

Evaluating the Business Improvement District Redevelopment Model: An Ethnography of a Tokyo Shopping Mall

Authors : Stefan Fuchs

Abstract : Against the backdrop of the proliferation of shopping malls in Japan during the last two decades, this paper presents the results of an ethnography conducted at a recently built suburban shopping mall in Western Tokyo. Through the analysis of the lived experiences of local residents, mall customers and the mall management this paper evaluates the benefits and disadvantages of the Business Improvement District (BID) model, which was implemented as urban redevelopment strategy in the area surrounding the shopping mall. The results of this research project show that while the BID model has in some respects contributed to the economic prosperity and to the perceived convenience of the area, it has led to gentrification and the redevelopment shows some deficiencies with regard to the inclusion of the elderly population as well as to the democratization of the decision-making process within the area. In Japan, shopping malls have been steadily growing both in size and number since a series of deregulation policies was introduced in the year 2000 in an attempt to push the domestic economy and to rejuvenate urban landscapes. Shopping malls have thereby become defining spaces of the built environment and are arguably important places of social interaction. Notwithstanding the vital role they play as factors of urban transformation, they have been somewhat overlooked in the research on Japan; especially with respect to their meaning for people's everyday lives. By examining the ways, people make use of space in a shopping mall the research project presented in this paper addresses this gap in the research. Moreover, the research site of this research project is one of the few BIDs of Japan and the results presented in this paper can give indication on the scope of the future applicability of this urban redevelopment model. The data presented in this research was collected during a nine-months ethnographic fieldwork in and around the shopping mall. This ethnography includes semi-structured interviews with ten key informants as well as direct and participant observations examining the lived experiences and perceptions of people living, shopping or working at the shopping mall. The analysis of the collected data focused on recurring themes aiming at ultimately capturing different perspectives on the same aspects. In this manner, the research project documents the social agency of different groups within one communal network. The analysis of the perceptions towards the urban redevelopment around the shopping mall has shown that mainly the mall customers and large businesses benefit from the BID redevelopment model. While local residents benefit to some extent from their neighbourhood becoming more convenient for shopping they perceive themselves as being disadvantaged by changing demographics due to rising living expenses, the general noise level and the prioritisation of a certain customer segment or age group at the shopping mall. Although the shopping mall examined in this research project is just an example, the findings suggest that in future urban redevelopment politics have to provide incentives for landowners and developing companies to think of other ways of transforming underdeveloped areas.

Keywords : business improvement district, ethnography, shopping mall, urban redevelopment

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