Semiotic Neighborhoods

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Introduction

In his *Philosophy of Money*, the classic sociologist Georg Simmel noted that industrial products "lack the spiritual determinacy that can be easily perceived in a product of labor that is wholly the work of a *single* person." When produced in large quantities, products have to be designed so they are "acceptable and enjoyable to a very large number of individuals," and therefore "cannot be designed for subjective differentiation of taste." In contrast, some products still have a personality: we can personally relate to them. For Simmel, such products include works of art, philosophical treatises, and crafts.[1]

Markets certainly have understood the craving for more personalized products. Take the example of a design icon, the "Juicy Salif" lemon squeezer, designed for Alessi by Philippe Starck. In the summer of 2000, the Juicy Salif sold for 40 Euros in Helsinki (a gold-plated one sold for 150 Euros). The fact that it is practically unusable makes it easy to see as an object of art. If it were displayed in a museum, it would be no more than an object of reflection. In ordinary contexts, however, it is available for use. An analysis of this object can focus on the product, but also on the designer, the company, or even the art and design world. It offers multiple possibilities for reflexive consumers who seek to build their identities through design objects, fashion, and art. It also is partly through these objects that people define good taste.[2]

These are "semiotic goods": most of their economic value is based on meanings people give them rather than their functionality, be these iconic, indexical, or symbolic. Unlike unsigned products, or products from flea markets, these meanings support and maintain significant parts of the economy. Today, the worldwide worth of the luxury retail sector alone, depending on the estimate, is 55–100 billion Euros. This sector makes its living mainly from fragrances, cosmetics, jewelry, watches, accessories, and fashion. Its main market is Asia, followed by the United States and Europe.[3] In addition to goods, "semiotized" services and experiences are a part of our everyday life. In the U.S., since the early 1960s "fun services" and "experience industries" have grown faster than other sectors of the economy.[4] Some theorists have generalized that this development is part of a postmodern world in which the real world is so absorbed into signs that people cannot escape from this signed reality.[5]

1 G. Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge, 1990), 454–7.

2 M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1994); S. Lash, *Another Modernity, a Different Rationality* (London: Blackwell, 1999); P. Bourdieu, *Distinction* (London: RKP, 1986); G. Simmel, ibid.

3 WWW information from www.hsbc.com, www.mintel.com.

4 G. Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds on Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990); and J. B. Pine and J. H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999).

5 J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* (London: Sage, 1998); and J. Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1999).

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The received wisdom is that this new consumption scene originated among the new, high-earning middle classes in global cities, with a recent estimate putting their number at fifty million worldwide.[6] This new consumption also has changed the look and feel of the shopping environment. While cities have lost many of their department stores, they have gained "megastores," shops-in-shops, flagship stores, posh restaurants, cafés, art galleries, antique stores, and luxury retail shops. In this paper, I call some areas with a high concentration of these types of places of consumption "semiotic neighborhoods." These areas live off selling and manufacturing semiotic goods. They are different from entertainment districts, which have a high concentration of movie theaters, theaters, restaurants, and bars. They also differ from malls. Unlike malls, semiotic neighborhoods are historical creations in which the streets belong to people, property ownership is decentralized, and passersby are exposed to a full scale of life rather than to a managed version of it.

Semiotic Neighborhoods

Downtown areas have dominated consumption for much of the twentieth century. Consumption in downtown areas is led by traditional department stores. Another dominant form of trade today follows suburban expansion. As suburbs have grown in North America and in Europe, retail trade has followed population to the suburbs, where retail corporations and developers have created large, centrally managed malls and retail parks. In terms of services, more upscale malls resemble higher-end department stores, with boutiques embedded in them. Typically catering to the middle-classes, department stores and malls offer a wide range of goods and services, some of higher quality than others, but overall, their business is geared towards the middle-income customer.[7] Less mobile classes and younger customers consume in what sociologist Sharon Zukin calls "neighborhood shopping streets."[8]

In contrast to these forms of mass consumption, exclusive goods traditionally have been available for the rich in the first type of semiotic neighborhoods. As Lewis Mumford noted in *The Culture of Cities*, hand-crafted, quality goods with extraordinary prices are available for the traditional upper classes in places such as New Bond Street, Rue de la Paix, and Madison Avenue.[9] As they are exclusively upper-class, goods and services in these streets and neighborhoods are far beyond the reach of ordinary consumers, except for window-shopping. Some of these streets have existed for centuries, and typically are rooted in royal courts and aristocratic consumption in Europe, and in their capitalist equivalents in North America.

A more recent development has created another type of semiotic neighborhood: designer streets and quarters. At the more exclusive end, there are a few ultimate designer streets: Avenue Montaigne and Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré in Paris, the *quadrilatero* in Milan, London's Sloane Street, and parts of New York's Fifth

6 S. Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); M. Savage, et al., *Property, Bureaucracy, and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995); www.mintel.com; and P. Ray and S. Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000).

7 G. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); R. Sennett, "The Fall of the Public Man" in *On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978); and M. B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869–1920* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981).

8 S. Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999). Of course, at the high end of department stores, luxury brands typically are present as shops-in-shops. Here, the line between boutiques and department stores vanishes.

