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Pleasurescapes

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FULL ARTICLE

Introduction

Pleasurescape—a word combination of pleasure and scape—is a rather new concept in urban history and urban cultural studies. It refers to landscapes of pleasure and architectures of public entertainment (Kosok, forthcoming). Previously, the term was mentioned rather loosely by Hannigan, among others, in his *Fantasy City* where he wonders whether these landscapes are “liminal sites where we can escape the social bonds of everyday life” (1998: 13). These places of escapist entertainment are often associated with nocturnal and playful elements, or places of heavily branded consumption created by “merchants of leisure” (Chatterton and Hollands 2002; Hall 2008; Hannigan 1998: 7). Yet, the term “pleasurescape” is more than a fancy shorthand for leisurely fantasy cities, or “Starbuckscapecs” that attract tourists and visitors to escape from daily sorrows and miseries (Cresswell 2003).

The cultural, spatial, visual, and infrastructural turns in urban history have sparked interest in pleasure practices as omnipresent human and technological phenomena. Cities and their accompanying pleasures have proven to be a fascinating field of research to explore, and to better understand public spaces of entertainment as expressions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernism and capitalism. This is, for instance, already evidenced in studies on amusement parks (Conlin 2012; Kane 2013).

Pleasure districts are often associated with metropolises, such as New York, Paris, London, or Berlin (Becker 2011). However, port cities have played a particular role in the evolution of pleasurescapecs as well, from rough sailortown districts to gentrified skyscraper waterfronts (Porfyriou and Sepe 2017). To evaluate the analytical strength of the pleasurescape concept, the HERA-funded “Pleasurescapecs” project (2019–2022) focuses on four European port cities: Barcelona, Gothenburg, Hamburg, and Rotterdam. The research project explores the reciprocal relations between the spatial characteristics of neighborhoods of pleasure and their sociocultural practices (Baptist 2020). The real challenge, however, is to operationalize the concept of pleasurescapecs in such a way that it effectively contributes to studies of urban transformations, and social and cultural restructuring of cities in the distant and recent past.

The Concept over Time

In his book *The Pleasure of the Imagination*, Brewer (1997) mentions the shift from individual tastes and recipients of courtly pleasures in eighteenth-century England to place-bound collective pleasures. “The market became the arbiter of taste” (Wilson 2020: 139). The rise of

commercial pleasures is intermittently linked to urbanity, ranging from eighteenth-century pleasure gardens to technologically advanced amusement parks, and into twentieth-century global pleasures of an increasingly borderless world. The modern world is, therefore, not to be understood without pleasures and how they are embedded in culture and society. Almost all commercialized pleasures appeared in particular “scapes.”

The popularity of “scapes” has particularly taken off since Appadurai (1996) has used the suffix to capture the cultural imagination of practices ascribed to modern globalization. He did not operationalize the term empirically but defined it in a conceptual sense as “perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors” (Appadurai 1996: 33). “The word scape refers to a view or a scene as well as to realist or abstract representations of a view” (Hall 2008: 236). “Scapes” then connect as much to physical environments that can be mapped or explored, as to collective memories of these same environments. In the meantime, the “scape” suffix has become a reflexive concept and has found its way into history quite easily. In relation to port and maritime history, for example, Bentley et al. (2007) have coined the term “seascapes.” The “port cityscape” has been proposed as a concept by Hein (2011), and as planning historian she also uses the idea of “petroleumscares” to express the impact of oil on modern urban life (Hein 2018).

The previously mentioned different scholarly “turns” have certainly influenced the “scape”-inflation among urban historians. The cultural turn has challenged them to put less emphasis on historical causation and meta-narratives, which traditionally prioritized economic conditions in exploring urbanization. Class distinctions mattered, of course, but urban identity was also shaped by a complex interplay of gender, racial, religious, and ethnic conditions, which were discursively constructed in part (Ewen 2016; Gilfoyle 1998). The shift toward cultural and visual representations of the city was matched by the spatial turn in studies indebted to postmodernism. Soja (2003) emphasized the agency of space in actively constructing, staging, and contesting social activities and identities. Ethington and Schwartz (2006) stressed the evolution of interdisciplinary scholarship on urban visual culture, including spatiality with respect to urban experiences and imaginations. We see this reflected in a new visual concept of the city, as for instance in the “synoptic city” (Coleman 2019). Urban history also benefited from the infrastructural turn that reveals the anthropology of infrastructural changes, assessing from a material as well as a cultural perspective the impact of socio-technical systems on modern society (Ash 2014). The convergence of spatial, cultural, visual, and ultimately global representations and perspectives has encouraged interdisciplinary research and new concepts.

