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Music Venue Clusters in Tacoma and Seattle, WA:

Identifying Indicators of Vibrancy

This project was designed to spatially identify and analyze vibrancy indicators of live music venue clusters in Tacoma and Seattle, WA. While the extent of a music scene tends to be referred to by municipality, the reality is that multiple scenes can and do exist within individual cities some not larger than a few blocks, only consisting of 3 or 4 venues.

Comprehensive research relating to individual music scenes in the United States is relatively limited. Most research has been conducted on a national scale and has been produced through the analysis of quantitative data. Studies conducted recently, preliminarily analyze the clustering of musicians in certain areas of the country. Another series of studies has sought to quantify the economic value of artists in a given region. The most local and simultaneously relevant report found was “The Economic Impact of Music in Seattle and King County” (Beyers, Fowler & Andreoli 2008). Employment is sighted as the variable that most affects the economic strength of the music industry in King County, WA.

By analyzing census data and location quotients it has been determined that the major factors shared by areas with vibrant music scenes are population density, income level, cultural diversity, and overall arts and entertainment activity (Florida & Mellander 2008). This research focuses on the geography of the music industry and concludes that New York City, Los Angeles and Nashville have the largest music scenes. The work also concludes that shifts in technology

are making possible the rise of indie music scenes without the prominent backbone of the music industry traditionally found in the above mentioned cities. The indie scene is a vast and complicated web of social networks across both the real and virtual worlds. Many of them are centered in and around college towns, which have large audiences of young people, attuned to music (Florida & Jackson 2008).

According to Markusen and King (2008), life-cycle patterns of movement are more pronounced among artists than many other occupations and are an added way that artists cross-fertilize and bring to their sequential hometowns new ideas and expertise. They found that, networking facilitated by artists' organization and their partners in the economy, offer the best options for strengthening the community of artists and the resulting artistic dividend. Markusen and King raise the issue of tradeoffs between funding the arts versus other forms or entertainment (e.g. casinos, sports facilities, shopping malls) and other economic development strategies.

“The Economic Impact of Music in Seattle and King County” (Beyers, Fowler & Andreoli 2008), used the American Community survey as well as the Public Use Microdata Sample for compile statistics. The economic impact study used an estimate of the number of self-employed individuals and their total income from music-related work.

Among performing artists, musicians are the most likely to be self- employed, at 39%. Some musicians are unionized employees of orchestras, while many others play local clubs, entertain at weddings and make occasional recordings; much of this activity is “off the books (Markusen & Schrock 2006). The article focuses again on the artistic dividend and its economic yields. It poses that evaluative economic development research is still too primitive to accurately

gauge potential economic yields of high visibility arts venues and live/work and gathering spaces for artists to K-12 and higher arts education, grants to individual arts and performing arts companies for specific projects, and to cultural events from free music in the parks to art crawls and art fairs. My critique of this is that the inherent value here is not necessarily in economic development, even though it usually is the justification.

Based on the literature I have reviewed, I have identified a gap in localized research focused on identifying factors that incubate a cohesive and diverse local music scene. Existing research shows that local art and music scenes have economic benefits, which include attracting what Florida calls the “creative class.” Using quantitative research data with the aid of a Geographical Information System I intend to determine how spatially relevant Florida’s hypothesis is to music venue clusters in Tacoma and Seattle WA. Further, what factors are present in areas of music venue clusters that can be interpreted as indicators of vibrancy? The second objective was to isolate factors that are present in close proximity to vibrant music scenes. My hypothesis is that a vibrant music scene as an economic driver is dependent upon low median land values.

The first task of this project was to compile an exhausted list of active live music venues including addresses and number of night a week live music is hosted. To accomplish this I collected mainstream and alternative newspapers over the course of two months. I also used online resources such as yellow pages.com and yelp.com. Once the list was collected it was verified through phone calls, and on site visits. In many cases venues that advertised live music had not found it financially viable for their business model. Through this process as well as visiting venue websites, I was able to establish the average number of nights a week a venue hosted live music. This data combined with the density of venues clustered established my

initial indicator of music scene vibrancy. In order to create a spatial indicator of overall arts activity I then gathered the addresses of arts related venues including recording studios, arts museums, live theaters, dance studios, and art galleries.

