

Building a bohemian boomtown: The construction of a 'creative class' in Asheville, North Carolina.

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**Building a Bohemian Boom
Town: The Construction of a
'Creative Class' in Asheville,
North Carolina**

by

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Asheville North Carolina is currently on the radar for developers, tourists, young couples and retirees looking for the perfect place to relocate. As a result of the development, sleek new buildings are popping up downtown and sidewalks are expanding to accommodate outdoor cafes and more and more visitors. Billboards line the highways leading to the city, advertising the openings of the sunset-bathed gated golfing communities, with captions boasting their

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proximity to downtown.

The ways Asheville is portrayed in tourist and travel guides would lead anyone to believe that the city is a paradise of idealism, unique shops, creative energies, and mountain vistas. As local business owner Sasha proclaims, "Oh, it's one of the best cities in the whole United States, there's no question. It's beautiful, friendly, small, not big things, and the people (inaudible). I love it. I'll never go to New York again. I told you how many countries I live in my life and everything, and that's it! I'm gonna die here." A wide spectrum of audiences, ranging from outdoor enthusiasts to art aficionados, agree that Asheville is a special city.

But what is it that is so unique, so special? Uniqueness has become a niche in Asheville, a stylistic device without a defined point of reference. Among my key findings were that development projects, the 'revitalization' of downtown, and the various media representations are cooperating to obscure what is ordinary or lowered about the increasingly moneyed city by promoting, and more importantly, creating "uniqueness." This goes largely undetected because of 1) the growing popularity of "uniqueness" and "progressiveness" in an increasingly homogeneous and conservative culture (Florida, 2002), and 2) the assumption within the "good city" discourse that an unusual city is impervious to mainstream influences (Hanna and Del Casino 2000; McCann 2004). Developing cities and the strategic nature of their representation is understudied, particularly in cities like Asheville that promote this image of "uniqueness" and impenetrability. The rationale of my research is that the politics of representation cannot be investigated without considering the interdependence of urban development,

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gentrification, and cultural representation.

Asheville is certainly not the first city to grow rapidly and end up with internal contradictions. In fact, Asheville has started to be dubbed the Santa Fe, the Santa Cruz, the Eugene, the Ann Arbor, and the Boulder of the East, aligning it with the other small cities that have become popular for similar off-beat appeal. Ironically, by marketing to progressives, New Age artsy types, and quality-of-life-seeking retirees, Asheville is currently funding a revitalization effort that follows the script of many other developing cities.

Richard Florida (2002), a professor of economics at Carnegie Mellon University, is the author of one such popular script, which he has titled "The Rise of the Creative Class." In his discussion of Creative Class theory he explains that "The key to [a city's] economic growth lies not just in the ability to attract the Creative Class, but to translate that underlying advantage into creative economic outcomes... (Florida 2002, p. 188)." Florida's theory was mentioned by one of my informants, who confided that Asheville planners are openly employing the strategy and heralding its success. This is more than plausible when considering the following quote from Florida (2002):

Places are also valued for authenticity and uniqueness. Authenticity comes from several aspects of a community--- historic buildings, established neighborhoods, a unique music scene, or specific cultural attributes. It comes from the mix---from urban grit alongside renovated buildings, from the commingling of young and old, long-time neighborhood characters and

yuppies, fashion models and "bag ladies." An authentic place also offers unique and original experiences. Thus a place full of chain stores, chain restaurants, and nightclubs is not authentic. You could have the same experience anywhere (p. 281).

Creative Class theory is central to my research, since one of my key findings was that Asheville is embracing "authenticity" and "uniqueness" as the dominant strategy for representation, and its proud citizens have for the most part entered into the hegemonic discourse of the "good city."

Theoretical Background

Theories of Urban Development, Planning and Policy

Although I am using Asheville as a case study, it is necessary to link Asheville's current situation to a larger national trend in urban development, often termed urban renewal, renovation, revitalization, regeneration, or rehabilitation (Palen and London, 1984). These terms are most commonly found in the rhetoric employed by urban planners and economic think-tanks. Many American cities are subscribing to the same plans and objectives due to what McCann (2004) has termed "interurban competition:" In their striving to achieve the ratings and rankings of "Among the Best Places to Live," etc., cities are increasingly relying on a combination of economic and extra-economic factors, implying that just as important as actual economic stability and access to resources is creating the perception of such, afforded to the masses through style, image, evidence of "culture," and other attestations to overall quality of life (McCann 2004, pp.1910-

1912). "Thus, power becomes wielded not through contextless articulations that foist power and a new way of seeing on an unsuspecting mainstream, but through cultivating prevailing beliefs and values (McCann 2004, p. 1926)."

This theory, which I define as *The Hegemonic Construction of the Popular Urban Center*, is connected to the creation of the Coalition Framework, identified by McCann (2004), which functions to give everyone a voice and a sense of participation in the community's future planning. The coalition framework exists in Asheville, evidenced by the fact that citizens assume someone likeminded, somewhere, is assessing the accuracy or fairness of representative imagery, and although it seems false or tinged, it must not be cause for concern; hence, the ultimate hegemonic mechanism (McCann 2004, p. 1918).

Another example of how Asheville gives citizens the impression of rampant opportunity is through the widely popularized notion of entrepreneurialism that the Good City is supposed to promote. McCann (2004) posits that entrepreneurialism is less of a viable option than it is a contributing factor to the quality of life image, which centers on the notion that the private sphere is being increasingly opened to the public. In other words, the Good City will appear to provide the general, middle-class population with more access to public processes that will ultimately affect them, and create a business milieu that is more Samaritan than cutthroat. McCann (2004) asserts the theory that this is not so much true as it is popular to assume. This is due almost entirely to the assumption that agency and upward mobility are options in a developing city, and whether or not this is being experienced first-hand, it maintains a citizenry's faith in and

love for the place, and keeps them complacent when opportunity and fortune fail to materialize (McCann 2004).