9 L. Mumford, *Kaupunkikulttuuri* (Porvoo, Finland: WSOY, 1949), 214. (Originally, *The Culture of Cities*.)

Avenue.[10] Similar displays of luxury exist in all global cities.[11] Smaller cities and less exclusive areas in global cities have developed local versions of these luxury streets, as witnessed by the examples of Strøget in Copenhagen and North Esplanade in Helsinki. Shops in these streets offer a vast selection of goods, ranging in price from 5 Euro key rings, to 25,000 Euro jackets to 100,000 Euro watches and upwards.

Semiotic neighborhoods have many functions in cities. They supply people with goods, services, and experiences with which they may construe identities and partake in conspicuous consumption. They attract tourism, educated residents, and creative inhabitants. Their indirect economic effects come through services such as restaurants, museums, coffee shops, and elegant magazines. Furthermore, these areas may become important elements in building a city's image. These neighborhoods also connect local society to global taste, and provide the cultural understanding any modern economy needs to function. Finally, they provide work for local artists, designers, and craftspeople.[12]

Traditional luxury shop areas aside, semiotic neighborhoods only fairly recently have become elements of cityscapes, from the mid-1960s.[13] Also, their tendency to concentrate in certain neighborhoods is a fairly recent phenomenon. Success breeds more success; in the end, several shops flock to the same area, pushing other businesses out. Some functions win in this competitive process, and come to dominate business in that area to the point where it becomes the neighborhood's second nature.

Take Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, California, with its extravagant displays of luxury, as an example. Rodeo Drive was elevated to its present status fairly recently; in fact, the first international luxury shops arrived at this short stretch of land at the end of the 1960s.

> Aldo [Gucci] continued the drive to open new stores. He identified Beverly Hills's then sleepy Rodeo Drive as a choice location long before it became a chic shopping avenue, and in October 1968 inaugurated an elegant new store there with a star-studded fashion show and reception.[14]

There had been jewelry shops, antique dealers, and high-end clothiers before, but with the likes of Gucci, other luxury shops followed. Today, more than fifty luxury shops populate this stretch of land (see www.rodeodrive.com).

In contrast to most consumer goods, proximity to other shops benefits the design trade: a Gucci bag is *not* identical to a Hermès bag. Since it is the semiotics embedded in products that makes the difference, not the price, proximity to other shops benefits the economy. When people and media recognize an area as a semiotic neighborhood, the area gets a "character." Circulated in media and folklore, this character directs people to these areas to browse goods

10 For a recent and amusing analysis of luxury products, shops, producers, and customers on these streets, see J. B. Twitchell, *Living It Up: America's Love Affair with Luxury* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002). Twitchell studies in detail boutiques on Rodeo Drive (Beverly Hills), Worth Avenue (Miami), Las Vegas; as well as "mothership shops" in midtown Manhattan.

11 S. Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo.* For Sassen, global cities are cities capable of envisioning, organizing, and financing business as well as other activities on a global scale. They are central nodes in the most recent wave of globalization, and differ from "world cities" that have led world culture for centuries. For Sassen, the global economy is shaped by activities organized in global cities rather than by major corporations as such. She holds that global cities have become a home to a group of professionals with top salaries who, in turn, create a market for designer goods and services. Thus, she links the current expansion of the luxury market to the global city phenomenon. In her original book, Sassen analyzed global cities mainly in terms of financial markets, concentrating on New York, London, and Tokyo (and Frankfurt and Paris *in passim*). In more recent editions, she has widened the term to include places such as Los Angeles and Berlin (leaders in culture) and Chicago (multinational corporations, world-class science), but also to smaller cities such as Stockholm and Helsinki (mobile communications technology).

12 R. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 165–89; S. Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*; V. Narotzky, "A Different and New Refinement: Design in Barcelona, 1960–1990," *Journal of Design History* 13 (2000): 227–43; E. W. Soja, *Postmetropolis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); and A. J. Scott, *The Cultural Economy of Cities* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000).

13 S. Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo,* 335–6.

14 S. Gay Forden, *The House of Gucci* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2000), 35.

and services, and to enjoy the atmosphere. These inscriptions of place guide consumers' actions "from a distance," as the French philosopher Bruno Latour says.[15] Shopkeepers' associations may develop to market the exclusive facet of the area (see the Oak Street Council, www.oakstreetchicago.com), as does trend journalism. When such second-order cultural constructs come to shape the city, entrepreneurs' location decisions go beyond economics alone, and are ultimately grounded in cultural processes.

To justly be called a semiotic neighborhood, I believe that three necessary conditions have to be met. First, the distribution of sophisticated semiotic goods has to concentrate in these areas: every part of a city cannot be established as a semiotic neighborhood.[16] Secondly, these areas have to have to have a dense enough concentration of semiotic business to give them a special look and feel in contrast to department stores, retailing, banks, or business services. Third, these areas have to be written into the popular imagination with maps and other media coverage. Without such inscription, people cannot get to these areas, and shopkeepers cannot locate there because of the "atmosphere" of these neighborhoods.

Data and Methods

This paper analyses semiotic neighborhoods in Helsinki, Finland. They are mostly located in South Helsinki, which dominates the national trade in arts, antiquities, design furniture, accessories, and fashion. In particular, neighborhoods surrounding downtown Helsinki contain a series of shops, as well as producers of culture such as advertising agencies, architectural firms, designer workshops, and interior design studios. As in any successful restructured postindustrial city economy, the crafts industries also have become important wealth creators in these areas of Helsinki.[17] This article focuses on goods rather than on services (such as luxury beauty parlors) or live entertainment (music, theater, and other cultural events). It also focuses on distribution, not on production (architects, designers, interior designers, sound production, and advertising). Finally, public sector investments in symbolic facilities such as opera houses and theaters are excluded, because these are based on political rather than market impulses.[18] I have had to limit my analysis in several ways. I have not studied fashion, which means that the downtown is underrepresented. Also, department store and mall distribution of luxury items is not included.