Pleasurescape is introduced as a new concept to analyze the complex reciprocal relationships between urban identities and modern cityscapes driven by commercial pleasure provisions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As an analytical construct, it seeks to define urbanity as part of an evolving cultural ecosystem, guiding spatial, environmental, and socioeconomic trends through the practices of pleasure and leisure (Vigar et al. 2005). Pleasure was key in the shaping of modern society and civilization from the eighteenth century. However, the invention of modern commercial pleasures and increasing purchasing power of the lower classes accelerated major urban transformations. “This is why pleasure districts are different from other urban locations. They produce a different kind of mindset” (McWilliam 2020: 136).

The period 1900–1939 witnessed a spectacular growth in amusement parks. From New York's Coney Island, the American trends in new technologies of pleasure were exported to Britain and the European continent. Kane's *The Architecture of Pleasure* (2013) is the first comprehensive study on these parks in the UK, which she compares with other popular forms of entertainment. Kane deals with the design of amusement parks and their mechanized pleasures and seeks to answer how they represented and displayed modernity. Her work shows how the advancement of technologies interacted with human experiences in both work and leisure environments. Amusement parks were more than just playgrounds: above all, they were a testing site for new cultural practices, experimental social behavior, nonconformist modes of thought and innovative technologies that shaped the new landscapes of pleasure. McWilliam argues that "the pleasure district provides for visitors an education in the nature of metropolitan culture. It is a network of sophisticated business enterprises but also offers a way of understanding popular and material culture, the lives of both sexes, social class, and the identities created by buildings and spaces" (2020: 15). Most studies stress the role of the metropolis, as does the research of Berlin historian Nolte (2018), for instance, who is interested in the relationship between pleasure culture, urbanity, and modernity. The metropolis is thereby often interpreted as a "laboratory of progress," caught in a competitive process of modernization (Reif 2012: 34). The concentration of capital, commerce, and consumption in the world's leading cities made these places forerunners in technologically driven pleasure.

Despite the scholarly consensus on the role that port cities have played in shaping modernity, the port city as harbinger of a new modern pleasure culture has gained far less attention. The key issue is then how port-related cultural practices were entangled with the spatial dynamics of port cities and their regions (Hein et al. 2021). The HERA "Pleasurescapes" group applies its main concept in their comparative research on European port cities by exploring the catalyzing role of waterfront-related pleasures in mediating processes of modernity between the 1880s and 1960s (Kosok, forthcoming).

The conceptual strength of pleasurescapes is explored by delving into the waterfront-related pleasures of sailortowns. They functioned as relevant identity markers of port culture, even when waterfronts lost their working function well into the twentieth century (Van de Laar 2020). Waterfronts represent both clear images and blurry myths of the past, and these continue to shape the present-day rebranding of port cities (Baptist 2020). "Port cities lie at the edge between black and blue" (Mah 2014: 27). The color blue's positive image of open horizons is countered by a black side of poverty and crime. As liminal spaces, port cities are inscribed with a history of asymmetric sociocultural and working relations and associated with dangerous and chaotic lives that generated a typical mixture of pleasures and endemic entertainment.

The waterfront in particular captures the mindsets of port cities, as also expressed in the cultural branding program "Cities on the Edge" of six port cities led by Liverpool as European Capital of Culture in 2008 (Hinks 2008). "Its social, economic and cultural expression is edgy, expressed along a shifting border between 'national marginality and world centrality'" (Carter 2018: 351). This ambiguity is also reflected in the urban identity of "second cities" (Hodos 2011). Port cities were traditionally perceived within their own countries as distinct or even unique places, sharing a common reputation of bad, unloved cities. They were often

secondary, not because of their lack of global connections, but because they generally were not centers of international finance, political power or advanced creative and service industries. Over time, their sense of “secondness” has come to the foreground in terms of urban consciousness and identity, and increasingly serves to distinguish them from first cities or capitals nowadays.

