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Naomi C. Hanakata, Monika Streule & Christian Schmid

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Incorporation of urban differences in Tokyo, Mexico City, and Los Angeles

Naomi C. Hanakata, Monika Streule and Christian Schmid

Reinvestment and intensification are common processes in many urban areas across the world. These transformations are often analyzed with concepts such as ‘urban regeneration’, ‘urban renaissance’, or ‘gentrification’. However, in analyzing Shimokitazawa (Tokyo), Centro Histórico (Mexico City), and Downtown Los Angeles, we realized that these concepts do not fully grasp the qualitative changes of everyday life and the contradictory character of the urbanization processes we observed. They do not take into consideration the far-reaching effects of these processes, and particularly do not address the underlying key question: how is urban value produced? Therefore, we have chosen a different analytical entry point to these transformations, by focusing on the production, reproduction, and incorporation of the intrinsic qualities of the urban. We found Lefebvre’s concept of ‘urban differences’ and Williams’ concept of ‘incorporation’ particularly useful for analyzing our empirical results. In this contribution, we compare the ‘incorporation of urban differences’ in the three case study areas and offer this concept for further discussions and applications.

Keywords difference, incorporation, commodification, gentrification, Henri Lefebvre, Raymond Williams, comparative urban studies, urbanization processes

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Differences endure or arise on the margins of the homogenized realm, either in the form of resistances or in the form of externalities [...] Sooner or later, however, the existing centre and the forces of homogenization must seek to absorb all such differences [...] (Lefebvre 1991, 373)

Processes of reinvestment and intensification are transforming many urban areas across the world. They are often analyzed with concepts such as ‘urban regeneration’, ‘urban renaissance’, or ‘gentrification’, to name just a few. However, in analyzing such processes in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Istanbul, Paris, Mexico City, and Los Angeles, we realized that these concepts do not fully grasp the qualitative changes of everyday life and the contradictory character of the urbanization processes we observed.¹ While these concepts focus on certain forms of upgrading of urban areas, and often also highlight the resulting relocation and displacement of inhabitants and users, they do not address the questions of the production of urban value and access of people to centrality and thus to the social wealth of a society. We therefore look at these questions from a different perspective, one that focuses on the production, reproduction, and incorporation of differences and thus on the intrinsic qualities of the urban.

‘Incorporation of urban differences’ is one of several urbanization processes we identified and conceptualized in the project ‘Patterns and Pathways of Planetary Urbanization in Comparative Perspective’ (Schmid et al. 2018). This research applied a variety of methods, including qualitative interviews with key actors, mobile and multi-sited ethnography, analysis of academic literature and popular discourses, and a specific form of mapping which allowed us to integrate knowledge of various urban actors. In order to make our concepts applicable to a broader range of cases and at the same time recognize the specificities of individual urban areas (Schmid 2015), we applied a transductive procedure, linking research and theory building through continuous feedback loops between the conceptual framework and empirical observations (see Lefebvre 1996, 63, 151). Our conceptualization is thus open to further revision.

This article starts with a theoretical discussion of urban differences and gives a first outline of the concept of incorporation. In the examples of Shimokitazawa (Tokyo), Centro Histórico (Mexico City), and Downtown Los Angeles, it then analyzes the dynamics of this process in a long-term perspective and develops a periodization for each case study. The last section presents a detailed comparison of the three case studies and positions the concept of incorporation of differences within a larger conceptual map of urban studies, particularly in relation to the concept of gentrification.

The production and incorporation of urban differences

The question of social differences has played an important role in urban studies for several decades. It has been used in various ways, sometimes to discuss diversity or multiculturalism, sometimes to describe the simultaneous presence of various social realities in urban spaces. A specific conjuncture emerged with the rise of poststructuralist and postmodern approaches, stretching out to feminist, queer, and psycho-analytic theory, making ‘difference’ one of the