The term "semiotic business" is the main unit of data gathering. First, semiotic businesses include shops selling designer goods, arts, and antiques, and related services (such as interior design), but not knowledge-based services such as research and law. Secondly, it includes producers such as interior decorators, industrial designers, and architects, but also TV, video and sound producers, new media companies, and advertising agencies. The concept of semiotic neighborhood can be broken into smaller units. For example, in

15 B. Latour, "Drawing Things Together" in *Representation in Scientific Practice,* M. Lynch and S. Woolgar, eds. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991).

16 Possible exceptions are small holiday resorts at, say, the French Riviera; small artistic colonies; and "latte towns," as the journalist David Brooks has called wealthy, upper-middle class suburban towns in his book on "bobos," the bohemian bourgeois. See D. Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

17 I. Koskinen, "Kulttuurikorttelit," *Yhteiskuntasuunnittelu* 39 (2001): 9–28. [Culture Blocks, in Finnish]; and E. W. Soja, *Postmetropolis,* 164.

18 On cultural events and their significance in the "symbolic" city economy, see S. Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities.* For an analysis of production, see S. Lash and J. Urry, *Economies of Sign and Space* (London: Sage, 1994); and A. McRobbie, *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* (London: Routledge, 1998). Incidentally, cultural production in the Helsinki region concentrates in south Helsinki. Even new digital industries have located in these neighborhoods, much like architecture in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the advertising industry later in the century (see I. Koskinen, "Kulttuurikorttelit").

areas that otherwise are empty of semiotic business, there may be "semiotic corners"—street corners on which semiotic business dominates the scene; the concentration of designer outlets at Brompton Cross in Knightsbridge, London, provides an example. Streets that are dominated by semiotic businesses are called "semiotic streets"; Union Street in San Francisco is an example. Finally, a "semiotic neighborhood" consists of a set of semiotic streets packed together; perhaps the best example is New York's SoHo, in which more than one hundred fashion boutiques exist between Lafayette, Sullivan, West Houston, and Broome Streets.

Data for this article came from three types of sources: (1) Data on shops (1952, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000) was obtained from the "Yellow Pages" directory, and was supplemented with design organizations' catalogs; (2) Cultural inscriptions were studied in general-purpose shopping guides, commercial maps distributed by department stores, and art and design maps. *Helsinki This Week* provided a time series back to 1956. It contains a monthly listing of places and events of interest to tourists; (3) Statistics used came from Statistics Finland, and the cities of Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa.

The Appendix locates south Helsinki neighborhoods on the map; readers unfamiliar with Helsinki ought to consult it at this point. For my analyses, I divided Helsinki into the following five zones. The first three constitute "south Helsinki":

1. "Downtown" consists of three neighborhoods;
2. "The downtown rim" denotes four neighborhoods adjacent to it;
3. "Other South" denotes three southern neighborhoods that do not belong to the downtown or its rim;
4. "Other town" refers to neighborhoods outside the south;
5. Espoo and Vantaa are major, independent municipalities bordering Helsinki. They are referred to with their own names.

Finally, Helsinki has one peculiar feature when it comes to semiotic neighborhoods: it has no traditional luxury areas. The reasons for this probably are historical. Along with Bern and Dublin (and possibly Oslo, which has had a royal family for less than a century), Helsinki is the only European capital that has not been home to a royal court. Finland also has had a small and poor aristocracy, which historically has been based in Stockholm and St. Petersburg, rather than Helsinki.[19]

The Concentration of Semiotic Business in South Helsinki

The first necessary condition for a neighborhood to be called "semiotic" is that business in that neighborhood is significantly more semiotic than in other neighborhoods. In the citywide context, all neighborhoods in south Helsinki have become semiotic over the last three decades of the last century.

19 E. Jutikkala, "Johtavat säädyt," in *Suomen kulttuurihistoria II* (Jyväskylä: Gummerus, 1934), 33–65. [*The Leading Estates,* in Finnish]; E. Jutikkala, "Varallisuussuhteet Suomessa Ruotsinajan päättyessä," *Historiallinen aikakauskirja* 47 (1949): 170–206 [*The Distribution of Wealth in Finland at the End of the Swedish Era,* in Finnish]; K. Wirilander, *Herrasväkeä: Suomen säätyläistö 1721–1870* (Historiallisia tutkimuksia 93, Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1974) [*Gentry: Gentry in Finland 1721–1870,* in Finnish]; and E. Konttinen, *Perinteisesti moderniin: Professioiden yhteiskunnallinen synty Suomessa* (Tampere, Finland: Vastapaino, 1991) [*Traditionally to Modernism: The Social Birth of Professions in Finland,* in Finnish].