In the literature on pleasure districts in port cities, sailortowns play a prominent role and are part of a distinct port culture with working-class neighborhoods. Various definitions circulate, but in essence a sailortown was an often densely populated district characterized by its public houses, brothels, and “low” entertainment offer of hedonic pleasures (Baptist 2020; Beaven et al. 2016). To outsiders, it was a world of vice, dangerous interactions, and resonances to bohemian lifestyles, with values and mores that ran counter to bourgeois society. Notwithstanding strong urban identities and local pride shared by the people working and living there, moral reformers were keen to portray these districts as places of otherness in need of social and cultural improvements.

From the early twentieth century onward, sailortowns started to disappear or were erased. Earlier waterfront communities were replaced by new ones, and existing urban narratives were rewritten. Port- and maritime-related nostalgic pleasures were rescripted to meet the demands of new city branding and marketing offensives. The gentrified waterfront now (re)presents a postmodern concept of pleasure. Like the amusement parks of the past, they are to be considered as testing sites for new cultural practices, this time of postindustrial pleasure experiences. As a result, these cloned waterfronts (Porfyriou and Sepe 2017) have become a product of globalized pleasure, like the copy-paste trends visible in amusement parks of the twentieth century. Even long-lasting pleasures such as Hamburg’s Reeperbahn, which continues to play a prominent role in the port city’s commercialized entertainment today, has changed drastically and fundamentally. The sailors of the past are nowadays replaced by tourists who benefit from low-budget flights and organized city tours. Some of these former maritime pleasures, for instance, Amsterdam’s Red-Light District or Barcelona’s Paral·lel Avenue and La Rambla, have hardly any visible connection to their past sailortowns anymore.

Interpretations

Pleasurescape is an inviting construct as it opens new ways of exploring the role of pleasure in shaping modernity from a transnationally comparative and historical perspective. The HERA research group’s work in progress distinguishes certain variations in pleasures. Most waterfront-related pleasures challenged the dominant morality, and its negative characteristics were therefore more easily pointed out in comparison to the values and importance that local populations attached to their popular culture. City authorities put much effort into transforming these pleasure districts into civilized places of modernity. While nightlife entertainment became increasingly influenced by modern, commodified forms of pleasures, the informal and uncontrolled dark sides of sailortown pleasures conflicted with a new sense of modernity. Before the First World War, Rotterdam’s Zandstraatbuurt sailortown was demolished and replaced by a new central business district. The necessity of this initiative was legitimized as an urban reform project, an early form of gentrification that underpinned the port city’s desire to Americanize its urban functions. More civilized entertainment alternatives

emerged as controlled countercultures to the disputed sailortowns as well. The Liseberg amusement park in Gothenburg is a case in point where pleasure modernization was carved out into separate pleasure areas away from the waterfronts. These different outcomes also show the ambiguity of the pleasurescape concept in relation to modernity discourses. Thus far, the conducted research on port cities “reveals the construction and development of public urban spaces on the waterfront through a triangle of governmental design, spatial-material regimes and social appropriation, with pleasure culture as the driving force” (Kosok, forthcoming). The investigated case studies hope to further unravel the most characteristic differences between urban pleasure districts in metropolises, port cities, and other industrial cities. Pleasure culture can then become a crucial criterion to assess whether port cities really are that different from metropolises, keeping in mind that many of today’s global cities, for example, New York, London, and Hong Kong, grew out of coastal settlements.

Becker (2011) formulated seven criteria in his comparative study on “Vergnügungsviertellen”—amusement districts—in Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna, New York, and Tokyo: these areas are supposedly liminal, heterosocial, egalitarian, cosmopolitan, commercial, mediatized, and theatrical. The liminal refers to the fact that most pleasure districts were situated at the urban periphery, both in a spatial and sociocultural sense. Becker (2011) also calls them “Schwellenräume”—threshold spaces—that shaped new communities and functioned as places of sexual initiation. Not only bohemians hunted for urban pleasures there but also sons of well-off families frequented these places to have their first sexual experiences. These areas showed significant shifts from a restrictive “homosocial” culture of sailors and pleasure-seeking men to a “heterosocial” one, serving working-class women such as shop girls, dressmakers, and typists, to enjoy unsupervised fun beyond the reach of neighborhood and family control. The wider variety of modern commercialized entertainment also attracted married couples that went to musical halls or other forms of new, conspicuous entertainment. Becker (2011) stresses that these frequented places, in a way, pursued a more egalitarian urban society. Pleasures, tastes, and different cultural forms in general—from opera arias to popular music—all came together there. Hannigan argues, however, that we should not overestimate the “democracy’s theater” (1998: 21). The districts could well draw in different social classes, but during performances every class oftentimes still had its own demarcated placements. When amusement parks such as Coney Island became too proletarian, the middle classes escaped to more civilized surroundings. Class distinctions were, perhaps, partly transcended because of the role commercial theater played as a model of bourgeois attitudes (Becker 2011). Male and female office workers imitated a bourgeois lifestyle to distinguish themselves from the working classes in dress, attitude, and manners, even though their wages were scarcely more than what industrial workers brought in. As a place of attraction for transient people, pleasurescape also offered cities a cosmopolitan appeal, which was further stimulated by the commercial successes of these areas. Sumptuous pleasure architecture, fluorescent billboards, and spectacular shows—often inspired by classic Parisian successes such as the Moulin Rouge and Chat Noir—all increased the mediatization of pleasure districts. As it was a place to escape from daily concerns, albeit temporarily, the pleasure district functioned as one big theater.