Theories of Gentrification

The demographic-ecological theory locates population, social organization, environment and technology as central to urban change. For example, the baby boomers can be held responsible for the overwhelming demand on housing supply that forced suburban-born idealists to be resourceful and reclaim space in underclass neighborhoods, in what Clay (1978) calls "the recycling of the inner city (cited in Palen and London 1984, p. 15)." The popularized value placed on community living leads these idealists to the space provided by neighborhood, and hence reinvasion, posing as regeneration, revitalization, etc., takes place in those neighborhoods poor enough to be overrun and ideologically weak enough to be dominated (Palen and London 1984).

As important as the sociocultural explanation might be, Marx for one would counter that the political-economic explanation is more crucial to understanding reinvasion. This theory is based on assumptions about competition, noted by McCann (2004) as the driving force for urban development and homogenization. Cades coins "urban residential reconstruction" to explain that reinvasion is the result of decreasing availability of land and resources and increasing cost of living and transportation, making the typically poor inner city more appealing (cited in McCann 2004 p. 1923). He says legislative changes have also de-racialized the slums with antisegregation laws, opening them to the once uninvited white middle class.

But Marxist theory claims that gentrification is not coincidental or innocent: gentrification is a strategic move on the part of the bourgeoisie to displace the proletariat. Smith and LeFavre (1984) explain gentrification as "a product of land-based interest groups (cited in Palen and London 1984)." This theory is relevant to a sociological analysis of Asheville, as the city relies on the working class for the labor which creates the option of a progressive lifestyle.

Theories of Representation and Urban Deviance

McCann (2004) argues that the media's role in the creation and perpetuation of the Good City image is understated. His theory outlines how "media discourse anoints certain cities as successful and worth emulating and specifying the extra-economic aspects of local economic development that are currently valorized in localities across the country (McCann 2004 p. 1910)." This explanation argues that the media is responsible for representing place in a way that appeals to certain consumers and investors, and in this way city, or the urban lifestyle, has been commodified.

Hall (1997) agrees that media is the most obvious means of representation, and representation is the way we negotiate our use of symbols such as language and style. Hall's theory is that while representation is at the heart of all social matters, the various aspects of representation (semiotics, discourse, and image) are deliberately constructed. Applying this theory to the study of Asheville and its conflicting representations will inevitably help to break down those representations that seem integral to the city's identity, and highlight how many of them are simply more marketable.

There are some basic routes a growing city will take to hide those representations that don't match the popular image being marketed. As Ferrell (1997) explains it, the urban culture of crime, most commonly associated with the marginalized subcultures of youth or racial minorities, provides an arena for the negotiation of the dominant group's control and use of space. Providing the example of graffiti, Ferrell (1997) delineates what is ultimately a code of resistance to status and power in the urban setting. But the point is that this code of resistance, so often criminalized and stigmatized, acts in direct response to a code of domination that is fundamentally hegemonic and pervasive in its manipulation of popular trends. In other words, public subversion, particularly in the urban context, is not as criminal as it is threatening to the hegemonic construction of a city's image. Ferrell (1997) suggests that the social agenda of a developing city will have an agenda that emphasizes only certain styles that promote its economy. This agenda typically includes "...an urban environment made safe for excursions and endless, effortless consumption, for the 'discovery' of urban charm and prepackaged urban adventure. They suggest...white-bread gentrification unimpeded by the ugly realities of street survival, a ghettoization of social life such that the young, the disobedient, and the down-and-out remain sequestered within ghost towns of physical and cultural isolation (Ferrell 1997, p. 29)."

Ferrell (1997) postulates that the use of crime and deviant style in the negotiation of cultural space is the only avenue for contestation, due to the increasing application of universal appeals to the urban setting. Calling it the 'dystopian dream,'

Ferrell identifies the ways a city's image is founded on idyllic principles of societal utopia, harking back to theory of reinvasion as the product of individual desire to belong to a transcendent community.

Related to this concept of the dystopian dream is the idea that most urban development is predicated on stereotypes, basing image-related policies on what lifestyle stereotype is currently most popular. Arguing that determining the popular stereotype is based on media representation, Frank (2003) claims that currently the most-promoted stereotype is that of the tight-knit community, the sleepy security of the all-American small town, and the general lack of deviance implied by the construction of pastoralism. This is nostalgic as well as compensatory; the lifestyle being popularized is that of community, but since real communal ideals are disappearing, "community" is being reinvented as a sign in developing cities like Asheville, which explains the growing appeal of the city. This theory also explains issues of non-representation and invisibility of certain groups: neighborhoods where violence is regular and poverty and suffering are obvious are apt to be omitted from a city's representation of itself, not simply because of their unpleasantness but because they run directly counter to the image of pastoralism that is in the process of being reclaimed as a lifestyle option even in bigger towns (Frank 2003).

Theories of Tourism

In order for media representations of a city to be taken seriously by the general public, there must be at least some corresponding reality; in Asheville, this is manifested through tourism,

which conveniently acts as an economic mechanism as well. Although tourism and the theories pertaining to it would ordinarily fall in the category of economics, my research targets tourism as the most clearly observable aspect of contested representation. The theory of tourism as providing the economic engine for the maintenance of control explains why tourism is always only representative of certain carefully chosen aspects of a city. Inherent in such a theory is the critical examination of authenticity, which has given rise to several more specific theories (Hanna and Del Casino 2000; McCann 2004). MacCannell's Marxist theory of the leisure class articulates the ways in which the general public seeks out the authentic in their attempts to order and structure the world, but ultimately ends up with nothing since everything being framed as authentic is responding to that label in a way that obscures reality (Hanna and Del Casino 2000).

Theorists Rojek and Urry (1997) clear up some of the ambiguities in this theory by proposing that tourism sites that are labeled as such because their manufacture of authenticity "...may not be as obviously artificial or contrived as once thought. It should not receive the denigration that tourism typically receives since all cultures are inauthentic and contrived (cited in Hanna and Del Casino, 2000, p. xxi)." Their theory helps to identify tourism not as a problem so much as a cultural practice that aids in the formation of social and spatial identities. By identifying with the attraction group and its activities or histories, or by identifying instead with a countercultural group of marginalized resisters, cities create social landscapes that are bound to produce and reproduce each other, creating more opportunity for equal representation.