If we look at the antique and art trade, and interior design, we get a picture of the process. Table 1 shows that the antique trade became an important feature of the Helsinki landscape in the 1980s, not just in the south, but also in other town. A similar pattern characterizes the art trade, which grew to a quantitatively new level in the 1980s, and has continued to expand in the 1990s, although at a slower pace. In particular, south Helsinki is significantly overrepresented in the art trade. In interior decoration, business spread to other parts of town in the 1960s, breaking the leading role of the south. The highest concentration of theaters, movie theaters, popular restaurants and bars, and live music establishments is in downtown Helsinki. The largest crowds in the evening flock to this downtown-based entertainment district.

Table 1
Distribution of Semiotic Businesses (frequencies)

	1952	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Antiques						
South	20	11	18	31	69	65
Other town	0	0	1	8	14	17
Art						
South	17	14	17	29	41	56
Other town	0	0	2	4	19	7
Interiors						
South	18	29	25	21	49	56
Other town	4	9	12	11	43	39

In some respects, Table 1 has a mixed message. On the one hand, the south historically has led the art trade. On the other, the table shows that semiotic business grew faster in "other town" in the 1980s. However, the recession in the early 1990s hit business outside the south hard. Thus, the art trade again has concentrated in the south, with a similar development taking place in antiques as well as interior design. In the 1990s, the south added shops, while business elsewhere suffered.

In qualitative terms, the high end of the market has concentrated in the south. In 1990, seventy-seven percent of art galleries (in contrast to mere art dealers) were in the south. In 2001, this figure was ninety-three percent. In interior decoration, Italian, German, and Danish furniture, Italian and French accessories, and other foreign interior decoration textiles have all concentrated in the south. In 2001, ninety-two percent of boutiques with foreign names (Finnish, Swedish, and English names excluded) were there. In other parts of town, as well as in the suburbs, there were only two shops with foreign names. During the 1990s, the top end of galleries, antique shops, and interior design shops have selected their home neighbor-

hood more conservatively than before, opting for southern locations. The south specializes in symbolically sophisticated goods; while cheaper goods are sold elsewhere in town.[20]

Figure 1 gives an index of how these three businesses developed over the last four decades of the twentieth century. Notice that numbers are standardized by area size to compensate for growth of the city and its suburbs. The figure shows that the antique trade in the south grew more than five-fold between 1960 and 1997. In other parts of Helsinki, growth has been modest, if we relate it to their overall growth. If we take into account suburban sprawl in the neighboring cities of Espoo and Vantaa, the special role of the south would be even more staggering. Close to 300,000 inhabitants migrated to these towns between 1970 and 2000, but there still are only a handful of galleries, antique shops, or interior decoration shops in these cities, although both have set up civic centers.

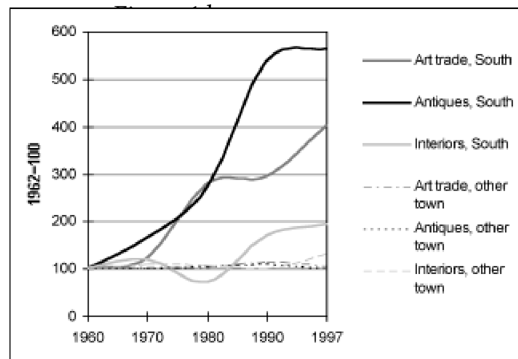

Figure 1
The development of Three Types of Semiotic Shops (shops/km^2)

Thus, although business in general has spread out of the downtown area as the city has grown,[21] semiotic business has countered the trend and, in fact, has concentrated in the southern neighborhoods. With good justification, we can say that south Helsinki neighborhoods are "semiotic": their economy revolves around signs more than the economies of other parts of town.

Which South Helsinki Neighborhoods Are Semiotic?

The second condition a neighborhood must fill to be called "semiotic" is that it is densely populated by semiotic businesses. This section studies development *within* south Helsinki to see how semiotic business has located there.

Figure 2 ranks Helsinki by area in terms of semiotic businesses (in 2000). The figure consists of art galleries and art shops, art museums, antique dealers, antique and arts-oriented auction houses, and interior decoration shops that sell designer goods. For comparison, this figure also gives a similar number for companies that produce culture.[22] The figures are standardized by the size of the area to account for size differences between the southern neighborhoods and the rest of Helsinki.

20 I. Koskinen, "Tuleeko keskustasta kulutusparatiisi?" (Working paper. National Consumer Research Centre, Helsinki, 2003) ["Is the City Going to be a Consumer's Paradise?" In Finnish, available at www.ncrc.fi/publications/]

21 S. Laakso, *Yritystoiminnan alueellinen erikoistuminen pääkaupunkiseudulla* (*Helsingin seudun suunnat* 1/2002, Helsinki: Tietokeskus, 2001) [*The Spatial Differentiation of Business Activity in the Capital Region,* in Finnish].

22 Including architects, industrial designers, interior designers, and other product design professionals.

The concentration of business in the south is striking, if we compare these figures to the citywide average of 2.7 shops/km^2, and 7.56 producers/km^2. In terms of shops, all top eight neighborhoods are located in the south, and only three southern neighborhoods are missing from the top ten. Since Helsinki has almost 130 neighborhoods, these figures reveal a significant concentration of activity. Closer analysis shows that the downtown area has the densest concentration of shops, along with the downtown rim producers. The key message of the figure is that Helsinki's semiotic marketplace is heavily concentrated downtown and in the neighborhoods in its immediate vicinity.