Becker’s criteria (2011) are not specific enough to conclude that pleasurescape in port cities were in nature different from the metropolitan ones, although case studies on Hamburg’s Reeperbahn or Barcelona’s Paral·lel are still comparable to them. The liminal character of the

waterfront was certainly an essential element in the shaping of port cities' pleasures, and their global connectivity fostered transnational exchanges and cosmopolitanism. The heterosocial nature of sailortowns is also evidenced in many studies on port culture. Female workers tended to go to pleasure districts to dance or entertain themselves, although they were certainly not expected to frequent these neighborhoods, as women were easily stereotyped in the role of prostitutes there. Prostitution, sexuality, and eroticism are all linked to the role of pleasures in sailortowns. However, Becker's "Vergnügungsviertel" (2011) partly paints a picture that does not entirely differ from the sailortowns in this respect (Milne 2016). Exaggerated masculinity and sexual lust for women onshore has dominated popular representations of sailortowns in literature, film, and even in maritime museums (Tibbles 2012). City officials also explored these images of sexually driven masculinity in their reform policies. They wanted to create a "new manliness" that focused on respectability and sobriety (Milne 2016: 74) and stimulated gendered boundaries for feminine or respectable pleasures. The Luna Parks, as was the case with Liseberg in Gothenburg, offered women a safe place for leisure (see also Rabinovitz 1998). The park gave rise to a new bordered space, separating pleasure time from work, and in the case of Sweden, alcohol control measures also counteracted the spread of pubs. This type of enclosed amusement was much easier to control than more unbound pleasures.

Given these differences, critical reflections on the meaning and use of pleasurescape are certainly needed to help progress scholarly insights. As previously mentioned, McWilliam (2020) talks about pleasure districts, like Becker's "Vergnügungsviertel" (2011). In his study on London's West End, covering the period from 1800 to 1914, McWilliam considers such districts as "areas within the interstices of cities where recreation, rather than production, administration, or domesticity, became dominant. These areas created networks of culture, entertainment, fashion, and retail, and developed a creative energy through bringing different forms of enterprise together" (2020: 2). In this context, lifestyles are predominantly driven by consumption, and McWilliam's research underlines the spatial and sensorial experiences pleasure districts were able to generate. These are not just related to sight, sound, and smell but also to haptic and tactile experiences that were the result of intense encounters between individuals in newly shared spaces (Kenny 2014). Bodily practices and sensorial experiences—or the general interaction between the physical and the mental—help to unravel urban developments (Kenny 2014: 11), a point already taken by Walter Benjamin before (Ethington and Schwartz 2006) and currently in particular investigated further through efforts in the field of history of emotions.

In emphasizing the importance of sensory dimensions, "its visual delights, its smells, its tastes, its constructions of glamour" (2020: 245), McWilliam further considers pleasure districts as utopian, a term that often appears in the literature (see also Becker 2011). This means that Michel Foucault is not far away, either. Moreover, we want to stress that it is through the timely and thorough conceptualization of new terms such as "pleasurescapes" that older concepts, for instance the ones coined by Foucault, can potentially be explored anew. In contrast to the well-known idea of utopias, Foucault introduced the term "heterotopia" in 1966–7, in a lecture for an audience of architects in which he emphasized the importance of space in social sciences. In various disciplines, heterotopia—a different or "other" space—has tremendously gained in popularity since Foucault's original French text was published in English in 1984 (Dehaene and De Cauter 2008). A Google search reveals that heterotopias are everywhere,

apparently. Scholars and artists alike have been tempted by Foucault's intriguing, but also confusing and seemingly open-ended concept in analyzing the spatiality of institutional public arrangements that relate to order and control in society.