One of the aims of this research is to show the relationship between factors that have been studied only independently in the past. This relationship framework provides a new framework for studying an unusual town like Asheville. Preexisting research addresses the issues of typical American boom towns, but it was my belief that since so many citizens have moved here to escape typical towns, studying Asheville required a different theoretical approach. I did this by studying 12 informed citizens who are well suited to make Asheville well-known, to see how aware these citizens are aware of the forces used to market a new image of Asheville, North Carolina. The questions are listed in the appendix.

Methods

My participants were 12 interviewees. I selected them because of their evident involvement with the issues or their position within an organization or business that I suspected to be a site of contradiction. I interviewed associates of popular downtown restaurants and shops; a commercial real estate broker; an officer with the Asheville Police Department; an editor for the *Mountain Xpress*, and members of the Planning and Development Department, the Coalition of Asheville Neighborhoods, the Asheville Affordable Housing Coalition, Public Interests Projects and the Asheville Community Resource Center. Eight were male, three female, and all but one were white. Four interviewees lived downtown, while two lived in West Asheville, one in North Asheville, three in Haw Creek, and one in Fairview. One woman was in her early 20's while all the rest were 30 or older. One informant has lived in Asheville for 25 years, five for 10-20 years, and five for six years or less, but none have lived in the city for less

than four years. Two interviews lasted over an hour, while most were 40-50 minutes long. Four informants met me at a restaurant or coffee shop, while I traveled to the offices or workplaces of the others.

Historic Background to the "Authenticity" of Today

Before discussing what I found in these interviews and observations, it is interesting to note that Asheville's history is one aspect that does distinguish it from the previously mentioned similar small cities. The city's historic trajectory was frequently mentioned by my informants as a source of pride and identity. It is important to establish that the city's renown among out-of-state tourists is not new; before the Depression, Asheville was already popular for its location in the mountains and near hot springs, both of which were thought to have health-restoring properties for malaria patients in particular. But the depression collapsed the thriving economy the town had established, and the rebound was especially slow because of the debt incurred in the 1920's. As Ron, a member of the Planning and Development city explained it to me,

One situation in Asheville was that we were the equivalent of a billion dollars in debt, public debt, at the time of the Depression. We borrowed money to build this building, to build the Asheville high school, to purchase the land and build the reservoir out at North Fork, paved streets in west Asheville that had never been paved before... the city bonded all this debt because we were growing, and a growing in a phenomenal way.

A bonfire in the square in 1974 celebrated the last debt payment, and today, planners and developers congratulate themselves when they see how neighboring cities gutted their historic downtowns in favor of industry, while Asheville's historic buildings now bring in tourism and testify to the much sought after element of character.

However, there was a major episode in between that Ron identifies as "Fifteen or twenty years ago, [when] there were just a huge number of vacant storefronts in downtown Asheville...It's good to see the storefronts filled, and the new life." But Paige, significantly younger informant, bemoans the loss of the social scene that accompanied the vacant storefronts:

I've known a lot of people who lived here when downtown was abandoned, and they say downtown first became cool when Malaprop's opened up on Haywood Street, and it was this really fringy little bookstore, and there was a coffee shop downstairs, and it just—the floor was sideways, and everyone just sat around and played guitar, and it was like the first cool thing. And then Downtown Books opened, and then Vincent's Ear opened, and for a long time it was just a handful of musicians and a handful of punks, and then a handful of street people and sex workers, and that was fine. It was fine that all those people coexisted.

Of the business owners I interviewed, the ones who had been in Asheville for more than 12 years told similar stories about the abandonment of the 80's and early 90's, but referred to it as "when

downtown was very bad, but much better now (Sasha)." Although once identified as the town that was in a constant recession, four of my informants referred to Asheville as a boom town without my prompting. A statement made by Jasper attests to the town's economic transitions: "It's been a boom town before in its history, like in the 20's or whatever, and they had a recession for a long time, and now it's a boom town again, and I think that's undeniable. It's boomin."

Because the transition from slump to boom occurred in a 15-year timeframe, Ron calls it an overnight success. Indeed, as revealed to me by Sasha, the owner of Old Europe, his 12-year old business is one of only three others that have been established downtown for more than 12 years—the rest are all new, and several have already come and gone.

Findings from the Field

Development

Because of this predicted population explosion, already very much underway, the city is erecting eight new condominium high-rises and otherwise making plans to accommodate more people, cars, and infrastructure (Behsudi 2006; Sarzynski 2004). The development discourse has become a prime arena for the hegemonic construction of the "good city" image. Development, as referred to in this research, is the appearance of new buildings and other large physical changes in downtown Asheville. Small-scale development has been occurring since the revitalization effort of the early 90's, and while the effort focused on renovation, it was also responsible for the two highly visible high-rises that dominate the skyline.

Tied into the development discourse is the influx of chains within the city limits. Citizens have different reasons for opposing chains, but the most common complaint I heard was that the developers had violated the city's ordinances. The Coalition of Asheville Neighborhoods (C.A.N), the NGO that represents the citizens in matters of development, has filed three allegations against the Department of Planning and Development, claiming that the city looked the other way and granted developers variances that violated the Unified Development Ordinances. The allegations were in reaction to the overnight appearances of businesses like Staples, Walgreens, and an oversized, overlit sign for Prudential Real Estate (Behsudi, 2006; Bothwell, 2006). The case is being closely followed by the news, since the ultimate outcome could be a permanent falling out between C.A.N and the city, causing serious detriment to the neighborhoods that C.A.N has been protecting from development they don't want. Ron, a planning board member, is optimistic about the stir over development, commenting that "...a lot of people are very dissatisfied with the new Staples building, but one of the things that has been brought to this community has been the awareness that perhaps there are some changes we need to make...to get buildings that are more compatible with what people really want."