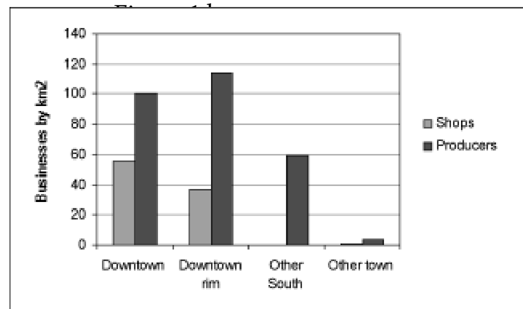

Figure 2
Semiotic Business in Helsinki by Area (2000)

However, Helsinki's central business district also is located in the south (see the Appendix). As dense as semiotic business is in this area, it is overshadowed by other economic activity. Figure 3 compensates for business activity, and elaborates the results of the previous figure by relating semiotic business to the overall number of businesses in the city. If an area's score is above 100, semiotic business is overrepresented in it. For example, the figure shows that, if there were 100 businesses per square kilometer in the town, there would be 130 semiotic shops downtown, 170 in the downtown rim, 87 in other parts of the south, and 11 in other town.

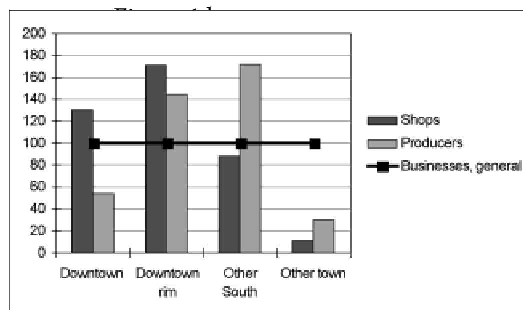

Figure 3
Semiotic Businesses and Other Economic Activity in Helsinki (indexed by overall business activity) (2000)

This figure shows that, even though significant in absolute numbers, semiotic business does not characterize the downtown. It has a significant number of semiotic shops, but its look and feel is based on the financial world, central government buildings, and department stores rather than art and design shops. In contrast, the downtown rim scores higher in this measure: compared to its share of economic activity and workplaces, semiotic business is overrepresented in the downtown rim, and producers in other southern neighborhoods. If we look behind these figures, we see that west of downtown, the Punavuori neighborhood, in particular, stands out in terms of semiotic business. In all, seventeen percent of its businesses either sell or produce semiotic goods. There are more than ninety semiotic shops, and more than 230 producers in each square kilometer in Punavuori. An old, working-class area that has gentrified since the 1960s, Punavuori still has plenty of workspaces and small apartments, which creates conditions for artistic invasion. Helsinki's semiotic neighborhoods surround the downtown: in the downtown rim, semiotic business is dense enough to give these neighborhoods a special character.[23]

The Cultural Inscription of Semiotic Neighborhoods

The third condition required for a semiotic neighborhood is that it is marked culturally with concepts and maps. Without such inscriptions, customers would not know what to seek in these areas, and there would be one economic reason less for entrepreneurs and businesses to settle there. The two previous sections have shown that Helsinki's semiotic neighborhoods lie in the southern part of town. This section looks at whether inscriptions follow the real thing.

The map in the Appendix shows how Helsinki's semiotic businesses are construed from three alternative value systems. Commercial and general-purpose maps locate the central point in the downtown area, while the art and design-oriented maps place it slightly southwest of downtown. Still, even on these maps, Helsinki's central point lies in the immediate vicinity of downtown. Thus, the distance between the central points in commercial maps and the arts map is only about five blocks, which makes it barely more than 500 meters (under 1,700 feet). Statistically, this distance is not significant(t-test>.70). Downtown's lively commercial world effectively biases this estimate. See the map of Helsinki in the Appendix.

Although Helsinki's southern neighborhoods have not gained distinct identities in cultural inscriptions, two factors should be noted. First, south Helsinki as a whole becomes a semiotic neighborhood if we situate the picture given by these inscriptions in the urban ecology of the Helsinki region: all maps place Helsinki's semiotic business in a small area in the south. Secondly, if we look at semiotic business only, there are rudiments of differentiation in perceptions of

23 These figures suggest two quantitative criteria for a semiotic neighborhood. First, it has to be an economically active place. Three design offices are not enough to make a neighborhood semiotic, if there is no other business in the area. Secondly, more than ten percent of its business activity has to be semiotic in character. In Helsinki, these criteria make three neighborhoods semiotic: Punavuori (17%), Ullanlinna (10%), and Kaartinkaupunki (9–10%). However, although these measures have the virtue of being simple, they ought to be refined using data from other cities.

southern neighborhoods. As Table 2 shows, *Helsinki This Week*

Table 2

Semiotic Businesses in *Helsinki This Week*, 1960–2000 (frequencies)

Neighborhood	1960	1970[1]	1980[1]	1990	2000	Combined
Downtown						72
Kluuvi	8	3	4	10	20	45
Kamppi	0	1	3	2	12	18
Kaartinkaupunki	0	0	3	3	4	10
Downtown Rim						21
Punavuori	3	1	1	2	6	13
Ullanlinna	0	0	1	1	4	6
Kruununhaka	0	0	0	1	1	2

1 Only major shopping street mentioned in 1970 and 1980.

has consistently placed the main shopping area for semiotic goods in the downtown area. In the downtown rim, only Punavuori and Ullanlinna received attention before the 1990s.