key concepts in urban studies and a privileged lens through which to focus on urban space (Bondi and Rose 2003; McKittrick and Peake 2005; Valentine 2008). In *Cities of Difference*, one of the key volumes on this topic, Fincher and Jacobs (1998, 2) asked: ‘*What happens to studies of housing, suburbia, the inner city, ghettos, gentrification, social polarization and urban social movements when framed not by a theory of the ‘city’, but by theories of difference?*’ In this poststructuralist context, the term ‘difference’ is usually seen as similar to terms such as diversity, heterogeneity, or cosmopolitanism (Fincher et al. 2014). Particularly in Anglo-American discourse, difference is closely linked to the concept of identity (and identity politics), whereby both concepts are understood as constituted, constructed, and articulated by varied and complex processes and (discursive) practices related to (dominant) frameworks of power. Typical aspects discussed in this context are ethnicity, race, gender, class, sexuality, and sometimes also age and disability, and they are seen as fluid, multiple, and variably positioned. In this understanding, different subjectivities can be privileged or marginalized, included or excluded, which raises questions of rights and access to resources (Fincher and Jacobs 1998, 3–7). In urban studies, the focus is mainly on the discussion and explanation of socio-spatial differentiation, segregation, and place making in urban areas, and the analysis of how difference is constituted and negotiated in various urban contexts. This leads directly to the question of an emancipatory perspective for ‘politics of difference’ that could bring together progressive coalitions and alliances bridging the diversity of political organizations and urban movements (Keith and Pile 1993).

Difference also became a key category of the postmodernist strand of the Los Angeles School of Urbanism, which examined the differentiation of socio-spatial structures as a result of uneven development and urban restructuring (Dear 2000; Nicholls 2011). Los Angeles, which, around the turn of the century, had developed into a polycentric, fragmented, and decentered urban patchwork formed by various immigration processes and by the initiative and struggle of inhabitants, appeared to be the ideal place for studying Foucauldian ‘heterotopias’ (Soja 1996). These contributions allow for a better understanding of the constitution of difference in various urban contexts and its repercussions on urban restructuring and everyday life. They usually conceptualize urban space as an arena in which differences unfold, analyze conflicts arising from the constitution of differences, and explore political strategies to form alliances between different actors and social groups in urban contexts. They do not, however, understand difference as an active social practice shaping urbanization itself. Furthermore, certain culturalist conceptualizations of difference were also strongly criticized for their uncritical promotion of cultural diversity and ‘food-and-festivals’ brands of aestheticized difference, leading to a commodified ‘bourgeois urbanism’ that absorbs subcultural practices and popular milieus (Goonewardena and Kipfer 2005).

A theory of differences

There is also another strand of theorization, one that places the production of differences into the very core of the urban and understands it as a process that is constituting the urban. This perspective was theorized by Lefebvre. His ‘theory of differences’ is a key element of his theory of the production of

(urban) space (Goonewardena et al. 2008; Schmid 2022). Here, ‘differences’ are rooted in active social relationships, and ‘differential space’ is the horizon, the concrete utopia of urbanization. As Buckley and Strauss (2016) stated, Lefebvre’s conceptualization might also offer ‘a productive opening for feminist, queer and other urban scholarship on the socio-spatial processes producing difference’ (2016, 633). While Lefebvre remains vague about the concrete specification of differences, he uses the concept in a very productive way to analyze the dialectical relationship between urban space and the interplay of different social realities in everyday life.

In Lefebvre’s view, ‘difference’ is a relational and dialectical concept: differences are socially produced and relate to each other, and they are multidimensional, dynamic and active. Differences arise from particularities, which relate to biological and physiological characteristics, to kinship and origin. Particularities remain isolated, yet confront each other in all sorts of struggles, which traverse history. As a result of these struggles, differences emerge, and create awareness and consciousness of others. Thus, the concept of difference arises as enacted practice, and ultimately as a mental act: differences connect with the totality of actions, situations, discourses, and contexts; they relate to multifarious networks of interaction that overlap, interfere, and change through the influence they have on each other. In this way, a movement is set in motion that ultimately changes the totality of social relations (Lefebvre 1970, 64, 126, 129; 2008, 111).

In contrast to poststructuralist approaches, Lefebvre clearly distinguishes difference from ‘diversity’, ‘heterogeneity’, and also ‘distinction’, because he understands differences as enacted contradictions that could also involve conflicts and struggle (Lefebvre 1970, 66ff). In other words, the crucial point is not that a variety of people are in the same space at the same time, but that there are *relations and interactions* between them. It is also important that this concept is not intended to serve as a means to romanticize or legitimize social disparities, poverty, and precarious living conditions. On the contrary: in Lefebvre’s understanding, difference includes processes of emancipation and presupposes recognition and equal rights as a precondition for people to meet and exchange their ideas and experiences (Lefebvre 2008, 88). This conceptualization shows many similarities to Young’s call for an ‘egalitarian politics of difference’ (1990).

