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Alternative Spaces of Cultural Consumption. An Analysis of Bucharest Urban Culture

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Abstract: In the last years, many pubs, bars and restaurants began to include in their offer cultural activities. Some cultural institutions also began to attract the public by offering a „leisure” space in the proximity, by association with private firms. This relatively recent phenomenon raised several specific questions about the identity of these spaces, the profile of their audience and the relation between artist, public and space, but also general questions about the emergent relation between economic and artistic sectors. The aim of this article is mapping the independent cultural urban spaces in Bucharest. On one hand we shall highlight the specificity of these hybrid spaces. On the other hand, the article analyses the customers’ attributes depending on age, education and occupation. At last, the manner of negotiating the culture-business relation between the participants, the established limits and the tensions and strategic alliances give more information on how economic and cultural spheres are and can be integrated.

Keywords: alternative space, underground culture, urban culture, night time economy, cultural consumption

Introduction

The context of the rise and development of this kind of spaces is related to a more complex social phenomenon bound to the mechanisation of the production systems, the labour division and the rise of two types of time: work time and spare-time. In this context, restaurants,

pubs and bars become not only consumption spaces, but also places to spend one’s spare-time or places of relaxation. They are characteristic to urban civilisation; they are also spaces of expression, of conversation, of social interaction, reflecting a certain social structure, a certain type of economic life or certain cultural values. (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002).

Also, they are „sensespaces”, using Urry’s term (2001) to designate the sensorial experience of the space, the way in which the light and the sound can define the identity of a place, not only through aspects related to visual experience. From this viewpoint we may consider the cultural consumption in these places not only limited to the type of a cultural event’s consumption, but also in a larger sense, that the place’s culture consumption, using an extended definition of the culture, in an anthropological approach, which includes elements of design, lifestyle, gastronomy, shared common values. These spaces can also be called „*landscapes of creativity*”, considered as the result of the emergent models of production, consumption and spatiality (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002). Such places are structured on two coordinates: a hardware type that includes physical infrastructure (cultural production and consumption infrastructure and leisure activities infrastructure) and a software type that includes intangible components, such as cultural events and activities (Milestone, 2000). They restructure the public space, creating spaces of conviviality and creative expression.

A similar study from U.K. „Sites of sound: spaces of pop culture in Manchester’s North Quarter” includes these spaces in the pop cultural industries, represented by the small and medium companies operating in the „production and dissemination of symbolic goods and cultural artefacts in the area of pop music and youth culture” (Ibid.). These companies are clustered especially in a certain area of the city (North Quarter), in a way similar with the trend of clustering this kind of spaces in the Old City of Bucharest. Also, the geographical proximity generated and re-straightened the social relations between the stakeholders that developed cultural industry networks.

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These spaces are also part of the night-time economy, characterised by young adults' consumption rituals in bars, pubs and clubs in the urban centres, especially during weekends. The sociological studies, such as Cultural Consumption Barometer (Becuț and Croitoru 2014) or The Special Eurobarometer dedicated to cultural access and participation (2013), showed that in the recent period there was noticed the tendency of teenagers and young adults (between 30 and 40 years old), active in emergent economic sectors, to have more or less the same cultural consumption practices as the „young-adults” (between 20 and 30 years old). „These young workers in services, professionals and cultural middlemen are often considered as saviours of the urban cultural and night-time economy. As they accumulate economic capital, they also search for symbolic capital and status through consumption and this way they are involved in a growth circle” (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002, p.98). Nightlife becomes this way divided into more types of spaces for entertainment, relaxation and cultural consumption meant to fulfil „the spare time” with non-lucrative activities. Therefore, comparing to the production spaces, they are characterised in some studies by emphasising the entertainment concept and they are called „playscapes”, part of the independent cultural sector.

The idea of relaxation and entertaining begins to be dominant in the cultural consumption, too, and in this context consumers prefer the combination between cultural and entertainment products. Thus, the cultural consumption is moving from the formal area, subjected to strict rules, to an informal area, where the space is adapted to the new needs of the audience/consumer. This trend is specific to the tendency of including art in daily activities, characteristic for the post-modern culture. Moreover, Russel Berman (1984) speaks about a „desublimation” of art, opposed to the „art for the sake of art” vision, with greater accent on the audience for which it is meant. Sharing the same vision, Scott Lash (1990) characterised the post-modern culture through what he calls „eclipse of the aura”, adding that „if cultural modernity is to be understood in terms of the separation and even the transcendence or ‘aura’ of aesthetic realism, then *post-modernity* would be a matter of transgression of the boundaries that separate the aesthetic from other cultural practices and from the social itself” (Lash, 1990, p.157).