However, this perception changed in the 1990s. Table 3 shows how three tourism maps in 2000 displayed semiotic businesses, broken down by neighborhood. For this table, the top five neighborhoods in each map have been ranked from 1 to 5 (with 5 being the highest score). Again, downtown ranks as the main shopping area, though nearby neighborhoods increasingly challenge it. In particular, in the design-oriented *b-guided map*, Punavuori (the downtown rim) follows Kamppi (downtown) at the top, in front of the other downtown neighborhoods of Kaartinkaupunki and Kluuvi. Without Stockmann's downtown-centered commercial vision, Punavuori would top the table together with Kluuvi (downtown).

Table 3

The Ranking of Semiotic Neighborhoods in Three Shopping Guides (2000)

Neighborhood	***Helsinki This Week***	b-guided.net	Stockmann	Sum
Downtown				25
Kluuvi	5	3	5	12
Kamppi	0	5	0	5
Kaartinkaupunki	3	1	4	8
Downtown Rim				18
Punavuori	4	4	0	8
Ullanlinna	3	2	1	6
Etu-Toolo	0	0	3	3
Kruununhaka	1	0	0	1
Other South	0	0	2	2

5 = Neighborhood with most markings on each map.

1 = Neighborhood with fewest markings..

As this analysis shows, these representations follow the real thing. However, these neighborhoods are hardly celebrated as such in the press and national imagination. A few downtown streets have come to be known for their creative qualities,[24] but most attention in the popular press goes to bars and nightlife. Much of this publicity is targeted to a youthful audience, whose members are neither interested in, nor wealthy enough to attract attention from, the more exclusive types of semiotic business.

This, of course, contrasts with global cities, in which tourism industries follow commercial developments in minute detail, and offer these as prime attractions for tourists. One obvious reason is that Helsinki's downtown is situated on a narrow cape, which tends to concentrate many economic activities close together.[25] The absence of geographic markers such as the island in Stockholm, or the medieval old town in Copenhagen, makes differences between neighborhoods difficult to perceive. Also, unlike New York or London, old industrial, harbor, and warehouse districts were not opened for commercial and residential use on a significant scale until the late 1980s. The real estate business operates with old neighborhood names instead of manipulating perceptions with New York-style innovations.[26] Finally, south Helsinki neighborhoods by and large have been designed by a fairly small group of architects and master builders in the national romantic and art deco styles.[27] For an untrained eye, a walk around the south does not become a catalogue of distinct neighborhoods, for their look and feel does not change dramatically as one passes from one neighborhood to the next. However, rudiments of such area identities exist in Helsinki, and semiotic business is one of the driving forces in the differentiation of urban space.

Conclusions and Discussion

This paper has introduced the notion of semiotic neighborhoods. This concept describes areas of town in which there is a high concentration of semiotic shops, with fewer in other districts, and when this semiotic quality is recognized in maps and other institutionalized cultural constructions. The term is justified when these three conditions are met. These neighborhoods are a distinct aspect of city landscape today, although routine consumption, mass consumption, and extravagant "cathedrals of consumption" have received much more scholarly attention than whole neighborhoods in cities.[28] "Semiotic neighborhoods" captures a visible, but largely neglected aspect of consumer culture, the trade of sophisticated goods targeting mostly the upper-middle classes and tourists. These areas also are landmarks in real estate, trend magazines, and tourism, each making business out of the semiotics of space.

In their archetypal form, semiotic neighborhoods can be found in global cities such as Los Angeles, Paris, and London. However, this paper shows that this concept describes consump-

24 C. Landry, *Helsinki: Towards a Creative City* (Helsinki: Comedia and Helsingin kaupungin tietokeskus, 1998).

25 L. Aario, *The Inner Differentiation of the Large Cities in Finland* (Turku, Finland: Fennia, 1952); and J. Siipi, *Pääkaupunkiyhteiskunta ja sen historia* (Helsinki: Helsingin kaupungin historia V.1, 1957) [*The Capital and its History, part V.1.* in Finnish].

26 Zukin shows how the real estate profession invented the acronym "SoHo" in an effort to turn former industrial area into more profitable residential and business districts. Of course, SoHo was just the first in a long line of increasingly ingenious names and acronyms aimed at effacing working-class and slum associations from old neighborhood names in Manhattan and Brooklyn. See S. Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

27 J. Moorhouse, et al., *Helsingin jugendarkkitehtuuri 1895–1915* (Helsinki: Otava, 2002). [*Jugend Architecture in Helsinki,* in Finnish].

28 See S. Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities,* Chapter 6; and M. B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869–1920.* The term "cathedrals of consumption" is from G. Ritzer, *Enchanting the Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge, 1999).

tion in smaller cities as well, even though they have a more modest luxury sector than global cities. An analysis of these neighborhoods in Helsinki shows that south Helsinki dominates the trade in arts, antiques, and other types of highly semiotic goods. Other parts of the city have not been able to compete with these neighborhoods. In fact, the south has become increasingly "semiotized" in the midst of suburban sprawl.

