Semiotic Neighborhoods
The Case of Helsinki

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**Introduction: the Experience Society**

This paper introduces the notion of “semiotic neighborhood,” elaborates it with international examples, and illustrates the rise of one such neighborhood, South Helsinki. It specifies the recently popular experience economy idea by showing that such economy has roots in local urban communities.

One of the classics of modern sociology, Georg Simmel, once noted that a product has a personality insofar as we can project our self to the product. It is unified, and we can relate it to it on a personal basis. His list of unified products includes art works that “requires only one person, but requires him totally, right down to his innermost core,” philosophical works, and crafts products (or custom work), which bear the mark of a craftsman, and is usually specifically tailored to the consumer (Simmel 1990: 455-457). In contrast to these personal products, there are industrial products that are a result of a complex division of labor. These products “lack the spiritual determinacy that can be easily perceived in a product of labor that is wholly the work of a single person” (Simmel 1990: 454). The product is an achievement, not of one person, but of several persons. This is “objective culture,” typical to modern consumer culture in which consumption is constantly determined by such impersonal products. Furthermore, if produced in large quantities, products have to be so designed that they are “acceptable and enjoyable to a very large number of individuals,” and therefore “cannot be designed for subjective differentiation of taste” (Simmel 1990: 455).

Markets have certainly understood the need for more personalized products. The following example gives an idea of how these “personalizations” can be translated into economic values. Take the example of a design icon, Juicy Salif lemon squeezer, designed for Alessi by Philippe Starck. Juicy Salif sold for 40 in Helsinki in summer 2000. The fact that it is practically usable makes it easy to see as an object of art. If displayed in a museum, it becomes just an object of reflection. In ordinary contexts, it is available for use, though. An analysis of this object can focus on the

- Product (shapes, forms, and contours, colors, looks, kinetic qualities, and touch).
- The designer (other products, history, artistic aims, training).
- The company (products, trends in those products; meaning of the product in company history and philosophy)
- The art world (design movements as a context, museums, exhibitions, awards).

Depending on the product, and the qualities of the customer, these objects lots of possibilities for those reflexive consumers who seek to semiotize their world, and build their identities through design objects, fashion, and art. There is literature to assist in such work. There are several well-illustrated books on both Alessi and Philippe Starck, and they are easily within reach.

Changes in production have gone along with this change. Increasingly, consumers are sold not only products, but also services and stories with them. Products themselves are more complex than before: it is not possible to design with one color only, as Henry Ford once did. Consumer products borrow their forms from cars, shorts shoes, jewelry, and other sources. These trends have been reflected in sociological Zeitgeist diagnostics in various ways. Postmodernists have followed Baudrillard, who likened postmodern consumption to quiz shows. In these shows, people respond to questions without context, and go on. The next question has no relationship to the previous one: what is being construed is a repetitive and serial world, which has no respect for complex arguments, structures, and grand narratives. Key to postmodernity is a sense of ecstasy in front of a series of images and meanings. Meanings float. The boundary to real vanishes; reality is absorbed in the hyperreal (Baudrillard 1998: esp. 74).

In contrast to Baudrillard, some commentators of the present condition claim that people relate reflectively to meanings and aesthetics (Lash 1999). For these commentators, signs do not seduce
people as if this process would be unconscious. Instead, they communicate their identities for each other through their lifestyle (Featherstone 1991: 86). Among the traditional societies of Europe, exemplary patterns of consumption were set by the upper classes, which were followed by the middle stratum (Bourdieu 1986). In the New World, the process centres more clearly around money (Lamont 1992). Some commentators maintain that we live in experience economy: experience-producing industries have grown faster than other sectors of economy since early 1960s (Pine and Gilmour 1999).

Empirically, this new consumption scene goes back to large cities, and to their new high earning middle classes (Sassen 1991). A recent estimate put the number of these people, prime consumers of sophistication and spiritual meanings in goods and services, to 50 million worldwide (Ray and Anderson 2000). Purchases of these new middle classes have prompted several new forms of consumption such as large-scale shopping malls, megastores, and flagship stores. The cathedrals of consumption typified by the Las Vegas casino scene (Ritzer 1999) illustrate the extremes of such world which, however, describes ordinary consumption much worse (see Savage et al. 1995; Ilmonen 1996). This new site for consumption also consists of what are called “semiotic neighborhoods” in this paper.

### Semiotic Neighborhoods

Semiotic consumption can be classified into three types according to its exclusiveness. In the mass-market end, there are traditional department stores and their 20th century equivalents, malls. Typically catering to the middle-classes, these stores offer a wide range of goods and services, some of higher quality than others, but overall, their business is geared towards the masses of middle-income customer (see McCracken 1988; Sennett 1978; Miller, M. 1981). This part of the distribution chain of signs is oriented to types who spend their time in downtown rather than stay – like less mobile traditional working classes – in what the sociologist Sharon Zukin calls “neighborhood shopping streets” (Zukin 1999: 189-192). Typically, large downtown stores offer a wide selection of goods and services, ranging from perfumes and cosmetics to electronics and books. However, their identity is based on the store rather than on, say, people who have designed or manufactured these goods.

In stark contrast to this mass-oriented semiotization, a more exclusive layer of goods is available for the rich, for institutions, and for connoisseurs with deep pockets. As Lewis Mumford once noted in his *The Culture of Cities* (p. 214), hand crafted quality goods with extraordinary price are available for the traditional upper class in the world’s most serene city center neighborhoods. Mayfair has New Bond Street, Opéra Quarter has Rue de la Paix, and Upper East Side has Madison Avenue. These are places for the rich and famous and for traditional aristocracy. Exclusively upper class, these streets and neighborhoods are far beyond the reach of ordinary consumers, except for window-shopping. Some of these streets have existed for centuries. Their roots typically lie in royal courts and aristocratic consumption in Europe, and in their capitalist equivalents in North America.