However, my research points out that people don't necessarily want the same thing, which is the point where the contradictions arise. Statements in which "the people" were referred to as a unified whole signified Asheville's tendency to confuse community with unanimity or to identify only two radically opposed groups as "people." Ron didn't define the "people" whose wishes for the city's

development he hopes to accommodate, but he did refer another group not necessarily included in the first "people." For example, he was aware of the opposition to development, and familiar with the criticisms inherent in the discourse, and confided that

...people get concerned when I talk about density, and more dense development happening closer to our core, but the problem we have in Buncombe County is that growth is going to occur. And we basically had the huge success of marketing ourselves as a great place to live and work and recreate, so people are coming here in droves.

One must infer that the people getting concerned about density are not the same people coming to the city in droves, since this is the group creating the density. Ron is trying to please both "people" because they are the most visible from his vantage point. The irony here is that Asheville prides itself on its diversity, and yet representations not visible from the top floor of city hall are not included in the "people" being considered in the development plans.

Another irony is that both groups of "people" are ultimately being accommodated, because the city is wisely catering to both with the same justification tactic. Because he was aware of the resistance to development, Ron explains it this way:

Well in downtown, vertical development makes a lot of sense...I think we should be concerned if we start seeing forty story buildings downtown, but in

general heightening downtown makes a lot of sense... [and] from a service provisional tax standpoint, it makes sense to concentrate development in the right places, and let it go up, and build up a city that's healthier in terms of its ability to pay for infrastructure and other things.

His reasoning was that it deters urban sprawl into the mountains and provides more downtown housing, which would necessitate public transportation and eliminate the current volume of long commutes into town. This effectively appeals to both his audiences: the concerned citizens, who are quieted by the threat of development in the mountains instead and the prospect of less traffic, and the droves who will keep coming because the mountains will still be beautiful and there will be more housing with views downtown. But in the large gap between these two groups are those who don't want or won't be able to afford downtown housing, or who already rely on public transportation to commute.

Although it is hard to pinpoint the specific development wishes of everyone in the gap, it is easy to distinguish between those excluded from the considerations and those who will benefit from the proposed development. While there's scarcely a peep from the former group, others are becoming less ashamed of their interest in urban growth. Restaurant manager Jasper admitted, "I mean, I don't have anything against a high rise just because it's a high rise. That's fine, I actually wouldn't mind if the city was five times as big. That would excite me." This shows that the way the city is promoting its own development, as illustrated in the last excerpt, is effective, even though the city was originally popular for its small

and self-sustaining appeal. Jasper's excitement was echoed in other interviews, while others showed signs of disengagement from the subject matter, in the case of Jim's comment: "The thing you can count on is inevitable change. And people will discuss whether it's good change or bad change, but again, those are just differences of opinions, depends who you ask." These statements prove that openness to development is becoming a normalized and well-established part of the discourse

Some interesting nuances should be noted. While none of my informants were pro chain business, there were several statements suggesting that chains could tailor themselves to Asheville's character and avoid objection that way. Jim seems to think that Asheville could accommodate chains that were willing to adapt to the city's image. He admits,

I mean, we've talked to Starbuck's, we've talked to them a good bit, kinda saying, 'oh yeah, Asheville, this is kinda how we have to do it in Asheville.' But they want to make people happy... there's a lot of people that don't want to see a Starbucks or a McDonald's or a whatever downtown, but my prediction is that it will happen. Just with all the—and there's ways that you can do it right. They can make it more appealing and aesthetic and fit in rather than just, you know.

This comment is compelling for two reasons. First, remember that Jim works in real estate, and has now openly admitted to negotiating with Starbucks and predicted that chains will inevitably become a part of downtown, and contrast this

with other informants who had faith in the city's tradition of independence.

Secondly, he is confident that chains, who "want to make people happy," could adopt Asheville's "appealing and aesthetic" characteristics, and thereby avoid ruining the image. This proves that there is an aesthetic design for the city's surface, that no matter what the reality, any business could dress up in Asheville fashions and thereby remain incognito.

Investigations into development in Asheville found that growth plans, while met with some opposition, ultimately maintain the consent of the people by promoting normalizing or neutralizing statements within the development discourse. This is proven by the fact that the people referred to in development rhetoric are either those trying to restrict growth or those relocates for whom the growth is occurring. Asheville is being developed to simultaneously suit relocates and the public opposition, while the rest of the citizens are not being acknowledged in the plans.

Gentrification

Development might be the most openly contested issue in downtown, but the underlying issue of growing class divisions is gaining momentum. As one informant put it, "I think the place is becoming more modernized, but more importantly, more moneyed, just more upscale." According to local news sources, the term "gentrification" entered the Asheville discourse when in 2004, the ACRC (Asheville Community Resource Center) was evicted, and Indy music venue Vincent's Ear suddenly lost its lease (Shanafelt, 2004). Both establishments, once located across from one another on North

Lexington Avenue in downtown, were committed in some form to accommodating and representing that part of the local population deemed countercultural. The ACRC was a non-profit community collective that worked to support social justice-oriented endeavors, like feeding the homeless, distributing health resources and hosting consciousness-raising events. The owners were evicted by their landlord based on reports of alleged unruly behavior during an event, and although many local businesses and individuals expressed their support and rallied with the collective, the address is unoccupied today. The closing of Vincent's Ear was well covered in the local news due to the venue's popularity and proud tradition of featuring big name underground punk and alternative music. As reported by *Mountain Xpress* reporter Steve Shanafelt (2004), "[Owner Joan] Morris says no reason was stated for not renewing the lease, leading more than a few regulars to conclude that the counterculture-friendly café is being shoved out to make way for a more mainstream – and presumably more upscale – business. The word 'gentrification' seems to pop up in almost every conversation, and not in a positive sense."