In conceptual terms, it is important to distinguish semiotic neighborhoods from two other types of areas. First, they are different from entertainment districts, as characterized by theaters, movie theaters, and popular restaurants and bars.[29] Semiotic neighborhoods and entertainment districts may overlap, but this is not necessarily the case. In Helsinki, the downtown area is the dominant entertainment district. On the rim of downtown, there are clusters of bars and restaurants in a few streets, but no crowd-gathering establishments such as multiplex cinemas. Rather, movie theaters in the downtown rim target selected audiences with interest in art cinema. Secondly, semiotic neighborhoods differ from the mall culture typical to suburbanized lifestyle. Of course, some overlapping features exist. Management in upscale malls has realized the potential of semiotic business, and attracts it to malls. Still, the difference is clear: in malls, the environment is centrally controlled, cleaned, and managed. Outside the limits of the mall is spread a suburban mat of roads and homes. In semiotic neighborhoods, a customer faces the city, in which shop owners do not have control over the streetscape.

Interestingly, semiotic neighborhoods appeared in Helsinki at the same time as they did in global cities, if Saskia Sassen's timing is correct.[30] However, the reasons for expansion must be different: Helsinki's financial sector is far smaller than London's and New York's. Also, its growth in the 1980s took place too late to explain the growth of semiotic business in the first place. Of course, it is possible that the present consumption scene first originated in global cities and then spread to smaller cities. However, some evidence speaks against this explanation. For example, Narotzky dates the growth of design consumption in Barcelona to the 1980s, and links it to the Olympic Games and the democratization of Spain after Franco's regime. Modern design provided distance from the Franco era, and the Olympics made Barcelona a desired tourism destination. Once the locals learned to recognize good design, there was sufficient demand to maintain a local design industry, even though the original impetuses were no longer present.[31]

In Helsinki, development has been evolutionary rather than prompted by Barcelona-like historical events. A more promising starting point is the interaction of consumers, producers, media, and the public sector. First, the expansion of higher education, media-intensive culture, and the welfare state in the 1960s created a mass of cultivated consumers with nontraditional values, and stable earnings that peaked by the end of the 1970s.[32] Secondly, by that time, the

29 Cf. T. Santasalo and H. Heusala, *Helsingin keskustan kaupallinen rakenne* (Helsinki: Helsingin kaupunginkanslian julkaisusarja A 16, 2002) [*The Commercial Structure of Downtown Helsinki*, in Finnish]

30 S. Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo.*

31 V. Narotzky, "A Different and New Refinement: Design in Barcelona, 1960–1990."

32 Consumption of semiotic goods and services indeed grew simultaneously with consumerism in Finland, if we follow historians of consumption. Cf. V. Heinonen, Näin alkoi kulutusjuhla. Suomalaisen kulutusyhteiskunnan rakenteistuminen. In K. Hyvönen, et al., eds., *Hyvää elämää. 90 vuotta suomalaista kulutustutkimusta* (Helsinki: Kuluttajatutkimuskeskus ja Tilastokeskus, 2000), 14–20. [*How the Consumption Fiesta Began: The Structuration of Finnish Consumer Society,* in Finnish].

design professions, as we know them today, were largely in existence to exploit and shape this evolving market, to co-opt public policy, and to supply the newly-built welfare infrastructure with goods and expertise. Third, Finnish design achieved international attention in the sixties, making design a legitimate and even coveted subject of consumption. The end of the seventies was the first time when all these conditions were working simultaneously, creating new practices and structures for both consumption and production. When the news media began to popularize a consumption-centered lifestyle in the eighties, this ideology fell upon a fertile ground that had formed in the previous two decades. Of course, a historical explanation of developments in Helsinki is beyond the limits of this paper. Still, these conjectures suggest that local reasons probably account for the expansion, rather than any single factor, such as the new middle classes or diffusion from global cities, even though both may have played a part in the process.

This paper opens new vistas for research. The concept can be used both as a dependent and an independent variable. For example, we can pose questions concerning the functions of semiotic neighborhoods in cities and the modern market economy, as well as ask what factors account for the birth and recent expansion of these areas. Such analysis also may throw new light on various theoretical arguments about modern consumption. Empirical studies have shown that sign-oriented consumption is largely limited to a few professional lifestyles such as marketing.[33] This paper suggests that these forms of consumption have a spatial aspect as well: this movement towards a society of experience does not treat areas equally, but concentrates in some parts of cities.

Thus, it may well be that cities proceed towards "Disneyfication," characterized by a Baudrillardian postmodern experience in which even having a cup of coffee becomes a path through a specifically designed experience. Such extremes may exist in places such as Las Vegas, London's Soho, and in several places in Manhattan.[34] However, these are extreme cases, and we should generalize from them cautiously. This paper suggests that such developments take place only in a few places. Furthermore, this development is largely partial: in Helsinki, only the downtown area is thoroughly dominated by commercial activities. In other parts of south Helsinki, the lifestyle is more tranquil: enough people live and own homes there to make these areas multifunctional in Jane Jacobs' sense.[35]

By and large, Helsinki's southern neighborhoods have successfully resisted becoming thoroughly commercial. Since the end of 1960s, the City of Helsinki policy has aimed at keeping even the central parts of the town populated.[36] Partly because of this policy, and partly because of the ups and downs of the economy, most parts of south Helsinki have remained populated (but see the Appendix). Consequently, there is enough local demand to keep grocery stores

33 See M. Savage, et al., *Property, Bureaucracy, and Culture*.

34 See G. Ritzer, *Enchanting the Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption*; and J. Hannigan, *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 1998).