Foucault was interested in studying the range of different ambiguous spaces that challenge or contest the overarching space we live in. Heterotopias boil down to six principles in Foucault's original text ([1967] 1984: 4–8): they arise in all cultures, but in different forms. His first principle also mentions the crisis heterotopia, with sacred spaces set apart from profane ones, and heterotopias of deviation, such as prisons. As history evolves, existing heterotopias can obtain different functions. This second principle is exemplified by the role and place of cemeteries in an urban context, for instance, which are the result of changes in the discourse on death and diseases. Foucault's third principle refers, for instance, to cinemas and theaters, that share the characteristic of combining several different, supposedly incompatible spatial-temporal elements. The fourth principal links heterotopias more explicitly to time itself, and in particular accumulations of time, as can be found under the roofs of museums and libraries, or rather contrasting transitory flows of time that offer temporal break-ups of daily rhythms through pleasure and entertainment. The fifth principle relates to ambivalent systems or rituals around entries and exits, which limit functioning as public place. Finally, under the sixth principle, spaces can function in relation to the dominant, remaining space as either illusion or compensation. Here, Foucault manages to both contrast and compare brothels versus historical colonies where all rhythms of daily life were rigidly controlled and ordered (Hetherington 2011). Becker (2011) argues that this list of principles generally applies to pleasure districts, and similar conclusions are formulated in other studies as well. McWilliam calls London's West End a heterotopic pleasure district that could turn consumerism into a dreamworld for many, since it was "based on ways of seeing in which vision and the imagination were stretched. Pleasure districts possessed the utopian capacity to enchant and transform" (2020: 103). On the other hand, the rebranded East End in London is often depicted as the anti-modern space compared to the pleasures of the West End, and arguably meets the idea of a crisis heterotopia in the sense of a counter-space "in which the uncanny or the disturbing can be effectively contained" (Newland 2008: 32). This characterization refers more to the vernacular waterfronts and sailortowns, exhibiting a space of disorder rather than those leisure places of modernity that feature in the classic metropolises (Campo 2002).

The concept of heterotopia extends to a discussion on nostalgia, which is an essential element in studies on sailortowns and modernization of the waterfront. As a strange space, where "'yesterday' always meets 'tomorrow'" (Lagerkvist 2009: 150), the sailortown exemplifies a heterotopic juxtaposition of past, present, and future. Pleasurescapes tend to be written down in the nostalgic coloring of their times, which is partly the result of the sources being used and the oral histories collected, especially in the context of a forgotten maritime past. Nostalgia becomes part of a layering of forgotten spaces, a utopian ideal, which is ultimately reproduced in cultural memories of pleasures.

Conclusion

The concept of pleasurescape is attractive, although its academic implementation and operationalization is currently still a work-in-progress. The "scape"-inflation did generate a positive impact on the debate regarding the role of pleasure districts in urban modernization.

It captures trends in urban studies that refer to geographical areas as liminal spaces, borderlands, and heterotopias. This is evidenced in the aforementioned port city case studies, which start from the assumption that port cities are a particular type of cities and share a common port city culture. Waterfront-related pleasures were prominent throughout history, but how relevant were they in shaping modernity? Scholars on metropolises emphasized that urban entertainment turned capital cities into world cities, but we should not overestimate the role pleasure districts played in port cities. The informal sailortown was a countercultural space, and not in itself an expression of the modern city. Whether these places could develop into pleasure districts that shaped modern life depended on local circumstances. World port cities had impressive pleasure districts, but not because of their port city functions. On the contrary even, the opposite was the case. It was their first city status that turned them into metropolises. Discussions like these can draw critically on the concept of pleasures as agents of modernization. Pleasure districts enjoyed considerable imaginative power as quintessential emblems of the modern city. However, this analysis needs to be more strongly integrated into urban history in the future, a point also made by McWilliam (2020) in his comprehensive study on London's West End. The ongoing spatial and visual turn offer new and critical lenses on pleasure as an urban concept, in particular when we consider pleasures as heterotopias subject to historical changes, which may function in different ways at different times.

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