A third, more recent development has to be added to the picture: designer streets and quarters. These streets are a recent addition to the exclusive end, but they have come to epitomize “chic” today for most people. At the far end of the development, there are a few ultimate designer streets: Avenue Montaigne and Rue du Faubourg St Honoré in Paris, the quadrilatero in Milan (the fashion district), London’s Sloane Street, and New York’s Fifth Avenue. It is in these streets in which most luxury goods companies have their flagship stores. Smaller but still extreme displays of luxury outside these flagship shop areas exist in all big cities: Los Angeles has Rodeo Drive, Chicago Oak Street, Berlin Kurfurstendamm and Fasanenstrasse. Smaller cities have developed their own, local version of these luxury streets, as the examples of Söder in Stockholm, South Helsinki, and Ströget in Copenhagen show. Mostly focusing on fashion clothing (for men, high-quality ready-to-wear), accessories and jewelry, shops in these streets offer a vast selection on a price range from $5 key rings to $25,000 jackets to $100,000 watches and upwards. These are “semiotic neighborhoods” proper.
What people buy from these neighborhoods are signs, distinction, and sophisticated cultural experiences rather than merely useful things. Cultural business has grown vastly (see Zukin 1999) up to a point in which even some of the greatest of cities are characterized less by manufacturing and even service economy than cultural production. In addition to arts and history, these semiotic neighborhoods have become tourist traps as well: tourist guides focus on them. Thus, culture has many functions in these cities: culture attracts tourism, educated inhabitants, and worldly business people. It also has significant indirect economic benefits for services such as restaurants, museums, and coffee shops (Zukin 1999).

These designer streets have become important elements of city landscapes fairly recently, that is, from the mid-1970s (Sassen 1991: 335-336). Also, their tendency to concentrate in certain neighborhoods is a fairly recent phenomenon. Success calls for more success; in the end, several shops flock in the same area, pushing other business out.

A diversified mixture of uses at some place in the city becomes outstandingly popular and successful as a whole. Because of the location” success, which is invariably based on flourishing and magnetic diversity, ardent competition for space in which locality develops. It is taken up in what amounts to the economic equivalent of a fad.

The winners in the competition for space will represent only a narrow segment of the many uses that together created success. Whichever one or few uses have emerged as the most profitable in the locality will be repeated and repeated, crowding out and overwhelming less profitable forms of use… Thus, from this process, one of few dominating uses finally emerges triumphant. But the triumph is hollow. A most intricate and successful organism of economic mutual support and social mutual support has been destroyed by the process. (Jacobs 1961/1992: 243).

Some functions win in this competitive process, and come to dominate business in that area up to the point in which cultural constructs start to guide people into seeking just those experiences in those areas. Famous cases are red light districts and other underbelly areas of cities, such as the dusky bar scene in Chicago’s Rush Street in the 1960s, or New York’s 42nd street, which came to be devoted to jazz, night clubs, and adult entertainment for much of the 20th Century.  

Take Rodeo Drive, with its extravagant display of luxury, as an example. Rodeo Drive was elevated into its present status fairly recently. In fact, first international luxury shops arrived at this short stretch of land at the end of 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. (Forden 2001: 35).

There had been jewelry shops, antique dealers, and high-end clothiers before, but with the likes of Gucci, other luxury shops followed into this neighborhood. Today, well over 50 luxury shops populate this stretch of land (see www.rodeodrive.com). Qualitatively, the difference is clear. Still, even in one of the wealthiest of cities on earth, a street or a neighborhood is established as a semiotic one over decades.

Less exclusive streets and neighborhoods are there as well: local producers and rising start of tomorrow, not dominant international luxury giants, dominate the scene here (take the Marais design scene in Paris as an example). Still, as these examples show, some areas come to be dominated by the selling of signs. They become semiotic neighborhoods in many ways. First, semiotics becomes their main business. Secondly, the distribution of sophisticated semiotic goods concentrates on these areas. Since sophistication has by definition a small social basis, every part of a city cannot be established as a semiotic neighborhood (with the exception of small holiday resorts typical to French Riviera). Instead, when one or two areas are established as such, the success of these areas suppress others. Third, they come to be known as areas of sophistication: this is the third main condition for a neighborhood to be called “semiotic.” To justly be called a “semiotic neighborhood,” there must be a high concentration of sign-selling shops in this area in comparison to other areas in the city. Also, this semiotic quality must be marked culturally with maps, shopkeepers’ associations, and media constructs.

Notice one economic peculiarity involved here. In consumer goods, it is not clear whether a strategy to get close to a similar shop is the best one. In designer goods, proximity is not a problem, but strength: a Gucci bag simply is not identical with a bag from Hermès. Producers to everything in their power to differentiate themselves, and since it is ultimately the semiotics that makes the difference, not the price, proximity is not a problem but an asset. When people and media recognize an area as a semiotic neighborhood, the area gets a “character.” Circulated in media and folklore, it directs people to these areas to browse. Proximity brings benefits rather than cripples this semiotic business by increasing competition.