The same author considers the relocation of the cultural offer into alternative spaces as being part of a de-sacralisation phenomenon of the culture/art. „One of the paradoxes of the post-modern culture is that, on one hand, as long as the artists try to eliminate the aura of art by producing masterpieces that transcend a museum's

frontiers, on the other hand, art is more and more displayed in non-museum contexts, such as government and corporation buildings, in banks, restaurants, hotels and other urban spaces, such as marketplaces, parks and near other kind of buildings in order to improve ‘the aura’ of the place. Art is more and more used as a means to improve the environment where it is displayed, turning it into a space distinct from daily life” (Ibid.).

However, including art in the daily life, although it is sometimes perceived as „symbolic pollution” (Douglas, 1966) by its association with „desacralised practices”, is not an indicator of the loss of symbolic significance or of the cultural authority, but on contrary, it is a way of expressing this authority by strengthening the symbolic authority of the place it associates with. Instead of being de-auraticized, displaying art in the vicinity of daily activities determined a transfer of the art aura's power to other spheres of the social life, raising them from the level of appetite satisfaction to that of cherishing art for art's sake (Negrin, 2009). Gronow argued that the western culture searches for dissociation between the so-called high pleasures associated to the intellect, such cherishing art, and the low pleasures associated to the body such as the alimentation. (Gronow, as cited in Negrin, 2009).

In Romania, this kind of spaces appeared in this general context, and this could be a consequence of adopting the international models and of the need to be distinct from the competition and to identify and promote the offers with high degree of innovation and uniqueness. The article is based on a study carried out in 2010 by the team of the Centre for Research and Consultancy on Culture, conducted by the author.¹ The research instruments were the semi-structured interviews (23) with businessmen who organise cultural activities or are partners with cultural institutions and representatives of the cultural institutions that have entertainment spaces nearby. The selection of the respondents was made on specific criteria, such as the organisation type - private (bar, club, coffee place, tearoom, restaurants) or public organisation (museum, cinema theatre and other cultural institutions), the location of the organisation (ultra-central, central, semi-central and residential or outskirts) and the type of cultural activity (theatre performances, concerts, stand-up comedy, exhibitions, film projections, etc.). Another method used for collecting information was the participative observation, carried out by the author during the period 2010-2011.

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The typology of spaces

Although there are differences in management, both types of analysed spaces (companies/economic agents that organise cultural events and those in partnership with a cultural institution) are entertainment spaces, being in the same time a part of the cultural infrastructure and a cultural consumption space. They are part of the cultural infrastructure because they provide cultural services or connected services for cultural consumption. Moreover, in some cases, they fill a void in the present public cultural infrastructure - designed for a mass cultural consumption, where some of the cultural fields or genres could not find their artistic expression. It is the case of the niche cultural productions for a „connoisseur” consumer, of the underground culture or that of the experimental productions, more appropriate for this kind of spaces (jazz concerts or alternative musical styles, contemporary visual art productions, experimental or independent theatre) than for a formal type of space (classic concerts halls and classic museums).

These places are cultural consumption spaces because the customers are attracted particularly by the cultural offer, not only by the general offer, and they become a distinctive category of cultural public/consumers. The recent consumption orientation towards a domestic cultural consumption reflects the consumers’ tendency towards familiar and convivial spaces. The analysed spaces can be deemed as types of a public space cultural consumption, very similar to the domestic cultural consumption, due to those familiarity and conviviality characteristics. In contrast to the mass cultural consumption spaces, where the infrastructure type is more orientated towards the (formal) individual consumption, these spaces encourage group consumption, on (informal) kinship and friendship criteria.

These places are socialisation and community expression spaces, places of sharing common ideas and tastes. They are part of the „habitus” concept, used by Bourdieu (1984) to explain tastes, being spaces of forming and sharing cultural preferences. This way they become places of forming and performing tastes, of cherishing common values. These kinds of practices are related to the search for entertainment, socialisation, distinction, display, and possession, spectacular (Williams & Paddock, 2003). In short, art is included in a series of social conventions. During any artistic experience, it is likely for us to consume food, wine and coffee or simply to contemplate the atmosphere in the cultural spaces. The analysed spaces encourage the „slow” type of cultural consumption, they are places where you come together

with your friends and family to „stay”, to socialise and consume culture, unlike the classic cultural consumption spaces orientated towards a cultural consumption of a „fast-food” type (you come, you consume, you leave). These places are a form of domestication of the public space and a form of outdoor cultural consumption. In differentiating between space types on the analysed dimension (entertainment, leisure, infrastructure or consumption) the space designation established by the owners is very important. In some cases, the spaces had an assumed identity from the beginning of the cultural events organisation. In other cases, the identity of the place was shaped over time, after many „try and fail” actions.

