

GOURMET GENTRIFICATION: MAPPING ELITE TASTES ALONG NEW YORK'S CONSUMPTION FRONTIER, 1990-2015

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Abstract

Theorists of gentrification and other urban scholars have long considered the spread of upscale amenities like restaurants, cafes, and bars to be important visual indicators of gentrification in the built environment. Scholars from urban geographer Neil Smith to sociologists Sharon Zukin, Sylvie Tissot, and Richard Ocejo have demonstrated how new high-end consumption spaces can themselves become spurs to further change in an area, in an unfolding dialectic of rising cultural and real estate capital, forcing out low-income residents. In this paper, I extend this tradition to consider the role of evolving informational networks about urban consumption, from paper guidebooks like the Zagat Survey to mobile location-based service (LBS) and web mapping applications like Yelp, Foursquare, and Google Local, and their interaction with broader trends in urban inequality and sociospatial segmentation. In my research, I argue that changes in the production and distribution of spatial data about urban amenities help to accelerate gentrification and residential displacement, as the use value of local businesses like gourmet restaurants and bars is quickly inscribed into digital databases and realized as exchange value in real estate and tourist markets. This paper looks at the period from 1990-2015, using data from New York's pioneer "user-generated" restaurant guide the Zagat Survey to trace the contours of "gourmet gentrification" over time, with special attention to the accelerating rate of change in Brooklyn neighborhoods.

Introduction

When wealthier newcomers move into a historically marginalized neighborhood, many aspects of daily life change, from an uptick of "quality of life" policing to increased investments in public amenities. Demographic shifts can take a relatively long time to register officially, as the U.S. Census Bureau and other agencies make data available to public officials, activists, and researchers. For many longtime residents, the most compelling evidence of gentrification is their own lived experience, whether seen in the evictions of older and poorer residents or a procession of Lyfts and Ubers ferrying well-heeled arrivals to and from remodeled homes. Some of the most commonly referenced evidence of neighborhood change, however, is in the upscaling of local retail

businesses (Zukin et al. 2009, Bridge and Dowling 2001, Ocejo 2014), whether the newcomers are national chains like Starbucks or Soulcycle or locally-owned restaurants and boutiques.

Gourmet restaurants occupy a particularly central role in both scholarly and popular accounts of gentrification. As a market substitute for home-cooked meals, they tend to cluster in urban areas with a high proportion of single professional women and dual-income couples with more money than time to spend on meal preparation, as noted by feminist geographer Ann Markusen (1980). Unlike other businesses associated with gentrification like banks or upscale clothing boutiques, restaurants need to regularly attract large numbers of customers to stay in business on notoriously small profit margins. As sociologist Sylvie Tissot puts it, the opening of a new French bistro in Boston's hypergentrified South End announces to new residents that they had successfully elevated their corner of the city "to the ranks of the neighborhoods showcased by guides and the papers' dining pages" (Tissot 2015).

Scholars from Tissot to urban geographer Neil Smith and sociologists Sharon Zukin and Richard Ocejo have demonstrated how new high-end consumption spaces can become spurs to further change in an area, in an unfolding dialectic of rising cultural and real estate capital, forcing out low-income residents. In this paper, I extend this tradition to consider the role of evolving informational networks in facilitating elite urban consumption, from paper guidebooks like the Zagat Survey to mobile location-based service (LBS) and web mapping applications like Yelp, Foursquare, and Google Local, and their interaction with broader trends in urban inequality and sociospatial segmentation.

Methods

I am using data from New York's pioneer "user-generated" restaurant guide the Zagat Survey to trace the contours of "gourmet gentrification" between 1990-2015. In other work, I analyze the origins of the Zagat Survey as both a born-analogue guidebook that from its origin in 1979 start relied on digital data processing technology and "informed" work environments (Zuboff 1988), and a pivotal transitional moment in the media business between the professional restaurant critic model and today's crowdsourced ecosystem of local reviews, from Yelp to Foursquare, TripAdvisor, and Google Local (Payne 2020 see also Gottlieb 2020, Paynter 2018a, Paynter 2018b). For the purposes of this paper, I turn to the New York City Zagat Survey guidebooks as a source of data on gentrification in the city; in future research I aim to show how changes in the production and distribution of information about urban amenities help accelerate residential displacement, as the use value of local businesses is quickly inscribed into digital

databases and realized as exchange value in real estate and tourist markets.