In the past two years, other business closings have included the much-frequented coffee shop Beanstreets, vegan sandwich shop Max and Rosie's (both on Lexington Avenue) and the Blue Moon Bakery. Concerned locals are crying "gentrification," but Sharon Willen, Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce director of business and industry doesn't think so: "I don't see gentrification. It has certainly become a more attractive business district than it once was, but the stores on Lexington are all offbeat, and I don't see anything too mainstream going in there"

(Shanafelt, 2004)."

Since the topic of gentrification itself can no longer be avoided because of loud citizen dissent, authorities are finding ways of talking about the issue that reveal why people like Sharon Willen are convinced it's not a reality. Several informants from the development and economic sectors offer examples of how gentrification is explained. These explanations avert its controversial aspects, which helps to normalize and thereby defend gentrification. The defenses rely heavily on oversimplifications of the debate, as well as pointing out what is not gentrified, and why it should be enough. Real estate broker Jimmy offered the following normalizing definition of the problem:

People are used to paying \$5 a square foot, and rent shoots up to \$15, then that's a hard point to swallow, your rent going up three times what is was. There's some people who can adjust and some who can't, and you will see the change downtown, or anywhere, when the market gets a lot of attention, because then there's people who are willing to pay certain rents.

For Jimmy, the issue is simply one of the economic development that affects any market that starts to get a lot of attention. Seeing as his job is to sell property, the reasons why the market is getting a lot of attention is not so much his concern, which is why he doesn't see it as controversial.

Development authority Ron on the other hand is necessarily aware of the controversy, and finds telling words to explain new developments. For

example, he cites the fact that traditional gentrification, meaning pressure on natives to give up their residences for less than they're worth, is not happening. "...there's a lot of concern I think about gentrification. And I think it's really displacement, uh, it really doesn't affect residential very much in downtown because the prices people are getting for their condos are through the roof, from \$300 to \$400 a square foot, it's phenomenal, to even more in some of the new construction."

It is true that residential gentrification is not an issue in downtown, but it is interesting that Ron brings up this point even though the accusations are not about residential gentrification. If this point is part of the defense, it would follow that concerned citizens are being dissuaded from resistance by looking on the bright side. Independent bookstore owner Annika, while unhappy about gentrification, exemplifies how citizens are learning to highlight what isn't being gentrified instead, and to internalize the normalizing logic. "Everybody gutted their downtowns, put in f***ing malls, took out old buildings, and that didn't happen in Asheville to such a degree. We're still visible, the art deco is still there, architecture is still there...but what's gonna happen now is, it's gonna be hard to resist." This statement shows that she acknowledges the fact that Asheville has not fallen prey to the same commercialized gentrification of other developing cities, because the signs of the city's uniqueness (like the art deco) are still intact, a fact frequently mentioned by the city's planners to defy allegations of gentrification.

Perhaps the most common defense for gentrification is the fact that downtown's boom in the 70's necessitated that the dingier parts of

downtown, once plagued by hard drugs and prostitution, clean up. These specific areas were the Montford neighborhood, most of West Asheville and all of Lexington Avenue.

Interestingly, Montford is now home to a gated community, West Asheville has some of the highest rents, and Lexington Avenue is probably the most attractive business district in downtown. In the past, Lexington Avenue was seen as the axis of everything about downtown that was grungy, countercultural or lower-end. One informant reflects,

...for a long time it was just a handful of musicians and a handful of punks, and then a handful of street people and sex workers, and that was fine. ...And those sex workers and those people who are addicted to drugs and those really grungy punk rockers and those really dirty hippies, they were here before all these hipsters were. And they're the ones that started it, they're the ones that made it interesting. Slowly but surely, it got bigger and it got bigger and businesses and police started to get rid of the street people. And now it's like everyone wants to be here.

Other points are included in the defense of gentrification that are hard to deny. The figures prove that crime, for example, has significantly dropped since downtown cleaned up, placing Asheville at the top of the list for lowest crime rates against persons and property in the state. Annika comments on the change:

Well, crime is a lot less. I think that there are sophisticated alarm systems now. They're installing those them on all

those little castle houses. Quite a few of them are bed and breakfast businesses, so they have the council...there's more police, there's a police stations, a separate station, in the neighborhood. They moved the liquor store away, all kinds of cleaning up. I would say it's more...watched.

She notes how increased presence of law enforcement is part of the cleanup process. The ethical objection to the decriminalizing of downtown is that it is the result of quarantining the "lower-end" population in public housing projects that are so well-hidden that I didn't even know they existed until a police officer took me through on his patrol.

In an attempt to discover whether informants were aware of the many public housing developments, they were asked to discuss the parts of the city considered by most citizens to be crime-ridden or "lower-end." None of them mentioned the projects, and the widespread ignorance about their existence was confirmed by a police officer who took me through the projects. After he had pointed out several notorious crack houses where busts had been made in the past, I asked him if he thought most citizens were aware that such activity was happening only blocks from downtown proper. He commented that residents of downtown and its frequent visitors are unlikely to be crack users, and therefore wouldn't have any reason to even venture into the projects. The director of an affordable housing organization mused that the houses are just nice enough that they don't pose a threat, and if people aren't scared, they're not concerned.

This goes a long way to explain why informants

had very little to offer on the subject of bad neighborhoods in Asheville, suggesting predominantly that there really aren't bad parts of the city. Jasper summarizes: "The neighborhoods here aren't that bad." His thoughts are seconded by Ron, who concludes that "... in general, Asheville doesn't have wide areas of neglected neighborhoods that would be considered slums." Interested in the realtor's perspective, I asked Jimmy, who responded tellingly, "No, I wouldn't say you have any bad neighborhoods or bad areas. You have some that might not attract certain buyers." These three comments demonstrate the lack of knowledge or even a lack of concern for the poverty- and crime-ridden areas revealed to me by the police officer (Barber, 2002).

Clearly, poverty in Asheville is worthy of discussion only to the extent that there is something appealing being done about it. Affordable housing is part of the planning discourse inasmuch as it helps to preserve the city's image, as attested to by Ron: "But we still need to look for opportunities to get affordable housing downtown. Because when you think about the area, there's a need for housing for the artists that make it so attractive."