I first input the addresses of music venues and overall arts locations in Tacoma and Seattle into ArcGIS using the geocoding tool. To produce my analysis several census data layers were compiled at the block and block group scale. These variables include population density, percent foreign-born, density of non-European ethnic groups, parcel land values, householder by age 15-34 both owner and renter, and median income. The layers were normalized and interpolated using the inverse distance weighted (IDW) technique. I also used raster calculator to spatially analyze Florida and Mellander's 2008 research. In order to fulfill the second objective of the project I concluded by analyzing land values and concentrations of households owned or rented by 15-34 year olds in relation to clusters of music venues.

At the onset of the project my perspective of the local arts and music scene was that of a municipality generating cultural tourism dollars and attracting young professionals. This perspective is pragmatic as it is from the position of an economic development department that one is most likely to implement the policy reformation informed by my project. According to my analysis households owned or rented by 15-34 year olds concentrate upwards of 30% in areas with vibrant music venue clusters. It soon became clear that the tide of gentrification that accompanies this economic development also displaces existing inhabitants and the music scene itself. As an economic development strategy in a municipality that values the arts, this model is thusly unsustainable without policy intervention. Backed quantitatively by low land values, the most active music venue clusters share a historic industrial or working class past. Ballard, a Seattle neighborhood, is a prime example of this. It is precisely the gritty feel of these

neighborhoods with their close proximity to industrial activity that has enabled artists and musicians to thrive. Capitol Hill neighborhood in Seattle, a former the auto row, has seen more new apartment and condo buildings in the last five years than new Starbucks franchises. One need only walk up Pike Street from Broadway to notice a qualitative difference from even two years year ago. It is a strange paradox that the very activities that spur desirable economic growth are systematically deemphasized and displaced when an area is embraced by the “creative class.” The challenge then becomes under these conditions to implement policy that creates equilibrium between these forces and sustains them the threshold of gentrification.

The conclusions that I have drawn from my data analysis are of course affected by the quality of the data collected and the level of bias with which my analysis was conducted. The census data used in in this project is relatively up to date. It is however only a snap shot in time and applicable to the percentage of the population that was surveyed accurately. It does not account for the population who did not complete the survey either due to lack of impetus or access. This limits the validity of the conclusions that can be interpolated from this data. Further, there is contestation as to the data scale at which gentrification can be perceived in terms of prediction and observation of time.

The framework surrounding the definition of a music scene that I have adopted is admittedly a hybrid of two cultures. The first culture is comprised of a skilled group of professional musicians who make a living ultimately through the creation and performance of music. It is tracked in terms of employment as traditional job sector. The second culture is that of the “indie music scene.” Not exclusive from the first, this culture is comprised of professionals from other sectors who make a hobby as part-time musicians as well as well as those who might more aptly fall into the category of starving artist. This culture is far less

focused on profit and has over time had the effect of undercutting the wages of the professional base of the first culture. Both cultures vary by individual in level of education and experience and are in a way dependent upon each other in degrees of creative expression that is ultimately dictated by audience reaction. Because the culture of the indie music scene is far more organic in nature, it has a quality that is difficult to quantify in terms of success or vibrancy. It is in fact this organic element that makes the justification of my analysis difficult and at the same time appealing as a culture.

Given the opportunity for further research, I would embrace a more qualitative approach in order to capture the essence of the organic and concurrently authentic appeal of local music scenes. The issue then becomes that the result of such research might be used in an attempt to fabricate authentic, organic music scenes. Luckily however, major record labels have been sidestepping such involved fabrications for decades by simply inserting bands into particular local scenes giving them the appearance of authenticity. Regardless of disingenuous applications, though a participatory GIS approach, I believe it may be possible to identify and distill the essentiality of creative endeavor within the context of a healthy and productive society for the betterment of that society.

References

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