What is Scenes Analysis?

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We have been working with the concept of "scene" since around 2003. It suggested itself initially as a solution to a specific research problem. We were at the time engaged in a research program under the label "The Cultural Amenities Project." Our question was: how and why do local amenities – operas, art galleries, restaurants, and the like – influence community and urban development.

To answer this question, we downloaded hundreds of amenities for every US zip code. As our research progressed, it became clear that it would be a mistake to focus too heavily on any single amenity. What mattered more than any contemporary art gallery, yoga studio, or body-piercing studio in isolation was the overall style of experience they all generate together. The question then became: what does this place "say," what views of life does it project, what meanings and attractions does it hold? This turned out to be an invitation to interjoin social and cultural analysis.

"Scene" offered a useful conceptual tool for making this synthesis. Instead of asking, "how many churches are in this neighborhood?" we now were asking, "to what extent is tradition a basis of legitimacy here?" Churches can feed into this type of legitimacy, but so too can classical ballet companies or etiquette schools. The question for each amenity then became: "to what kinds of scenes do they contribute"? Answers to the question "what kind of scene is here?" now came in more explicitly cultural-aesthetic formulations like: "one that tends to anchor legitimacy in personal self-expression, favor transgressive styles of theatricality, and attacks the authenticity of the corporation." Looking for scenes meant looking for the holistic but differentiated meanings of places.

The attraction of the concept lies in its grounded mobility. When we describe a place as a scene, we are trying to capture the experiential dimensions rooted in the ongoing life of its businesses, people, places of worship, activities – in the concrete practices happening here. At the same time, these meanings are not exclusive to this place; we can find them elsewhere, even if at different degrees and in different

combinations. To investigate scenes, that is, is to ask what is in the character of this particular place that may speak to broader and more universal themes?

Table 1: Analytical Dimensions of Scenes II: 15 dimensions of theatricality, authenticity, and legitimacy	
Authenticity	
Local	Global
State	Anti-State
Ethnic	Post-ethnic
Corporate	Anti-corporate
Rational	Irrational
Theatricality	
Exhibitionistic	Reserved
Glamorous	Ordinary
Neighborly	Distant
Transgressive	Conformist
Formal	Informal
Legitimacy	
Traditional	Novel
Charismatic	Routine
Utilitarian	Unproductive
Egalitarian	Particular
Self-expressive	Scripted

Three basic principles of analyzing scenes follow from this general orientation:

1. *Holism*: the meaning of any particular amenity or activity depends on the context within which it is embedded.

2. *Thematic specificity*: it is not enough to say that "culture matters," we need to articulate the substantive cultural content that scenes may offer, like glamour, formality, transgression, exhibitionism, or local authenticity, wherever they are.

3. *Combinatorial thinking*: specific scenes combine these general dimensions in specific and often unique ways. A scene in one place that joins glamour with transgression is not the same as one somewhere else that joins glamour with formality.

To describe and compare scenes more precisely, we have often worked with a heuristic, a "grammar of scenes" if you will. The idea is to articulate a range of dimensions that might be at play in any given scene. Drawn from classical cultural and social theory, as well as contemporary urban and community research, these dimensions allow us to "read" the aesthetic meaning expressed in the amenities, practices, and experiences a place offers. This heuristic is neither exhaustive nor deductive; its justification is primarily pragmatic, rooted in its ability to capture main themes in the history of cultural and social theory and in its ability to help us and others to better navigate and comprehend the cultural meanings that fill the everyday situations through which we move.

Working with these dimensions allows us to pinpoint subtle contextual variations in scenes. The logic is familiar in the arts. The brush strokes in paintings have different meaning depending on the other brush strokes around them. Similarly: a scene that joins personal self-expression with transgression is different than one that joins self-expression with glamour. For the former, the poetry of Baudelaire could be our guide; for the latter the paintings of Renoir.

Our goal is not only to describe scenes; scenes offer powerful explanatory leverage. To show this, we have often employed large databases of local amenities. Our US database for instance covers every US zip code, and includes hundreds of categories (like art galleries, body piercing studios, night clubs, nature parks, flea markets, and more) and millions of data points. This database allows us to map every US zip code in terms of the degree to which it supports specific scenes, that is, distinct patterns of cultural experience. We illustrate these in numerous ways, from statistical tables to journalistic reports to short videos to maps.

Consider Bohemia as an example of our general approach. Start with a description. Think of the Latin Quarter in Paris or Wicker Park in Chicago. These are specific

neighborhoods, which invite those who enter to think of themselves as a struggling but elite cadre of non-conformists, thinking thoughts, feeling feelings, experiencing experiences that would be out of bounds for "regular" people – as long documented in novels and operas. Yet classical Bohemias are not isolated neighborhoods. They have typically been at their peaks when their wider metro areas have not been bohemian. The Latin Quarter in the 1840's stood out because the rest of Paris provided very few opportunities for concentrated and public experiences of self-expression; Louis-Philippe was at his most repressive. Wicker Park in the 1990's existed within a Chicago that had long been dominated by ethnic churches and a political machine. If an entire metro area was "bohemian," then this boundary work would be much harder.

Now move to a general proposition: neighborhoods with bohemian scenes should impact population change and other indicators of economic growth more strongly when located inside less bohemian cities. Our scenes concepts and data then can be used to test this hypothesis. We start by looking for places whose local amenity mix evokes a distinct complex of cultural dimensions that approximate "bohemia" (transgressive, self-expressive, anti-corporate, anti-state, anti-traditional). We then look for wider metro areas that express a less counter-cultural style (traditionalistic, neighborly, formal). Having merged our amenities data with social-economic data, we can then ask if bohemian scenes situated in less bohemian metro areas are associated with distinct outcomes (like growth in college graduates or rent). We find they are. In this way we show that what a place means strongly influences what it becomes. Aesthetics becomes an element of social explanation.

