear.

## CULTURE AS AN ECONOMIC BASE

Suppose we turn the old Marxist relation between a society's base and its superstructure on its head and think of culture as a way of producing basic goods. In fact, culture supplies the basic information – including symbols, patterns, and meaning – for nearly all the service industries. In our debased contemporary vocabulary, the word *culture* has become an abstraction for any economic activity that does not create material products like steel, cars, or computers. Stretching the term is a legacy of the advertising revolution of the early twentieth century and the more recent escalation in political image making. Because culture is a system for producing symbols, every attempt to get people to buy a product becomes a culture industry. The sociologist Daniel Bell used to tell a joke about a circus employee whose job it was to follow the elephant and clean up after it; when asked, she said her job was in “the entertainment business.” Today, she might say she was in “the culture industry.” Culture is intertwined with capital and identity in the city's production systems.

From one point of view, cultural institutions establish a competitive advantage over other cities for attracting new businesses and corporate elites. Culture suggests the coherence and consistency of a brand name product. Like any commodity, “cultural” landscape has the possibility of generating other commodities. Historically, of course, the arrow of causality goes the other way. Only an economic surplus – sufficient to fund sacrifices for the temple, Michelangelos for the chapel, and bequests to art museums in the wills of robber barons – generates culture. But in American and European cities during the 1970s, culture became more of an instrument in the entrepreneurial strategies of local governments and business alliances. In the shift to a post-postwar economy, who could build the biggest modern art museum suggested the vitality of the financial sector. Who could turn the waterfront from docklands rubble to parks and marinas suggested the possibilities for expansion of the managerial and professional corps. This was probably as rational a response as any to the unbeatable isolationist challenge of suburban industrial parks and office campuses. The city, such planners and developers as James Rouse believed, would counter the visual homogeneity

of the suburbs by playing the card of aesthetic diversity.

Yet culture also suggests a labor force that is well suited to the revolution of diminished expectations that began in the 1960s. In contrast to high-rolling rappers and rockers, “high” cultural producers are supposed to live on the margins; and the incomes of most visual artists, art curators, actors, writers, and musicians suggest they must be used to deprivation. A widespread appreciation of culture does not really temper the work force's demands. But, in contrast to workers in other industries, artists are flexible on job tasks and work hours, do not always join labor unions, and present a docile or even “cultured” persona. These qualities make them, like immigrants, desirable employees in service industries. Dissatisfaction with menial and dead-end jobs does not boil over into protest because their “real” identity comes from an activity outside the job.

[...]

## CULTURE AS A MEANS OF FRAMING SPACE

For several hundred years, visual representations of cities have “sold” urban growth. Images, from early maps to picture postcards, have not simply reflected real city spaces; instead, they have been imaginative reconstructions – from specific points of view – of a city's monumentality. The development of visual media in the twentieth century made photography and movies the most important cultural means of framing urban space, at least until the 1970s. Since then, as the surrealism of *King Kong* shifted to that of *Blade Runner* and redevelopment came to focus on consumption activities, the material landscape itself – the buildings, parks, and streets – has become the city's most important visual representation. Indeed, in *Blade Runner*, the modern urban landscape is used as a cult object. Far more than King Kong's perch on the Empire State Building, *Blade Runner's* use of the Bradbury Building, an early twentieth century office building in downtown Los Angeles that has been preserved and lovingly restored, emphasizes the city's material landscape as a visual backdrop for a new high-tech, global society...

[...]

More common forms of visual re-presentation in all cities connect cultural activities and populist images in festivals, sports stadiums, and shopping centers. While these may simply be minimized as "loss leaders" supporting new office construction, they should also be understood as producing space for a symbolic economy. In the 1960s, new or restored urban shopping centers from Boston to Seattle copied suburban shopping malls by developing clean space according to a visually coherent theme. To the surprise of some urban planners, they actually thrived. No longer did the city's dream world of commercial culture relate to the bourgeois culture of the old downtown or the patrician culture of art museums and public buildings. Instead, urban commercial culture became "entertainment," aimed at attracting a mobile public of cultural consumers. This altered the public culture of the city.

Linking public culture to commercial cultures has important implications for social identity and social control. Preserving an ecology of images often takes a connoisseur's view of the past, re-reading the legible practices of social class discrimination and financial speculation by reshaping the city's collective memory. Boston's Faneuil Hall, South Street Seaport in New York, Harborplace in Baltimore, and London's Tobacco Wharf make the waterfront of older cities into a consumers' playground, far safer for tourists and cultural consumers than the closed worlds of wholesale fish and vegetable dealers and longshoremen . . .

[...]

Culture can also be used to frame, and humanize, the space of real estate development. Cultural producers who supply art (and sell "interpretation") are sought because they legitimize the appropriation of space. Office buildings are not just monumentalized by height and facades, they are given a human face by video artists' screen installations and public concerts. Every well-

designed downtown has a mixed-use shopping center and a nearby artists' quarter. Sometimes it seems that every derelict factory district or waterfront has been converted into one of those sites of visual delectation – a themed shopping space for seasonal produce, cooking equipment, restaurants, art galleries, and an aquarium. . . .

[...]

So the symbolic economy features two parallel production systems that are crucial to a city's material life: the *production of space*, with its synergy of capital investment and cultural meanings, and the *production of symbols*, which constructs both a currency of commercial exchange and a language of social identity. Every effort to rearrange space in the city is also an attempt at visual re-presentation. Raising property values, which remains a goal of most urban elites, requires imposing a new point of view. But negotiating whose point of view and the costs of imposing it create problems for public culture.

Creating a public culture involves both shaping public space for social interaction and constructing a visual representation of the city. Who occupies public space is often decided by negotiations over physical security, cultural identity, and social and geographical community. These issues have been at the core of urban anxieties for hundreds of years. They are significant today, however, because of the complexity and diversity of urban populations. Today the stakes of cultural reorganization are most visible in three basic shifts in the sources of cultural identity:

- from local to global images,
- from public to private institutions, and
- from ethnically and racially homogeneous communities to those that are more diverse.

These rather abstract concepts have a concrete impact on framing urban public space.