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Poetics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic

The place of art: Local area characteristics and arts growth in Canada, 2001–2011



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 January 2015

Received in revised form 20 May 2015

Accepted 21 May 2015

Available online 20 June 2015

Keywords:

Sociology of art

Art districts

Neighbourhood effects

Gentrification

Social ecology

Scenes

ABSTRACT

Analyzing Canadian business and census data from 2001 to 2011, this paper examines local area characteristics associated with arts organization growth. We consider five hypotheses: (1) Critical Mass: arts growth will occur in existing arts districts. (2) Gentrification: arts growth will occur in low-income and low-rent areas. (3) Rising Tide: arts growth will parallel general economic growth. (4) Urbanity: arts growth will occur in urbanized areas. (5) Perfect Audience: arts growth will occur in neighbourhoods with demographic groups most likely to consume the arts. We test these hypotheses at three levels: qualitative descriptions of Canada's top three arts growth neighbourhoods, ecological analysis of arts growth in Canada's three largest metropolitan areas, and a national hierarchical linear regression. Our findings demonstrate strong support for Critical Mass, Urbanity, and Perfect Audience. Mixed findings for Gentrification and Rising Tide reveal that arts growth occurs in a diversity of local economic conditions. Our conclusion articulates the utility of 'ecological' approaches to arts production and consumption more generally.

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1. Introduction

Arts production and consumption is a defining topic for the sociology of culture. The field has largely revolved around explaining *how* particular art forms are produced and *who* consumes them.

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These explanations have often focused on organizational structures of production systems (e.g. Dowd, 2004; Peterson & Anand, 2004), and consumers' demographic features (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007). More recently, sociologists of culture have turned their attention to *where* artistic practices occur. Emerging research suggests that both artistic production (e.g. Lloyd, 2005; Molotch, 2003) and consumption (e.g. Babon, 2006; Griswold, Mangione, & McDonnell, 2013) are greatly influenced by *location, location, location*. Nonetheless, many questions remain about the relationship between place and artistic practices.

One way in which place and the arts are connected is through artistic districts or “scenes” (Silver, Clark, & Yanez, 2010). Indeed, art forms often evoke specific place associations (e.g. Hollywood films, Chicago jazz). Urban sociologists have long-standing interests in urban arts districts, with seminal case studies documenting their characteristics and connections to political, economic, and geographic structures and processes (e.g. Lloyd, 2005; Zukin, 1982). While these studies offer important insights, urban sociologists have tended to treat artistic production and consumption as independent variables in the explanations of other phenomena such as gentrification (Ley, 2003) and economic development (Mommaas, 2004).

In the mode of the sociology of culture, by contrast, this paper seeks to explain artistic practices themselves. In particular, we identify local area characteristics that foster the expansion of those practices. To do so, we analyze arts growth using Canadian census and business data from 2001 to 2011, operationalizing arts growth as the absolute change in the number of arts organizations¹ within neighbourhoods.

The paper first reviews relevant literature from fields such as the sociology of culture, urban sociology, and organizational sociology. We synthesize five hypotheses that offer potential explanations for *where* arts growth tends to occur: (1) *Critical Mass*: arts growth will occur in or nearby existing arts districts. (2) *Gentrification*: arts growth will occur in low-rent, working class neighbourhoods. (3) *Rising Tide*: arts growth will parallel general economic growth and prosperity. (4) *Urbanity*: arts growth will occur in denser, less car dependent urban areas. (5) *Perfect Audience*: arts growth will occur in areas with people who are most likely to consume arts and culture amenities: the younger, single, and educated.

We evaluate these hypotheses at three geographic levels. First we assess the hypotheses against descriptive case studies of Canada's top three arts growth neighbourhoods: the Plateau in Montreal, Parkdale in Toronto, and South Downtown Vancouver. Next are metropolitan analyses that use *t*-tests to identify social and geographic features of top arts-growth neighbourhoods in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. Finally, hierarchical linear regression tests all five hypotheses in relation to each other at the national-level.²

Results offer strong support for *Critical Mass*, *Urbanity*, and *Perfect Audience* across Canada. Evidence for *Rising Tide* and *Gentrification* is mixed. Neighbourhoods with strong arts growth did not share a uniform economic profile. They were not particularly rich or poor in 2001, and did not become noticeably wealthier over the decade, relative to other areas. They did, however, experience significant population growth, but saw declines in working class populations and slower racialized minority growth than otherwise similar areas.

The larger implication of this paper is the clear illustration that space matters for artistic practices. Arts districts are not evenly distributed across Canada. Rather, they are highly concentrated into very distinct areas with specific social ecological characteristics. This spatial concentration points to the importance of incorporating an ecological approach to the sociology of culture in order to complement

¹ We use the general term “organizations” referring to either for-profit or not-for-profit group involved in the production or distribution of the arts. See a complete list of the types of organizations in Table 1.

² Canadian cities are in some ways a middle-ground amidst common experiences of deindustrialization and the rise of the symbolic economy. As in the United States, they are often characterized by 19th-century city centres surrounded by sprawling, car-dependent suburbs built in the post-war period. They are also extremely diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and birthplace. Like Europe, however, there is heavy overlap between racialized minority and immigrant populations. Also like Europe, Canada's urban cores have remained populated and prosperous relative to the US (becoming even more so in the early 21st-century). One distinguishing factor is the spatial distribution of Canadian cities. Over half of Canada's population inhabits an urban corridor stretching along the US border from Ontario to Quebec, encompassing Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa. For more information see Lightbody (2006).

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