This cultural process changes entrepreneurial logic: entrepreneurs seek best locations, true, but what is seen as the best location changes as a cultural definition process goes on. When a place gets a “character,” and consumers, entrepreneurs, and media recognize it as such, this cultural definition changes economic rationality. It makes sense to go to an area because entrepreneurs know that people know they find goods from there – and vice versa. As all parties start to construe a place with these semiotics-driven terms, the construction of place guides actions of the wealthy masses. Ultimately, these constructions become fact-like things in economy. Shopkeepers’ associations develop to market the area, as the case of Oak Street Council shows (www.oakstreetchicago.com). When this is the case, location decisions are not just random decisions based on entrepreneurs’ calculations. Entrepreneurial logic has its grounds in cultural logic upheld by institutions, as these second-order cultural constructs come to shape the commercial face of the city.

**Research Questions**

This paper focuses on semiotic neighborhoods in Helsinki. There are several semiotic neighborhoods in Helsinki, as Koskinen (2001) has shown. They are located in South Helsinki, which dominates trade in arts, antiquities, designer furniture, and luxury accessories as well as designer clothing. This paper has two research questions.
When have these areas developed in Helsinki?

Literature provides some clues to this question. Sassen (1991) notes that the financial sector (FIRE) in particular is responsible for creating a high-income consumer group that is neither tied to the traditional bourgeois culture, nor sufficiently wealthy for the luxury life styles of the old rich (Sassen 1991: 335-336). According to Sassen, these new middle classes are numerous enough to produce a “critical mass” for luxury and design shops, boutiques, and services (Sassen 1991: 267; also 280-1 and 335). As Sassen also notes, while only 5% of residents in New York City were professionals and managers in first decades of the 20th century, in the 1980s this figure was approximately 30%. A recent study estimated the number of these “culturally creative” people to be around 50 million worldwide (Ray and Anderson 2000). In London, it was the opening up of global financial markets in mid-eighties that brought along an influx of international money to the City, and created a wealthy, young urban high-earning mass with no inherited bourgeois taste. The design scene arose in response to this demand in several places in the world (for Barcelona, see Narodsky 2000: 239-240).

However, Sassen talks about global cities. Smaller cities and less affluent people may follow in the footsteps of these extremely large cities, but it may as well be that they do not. Think about the Nordic countries, in which income distribution is small, female workforce an important part of the workplace, and in which the welfare state levels opportunities to consume efficiently (Lehto 2000). Also, these countries have a small rich class of people, and their markets are competitive, which makes it costly to get to these countries. Given the small size of the market, these countries are not at the top of the list of production. This leads us to the following string of hypotheses:

- In Helsinki, there are two potential candidates for the establishment of new consumption on luxury: mid-1980s opening of financial markets, or the increased share of income of the top 20% of people after 1995, or a combination of these. In global cities, fads work quicker due to larger critical mass and tourism. In contrast, semiotic neighborhoods in Helsinki ought to be more stable in terms of place.

Where have semiotic neighborhoods located themselves?

In economic terms, semiotic goods and services are peculiar in two ways. Typically, they are fairly expensive, which means that transportation costs are normally insignificant. They are also often (almost) unique; in the absence of viable alternatives, search costs are also minimal. Therefore, semiotic neighborhoods can in principle locate freely in cities. However, few reasons work against this conclusion.

- Semiotic businesses maximize business potential by locating into areas close to densest pedestrian areas in which purchasing power is highest. However, these are the fiercest competed-for central areas in cities. With the exception of fashion, designer goods are typically sold by small businesses that cannot compete for best places with resource-rich, large organizations such as banks and insurance companies. Thus, semiotic neighborhoods develop into areas that combine dense pedestrian traffic with rent level that is modest in comparison to best downtown locations. These are typically areas that are close to downtown, but not in it. In Helsinki, this reasoning leads to the expectation that designer semiotic neighborhoods develop to Kaartinkaupunki, Punavuori, Kamppi and, to a lesser extent, Kruununhaka, Katajanokka and Etu-Töölö.
- Since much of demand for semiotic goods, services and experiences come from the design occupations. Semiotic business thus locates near to residential areas with a high proportion of these professionals. In Helsinki, this favors the South: in particular, Ullanlinna, Punavuori, Kamppi, Etu-Töölö, Kruununhaka, Katajanokka and Kallio (Hirvonen 2000).
However, because of the importance of pedestrian streams, "border shades" play a massive role in the location decisions (see the notion of "border vacuums" in Jacobs 1962, Ch. 14). Typical border shades are massive government complexes, waterways, and long blocks that effectively cut pedestrian traffic in areas that become shaded by these shades. Areas behind these curtains suffer in comparison to "free areas." If this logic holds, then Kruununhaka, Katajanokka (government buildings) and Etu-Töölö (areas of heavy traffic) are disfavored areas in the otherwise favored South. However, as any business, there may be fad logic at work. Once new areas are tried out, and become successful, they get established as semiotic neighborhoods, as business flows into some of these disfavored areas.

As soon as an area has developed into a semiotic neighborhood, people who seek semiotic goods know where to go. If this logic holds, semiotic neighborhoods tend to stay in that place because of search costs, and reputation benefits flowing from second-order constructs such as maps and media coverage. Thus, even an unfavorable location may become a stable location, if established once as such because of fad.

When we combine these four sets of reasons, we get the following hypothesis for how semiotic business is located in Helsinki: Kaartinkaupunki, Kamppi and Punavuori are prime locations, followed by Kruununhaka, Kluuvi (downtown), and Etu-Töölö. Other places do not combine several of these assets at once.

Data and Methods

Previous research (Koskinen 2001) has shown that semiotic trade largely locates in southern Helsinki. In particular, neighborhoods surrounding the Kluuvi area – the downtown – contain a series of shops as well as producers of culture such as advertising agencies, architect firms, designer workshops, and interior design studios.