"Scene" as a concept has other related meanings and a rich history. There is the "jazz scene," (activity) the "country club scene" (people), and the "Nashville scene" (place). Our usage combines theses emphases on activities, people, and places, adding a distinct focus on the holistic meaning they all generate, as a film director might. And the example of Bohemia is enough to illustrate the historical power of the idea.

The news, however, are about how salient scenes have become for wider swathes of humanity, not only the denizens of the Latin Quarter. Indeed, one can find quasi-

bohemian, or "neo-bohemian" (as Richard Lloyd calls them) scenes in Buffalo, Philadelphia, San Diego, Detroit, and beyond.

And these are not only scenes of indie art, cafes, and electronic music. In bucolic Ave Maria, FL, all roads lead to a central Cathedral and the TV in the only coffee shop is always tuned to Mass. The Village, near Vallejo, CA, transforms scenes from the paintings of Thomas Kinkade into an urban aesthetic promising "calm, not chaos. Peace, not pressure." Celebration, FL evinces a Disney Heaven of safety, cleanliness, and Main Street USA. Indianapolis transformed itself from Naptown to Super City and is now saturated with sporting events, sports organizations, and sports-themed amenities. The 1999 Canadian Census of Business reports that Peterborough, ON and Penticon BC (small towns) had two and one interior designers, respectively. By 2008 they had 17 and 10.

"Scene" is in many ways analogous to "wealth" – discussed for eons, all around us, but hard to analyze and measure. Indeed, the concept of gross national product only took off with Keynes' theory and Kuznets's measures in the 1930s. We believe that the time is ripe for "scenes" to take a similar step. The cross-disciplinary and cross-national interest the research program has sparked is already an indication. There are also broader theoretical and historical movements at work.

Most thinking about how people live and consume is driven by work-based, or "productivist" models. Whether it is in Adam Smith, Karl Marx, or Time magazine, "work" and production are always the drivers. Your job is who you are. Work is sometimes expanded to social categories like class, race, gender and national origin. These persist in shaping social life in powerful ways, but their workings are more often transformed by symbolic and cultural dimensions, as we have shown in work to date. For civic participation and leisure consumption activities – like going to a concert – race, class, gender, and national origin (as normally measured) all explain only about 15% of the variation. That is to say about 85% is not explained by these characteristics. Moreover, for more and more persons, work itself takes on characteristics of "consumption" – a lifestyle decision about how to meaningfully spend one's day rather than necessary toil until the weekend.

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In our increasingly postindustrial, knowledge-driven societies, where symbols replace widgets and ploughs, we need new concepts to better capture how people think, work, and live in consumption, politics, and family life. Aesthetics is thus a key concept which we hope to bring more seriously into the social sciences. It has been developed primarily among philosophers and critics of art and culture, but largely ignored or denied by social scientists as nonscientific. We disagree. Especially as people's lives are increasingly focused on consumption and lifestyle rather than just work (and as work itself transforms), it is essential to think more coherently about how tastes combine into distinctive lifestyles.

This increased social salience of aesthetics is part of broader social transformations. Scenes have grown distinctly important for younger persons released from more encompassing control of parents and grandparents. This took place in Western Europe and the US in the late 20th century, but traditional families and villages maintain far more stringent controls over young persons, and permit fewer quasi-independent scenes. Still, scenes elements penetrate virtually everywhere, such as a family or workplace, but these are in certain contexts more subordinated to the traditional dynamics that make them harder to assess.

Scenes are part of the increasing general social salience of the arts and culture, which are taking new forms in the 21st century. Robert Putnam in Bowling Alone documents a decline in traditional associations such as Boy Scouts or Lions Clubs. He laments a loss of legitimacy and rise of individualistic hedonism. Yet his findings are narrowed by not exploring the specifics of arts and cultural associations. We did this, reanalyzing the same data in the US and internationally, finding dramatically different results: a doubling of participation in arts and cultural activities in the US in some 20 years, a tripling in the Netherlands, and large increases in Canada, Sweden, Korea, and several other countries. These increases are particularly marked among persons in their 20s, but of all income and educational levels. Many arts and culture groups are volatile, like informal bands or dance groups in homes or underground settings.

This more expanded view of the bases of social actions and connections opens the door to alternative ways of understanding how and why race or gender may work in a less-deterministically race- or gender- based manner. Indeed, racism itself has grown

more subtle and is less captured simply with the past indicators. One of our inspirations is Claude Lévi-Strauss' work on mythology, where he explored how particular myths were transformed as their contexts shifted; he built a chain of propositions to explain how and why. For instance the Oedipus myth in a patriarchal society can transform into anti-maternal myths in matrilineal societies.

Scenes analysis can help specify these contextual shifts, as the example of Bohemia above illustrates. Our goal in doing so is to add the concept of scene in a serious manner into the lexicon of thinking by social scientists, humanists, and the general public. To do this as was the case for gross national product we need to sharpen the concepts, methods, and indicators that link the specific workings more precisely. We need to show how and where scenes make a specific difference. Still we do not seek to replace most past thinking or models – about who resonates to hip poetry or Johnny Cash – but to add scenes to show how and where they transform more traditional variables and models.