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The Birth of an Arts Scene

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Degree Type

Dissertation

Degree Name

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Department

Sociology

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202

Abstract

Scenes, created and defined by particular social settings offer to focus community interaction, a sense of purpose and of belonging. This dissertation is about the grassroots development of an art scene in Las Vegas – Las Vegas, a city sociologists have often described as a place with an outward focus on tourism, a weak civic culture, and social fragmentation, resulting in an individually-focused and socially fragmented scene.

Using the multiple techniques of ethnographic research, this study includes (1) conversations with early visionaries, (2) participant observation, and (3) an assortment of secondary data, both local and national. My ethnographic study of the development of the Las Vegas art scene highlights the efforts of artists and activists to create a community through conflicts over its design and implementation (gallery walk or festival), the creation of a monthly city-wide First Friday event and activities within the Arts District, the failure of a corporate revitalization of the Entertainment District in the 1990s (Downtown Project), and the sudden purchase of the non-profit arts center by the managing conglomerate connected to the Downtown Project.

This study has four key findings. First, I found support for the idea that the Las Vegas art scene can be interpreted as a response to the isolating, and inauthentic nature of Las Vegas. With a monthly gathering of massive crowds within the Arts District, also called the “18b,” First Friday has become a type of community event focused upon an organized focal experience for a wide variety of people. Second, authenticating cultural and aesthetic activities and experiences within the arts culture of Las Vegas has formed a loosely organized social network where people share meaning and interests and at times conflict, such as the long-standing internal conflict regarding the implementation of First Friday (the street festival). Third, the Las Vegas arts community is an important source of social capital, especially if more social venues are developed where people can meet, talk and relax (Oldenberg 2001). At the same time, however, the Arts Factory or The Funk House will be necessary to maintain a community. It is unclear if the Arts District, in and of itself can ever become a community (Oldenberg 2008) like that of the Entertainment District in old downtown. Fourth, the promotion of Las Vegas as a center for the arts is a double-edged sword. The “meaning” construed from the consumption of art must depend upon the context and/or experience of the consumer, and while art has a strong capacity to create art and for some who see it, art also marks hierarchies of social capital (gallery, public street murals etc.) alone, however, cannot characterize a community when those without social capital have to live at a basic survival level.

Keywords

Art Scenes; Cultural Sociology; Ethnography

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