Data for this article comes from a variety of sources. The basis of the data is from the yellow page of the Helsinki Telephone Directory. These lists have been supplemented with tourism maps (both commercial and official), maps of designer shops and art galleries, and so forth. In terms of time, the data consists of crosscuts from 1952, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000. By far, the best data on semiotic business comes from 2000: it was in 1999 when the first designer shop guide, b-guided.net, began operating, and although art galleries have arranged "gallery walks" for almost ten years, both of these data are incomplete due to self-selection. Thus, cautiousness is needed when making comparisons over decades; the only reasonably consistent source is the Yellow Pages. These maps have been used as (1) an information source (Yellow Pages) (2) a source for cultural inscription of place (other maps such as the Tourism Board maps, b-guided.net, and cruise companies’ shopping maps). The second point is needed to see whether semiotic business in South Helsinki is dense enough to be construed as a semiotic neighborhood by local actors. Notice though that these maps are selective; companies can buy a place in them, which restricts their usefulness and prompts caution. Also, these maps have not been archived systematically, which means that we have to focus on the late nineties when using them.

The term "semiotic business" is the main unit of data gathering. Semiotic businesses cover the distribution chain of designer goods, arts, and antiques, and services related to them (such as interior design), but not services such as research and advertising. In areas that are otherwise empty of semiotic business, there may be "semiotic corners," street corners in which semiotic business dominates the scene; the concentration of designer outlets at Brompton Cross in Knightsbridge, London, provides an example. Single streets that are dominated with semiotic businesses are called "semiotic streets"; Union Street in San Francisco is an example. Finally, "semiotic neighborhoods" consist of a set of semiotic streets packed together. Thus, semiotic neighborhoods can be broken into smaller units.

Goods sold in these areas are called "semiotic goods" in this paper. Also, semiotic services and experiences exist, as casino hotels in Las Vegas, Disneyland, or luxury gym witness. Their value lies in
meanings people give to them rather than in their function. Economically, their value is based on these meanings. Thus, the Starck lemon squeezer is over ten times more costly than a plastic squeezer sold in the grocery shops. Because these goods easily lend themselves to a variety of interpretations, they are also useful socially for marking sophistication. This paper focuses on one class of such goods only, trade on designer goods, i.e. goods. It will not focus on goods bought from flea markets or from supermarkets. People may love them, but trade on these goods does not depend on signs.

A few restrictions have been done in this article. Fashion has not been studied systematically, which means that the city center (that is, the Kluuvi area) is underrepresented in the figures of this article. Also, department store distribution of luxury items is not included. This article furthermore focuses on goods rather than services (such as beauty parlors) and live entertainment (music, theater). Finally, it focuses on distribution, not on cultural production or design as such (architects, designers, interior designers, sound production, etc. – For an analysis on production, see Lash and Urry 1994; Scott 2000; McRobbie 1998). Incidentally, cultural production is significantly overrepresented in South Helsinki, no matter how figures are compared (see Koskinen 2001).

Data for all statistical analysis exercise is from the City of Helsinki Statistics (www.hel.fi/tietokeskus/). Data for semiotic business are from my own calculations. Inhabited areas for figures are my own estimations; I have taken official figures, and counted away parks, forests, wetlands, and industrial areas, including harbors. Appendix 1 locates South Helsinki neighborhoods on the map and names them. Markings in maps are accurate within one-block radius.

Semiotic Neighborhoods in Helsinki

The Timing of the Semiotization

The current luxury consumption scene in London is a recent phenomenon. As Sassen notes, in 1985, there were only 67 junior executives, stockbrokers and dealers in the City who earned over a £100,000. In 1987, with opened financial markets, more than 2,000 young executives in this segment made more than that (Sassen 1991: 271-272). In New York, a similar change had taken place a few years before. Sassen maintains that these people are the backbone of the high-earning new professionals, who would spend on themselves much more than similar groups before.

These new high-income earners emerge as primary candidates for new types of intermediate investment: stock, arts, antiques, and luxury consumption. The conjunction of excess earning and the new cosmopolitan work culture creates a compelling space for new lifestyles and new kinds of economic activities. It is against this background that we need to examine the expansion of the art market and of luxury consumption on a scale that has made them qualitatively different from what they were even fifteen years ago – a privilege of elites. (Sassen 1991: 341).

Size differences and differences in the size of the FIRE sector aside, Helsinki follows London in one important respect. In particular, the Finnish financial market was opened in mid-eighties (1987), which led to an influx of foreign money to the country. Much of this money was invested in the “fun” sector (as Esping-Andersen 1990 calls spas, theme restaurants, and extravagant amusement parks types of businesses; for a quantitative estimate of the experience economy, see Pine and Gilmour 1999: 14). The first peak in consumption ought to have taken place at the end of the 1980s. The second peak ought to have taken place in the latter half of the 1990s. During that time, the highest-earning 20 % of
the population increased its share of income formation in the country significantly. This new wealth is the second possible candidate for luxury consumption.

If we look at antique trade and art trade as indicators, we get a partial confirmation to these expectations. As Figure 1 below shows, antique trade became an important feature of the Helsinki landscape in the 1980s. The recession that took place in 1991-1993 did cut business, but the antique trade recovered quickly. In 2000, South Helsinki had approximately 65 antique shops, while the rest of the city had 17 shops. The most significant new development in antiques in the nineties was probably a style switch: “modern classics” became a sought-after item in the latter half of the decade. These modern classics – like design furniture and glassware from the 1950s and 1960s – were a new addition to this trade in Helsinki just as they were in Stockholm, Copenhagen, and New York (see Picture 2).

