

“Cultural markets and urban transformation in the historical center of Athens 1990-today”

Nicos Souliotis*

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(*) National Center for Social Research, Kratinou 9 and Athinas, Greece 11742,
nsouliotis@ekke.gr

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Abstract

This paper examines the contribution of cultural markets to gentrification processes in the historical center of Athens during the last two decades. Based on both ethnographic research and secondary statistics, we focus on micro-businesses in night-time entertainment market (bars, cafés, restaurants), art galleries, theaters, cultural non-profits run by collectors of works of art and incubators of cultural enterprises. We analyse localization choices in relation with the socio-professional trajectories, resources and strategies of cultural entrepreneurs and we investigate the impact of the concentration of cultural activities in the historical center on the housing market. We argue that this impact is rather ambiguous due to speculative practices of cultural entrepreneurs and the fragmented real estate ownership in the historical center.

Introduction

Pioneer studies of gentrification have stressed the contribution of cultural activities to housing market dynamics in the city center of western metropolises (see Zukin 1989 [1983]). However, the discussion that followed rather overlooked this question or, at least, did not examine it in depth. This paper investigates the interplay of various cultural and leisure activities (bars, cafés, restaurants, art galleries, theaters, cultural non-profits run by collectors of works of art and incubators of cultural enterprises) with the housing market in the historical center of Athens during the last twenty-five years. Methodologically we draw upon the sociological approach of the cultural economy as system of actors (Bourdieu 1979, 1992; Zukin 1995). We argue that cultural activities change the common representations of dilapidated areas of the historical center and reintegrate them to the life of the city by increasing the flows of everyday visitors. However, the speculative practices which are linked to the logic of coordination in cultural and leisure markets in association with the fragmented real estate ownership limit the dynamics of the housing market. As a result, gentrification developed only in pockets and not in a large scale in the historical center.

The paper is divided in three parts. The first examines the localization choices of cultural and leisure activities in relation with entrepreneurs' socio-professional

trajectories, strategies and resources. The second examines the impact of urban policies on the dynamics of cultural markets. The third investigates the relation between the expansion of cultural markets in the historical center and the housing market.

Conclusion

The interplay of cultural and housing markets in the historical center of Athens depends in a large degree upon the logic of coordination of cultural entrepreneurs. Cultural and leisure markets, being composed by small enterprises, are characterized by competitiveness, fluidity and demand-sensitivity. The strategies of leisure micro-businesses are based on common cultural representations, empirical observation of the market and expectations about the future development of urban policies. For these reasons these businesses are prone to be part of bubbles of localized leisure markets (spontaneous quick emergence of clusters of leisure activities which decline also relatively quickly). Theaters' localization in the historical center is associated to the logic of actors' and directors' trajectories (starting a career in companies, making an autonomy career when individual reputation increases, transition from the status of actor to the status of director) offering opportunities mainly for early career stages. Private nonprofits turn to the historical center in search of prestigious localization, as this opportunity is no longer given in traditional well-off areas of the city center. Private nonprofits are less demand-sensitive and form their own cultural agenda, while they have the economic and political power to influence more directly urban policies. Urban policies do not lead the gentrification processes. They rather coordinate the action of cultural enterprises through specific urban interventions (construction of pedestrian streets, metro stations etc.) and the definition of the symbolic value of space (i.e. through the definition of what "historical center" means).

Cultural markets affected symbolically and practically the historical center mainly in two ways. First, the concentration of cultural and leisure activities changed the common representation of the previously derelict neighborhoods of the historical center. Images of the historicity of the space, comparisons of the Athenian historical

center with those of major US and European metropolises, the anesthetization of the industrial past etc. changed the way Athenians perceive the historical center of the city. Second, cultural markets created large flows of visitors in the historical center. The latter has been thus reintegrated in the patterns of everyday mobility and re-appropriated by city's residents. However, this impact has been contradicted by speculative practices of leisure entrepreneurs. They hyper-concentration of night-time entertainment activities in the historical center, as a result of the inadequate regulation of land uses, impeded the development of the local housing markets. Furthermore, the fragmentation of the real estate ownership did not allow the planning and the implementation of integrated rehabilitation projects. The overall outcome was that gentrification in the historical center has been rather segmented and limited.