Conversely, there was nothing attractive about the projects and the conspicuousness of their neglect. An interview with the director of the Asheville Affordable Housing Coalition gave me further insight into this reality. His comments on the nature of revitalization were compelling. "You gotta hide the blight!" he says, to capture the mentality of city planners. He explains that the blight refers to heavy concentrations of people like himself that are different than what the city has chosen to incorporate as part of its image. Efforts might be made to rehabilitate these areas, but if

the people themselves don't change to fit the criteria, they are pushed to the periphery. Most interestingly, he asserted that this push doesn't have to be literal, because citizens will automatically hide what makes them uncomfortable. In terms of housing, the city doesn't need to intervene at all, because the landlord will simply jack the price up to exclude the typically impoverished non-white population.

Asheville's gentrification segregates the traditionally segregated city to an extreme degree. The people that are different are being metaphorically pushed to the periphery, but as it happened on Lexington, that countercultural appeal means business, and business means the area needs to clean up, i.e. the original inhabitants need to either conform or move. Many have moved to West Asheville, but that too is now being upscaled, and there seems to be fewer and fewer options of places to hide. The former ACRC member went on to express her dismay.

...when I first moved here, which was only four years ago, I remember being in high school and everyone being like, 'West Asheville's this really f***ing scary place, like it's all Black People and Latino people and watch out if you're going there at night,' and now it's like the cool thing? That is f***ed up. Because where are all these Black and Latino people going? They're gonna get pushed outside the city limits, and why? Because they don't have as much money as the rich white college students who wanna live in their neighborhood? I mean, yeah, that's the truth, but I don't think it's ethical at all.

Some would say that Paige voices the opinion of the idealist, but the way she puts it presents the irony inherent in the gentrification of a city like Asheville that prides itself so much on its progressive reputation.

In conclusion, investigation into gentrification in Asheville found that while there are some signs of traditional methods of revitalization, overall the phenomenon is happening covertly, thereby maintaining the consent of the typically conscientious citizenry. By reminding residents of the ugliness of downtown's past, and by pointing out how the city is still off-beat, authorities and developers make a convincing case for subtle gentrification.

For the most part, citizens were unaware of how this subtle gentrification was carried out through the mediums of public housing, segregation, crime management, suggesting that Asheville fit the "good city" criteria on so many levels that neighborhood neglect and segregation were not possible. This locates Asheville as what Ferrell (1997) would call a Dystopia, where "there's a mood among people that if [you] make the town look like it doesn't have problems, then it doesn't have problems (p. 25)."

Not so coincidentally, the historically lower-end neighborhood and districts are now the most popular and affluent, harking back to Palen and London's (1984) theory of reinvasion by suburbanites in search of weak spaces wherein to foster their own transcendent communities. Gentrification is alive and well in Asheville, but is not taking the traditional forms that members of the Creative Class can recognize, and is therefore hardly contested.

The Economy of the Mind

Representation and Tourism

Planner Ron states:

The small town charm, the relatively easy and uncongested transportation, things along those lines. And it's a draw—they are moving here to run their businesses, because to those economies, it's not the location, it's the circuit...But today's economy is more an economy of the mind rather than an economy of materials...So they want to come to some place that's cool, and they can do that because they aren't tied to the location-specific part of their industry.

This excerpt is telling in that Ron accurately identifies the reasons for the city's appeal while also disclosing the underlying economic reason. It was interesting that Ron was the only informant to attribute Asheville's popularity to an "economy of the mind." His observation, while framed objectively, can ultimately be seen as an admission on his part to a deliberate exploitation of cultural (mind-based) symbolism. His statement can be reread to mean that without industry, there's no traditional economic explanation for why Asheville is as wealthy as it is; the promotion of Creative Class, the term theorist Richard Florida has coined to refer to this "economy of the mind," is clearly at the root of it.

For the most part, informants did not recognize a connection between the city's tourism and this hegemonic notion of an "economy of the mind." But downtown restaurant manager Jasper has a particularly succinct observation of the tourism

contradiction:

[Tourism] is like a double-edged sword. It helps get jobs, it helps support the arts, but at the same time it brings up the prices on everything, which affects the quality of life for just your local people, working people. And it creates a kind of Walt Disneyworld feel when you go to Belle Chere or something. So basically it's both: we have to have it here to support the arts and for Asheville to be what it is, and there's always been a lot of tourists here, but at the same time the more tourists start to move here, it just makes it harder for the mountain folk, or just the local working people who have been here for generations. They might be forced out.

It is interesting that Jasper mentions the 'Disneyworld feel,' since urban sociologist Ferrell uses the same analogy in his discussion of the Dystopian Dream phenomenon (although his case studies were conventional, mainstream urban spaces). But the synthesis of tourism and gentrification, in particular his example of how tourism is needed to support the arts but ends up getting 'Disney-fied' shows that there is at least some level of awareness and dissent.

Perhaps even more compelling is the way other news sources and publications from across the country have rated and thereby represented Asheville (Ball, 2006). If an out-of-state tourist types "Asheville" into an internet search engine, one of the first results will be the colorful and engrossing official tourism website, directly accessible at <www.exploreasheville.com.> A

direct link from the first page, Asheville Accolades, will take the searcher to the 2 page-long list of mentions of the Top 10 lists that Asheville has made it onto over the years (see Appendix B). [link](#)

Because the city has been making list appearances equivalent to a hit song at the top of the charts in the past year, several of my informants mentioned this phenomenon without being prompted. When I asked Jim the real estate broker if the majority of his clients were looking to buy or to sell, he responded, "I'd say you have a lot of people wanting to buy. They recognize that Asheville is a booming market, it's always in the top ten of something, to retire to, to move to, top ten to start a business, you know, whatever." Jim wasn't aware of the specific lists his city is featured on, but he made it clear that he didn't have to be: Asheville is booming, which leaves its agents free to focus on the transactions themselves, since the city has already been sold. Ron, however, as director of planning and development, was more acutely aware, most likely because he had a hand in advertising the city in the right way to the list publishers: "The community marketed itself to basically the world, and it's hard to find a top ten list that Asheville isn't listed on."