A similar pattern characterizes art trade (Figure 2). The art trade, including art traders, galleries, and auction houses, grew in Helsinki to a qualitatively new level in the 1980s, and has continued at that level in the 1990s. In particular, South Helsinki is significantly overrepresented in art trade. In terms of location, the almost complete dominance of the southernmost tip of the city was challenged as the art trade grew in the 1980s. Still, in the nineties, the trade largely withdrew from other parts of town back to the South. The recession hit newly established galleries and houses harder than those in the old core areas of Kamppi, Punavuori, and Kaartinkaupunki.

![Figure 1: Antique shops and dealers in Helsinki 1952-1990](image)

A combined figure (Figure 3) shows that art and antiques largely have followed a similar pattern. Both have had an established presence in the capital for decades, but a significant growth of business had taken place since the 1980s.

Given these figures, Sassen’s (1991) argument that links the growth of the high-earning middle class to the consumption of signs and signed experiences is at least viable in Helsinki. Although the city – more accurately, its suburbs – have grown significantly in the last two decades of the century, this growth has not been exponential, but more or less linear. Antique trade and art trade, in contrast have grown almost exponentially in this period. Without detailed data on consumption, it is not possible to estimate whether these sectors have grown because of the new, international wealth in the 1980s, because of increased consumption potential of the wealth in the 1990s, or simply because of institutional investors (such as banks) have included antiques and art into their portfolios. Data from the distribution chain is consistent with both main hypotheses. Also, the behavior of the art market in the 1990s suggests that Sassen may have hit to a right point: recession ate the art sector significantly, which follows a similar pattern in New York in the late 1980s.
Picture 2. Modern Classics at Sale
The economist Seppo Laakso has noted that in Helsinki, there has been a restructuring of economy since the early 1960s. Population has moved away from the old city center into suburbs not just in relative, but also in real terms. For example, almost 20,000 people lived in Ullanlinna and Kamppi in 1962. By 1997, both areas had approximately 10,000 inhabitants. In contrast, northeastern suburbs have grown from 20,000 inhabitants to almost 100,000 in the same period of time. As Laakso also notes, workplaces have followed suit.

In early 1960s, two thirds of workplaces in Helsinki were in the old part (kantakaupunki) of the town. After that, the number of jobs has more than doubled, but practically speaking the whole net growth of jobs has taken place outside the old part of the town… As subcenters and new business areas have developed into suburbs, company headquarters, business services and other services have followed since the 1980s. (Laakso 2001).
However, in semiotic marketplace terms, this has not been the case. Instead, old areas in the proximity of the downtown still dominate the trade. Given the growth of the city, this concentration is in many ways stronger than it has been before. Most of Southern Helsinki has become “semiotized,” and although some neighborhoods have won more, as this section shows, the restructuring process is slowly transforming the South part of the city into a big semiotic marketplace.

Figure 4 ranks all neighborhoods in Helsinki in terms of semiotic market intensity (in 2000). The figure consists of art galleries and art shops, art museums, movie theaters, theaters, dance groups and theaters, clubs with regular live music, antique dealers, antique and arts-oriented auction houses, and interior decoration shops that sell designer goods. These densities are standardized by the size of the neighborhood’s built area (sq. km).

As the figure shows, semiotic business is heavily concentrated in the South. The concentration is even more significant, if we compare the figure to the citywide average of 2.7 shops/square kilometer. Clearly, the marketplace is heavily concentrated in the neighborhoods of Punavuori, Kluuvi (downtown), Kaartinkaupunki, and Kamppi. Today, Kruununhaka is also transforming into a semiotic neighborhood largely because of an influx of antique dealers into the area. This influx started in the mid-eighties, and has continued ever since.

In theoretical terms, these neighborhoods surround the city center, which is located in the neighborhoods of Kluuvi, northeastern Kaartinkaupunki, and northeastern parts of Kamppi. Thus, the close-to-pedestrians hypothesis seems to hold: the heaviest concentration of semiotic marketplace is in neighborhoods that surround the downtown. There is an immediate ring around the downtown that attracts semiotic business. These are semiotic neighborhoods proper: semiotic business has a much stronger position in these areas than in the downtown that, of course, has its own share of such business. Reasons for such location are many. For instance, they are related to rent levels, pedestrian traffic, and the purchasing power and sophistication of pedestrians. For example, Punavuori has hundreds of designer and architectural workplaces and artists’ work rooms – it is just these people who are the best consumers of designer goods and arts, as Zukin (1999) has noted.

Figure 4: Specialty shops by neighborhood (for legend, see text)
Also, the “border shades” argument developed in the theoretical section seems to hold as well. The case of Kruununhaka illustrates this argument. Kruununhaka is cut off from the bust of the downtown by the University of Helsinki central campus, by several ministries, including the Council of State, the Senate Square area, with its administrative buildings and churches, and several other administrative buildings, both public and private. These blocks effectively “shade” Kruununhaka, and direct pedestrians to other directions, despite tourist harbor areas in the West.

Were we to look Kruununhaka back just 20 years, we would find a high-income residential area with few semiotic shops. For example, there was only one at gallery in that neighborhood between 1960 and 1980. The previous high figure hides this by focusing on 2000, which includes the process in which almost 20 antique dealers migrated into Kruununhaka. Without this migration, the figure would look different indeed: it would be difficult to classify Kruununhaka as a semiotic neighborhood.