Difference and centrality

Urban life strives for differentiation, as Simmel already demonstrated in his seminal text *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1950). He observed that the concentration of people in large metropolises not only leads to an increased level of social interaction, but also gives much greater significance to the money economy and hence to exchange values and the market. This in turn forces individuals to specialize their professional skills in order to make a living. The agglomeration of a large number of people with different interests leads to an increase of the division of labor, which is not limited to an economic differentiation of products and services but also leads to a differentiation of livelihoods and personalities. Thus, urban differences are not only emerging based on immigration or different origins of inhabitants but result from the social division of labor and the related production of cultural, economic,

and social inventions in large metropolises. Along this line of argument, we emphasize the crucial social effect of urban centers: they not only attract differences, but they become sites of the production of differences themselves.

Lefebvre sees this productive aspect of difference in a similar way, but goes one decisive step further: differences become productive in that they generate a new quality of social interaction and transcend the existing boundaries of daily life (1991, 372 ff, 295 f.). Therefore, the specific quality of urban space results from the simultaneous presence of people with different historical, social, and economic backgrounds, of activities, functions, and ideas that meet in an urban space, interact and generate all sorts of social inventions. Urban space establishes the possibility of bringing the differences of a society together and making them dynamic: it becomes a productive force, continuously destabilizing existing modes of coexistence and innovating new ones (Schmid 2015). Accordingly, we can understand differences as 'productive instabilities' within the urban condition (Hanakata 2020).

Difference implies encounter and meeting and is thus directly linked to centrality. Lefebvre notes that 'Centrality as a form implies simultaneity, and it is a result thereof: the simultaneity of 'everything' that is susceptible of coming together – and thus of accumulating – in an act of thinking or in a social act, at a point or around that point' (1991, 332). Centrality is a precondition for differences to unfold because they can only emerge when people come together, meet and encounter. It is illuminating to see that Lefebvre's famous call for the 'right to the city' (in *The Right to the City*) evolved into the 'right to centrality' (in *The Urban Revolution*), and then into the 'right to difference' (in the *Production of Space*), which clearly shows the intrinsic relationship between these aspects of the urban. It is important to understand that Lefebvre developed centrality and difference as formal concepts: centrality means that a variety of different elements of a society come together and interact with each other. In the same way, he does not specify the concrete qualities and modalities of difference. The identification of the specific characteristics of centrality and difference in a certain urban space always requires a concrete empirical analysis. This Lefebvrian conception of difference became a key concept of the territorial approach of ETH Studio Basel, which integrated it into an analytical framework for the analysis of the specificity of urbanized territories (Diener et al. 2006, 2015; Schmid 2014, 2015).

Hegemony and incorporation

The production of differences is contradictory, because it has the potential to transform existing social relations. It is therefore always confronted with and challenged by dominant political and social forces, which try to contain, tame, and reduce differences. This leads, in Lefebvre's words, inevitably to a 'titanic' confrontation between homogenizing powers and differentiating capacities (Lefebvre 1970, 49). This confrontation can become apparent in uprisings or be implicit in the 'interstices of everyday life' (Kipfer 2008, 203). Lefebvre further distinguishes between 'minimal difference' and 'maximal difference', and between 'induced' and 'produced' differences. This is less an empirical than an analytical distinction: while minimal differences are integrated into a system and are constitutive for that system, maximal differences have the capacity to

generate all sorts of surprises, they are unpredictable, potentially explosive, and put into question the existing system (Lefebvre 1991, 372 ff, 395 f.). Referring to Gramsci, Kipfer (2008) linked the question of difference to the question of hegemony, which tries to reduce maximal differences and to incorporate minimal differences.

Departing from this interpretation, Shmueli regards Lefebvre's concept of minimal difference as 'strictly analogous' to the process Williams referred to as 'incorporation'. Williams (1977) developed a dynamic and open interpretation of Gramsci's concept of hegemony that shows astonishing parallels to Lefebvre's conceptualization of political processes. In Williams' understanding, '*a lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure*' (1977, 112). He defines hegemony as a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, and therefore it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance, but it has continually to be '*renewed, recreated, defended, and modified*' (Williams 1977, 112). It is also continuously challenged by the active presence of resistances and various forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and practices. Therefore, any hegemonic power must be especially alert and responsive to alternatives and oppositions which question or threaten its dominance. It has to try to include the efforts and contributions of those who are at the edge of the terms of the specific hegemony and to control, transform, and incorporate them. Much of this incorporation is not directly enforced, but might look like recognition, acknowledgment, and a form of acceptance (Williams 1977, 113, 125).