While there have been a number of scholarly and popular articles linking food review sites like Yelp to gentrification and racist tropes about "ethnic" food (Hyde 2014, Gottlieb 2015, Kay 2019, Zukin et al. 2015), most research in this area has focused on reviews in one or two specific neighborhoods, or looked at a whole corpus of reviews for specific cuisines across a city, without necessarily connecting reviewers' aggregate behavior with the evolving spatial contours of gentrification across an entire city. Some quantitative studies have shown promise for understanding how upscale amenities contribute to gentrification and neighborhood change. Using national data, online real estate site Zillow's Jamie Anderson has shown how new Trader Joe's and Whole Foods locations in an area are associated with increased home price appreciation concentrated two to three years later (Anderson 2017). David Wachsmuth and Alexander Weisler (2018) have shown the even more direct impact of "homesharing" startup Airbnb on decreasing the housing supply available to longterm renters in cities with significant tourist markets, opening up an increased "rent gap" (Smith 1979) between monthly and nightly prices and increasing gentrification pressure in many parts of New York City.

Most of the scholarly research done on restaurants and commercial gentrification, however relies on a limited number of datasets and framing assumptions. Several studies look to digital review platforms like Yelp to draw broader conclusions about restaurants and local economies, notably economist Michael Luca, who has demonstrated how a higher Yelp average rating helps ensure that independent restaurants survive longer and have higher revenue (Luca 2011). Along with Edward Glaeser and Hyunjin Kim, Luca used Yelp data for New York and several other cities to show that gentrification is strongly associated with increases in the numbers of grocery stores, cafes, restaurants, and bars in a ZIP code, and that new Starbucks locations are associated with a 0.5% increase in housing prices (Glaeser et al. 2018). Perhaps unsurprisingly given Glaeser's staunchly pro-market politics and affiliation with conservative think tank the Manhattan Institute, the authors' only citation to discuss gentrification is a 2014 *New York* article entitled "Is Gentrification All Bad?" (Davidson 2014). The authors also fail to distinguish between prices or ratings among the Yelp listings, or analyze demographic data at a finer scale than the ZIP code tabulation area. To see why the latter might be an issue when analyzing gentrification in New York, consider that one ZIP code, 10013, contains all of TriBeCa and about half of SoHo, Little Italy, and Chinatown.

Beyond these specific critiques, there are more fundamental issues with using data from Yelp and its contemporaries to study gentrification over time. First of all, Yelp data only exists since the company's founding in 2004, and initially only in any significant volume for its home of San Francisco and several other major cities. In many areas, Yelp's

database still has significant gaps for restaurants that cater to older or non-English speaking populations, making it a poor stand-in for authoritative public data (see especially Folch et al. 2018 on Phoenix, Arizona). Second, Yelp collects only very general impressions of the cost of different restaurants, approximated by a scale of dollar signs from one to four. A donut shop usually has one dollar sign, and a Michelin-starred steakhouse would typically have four, but the finer gradations that might provide evidence that a neighborhood is gradually moving upmarket are absent. Third, Yelp only releases clean datasets for particular smaller cities on a rotating annual cycle, mostly as a hiring and promotional strategy targeting academics and data scientists. In fact, Kim and Luca have both been paid to consult for Yelp, and were given special access for the data used in their papers. Any attempt to piece together useful longitudinal datasets runs up against numerous technical and bureaucratic or legal barriers, starting with the simple problem of reliably including restaurants that no longer exist.