A similar process has taken place in the 1980s in Ullanlinna, a prestigious neighborhood in the southernmost tip of the city. Two streets, Korkeavuorenkatu-Kapteeninkatu, have become upscale shopping streets in that neighborhood. Shaded by banks, a hospital, a park, Ministry of Defense, and army headquarters, it forms a separate, tranquil area with no direct connection to the downtown.

Figure 5 and Map 1 illustrate these developments by breaking the location of antique shops by neighborhood. As the figure shows, antique trade has a stable core area in Punavuori and Kamppi (esp. Bulevardi, which forms a boundary between these neighborhoods). Antiques have been sold in these neighborhoods for more than 50 years. With new concentrations in Ullanlinna and Kruununhaka, the trade has diversified into four clusters instead of the previous larger one. In addition, a few streets have dominated the trade in the city center area for much of the 20th century (esp. Bulevardi, Annankatu, and Uudenmaankatu), which is not the case any more. They are still at the core of the business, but there are shops all around in these neighborhoods.

Figure 5: Antique dealers by neighborhood, 1952-1990

In arts, the situation is largely similar to antiques. As maps 2 and 3 show, there is a stable core of art dealers and galleries in the downtown in the Esplanades, in southeastern Kamppi, and in northern part of Punavuori. Furthermore, this core area has grown over time. In addition, there has been a “regional” gallery street in Museokatu in Etu-Töölö. Although Museokatu has lost its status in the 1970s, these galleries have spread into other parts of Etu-Töölö.
Again, reasons for this pattern in the selection of location are apparently similar to those in antiques. Notice, however, a few differences. In particular, the “border shade” argument seems to work well in the art trade. In antiques, fad filled Kruununhaka and Ullanlinna with shops in the 1980s. In arts, this has not happened. Although Ullanlinna has been home to several galleries and art shops for decades, this is not the case with Kruununhaka which, despite its amenities (scenic atmosphere, old buildings, and wealthy local residents), seems to suffer from the shade cast on it by the University and the administrative quarters. Galleries in Töölö have been long established, and separate from the Southern gallery streets. Töölö is a large, wealthy inhabited area, which apparently creates its own demand, and can compete with the more central locations because of local demand. However, more research is needed on the Töölö location before conclusions can be made.

Map 1. Antique dealers in the Southern neighborhoods 1980 and 1990

As noted previously, and as Figure 6 shows, the booming art market broke the concentration of the dealers into a few neighborhoods in the 1980s. However, the spread of galleries never broke the dominance of South Helsinki neighborhoods in this trade.

Furthermore, the strongest absolute growth has taken place in the traditionally strong neighborhoods and in neighborhoods adjacent to them. Thus, a previous concentration of galleries and art shops were in southeastern Kamppi has spread to Uudenmaankatu and south from that street into Punavuori. Also, it needs to be noted that the recession in the early 1990s hit harder newly established galleries outside former core areas. Thus, as Figure 6 shows, there were 17 galleries outside the South. However, in 2000, only 7 galleries were left in "other town." Contrast this to the fact that there were 46 galleries in
the South in 1990, and 56 in 2000 – in fact, art trade has increasingly concentrated in the South in the last decade of the century.

It is as it after the booming economy of the late 1980, there has been a return to normal times, and galleries have selected their home neighborhood more conservatively than before, opting for “sure” southern locations. This correction has been stronger in art trade than in antique business. Thus, when we calculate the growth of population density in the Southern neighborhoods and other neighborhoods, standardize this figure to 1 in 1960, and perform a similar calculation to antique dealer and art trade data, we can map the development of semiotic density in these two areas. The following figure shows how semiotic density has developed citywide over the last four decades of the century. Notice that numbers are standardized; they are not meant to be read as absolute numbers. They only indicate relative directions of density in the southern neighborhoods vs. other parts of the town. Taka-Töölö and Lauttasaari are included in the South.

![Figure 7. Relative Densities of Semiotic Business in the South and Other Town](image)

Notice that “other town’s” figures are above “1” in both art trade and antiques because of an addition: since there were no art shops and galleries outside the South in 1962, I have added 1 to the true figures to ease calculations.

The figure underestimates semiotic densities because I did not have figures of inhabited space from earlier decades. Areas are estimated from 2000 figures. Therefore, the South’s figures are underestimated somewhat while other town’s figures have more serious bias (the city has grown more outside the South, in which built area has been largely constant for most of the study period). To correct for this bias, I calculated an estimate for the development of inhabited area for other town. This estimate works backwards from 2000, and subtracts –10% for each previous figure. In 2000, the size of the other town was estimated to 127 sq. km. In corrected figures, the area was 82 sq. km in 1960. Even with this correction, the differences are minuscule (the largest difference is in 1990, not corrected 0,15 shops/sq. km, corrected 0,17). Even the 1980s sprawl of galleries outside the South is insignificant in the larger context of the city.

Furthermore, these figures only look at the City of Helsinki, and neglect its position in urban ecology of the Helsinki region. Should we take into account suburban sprawl in the neighboring cities of Espoo and Vantaa, where metropolitan growth has mainly taken place, the special role of the South would be even more staggering. With the exception of the late 1960s and the 1990s, practically all growth in the region has taken place in these suburban towns. Close to 400,000 inhabitants have migrated into these towns with only a handful of galleries, classy antique shops, or art museums (although both have set up civic centers, which house art museums).
Thus, we can safely conclude that although semiotic business has spread out of the city center with city growth, semiotic business has countered the trend and has in fact concentrated in the southern neighborhoods. With good justification, we can say that South Helsinki neighborhoods are “semiotic”: their economy revolves around signs. In contrast, although other town has gained antique dealers and art shops as well as galleries, their relative density has shrunk because population has grown faster than semiotic business in these neighborhoods.

