

Discursive Shaping of Place: Discourse, Design, and Gentrification

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ABSTRACT

The concepts of Place and Space have been of great importance to geographers and sociologists who seek to understand how people, practices, and cultures collide in the process of configuring and delineating “spaces” from “places” in the built environment. Place is also a key aspect in the social justice issue of gentrification. While HCI has adapted the concept of Place to inform the design of location based technologies in urban computing applications it has not yet considered the implications for gentrification these technologies may introduce. Our work argues that location based technology can contribute to gentrification through *discursive shaping of place* – a concept we introduce that highlights the affordances of technologies that enable the mapping of discourse onto space. Ultimately, we are interested in how to engage communities impacted by these technologies in design practices that would empower and provide opportunities for resisting and challenging gentrification.

Author Keywords

Gentrification; Social Justice; Design.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI); Miscellaneous;

INTRODUCTION

“One by one, many of the working class quarters have been invaded by the middle class - upper and lower ... Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social social character of the district is changed. [14]”

HCI has come to embrace a wide array of social justice issues including colonialism in ICTD [17], creation of

sustainable technologies[8], confronting gender dualism in design [1], and the technology needs of the urban homeless [5] among many others. These studies have established Social Justice as a major genre of research in the field with its own design strategies [6,9,11,16], workshops [12,13], and several case studies and systems [3,4,7,15,18,20]. Despite the range and depth of HCI’s social justice agenda, the increasingly visible issue of gentrification has not yet been a major focus. This may be due to the lack of a direct, visible connection between gentrification and technology. Gentrification, after-all is a wicked problem; scholars call it a “chaotic concept [19]” lacking any one source or well defined approaches/solutions to address it [2].

We hope to introduce the relevance of gentrification to HCI through our ongoing research on the discourse of gentrification online and its role in shaping place – what we call *Discursive Place Shaping*. This concept we use as means to call out the role of technologically mediated discourse in shaping particular “gentrified places.”

An example of this was provided by the imminent gentrification scholar Sharon Zurkin who looked at the restaurant review platform Yelp [26]. Here, Zurkin draws from her previous work on understanding the role of cultural power in terms of the desires and tastes of would be gentrifiers in inducing gentrification in particular places [25]. She takes this line questioning to Yelp through conducting a discourse analysis of restaurant reviews in two neighborhoods. Her focus was not on the actual reviews of the restaurants themselves-- rather she wanted to see if there were differences in how the neighborhoods wherein the restaurants were located were described. Both of the neighborhoods in the study were currently experiencing gentrification with the difference that one was historically African American and other Polish American. She found that the racial identities of the neighborhoods factor in significantly into how reviewers perceived and described neighborhoods.

Zurkin argues that the reviews can contribute to acts of “discursive red-lining” through the ways in which particular racialized ideologies are super-imposed onto geographies via the Yelp platform. The connection between place, discourse and technology is then in how the cumulative effect of the geographically organized reviews can impact perceptions of neighborhoods and how this factors into the

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larger economic and cultural engines that drive gentrification. Ultimately, reviews are *discursive investments* that can “**remake a neighborhood’s sense of place and contribute to gentrification.**” This discursive shaping of place is amplified and mediated through the technology as it “enhances the flow of like-minded consumers to individual restaurants, their cultural capital enhances the flow of visitors and developers to the neighborhoods.”

Zurkin’s findings potentially implicates several genres in HCI such as urban computing, mapping software and other location specific technologies that create platforms for user generated content to be mapped unto specific spaces. The question then is how does HCI address the politics[24] and moral consequences [23] in how use (and non-use) of these technologies can shape a *particular place for particular people*?

Building from Zurkin’s work, we conducted a similar study of the real-estate website Zillow.com. Zillow is an online real estate information platform designed to increase access to information to potential home buyers, sellers, and renters while as providing real estate agents, lenders and landlords access to these potential customers. Real-estate as a practice has its own particular discourse used in transactions as the creators of Zillow mentioned in their book based on the website, “when it comes to real-estate listings, words matter [21].” In the chapter “Magic Words and Dangerous Descriptors” they discuss how words and texts used in real-estate listings are “loaded with hidden meanings.”

Our study of 452 listings on two neighborhoods in Atlanta, GA revealed similar occurrences of discursive shaping as particular ideologies of the neighborhoods are reified through descriptions on the website.

Our work as well as Zurkin’s introduce the following questions: Whose discourse of places are being mediated and amplified in place based technologies? Whose place is reified? Whose place is replaced? According to Dourish the “*technologically mediated world does not stand apart from the physical world within which it is embedded; rather, it provides a new set of ways for that physical world to be understood and appropriated* [10].” Given that place and space are increasingly made “real” via technology – of what concern or consideration should designers have for gentrification? More importantly, how can communities and populations impacted by gentrification be empowered to address it?

One approach we are currently experimenting with is the design of an online platform that would automate the discourse analysis of Zillow listings. This could be extended to Yelp and other platforms via open source API as well. The tool would be designed with an accessible interface to allow people to perform searches on what is being said about an area on a particular platform. The intent

here is to give access to the discourse to those who maybe impacted by it. The limitations in this approach would be in how to introduce the platform to a particular community. And furthermore, is such a tool immediately useful for those currently experiencing gentrification?

Another method we are considering is drawn from critical geography know as “counter-mapping” which describes how oppressed populations appropriate mapping techniques of those in power in order to represent oppositional claims to place [22]. Adopting this method could entail engaging in a participatory design effort to generate counter-discursive shaping platforms. Here, the question of resources and technological capacity necessary for the design of such technologies would need to be addressed.

Another perspective might be to hack or appropriate existing place-making technologies in order to directly engage discursive shaping at its source in creating counter-discourses. A challenge here would be the need for critical mass of use necessary to have any real impact in a counter-discursive shaping effort.

Finally, one more approach we are tangentially involved with through ongoing volunteer work with a social innovation incubator located in Atlanta, Goodie Nation [27]. Goodie Nation is currently attempting to “hack” gentrification by providing resources to entrepreneurs in efforts to connect people in gentrifying areas to economic opportunities introduced by gentrification. Their approach is interesting in that rather than trying to combat gentrification by opposing it, they instead focus on using technical innovation to create viable businesses that would leverage the influx of capital created by gentrification in ways that would benefit those being gentrified. The question here lies in the ultimate viability of these solutions and furthermore this approach as a whole is still “outside in” as those impacted are not in fact involved directly in the program as designers.

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