The analysed places are hybrid spaces, combining elements of „leisure”, „entertainment” and niche cultural consumption. Depending on each element’s proportion, the spaces fall into one of these categories. Sometimes the space’s dominant dimension from the owners’ viewpoint is not the same with the one perceived or assumed by the consumers/audience. In other words, if the owner intended the space to have a cultural consumption dimension, it is possible that a part of the public will not attach the same meaning to it, and perhaps they will come to this place not necessarily for cultural consumption, but for their association with the values of that particular space. These places are called sometimes alternative spaces because they are a second choice for the public cultural infrastructure for mass consumption, an alternative to „popular” or box-office success cultural consumption genres. „These are the sites for goods acquisition that are not formal retail Outlets (including mail order companies and the internet) selling new goods.” (Williams & Paddock, 2003, p.138).

Other authors refer to this type of spaces as part of the independent cultural sector, on one hand because of the management method (private), and on the other hand because of their classification as part of the creative industries. This is a result of the owners’ behaviour as cultural entrepreneurs, being in the situation to find innovative solutions and to work in an intense innovative environment. In such an environment, networks are very important and this is the reason why these places become „networking” spaces, meant to form, maintain and develop personal and business relationships.

Creative companies are connected via partnership networks, extendable horizontally through partnership groups and vertically through supply and distribution channels. In many cases, these partnership connections are structured in a specific area. A virtual network development, introducing the company into global

partnerships, is also possible. But in many cases partnership cultures are embedded in local communities, face-to-face. A great part of creative industry businesses, such as films or new media, takes place in bars and cafés and not at the office. This sociability network is the invisible line maintaining partnerships (Bilton, 2007).

Other times they are perceived as underground consumption spaces, in contrast with the consumption spaces of the mainstream cultural products. There is a relationship between the offer content and the proportion of the business and cultural dimension that will be discussed later. For the moment it is important to stress the fact that both space types, distinguished on the basis of artistic content, are not mutually exclusive. The line between them is very thin and flexible (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002), as the present underground spaces may be the next mainstream spaces, due to their fast dynamics and rhythm of change, being part of the independent sector.

As we said above, there is the trend that these kinds of spaces to cluster in a certain area of the city - in Bucharest particularly in the Old City. Some authors consider the return in the centre of the city, or downtown, as it is called, an expression of the belief that the revitalisation of the central areas of the old industrial cities is very important for the urban economic development (Ibid.). Nevertheless, there are exceptions, when residential areas are preferred, according to the same gentrification tendency of the cultural consumption spaces (Ibid.). The alternative spaces of cultural consumption are a very important aspect of the city life and they play an important role in attracting creative people, as Florida (2014) showed in his studies about the creative class and the economic development of the cities.

The profile of the consumer/public

When speaking about the profile of the consumer/public we are referring especially to the social space, using Henri Lefebvre definition “(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: -rather it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder” (1991,p.73). We shall consider that there is a strong relation between the characteristics of the place (including the forms of interaction) and the profile of the people who are using it.

The gentrification trend aforementioned is highlighted through the consumer/public profile from the analysed spaces. These places are visited and preferred by young people, both young adults and middle youth, a feature

of youth culture extension to the early middle age. This phenomenon is highlighted in terms of „post-adolescence” or „middle youth” and is characterised by a delay of the transition to maturity and of the adult role performance. The research showed the direct connection between the public’s age and the cultural offer, certain cultural genres being more integrated in the youth culture than others.

As far as the education level is concerned, these places are preferred by people with medium to high education, precisely because of the framework for performing their common tastes found in these spaces. The latter are spaces of legitimisation and confirmation of a certain status, through attachment to certain common values. As far as these spaces, consumers’/public’s professions and social statuses are concerned, these are specific to the so-called „middle class”, including entrepreneurs and services system or multinational corporate employees. Their customers fall into the „yuppies” category (young professionals); as long as the night-time economy focuses on the idea of being „cool”, these young professionals are search of „cool” and fashionable bars and clubs (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002).

The public’s profile is influenced by the place’s design and structure, depending on the cultural offer delivered to the public. The cultural genre or the event type shapes the place’s identity and the public / consumer’s profile. These „sensescape” spaces are defined through the ambience designed by the owner for that place and this way the latter structures the profile of the future public/consumer.