35 J. Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961/1992).

36 Cf. O. Turpeinen, T. Herranen and K. Hoffman, *Helsingin historia vuodesta 1945* (Helsinki: Helsingin kaupunki, 1997), 155–171 [*The History of Helsinki since 1945*, in Finnish]

and other modestly priced shops in business, which in turn makes south Helsinki an attractive living environment for diverse people. Even today, inhabitants in this area range from upper-middle class to the less fortunate, and from young professionals and families with children to senior citizens, which creates a demand for a great variety of ordinary goods and services. South Helsinki has become neither a shopping paradise, nor an entertainment district, quiet during the daytime, and alive only after dark.

Appendix

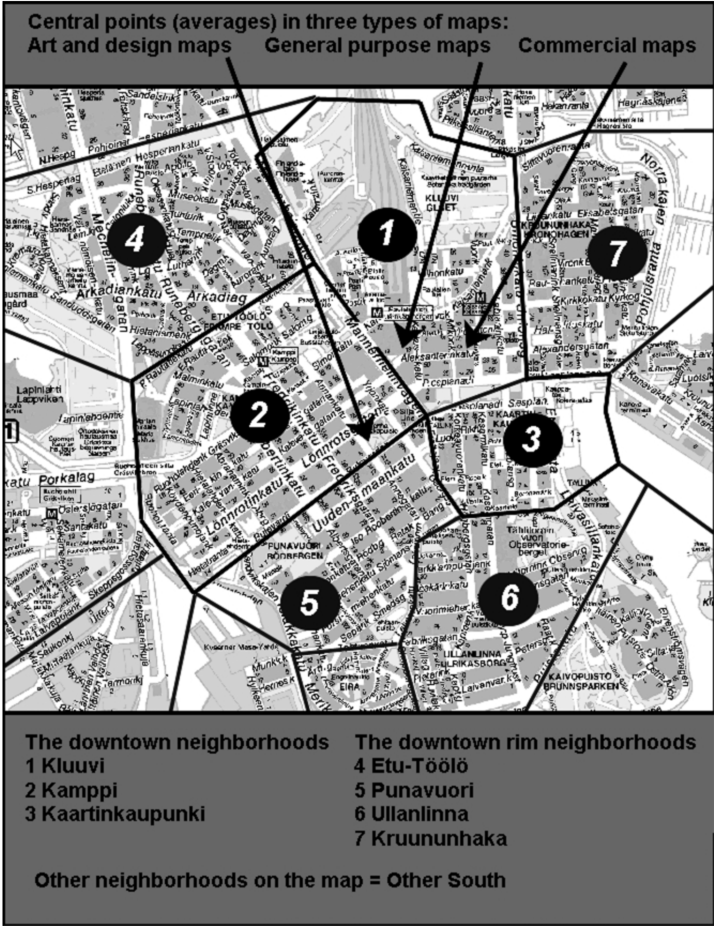

Figure 4
Southern Neighborhoods and City Facts, Helsinki.

In 2000, these south Helsinki neighborhoods had about 56,500 inhabitants and 87,200 workplaces in an area of approximately 6 km^2 (i.e., not including land area with parks, harbors, major traffic areas, and industrial areas). This makes up less than five percent of all inhabited area in the city, while the inhabited area in other town is about 127 km^2 (my estimate). In 1962, more than thirty-one percent of Helsinki's inhabitants lived in the south. In 1997, the figure was about eleven percent.

The downtown area, marked with a black line, consists of Kaartinkaupunki, Kluuvi, and the eastern part of Kamppi. Government buildings and the University of Helsinki's central campus fill the western part of Kruununhaka. Kluuvi and Kaartinkaupunki have very few permanent residents. Adjacent parts of these three neighborhoods also are void of inhabitants. This uninhabited area is about 2.5–3 square kilometers in size. This geographic pattern has its origins at the end of the nineteenth century.[37]

In 2000, the city of Helsinki had approximately 550,000 inhabitants. It is surrounded by two major independent communities, Espoo and Vantaa, but the metropolitan area extends beyond both. The Helsinki metropolitan area has approximately 1.2 million inhabitants. Between the end of the 1960s and early 1990s, practically all growth in the area took place in Espoo and Vantaa. Work and retail trade have followed the population.[38]

A recent Europe-wide statistical analysis of forty-eight metropolitan areas in Europe revealed that, in terms of gross value added (GVA) per capita, Vienna, Paris, Helsinki, Zurich, and the other Nordic capitals follow Brussels and Hamburg at the top. With Dublin, Helsinki tops the list of the fastest-growing cities.[39]

37 As noted by Aario (L. Aario, *The Inner Differentiation of the Large Cities in Finland*); Siipi (J. Siipi, *Pääkaupunkiyhteiskunta ja sen historia*); and S-E. Åström, *Samhällsplanering i Helsingfors, 1810–1910* (Helsinki: Mercator, 1957) [*Town Planning in Helsinki, 1810–1910*, in Swedish].

38 S. Laakso, *Yritystoiminnan alueellinen erikoistuminen pääkaupunkiseudulla*; and I. Koskinen, "Tuleeko keskustasta kulutusparatiisi?"

39 S. Laakso, *The Regional Economy of Helsinki from an International Perspective* (Web Publications 10/03, Helsinki: Helsinki City Urban Facts, 2003). (www.hel.fi/tieke/)