Conclusions

Development, gentrification and representation in Asheville reinforce one another in constructing a city of wealth and prestige that masquerades as creativity and conscience. This has gotten as far as it has because the hegemonic discourse of the "good city" co-opts citizens who would otherwise resist its implications in an ironic twist. The signs of the Good City are well thought out, and for the most part citizens do believe that the city represents their own ideals and values. The

citizens who are doing the most to subvert this are the few who standing up to the city government and demanding that they follow the rules, like the group filing the allegations right now. This is a form of resistance because it symbolizes a pressure on the city to stay faithful to what they and the citizens agreed upon.

Finally, conducting this research has made me realize that what's happening in Asheville is becoming epidemic in this society, because as a society we have discovered this "economy of the mind," and are increasingly exploiting cultural capital not just for status, but for class benefits as well. As my findings suggest, Asheville citizens for the most part are not using specifically political terms to describe the city's identity as "progressive," indicating that the image of such suffices. In discussing the power of the Creative Class's influence, Florida (2002) makes similar observations, and goes as far as to incite the Creative Class to action:

Many Creative Class people bemoan trends like suburban sprawl and mindless urban renewal. But these are the products of well organized groups—developers, contractors, building trade unions, politicians—eager to enrich themselves or to erect tangible monuments to their efforts. Countering such well ensconced interests with their institutional power bases takes a lot more than firing off an angry letter to the editor or signing a petition. To be effective, the Creative Class may ultimately have to invent new forms of collective action (p. 317).

By assuming their role as integral (if not

authoritative) members of the mainstream, the Creative Class must recognize their own tendency to dominate the representative arena to the detriment of citizens who don't meet the image's criteria. While Asheville's growing popularity symbolizes a profound ideological shift in American society, this symbolism is simply reproducing itself rather than representing a reality. Creativity, by definition, is the presentation of something new, and cannot consist entirely of representation. Asheville and its reputation have tremendous potential for the creation of a revolutionary urban reality, if only its citizens would stop settling for symbolism alone.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1) Why do you live in Asheville?

a) Did you choose Asheville, or are there other reasons?

2) What's different about your neighborhood and downtown Asheville?

a) If you consider your residence downtown, how is it different from surrounding areas?

3) What are your definitions of Asheville's "good" neighborhood and "bad" neighborhoods?

a) What leads you to define them this way?

b) Have these neighborhoods changed over the years?

4) If and when you go downtown, what are you likely to do?

a) Is it more often for business or pleasure?

5) What's your impression of tourism in Asheville?

a) How does it affect you personally?

b) Do you agree with the generalization that Asheville is a tourist town?

6) What can you say about the persistence of crime rates in Asheville?

a) What do you see or not see in terms of evidence of crime?

b) Does persistent crime in Asheville concern you?

7) How well is the media covering news events in Asheville?

a) Which publication or channel do you rely on for news?

b) Why?

8) How do you feel about the major downtown developments, i.e. the Battery Park parking garage?

a) What other issues or developments are similar?

b) How will you be affected by more developments like this?

9) Can you describe any major visible changes (buildings, storefronts, signs) that have taken place since you've been living in Asheville?

10) What can you say about the recent closings of establishments like Vincent's Ear, Beanstreets, the ACRC, or any others you might know of?

a) Why do you think these businesses are closing?

11) If you had to choose, what would you say is your favorite aspect of living in this city?

Appendix B

Asheville Accolades

2005

· *AmericanStyle Magazine*: Readers voted Asheville #8 in a poll of the Top 25 Arts Destinations, up from #10 in last year's poll.

· *RelocateAmerica.com*: Named Asheville #9 in "America's Top 100 Places to Live in 2005." The nominated towns were compared against education, crime, employment and housing data for the past year.

· *Men's Journal*: Western North Carolina attractions, Asheville's Early Girl Eatery and The Grove Park Inn Resort and Spa listed in its "12 Months of Adventure" expert's guide to the perfect trip in 2005. (February 2005)

· *Conde Nast Traveler*: Named the Inn on Biltmore Estate to its 2005 Gold List: The World's Best Places to Stay. The Grove Park Inn Resort and Spa was named to the 2005 Gold List Reserve.

· *Pinnacle Living Magazine*: Asheville rated one of the top 25 towns in the Southern mountains for relocation, second homes and retirement. (2005).

· *Consumer Reports*: One of the Five Best Places to Retire Money Adviser (September 2005).

- *MSN/Sterling's Best Places*: 8 of 10 Best Places to Live (July 2005).
- *Farmers Insurance Group*: 19 of Top 25 Most Secure U.S. Places to Live (June 2005).
- *Forbes*: 31 of 168 Small Metros Best Places For Business And Careers (May 2005).
- *Entrepreneurial/Innovation Index Small Business Administration*: 31 of 394 Regions, (April 2005).
- *AmericanStyle*: 8 of America's Top 25 Small Town Arts Destinations (Summer 2005).
- *Men's Journal*: 11 of 50 Best Places To Live (April 2005).

2004

- *Mountain Bike Magazine*: Pisgah Forest voted one of the best trails for mountain biking. (October 2004).
- *USA Weekend Magazine*: Asheville named one of five "Cities that are Special." (July 2004).
- *National Geographic Adventure*: Asheville listed as one of the "10 Great Adventure Towns." (September 2004).
- *Men's Journal*: Asheville ranked as one of "The 10 Best Fall Mountain Bike Rides" in North America. (September 2004).
- *Southern Living Magazine*: Asheville chosen as one of the top mountain destinations in the Southeast in a Reader's Choice poll. (April 2004).
- *RelocateAmerica.com*: Named Asheville #5 in "America's Top 100 Places to Live in 2004." The nominated towns were compared against

education, crime, employment and housing data for the past year.