This tendency of influencing the profile of the public through the set-up of the space and by creating „sensescape”- type spaces highlights the extremely important role of these spaces’ owners or managers in the way the cultural offer is structured and the cultural tastes are formed and performed. These „night-time” „leisure” or entertainment economy stakeholders become a kind of „gatekeepers” who control the system of inclusion and exclusion of different social groups in the „urban nightscapes” (Ibid.). The inclusion method for a certain social group consists in maintaining the existent public or promoting the place through informal channels. This way, the owners/managers make sure they maintain the cultural homogeneity of the place and keep the identity the public associate themselves with, when they come to these spaces for sharing common values.

The artist-audience-space relation

As we mentioned before, the owners/managers are important actors in the night-time economy, mainly

because they manage the artist-public-space relation. They control not only the profile of the audience, but also the artistic content offered in the space they manage. They are the people who decide which artistic genre is fit or not in that space, what artists are accepted or not, acting as „gatekeepers” of the cultural offer. These stakeholders have the power to legitimate or de-legitimate a certain type of cultural offer if only through its inclusion or exclusion in such a cultural consumption space. And the main reason is, as in the audience case, maintaining coherence between the space’s design and structure, the cultural offer and the profile of the audience. Their stake is to accomplish that „sensescape”, an identity of the place that includes sensorial elements as well, i.e. those elements that give the uniqueness touch of the place and distinguish it from other similar spaces. However, there are places where artists are free to choose the artistic content offered to the audience. *„We decide, no one tell us what to sing, we choose our repertoire by ourselves, sometimes we don’t even know ourselves what tune we are going to perform, we decide on the spot”* (Artist).

The partnership between owners/managers and artists is sometimes negotiated directly between those two partners (at the artists’ or at the hosts’ initiative), other times it is mediated by artistic managers. What is interesting in the first case is the compensation for a lack of a link in a cultural product’s production-distribution chain, through the system of networking and friendship. Artists’ selection is made on subjective criteria, without taking their notoriety into account, on the contrary, some places use a policy of promoting unknown artists and providing an original offer to the audience. This is the stake for defining that space more as an underground or a mainstream one.

On the other hand, the artists also choose their performance spaces on the criterion of the coherence between the artistic content and the place’s identity. While in the aforementioned cases the choice of the cultural offer was made on the subjective criteria of the owners/managers of these places, in other cases the selection is made according to objective circumstances entailed by the structure of the space. Sometimes this is flexible, being restructured according to the cultural offer, other times it is impossible to adjust it to the artistic contents addressed to the audience. Another objective criterion that may influence the artist-public-space relation and may limit the cultural offer in these spaces is the facilities specific to a certain artistic field.

Artists prefer this kind of spaces because of the way they can interact with the audience or because of the way in which the space is adjusted to the artistic content.

These places are a type of cultural infrastructure where the audience-artist relation is that of proximity and intimacy. These spaces become places of conviviality, not only from the audience’s viewpoint, but also from the artists’, too, reducing the cognitive distance between the artistic message provider and receiver.

Unlike in the classic cultural infrastructure, where the artists’ status and their relation with the audience is very well defined in terms of distance and time of contact (the distance between the artist and the audience is restricted by the stage and the physical proximity is reduced to the minimum, and the contact period is restricted to the performance duration), in this type of cultural infrastructure the physical and cognitive distance between the artist and the audience is greatly reduced, and the contact period is sometimes extended after the performance duration.

Therefore, these post-modern cultural infrastructure spaces induce the perception of intimacy and a minimum distance between the artist and the audience, which determines some loss of the artists’ „aura”, which they were vested with through the artist-audience distance restriction practices.

The Culture - business relation

The culture-business relation was a topic for a long series of social sciences authors, such as Weber, Bourdieu, Durkheim, Schumpeter or Simmel, especially from the entrepreneurial viewpoint and the way economy and art influence each other (Swedberg, 2006). In Schumpeter’s approach, the true artist should be deemed an entrepreneur, both having disciples and imitators (Ibid.). Both the entrepreneur and the artist are dynamic, active, and energetic and have leader attributes, while their followers are passive and static (Ibid.). Weber analyses the culture-business relation from the viewpoint of artistic environment’s hostility towards everything that means economy, considering this an effect of the origin of the artistic sphere in the religious system, inheriting from it the hostility for the entrepreneurial spirit (Ibid.).