The Cultural Construction of Semiotic Neighborhoods: Case Punavuori-Kamppi

To illustrate the intense semiotic quality of some South Helsinki neighborhoods, we may begin with an observation from a previous study. Koskinen (2001) studied the shops for some designer goods in northeastern Punavuori and eastern Kamppi, which belong to the core semiotic neighborhoods in Helsinki. He found that these neighborhoods have a massive concentration of art galleries and art shops (over 40), antique shops, design shops, and interior design shops as well as live culture. He also found that there is a dense concentration of creative professionals in these neighborhoods as well, ranging from architects and designers to advertising agencies and interior decorators to sound and video producers.

Thus, it is hard to escape the semiotic quality of business in these neighborhoods. A good deal of goods, services and experiences sold in these neighborhoods are signed objects of various sorts, or at least designed in one way or another. It is easy to create layers of meaning into these goods, when wandering in these worlds of goods. However, as Appendix 1 shows, there are inhabitants in these areas, there is a more mundane layer as well – convenience stores, markets, and barbers. These blocks are not thoroughly semiotized in the manner of London’s West End or Chicago’s Magnificent Mile.

Still, their quality has been noted by institutions, as the following data shows. Perhaps the best source of how the semiotic business of Helsinki is construed is given by Helsinki This Week, aimed at foreign tourists. Table 1 shows how this guide constructs semiotic neighborhoods in Helsinki. Listed are shopping streets, design shops, and interior design shops from the guide. As the map shows, for tourism board, Helsinki’s main shopping areas for semiotic goods is in the main shopping streets in the Kluuvi area. In addition, two streets in Punavuori have been listed, as Korkeavuorenkatu and Kapteeninkatu have become a noted Ullanlinna shopping district. (In 1970 and 1980, only shopping streets were listed.

Table 1. Semiotic neighborhoods in Helsinki This Week

Helsinki This Week has a two-fold policy in its construction of semiotics in Helsinki. On the other hand, it lists major shopping streets and department stores. On the other hand, it lists places to go for designer goods. Fredrikinkatu appeared in the guide as the first street outside the downtown in 1980. However, still in 1990, the guide labeled areas in Punavuori, Kamppi and Ullanlinna still as “exciting departures” from the downtown.
In 2000, the balance had changed (see Map 4). As the table shows, it was only in 2000 that Kamppi, Punavuori, Kaartinkaupunki, and Ullanlinna have challenged the previously dominant position of Kluuvi (the downtown) in the guide. The guide still names as shopping districts three downtown streets, and three streets in Kamppi, Punavuori, and Ullanlinna. Importantly, all shops of interest in these neighborhoods are designer shops. Interior design and kitchenware shops, in contrast, are identified in Punavuori mostly. In antiques, the guide mentions three districts in Kruununhaka, Rauhankatu and Mariankatu as key streets. In Punavuori, the guide mentions Annankatu, Uudenmaankatu, and Fredrikinkatu. In addition, the guide mentions the Töölö neighborhood as a place to go for antiques. The guide has noted the quality of the downtown rim of semiotic neighborhoods.

Map 4. Semiotic Neighborhoods in Helsinki This Week 5/01

If we compare this version of Helsinki with two of its competitors, we can see how Helsinki’s qualities are construed from two alternative value systems (Maps 5-6). The b-guided.net’s map is compiled several times a year by an advertising agency. It focuses on art, design shops (esp. interior design), fashion, chic restaurants, and coffee shops. The largest department store (now a chain) in the country, Stockmann tells a more blatantly commercial version. B-guided is self-consciously elitist and sophisticated in terms of design. The difference between the specialist b-guided map and the Stockmann map is obvious. They tell spatially two different stories of the city. With the exception of the Esplanades, points of interest are in different neighborhoods.

Table 2 breaks information in Maps 4-6 by neighborhood and ranks it. For this table, top five neighborhoods in each map have been ranked. Thus, the densest neighborhood gets “1” and the second “2.” These figures have then been inverted for readability. As the sum column shows, Kluuvi (the downtown) still ranks as the main shopping area. However, as the city economy has restructured, the downtown rim of semiotic neighborhoods increasingly challenges the downtown. In b-guided.net, Kluuvi ranks third after Kamppi and Punavuori. If other guides reflect the interests of the increasingly semiotics hungry consumer, it is evident that without restructuration, the downtown area is going to lose still more ground to its competitors.
Maps 5-6. Two commercial versions of Helsinki

As this analysis illustrates, major institutions do research the city, and provide guides for people to navigate in the town. These representations follow the real thing: streets that are key shopping areas are mentioned as such. However, this identity is not elevated into a fad-like celebration: the Uudenmaankatu bar scene is the only celebrated feature, mostly in Finnish language weeklies aimed at the bar-going crowd in their twenties (see Landry 1998). This, of course, contrasts with global cities, in which tourism industries follow commercial developments closely, and offer these as prime symbols of the sophistication of these cities and as prime attractions for tourists. Rudiments of such second-order construction, however, exist in Helsinki as well.
This paper has introduced the notion of semiotic neighborhoods. This concept is used to denote areas in which there is a high concentration of semiotic shops in one area, and much less so in others districts of the town, and when this semiotic quality is recognized in maps and other institutionalized cultural constructions. This concept focuses on one visible, but largely neglected aspects of consumption culture, trade on highly sophisticated goods targeted mostly at the upper middle classes and tourists. It is claimed that semiotic neighborhoods are a distinct aspect of city landscape today, although routine consumption (Zukin 1999: Ch. 6), mass consumption (see Miller 1981), and extravagant “cathedrals of consumption” (Ritzer 1999) have received much more scholarly attention than these neighborhoods and their streets.