- *Where to Retire Magazine*: Named Asheville one of eight great college towns. (May/June 2004).
- *AmericanStyle Magazine*: Readers voted Asheville #10 in a poll of the Top 25 Arts Destinations, up from #18 in the previous year's poll.
- *Men's Journal*: Nantahala Outdoor Center -- "the Harvard of paddling instruction" -- named one of the 100 Best Trips on the Planet. (April 2004).
- *Cities Ranked and Rated*: Named Asheville the #8 rated city in America to live in 2004. Determined by a number of essential factors, including economy and jobs, cost of living, climate, education, health and health care, crime, transportation, leisure, and arts and crafts. Presented by Frommer's Travel Guides. (March 30, 2004).
- *Travel and Leisure*: Named Grove Park Inn Resort & Spa as one of the top 500 greatest hotels in the world. (January 2004).
- *Travel and Leisure*: Named Grove Park Inn Resort & Spa as one of the top resort spas in the world. (2004).

2003

- *Where to Retire Magazine*: Asheville selected as one of eight great walking towns. (12/15/2003).
- *MSN Money*: Named Asheville one of the top 10 towns for a second-home investment. (2003).
- *MSN*: Asheville named one of the top five "Best Places to Retire." (2003).

- *AmericanStyle Magazine*: Readers voted Asheville #18 in a poll of the Top 25 Arts Destinations. (2003).
- *Travel and Leisure*: Named Grove Park Inn Resort and Spa as one the world's best golf resorts in a reader survey. (2003).
- *Blue Ridge Country Magazine*: In the 15th Anniversary edition, Asheville was ranked in the top three in "Best Mountain Town," "Best Couples Getaway," "Best Festival," for Belle Chere, "Best Retirement Town," "Best Weekend Getaway," and "Best Shopping Overall." (August 2003).
- *Southern Living Magazine*: Asheville chosen by a Reader's Choice poll as one of the top mountain destinations and weekend getaways in the Southeast. (May 2003).
- *Mountain Bike Action*: Named Asheville one of the 10 best mountain bike towns. (May 2003).
- *National Geographic Adventure*: In their Best of Adventure 2003 Issue, Asheville was named one of the top mountain biking destinations in the Southeast. Asheville "is fast becoming the Boulder of the Southeast – with better riding."
- *AARP Magazine*: Asheville selected as one of the Top 15 Best Places to Reinvent Your Life. (May-June 2003).
- *Parents Magazine*: In the round-up of "editors' picks," Asheville is listed among of the top destinations for family travel. (April 2003).

2002

- *Self Magazine*: Named Asheville the Happiest City in the United States.

- *New York Times*: Asheville made the Harris Poll list of "Most Desirable Places to Live." (September 2002).
- *Hemispheres*: Asheville joined a select list of 70 of the world's most visible and visited cities—the only in NC ever featured in the popular United Airlines magazine. The feature piece is titled, "Three Perfect Days in Asheville." (September 2002).
- *USA Weekend*: Blue Ridge Parkway listed as one of noted cyclist Greg LeMond's best scenic routes to train. (August 2002).
- *USA Today* ran two stories one week apart entitled, "Top 10 Literary Destinations" and "Historic towns that invite you to stroll." (July 2002).
- *National Trust for Historic Preservation*: Listed Asheville among its List of America's Dozen Distinctive Destinations, describing it as "offering diverse natural, historic, and cultural experiences that preserve generations of the 'Appalachian tradition.'" (July 2002).
- *Men's Journal*: In the Best of Summer Issue, Asheville was listed as one of the Top 50 Hot Road Trips that "will make the greatest three months of your life."
- *AmericanStyle Magazine*: Readers voted Asheville as #13 in the list of the Top 25 Arts Destinations in America for "sharing a love for the arts and promoting cultural tourism." (Summer 2002).
- *Bike Magazine*: In nominating 2002's premium places to live and ride, Asheville was ranked as one of America's Top Five Best Mountain Biking Towns. (June 2002).

- *Where to Retire Magazine*: Asheville listed as one of the Best Tax Heavens in the Country. (Spring 2002).
- *Book Magazine*: Asheville ranked 3rd in the Top 10 Great Literary Trips in the nation. (May/June 2002).
- *USA Today*: Ranked Gold Hill Cafe in Asheville one of "10 Great Places for Caffeine and Conversation." (March 2002).
- *Barron's Online*: Asheville listed as one of the Best Places to Retire. (March 2002).
- *Wallpaper Magazine Annual Round-Up Edition*: Asheville ranked the #1 Urban Haven in the World —with benefits of rural life, urban sophistication and energy. (Jan./Feb. 2002).
- *Outside Magazine*: Named Asheville one of the ten best outdoor towns.

2001

- *Southern Living Magazine*: Asheville was chosen by Reader's Choice poll as one of the top mountain destinations and weekend getaways in the Southeast. (Fall 2001).
- *National Geographic Traveler*: Rated Biltmore Estate in Asheville as one of America's Top 50 Places of a Lifetime. (October 2001).
- *MSN Home Advisor*: Ranked Asheville among the Best Five Places to Retire.
- *Where to Retire Magazine*: Asheville rated in Ten Great Towns for Retired Singles. (Summer 2001).
- *Employment Review*: Asheville rated one of Ten Top Small Cities in America's Best Places to Live

and Work.

- *American Style Magazine*: Asheville rated eighth of the top 25 arts destinations in the USA. (Summer 2001).
- *Whitewater Paddling Magazine*: Rated Asheville a Top 10 Whitewater Town.
- *Canoe and Kayak Magazine*: Asheville named one of the top 10 paddle towns. (April 2001).
- *FamilyFun Magazine*: Asheville named one of the top five Southeast cities for family vacations.
- *Mountain Bike Magazine*: Named Asheville one of the 10 best U.S. cities for mountain bikers. (June 2001).

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