

Alessandro Busà

REZONING NEW YORK CITY

City Producers, City Consumers, and the Production of Space in the Times of Bloomberg

ABSTRACT

This work connects scholarly research on capitalist-driven urbanization (Harvey, 1989, 2008; Lefebvre, 1970) with an empirical analysis of specific patterns of sociospatial restructuring in New York City. Drawing on three recent cases of redevelopment through rezoning set forth by the Bloomberg Administration, the dissertation investigates the ongoing process of production and consumption of space in New York City. In addition to providing an empirical analysis of how processes of restructuring find their “spatialization” in the urban landscape (Brenner, 2002), this work also exposes the strategic actors behind the production and consumption of space in this specific urban context.

After introducing the growth agenda pursued during Bloomberg’s first mayoral terms (2002- 2009), I highlight the role of specific key actors (“City Producers”) in “producing” the city, i.e., in shaping its socioeconomic and physical fabric, as well as producing its representations. Amid the many political strategies of socio-economic restructuring of the urban landscape, I particularly emphasize: the role of rezoning as a planning device allowing for the production of a new physical and social space; and the role of city-marketing and branding campaigns in “advertising” urban life and the city as symbolic commodities. I then address the main recipients of the produced city (“City Consumers”), investigating their practices of consumption of the urban space, of urban lifestyles and of their representations. Throughout the dissertation, I analyze in detail the case of New York City under the first two Bloomberg mayoral terms, both before and after the Wall Street meltdown of 2008. By focusing on three case studies of redevelopment through rezoning in iconic places widely portrayed in the popular culture - 125th Street in Harlem, the Lower East in Downtown Manhattan, and Coney Island in Brooklyn - I illustrate in concrete terms the concepts I introduced by examining specific patterns of urban development and political practice, as well as patterns of consumption of the newly engineered urban space.

AIMS / METHODS

The research work was designed through a mixed-method approach which makes use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection. The research developed according to the canons of so-called “grounded theory”. It relied upon the process of collecting and analyzing data in different stages along a 4-year period of time, while inductively gradually developing a theory which was grounded in the data collected.

AIM 1 - To investigate how the process of production and consumption of the urban space finds its “spatialization” in the specific context of New York City under the Bloomberg administration.
METHODS - Analysis of planning and policy documents, interviews with city planning officials, planning review of newly completed developments projects, field research and photographic reportage.

AIM 2 - To investigate the “spatial practices” of City Producers, their aims, and their contribution to the production of space in Bloomberg’s New York.
METHODS - Interviews with local and extra-local stakeholders, analysis of policy discourses of local authorities, developers and business groups. Literature review.

AIM 3 - To investigate the “spatial practices” of City Consumers, their aims, and their contribution to the production of space in Bloomberg’s New York.
METHODS - Interviews with local and extra-local interest groups and individuals. Literature review.

AIM 4 - To unravel the practice of rezoning in its implications as both a physical design tool as well as a socio-economic engineering device aimed at a flexible “extraction of value” (Weber, 2002) from once unprofitable real estate.
METHODS - On-field research, analysis of rezoning plans and planning documents. Analysis of reports on housing spending and housing production. Analysis of planning and policy documents of local authorities, developers and realtors.

AIM 5 - To investigate the role urban branding strategies play in advertising New York’s urban space and “urban lifestyle” as symbolic commodities.
METHODS - Analysis of policy documents of the local city branding agency, analysis of online content, brochures, statements. Literature review.

AIM 6 - To unveil the gap between official discourses and practices in urban policies under the Bloomberg administration;
METHODS - Discourse analysis of city planning statements, review of official talks by city officials, review of Department of City Planning’s renderings and presentation. Analysis of the outcomes of the proposed plans in terms of their design and of their social sustainability. Quantitative data surveys on housing availability and affordability, housing spending, jobs and income creation, displacement and homelessness in New York City.

AIM 7 - To explore the perceptions of local residents and communities as well as those of advocacy groups in the areas undergoing rezoning;
METHODS - Participant observation at community board meetings, action research. Qualitative data collection through interviews. Review of policy statements of local citizen groups and grassroots associations.

AIM 8 - To discuss the dysfunctionality of the current regime of production and consumption of space and its consequences for the survival of the city; to discuss its implications for the notion of a “Right to the City”;
METHODS - Quantitative data surveys on housing availability and affordability, housing spending, unemployment, commuting time, jobs and income creation, displacement and homelessness in New York City.
Interviews with “Right to the City” activists in New York. Literature review.

AIM 9 - To propose a set of recommendations for socially sustainable urban policies in New York City.
METHODS - Analysis of practices and statements of advocacy groups resisting gentrification and displacement and opposing Bloomberg’s urban development agenda. Review of alternative policy recommendations proposed by local politicians, and local think tanks.



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EDUCATION

• Visiting Scholar at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation of Columbia University in New York (September 2006- February 2009)

• DFG Fellowship, Center for Metropolitan Studies, Transatlantic Research Program Berlin/New York (January 2008-present)

• Master Degree in Architecture cum Laude, (MArch, Dipl.-Ing.) at the Technische Universität Berlin.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE (LATEST)

External Reviewer, Designing the City, course by Jeffrey Schumaker, Urban Studies Department at Fordham University. New York, May 3rd 2010

External Reviewer, Radical Urbanism, course by Nina Rappaport, School of Architecture, Syracuse University in New York Program. New York, May 5th, 2010

„Urban Studies and Open Access Publishing“, guest seminar at Pratt Institute, Center for Planning and the Environment, Graduate Center for Planning and the Environment. New York, April 2010

CONFERENCE TALKS, LECTURES (LATEST)

“Where Utopia was born, and died: The Struggles for Coney Island and the Death of Utopia”, (IASTE). Beirut (Lebanon), December 15th-18th 2010 (forthcoming)

“New York’s City Producers, the Global Crisis, and the Green Way Out”, RGS-IGB London (UK), September 1st-3rd 2010

“Rezoning Coney Island: the Struggles over the People’s Playground”, IAPS CSB Housing Network. Istanbul (Turkey), October 12th -16th 2009

“New York’s Routine-Development in Times of Crisis”, RGS-IGB. Manchester (UK), August 26th -28th 2009

“The Production and Consumption of Urbanity in Bloomberg’s New York: The Rezoning Plan for 125th Street in Harlem”, Mapaca Niagara Falls, Ontario October 20th – 26th, 2008

PUBLICATIONS (LATEST)

BOOK CHAPTERS:

„New York City, New York“, in Robbins, Paul, Cohen, Nevin and Golson, J. Geoffrey eds., Green Cities. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers, 2010

„City of Memory“, in Ray Hutchinson ed., Sage Encyclopedia of Urban Studies. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers, 2009: 158-161

„The City Re-Invented: Confronting Urban Strategies in the Entrepreneurial Era“, in 11th Planet Congress Warsaw 2007 ed., Top Down/ Bottom Up. Warsaw, 2008: 43-36

JOURNAL ARTICLES

„The Right to the City - The Entitled and the Excluded“, in Alessandro Busà ed., The Urban Reinventors 3:09. New York, 2009

“Celebrations of Urbanity“ in Alessandro Busà ed., The Urban Reinventors 2:07. New York, 2007.

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Above: New developments along 125th street in Harlem
Right top: New condominium buildings along Delancey Street in The lower East Side, and along 125th Street in Harlem.
Right bottom: Planned condominium buildings along the Ocean waterfront at Coney Island.