The term semiotic neighborhood is justified when these three conditions are met. This paper has also shown that this term is viable for world cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, London and Paris. Finally, it has illustrated this concept with Helsinki data. An analysis of that town shows that there are semiotic neighborhoods in that town, and that the concept communicates a yet-little-elaborated quality of that town.

Secondly, the paper has related this argument to Sassen’s (1991) thesis of new consumption culture in global cities. She argues that the opening up of world’s financial markets brought along an increase in high earning city population in some global cities first. Recruited typically fresh from college, these high-earners came typically from background different from the old elite and businesspeople – for instance, they were computer specialists, and lawyer and accountants from second-tiered colleges. Consequently, their consumption took a different route from traditional high-earning occupations. Given our initial findings in this paper, it appears that although Helsinki is a small city compared to Tokyo, New York and London, which Sassen studied, it has followed development in these cities closely. Of course, there are qualitative differences in the marketplace – New York has bigger stores, and a string of international luxury companies’ flagship stores – but the pattern is clear. The growth of semiotic business in Helsinki has been almost exponential in the 1980s and 1990s, as our analysis of antique trade and art trade has shown. Even though the growth has slowed down in the 1990s, Helsinki looks a different place than previously, due to this development.

Thirdly, this concept has been interpreted in terms of place. What was learned was that as expected, South Helsinki dominates trade in arts, antiques, and other types of highly semiotic goods. In other parts of the town, there are shops, but these do not cluster, and cannot compete with the downtown and its surrounding areas. Key parts of the distribution of these goods are found in areas immediately outside the high-rent downtown: the neighborhoods of Kamppi, Punavuori, Kaartinkaupunki and, to some extent, Ullanlinna Kruununhaka, and Etu-Töölö, have become key places of semiotic consumption.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Helsinki This week</th>
<th>b-guided.net</th>
<th>Stockmann</th>
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Table 2. Ranking of Points of Interest in Three Guides (2000)
In contrast to the former three neighborhoods, these three neighborhoods, however, have specialized to one of another type of semiotic trade. In this sense, they are not semiotic neighborhoods proper. The South does not dominate the trade totally, as they did in the 1960s, but their significance has all but diminished. In fact, we have also learned that although the increased market for semiotic goods has spread the distribution somewhat outside these semiotic neighborhoods, most of the growth has taken place in these neighborhoods. These neighborhoods have become more thoroughly semiotic over the decades.

Thus, the South has “semiotized” – all the more so if we note that suburbs have grown vastly since the end of the 1950s, but semiotic business has stayed and flourished in the southern neighborhoods. This quality has been noted in tourist guides, and several cultural constructs and institutions support this perception. However, the scene is not celebrated into a new industry of the sort typical to London, Prague, or Paris, with its endless reinnovation of T-shirts and coffee mugs. National monuments and churches dominate this trade in Helsinki. For how long, remains to be seen.

Notice that in conceptual terms, semiotic neighborhoods can be broken into smaller units. There are semiotic streets in areas that are otherwise empty of semiotic business. Union Street in San Francisco provides an example of a semiotic street. Also, there exists street corners in which semiotic business dominates the scene – as the concentration of designer outlets at Brompton Cross in Knightsbridge shows.

Finally, a few words of caution are needed. To truly define a semiotic neighborhood, a series of quantitative indices with threshold values could be built on the observations of this paper. For instance, certain percentage of semiotic business contra all business in an area might be taken as a simple index of the semiotic intensity. In giving weights to various elements in such indexes, possible candidates are many: for instance, the presence of flagship stores, the average size of a buy, or the presence of shops in other prestigious cities (a chain location on Paris’ Avenue Montaigne scores higher than on Stockholm’s Stureplan). Next layer could consist of signed vs. non-signed distribution: for instance, the high end of the luxury market has a presence in Helsinki, but with few exceptions (such as Wolford and Boss), in specialist shops run by local owners, not in signed terms – that is, as franchises or flagships. Such analysis would make international comparisons easier and better comparable.

The observations made in this article could also be made more accurate. For example, there are qualitative differences in the semiotic marketplace. Remember the example of the current “modern classics” fad, briefly touched upon above, in antiques. How about art, fashion, or furniture? Or what about smaller areas in semiotic neighborhoods? For instance, southwestern Punavuori has a different semiotic profile than the antique and art oriented northeast. Punavuori’s southwest has video and sound production, and its western part a collection of new media companies. In consequence, the look and feel (Zukin 1999) of the neighborhood changes in one kilometer from the bust of the northeast to the tranquility of the southwest. How should such differences within neighborhoods be taken into account? Finally, I have focused on one type of semiotic neighborhoods only: on the new luxury consumption. Other alternatives are mass-market oriented department stores and other large-scale downtown locations, including so called “megastores,” and old elite luxury shopping streets. In any case, this paper shows that city landscapes have undergone a significant change with changing patterns of consumption.

References

Appendix 1. Southern neighborhoods

In brief, in 2000, this area had approximately 56,500 inhabitants and 87,200 workplaces in an area less than 6 square kilometers, which is counted as a sum of total built area minus parks, harbors, major traffic and industrial areas.