

ENVIRONMENTAL CUES AND SOCIOSPATIAL IMAGINARIES

ABSTRACT

Environmental Cues and the Sociospatial Imaginary: An Examination of Spatial Perception and
Meaning-Making in a Gentrifying Neighborhood

by

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What could be more ordinary or pedestrian than two people walking down an urban street and talking about what we see and what we make of it? Yet this simple, quotidian act of walking a street—seeing, perceiving and experiencing physical spaces, places and objects—and making meaning of what is encountered, is the basis of my dissertation. It is also my basis for claiming that I have learned a great deal—and much unexpectedly—about how differently different people see and interpret the urban streetscape. What are the various environmental cues that stand out to different individuals? What are the psychosocial imaginaries that such cues generate? As I will show, my research suggests that it is *almost as if different people live in different worlds*. Along the exact same streetscapes, different people often see very different things as significant to their understanding of the environment and, when noticing the same things, they often interpret what they see much differently. Ultimately, my challenge with this dissertation is to take the reader from the moment of walking with my participants as they talked to me and took photos of the environmental cues they identified as significant in informing them of the local and general environments of the community of Central Harlem—their sociospatial imaginaries. During the walking interviews, my nine participants produced roughly 1,050 environmental cue-sociospatial imaginary pairs represented predominantly by photographed

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images and accompanying narratives. I walk the reader through a step-by-step analysis of all of the walks—with each participant’s images and commentaries—simultaneously discussing imaginaries comparatively at the collective level and contextually at the individual level.

Working across these two scales of analysis allows me to reveal perspectives and environmental perceptions that are both social, broad and overarching as well as very specific and personal. The neighborhood for my research is not just any neighborhood. No. It is Harlem, fabled as a bedrock in the evolution of Black American cultural identity and now a much-gentrified neighborhood in the swirling vortex of New York City real estate exploitation. My interest in environmental cues and psychosocial imaginaries, then, is connected to the social, racial, political and environmental realities of this exceptional urban space. The walks that I took with my participants are thus heavily influenced by all of these facets as integral to both the history and current status of a community experiencing the spatial flux and conflicts of gentrification. This research began before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic which drastically and globally changed how people interacted with one another. Fortuitously for me, I had already collected a sufficient wealth of data from conducted interviews to begin analysis once stay-at-home orders were issued by local government in March of 2020. In thinking about the participants that I would want to have in my research, I made assertions—mini hypotheses if you will—about the demographics of who I would want to participate and outlined essentially five categories or types of participants: long-term residents, short-term residents, urban designers, critical urban scholars and community activists. How might I get a relatively broad range of responses to my questions about environmental cues and psychosocial imaginaries? And while I don’t intend to reduce my participants to mere representatives of different demographics, the findings of this study demonstrate that there is a tangible difference between responses from these participants. Such

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differences are so salient that, in another similar study involving much larger numbers, we could expect to learn even more about how different groups of people perceive and imagine the built environment. These differentiated perceptions are based not only on the particular environmental cues that they deem significant, but also on their shared or different demographic backgrounds, social identities and environmental histories. Furthermore, the findings of this research suggests that individuals are able to draw significant meanings and produced expansive imaginaries around race, class, gender and other social constructs, statuses and processes from the perception of a variety of dimensions of seemingly mundane material culture such as architecture, spaces, places, and objects.