Moreover, art is seen as something that could save humankind, in the capitalist and bureaucratic world’s senselessness. In this context, the cultural entrepreneurship is a combination of practices and values that surpass the traditional tension between the two fields, being situated at the crossroads of two fields: art and economy. Richard Swedberg (2006) thinks that there is major difference between the economic and cultural entrepreneurship. The first particularly searches to create

something new (and profitable) in the economic area, while the other wants to create something new (and appreciated) in the cultural area (Ibid.). Although the economic profit is an essential element, in the cultural business it is its defining feature; what mobilises the entrepreneurial forces is priority the cultural element. From this viewpoint, the analysed cultural consumption spaces are sometimes the result of a kind of economic entrepreneurship and other times the result the cultural entrepreneurship, the difference consisting in the identity the owner wants to give to that particular place, in his relationship with the artists and in the customer recruiting strategy. As we previously saw, the collaboration between the business environment and the cultural sphere started from the need for distinguishing the public consumption spaces and for providing a cultural offer adjusted to the new requirements and expectations of the public/consumer. For the bar, pub and club owners, the partnership with the artists brought a plus to their business, cultural events being „a hook” for customer recruiting.

The businesses in this service sector are characterised by vulnerability to various factors (buying power drop-down, lifestyle changes, seasons’ dynamics and sometimes even weather conditions); in this context, the cultural offer provided has the role to attract and even to maintain the clients. Some owners of the analysed spaces went so far as to create a certain identity of the managed place, which is prevalently defined through its associated cultural events. On the other hand, the representatives of the cultural institutions have become aware of the need to adapt to the new requests of the public and took the partnership with private companies as an opportunity to attract and maintain the public, by organising leisure spaces in the proximity of cultural institutions. This way, these cultural institutions have been revitalised by opening-up to certain public categories to which they had no access until then.

From this standpoint, the post-modern cultural institutions have become more accessible and „friendlier”; they have been providing cultural services adapted to the new expectations of the public, without losing their cultural and educational mission and they have become cultural consumption spaces of the „sensecape” type. The partnership between the private business environment representatives and the artists is situated at crossing area of the informal and formal partnership. Most of the time, the partnership is settled through verbal agreement between the two actors, yet a tendency towards official contracts is emerging. In some cases, a freelance contract is signed, defining various clauses related to financial aspects or specific requests of the artists. As far as the

financial aspects of the agreements are concerned, the calculation formulas for the artists’ payment are very different and depend on the two partners’ negotiation. Sometimes, a fixed amount is settled, which the artist will receive, other times is the latter will receive a percentage from ticket selling.

The sale of the tickets directs these alternative cultural consumption spaces to a grey zone of the culture economy, as in very few cases these tickets comply with the official rules of access to cultural events. Perhaps this is the reason why the owners of these types of spaces do not get involved in managing the tickets, this task falling into the hands of those who mediate the artist-space owner relationship. From this standpoint, the legal framework within which these spaces operate, which are situated at a culture-business field crossing, is not always favourable to such undertakings and partnerships. Moreover, the formal aspects of this type of partnership may represent a drag in the development and reproduction of similar undertakings. The partnership between cultural and business environments is seen by the involved actors in this type of partnership as an opportunity for both sides. The owner’s vision of an alternative cultural consumption space makes the difference between the economic and cultural business and their preference for economic or cultural aspects reclines the balance in favour of the first or the second type of business.

Conclusions

The analysed spaces (both those managed by the economic agencies that organise cultural events and those managed in partnership with a cultural institution) are entertainment or leisure spaces, part of the cultural infrastructure and of the cultural consumption spaces. They are socialisation places and spaces of sharing common ideas and tastes. We considered these places as alternative cultural consumption spaces because they are an alternative to the public cultural infrastructure type, addressed especially to mass consumption of „popular” cultural genres. Likewise, we considered this type of spaces as part of the independent cultural sector because of the management method (private) and their inclusion in the creative industries sector. The profile of the public consists from young people, both young adults and middle youth. They are those young professionals in search of „cool” places.

The owners and the managers of these spaces have an important role in the way the cultural offer is structured and cultural tastes are formed and performed. They have

the power to legitimate and de-legitimate a certain type of cultural offer, if only through its inclusion or exclusion in this kind of cultural consumption space. The artists prefer this type of spaces because of the manner they can interact with the public or because of the manner the space is adjusted to the artistic context. These places are a type of cultural infrastructure where the public-artist relation is one of proximity or intimacy. From the culture -business relation viewpoint, the partnership with the artists brought a plus to the business of bar and club owners. On the other hand, the post-modern cultural institutions have become more accessible and „friendlier”, by their association with leisure spaces. The partnership between the cultural and the business environment is seen by the stakeholders of this partnership as an opportunity for both sides.

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