Using Zagat Survey data, especially for New York City, solves a number of these issues. From the mid-1980s, the Survey includes exact dollar amounts for the cost of a meal and one drink per person at each restaurant, aggregated along with the ratings by volunteer diner-surveyors and fact-checked by the Zagats' professional staff, making it much easier to compare pricing at a fine scale over time. The Survey has existed since 1979, and has been widely used by New York gourmets since the mid-1980s, so that Zagat ratings provide a vivid picture of what the urban professional class of potential gentrifiers thought about particular businesses and places in the city. The Zagat's-eye-view is not an objective picture of the city from above, but a deeply situated and classed perspective; Bret Easton Ellis' fictional stockbroker serial killer Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* cherished almost as much as his pristine business cards (see Payne 2020 and Gottlieb 2020 for more extensive class analyses of the Survey).

There have been few examples of scholars using Zagat Survey data as a primary source, partly due to the fact that until now it had been confined to printed books hardly amenable to computational analysis (one notable exception is Ray 2016 on using the Survey to track the relative prestige of different "ethnic" cuisines over time). Recent advances in AI-driven optical character recognition (OCR) and open-source spatial analysis (including the New York City Planning Department's GeoSearch geocoding API) have made this project feasible for one graduate student and several part-time undergraduate research assistants to assemble this dataset in fits and starts over the course of several years. Ironically, given Google's notoriously mismanaged acquisition of Zagat in 2009 (they sold the brand again to startup The Infatuation in 2018; after several years hiatus publishing annual print guides the new owners have announced that a 2020 New York City Survey is forthcoming later this year), one of the key tools making this project possible is the company's AI-driven Cloud Vision API for accurate OCR.

Preliminary Results

While my processing and spatial analysis of the Zagat Survey data is ongoing, with several years of review data remaining to process and integrate with demographic data to better understand the relationship between gastronomy and gentrification, even the preliminary results have been revealing for the potential of historical restaurant review data to help map the changing contours of American cities. Perhaps the most striking finding is the drastic increase in the upper end of the price range in Zagat Survey restaurants (in 2016 dollars) included in each year, as New York's plutocratic elite continued to outpace each other in conspicuous consumption while middle-class wages stagnated. In 1991, the most expensive restaurant listed, Midtown East's The Quilted Giraffe, had an average price listed of \$74, or \$132 in 2016 dollars; in 2016, the priciest listing, 3-Michelin-starred Japanese restaurant Masa in Columbus Circle, reached an astounding \$585 for its mandatory *omakase* set menu. At the same time, the median and mean cost of a meal in the 1991 Survey were \$57 and \$58 in 2016 dollars, respectively; by 2016 that had dropped to \$41 and \$45, likely reflecting the wave of post-Great Recession casual dining aimed at relatively price-constrained Millennials (Sedacca 2016).

On a borough level, the biggest increases in coverage have come in Brooklyn, which accounted for only 2% of listings in the 1991 Survey and 14% in 2016; Queens accounts for another 5% (up from 1% in 1991), with Staten Island and the Bronx perennially stuck at a handful of listings each. Within Brooklyn, there has been a notable dispersal from areas that were already solidly middle-class or affluent in 1990, like Brooklyn Heights and Bay Ridge, to more historically marginalized Black neighborhoods now gentrifying rapidly. Park Slope, which was already in the midst of gentrification in 1990, adds a few listings a year, plateauing between 40-50 listings after 2006. In 2006, Williamsburg had 14 listings, which shot up to 72 by 2016, in tandem with the new high-rise condos along the waterfront. Until 2009, there had never been a Zagat listing in Bushwick, Bedford-Stuyvesant, or Crown Heights; by 2016 each had around ten listings.

By 2016, there were scarcely any areas in Manhattan outside the purview of upscale consumption; even long-marginalized poor Black and Latino neighborhoods in the far northern section of the borough like Harlem and Washington Heights had started to fill in with restaurants like celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson's Red Rooster. By understanding the role establishments like these play in the cycle of rising rents and displacement, longtime residents and activists can more effectively respond to efforts to transform the commercial landscape of their neighborhoods, using what geographer Elvin Wyly calls "strategic positivism" to show the potential for real harm that can result from converting the city into a playground for the wealthy (Wyly 2009).

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