Urban value and the commodification of the urban

This moment of incorporation is strongly related to the commodification of urban space. Differences constitute assets that can be drawn into market mechanisms and thus be transformed into a commodity (Gibson 1998). In this process, urban life itself is tied into the commodification process. As Lefebvre noted, urban space as such becomes a commodity and is bought and sold (Lefebvre 2003, 154). This process includes not only the sale of parcels of land but the commodification of the entire social space—including the people living in it, as well as the social resources and the economic effects produced by them (Schmid 2012). As such, it is a process that turns the use value of urban space into exchange value. The use value of the urban is produced by the people, by inhabitants, workers, visitors, and users who create it through their activities and interactions. It is based on a wide variety of social, economic, cultural, and political networks anchored in specific urban places. Urban value is potentially open to everybody and thus forms a particular form of the (urban) commons. It not only includes material assets and potentials, but also immaterial values and imaginations.² However, as a result of commodification processes, most of these lively urban areas, full of different people with their practices and uses, often but not exclusively located in central areas, are turned into spaces of consumption for privileged residents and users, and are thereby incorporated into market logics. On a general level, Lefebvre understood this commodification process as a process of abstraction that leads to 'abstract space', while the creation of maximal difference tends towards 'differential space'.

Conceptualizing incorporation of urban differences

With the concept of ‘incorporation of urban differences’, we try to bring several contradictory aspects of urban transformation together. First of all, the production of differences constitutes a key aspect of the generation of urban value: encounters and interactions of people are becoming productive because they have the potential to generate all sorts of social inventions. In this sense, differences constitute the social wealth of an urban society. A crucial question is whether these differences are allowed to flourish and for whom they are accessible. This refers directly to the use value of urban space: appropriating urban space presupposes specific places, which enable meetings, gatherings, exchange, and are accessible for all social groups, open for all sorts of experiments and extend the capacity to produce new differences. An urban space can thus be defined as a place where differences evolve, recognize each other, respect each other, and enter into a productive exchange. It is important to understand that these differences are dynamic: they are not something a place ‘has’, they are something that this place constantly produces and reproduces. It is crucial that all people have the opportunity to live these differences and to generate new differences (Schmid 2015; Meili 2015). We understand these differences as relative and variable, they are constituted by various processes and always imply power relations. Because of its potentially emancipatory character, the production of differences is exposed to political interventions. While differences might be seen as an urban quality by political authorities, they are often also defined as a ‘problem’ leading to conflicts and social unrest, therefore calling for appropriate ‘solutions’ and ‘measures’. As Fincher et al. (2014) showed, political strategies addressing difference often oscillate between celebrating diversity and regulating or even repressing difference.

Incorporation of differences has thus a double characteristic: homogenization and commodification. State actors often play key roles in this process: they might initiate, guide, and lead urban transformation, support commodification processes through all sorts of policies and strategies to ‘upgrade’ neighborhoods, and are advancing homogenization through controlling and policing public spaces. The dialectics between the production of differences and the incorporation of differences sets a process in motion, which may result in phases of closures and openings, with moments of strong incorporation and moments in which differences expand and flourish. In the following, we will explore this dynamic of the production and incorporation of differences at the examples of Shimokitazawa in Tokyo, Centro Histórico in Mexico City, and Downtown Los Angeles.

Shimokitazawa: the production of an alternative centrality for Tokyo

Shimokitazawa is a neighborhood in the southwest of Tokyo with a population of approximately 18,000. It is situated at the intersection of the Odakyu- and Keio Inokashira train line, putting it in the center of one of the low-rise commuter belts stretching out from the central area into the region. It is located just outside of Tokyo’s central Yamanote railway line, which marks the limits

of the central district of the metropolitan region, including Shibuya, a major center for commerce, creative industries, and fashion, and Shinjuku, the seat of the city's government and a commercial, entertainment, and business centrality. Over the past three decades, Shimokitazawa has transformed from an intimate local neighborhood, known for its music and theater scene, into a destination for people from all over the region who are seeking an urban experience they can no longer find in any of the other centers of Tokyo (Hanakata 2020, 261).

The roots of an alternative entertainment centrality: Until the end of the feudal system in Japan in 1868, the area of Shimokitazawa was mainly agricultural land. Its gradual urbanization began with the industrialization and modernization of the country in the late 19th century. In 1878, the Komaba School of Agriculture was founded (today Komaba Campus of Tokyo University), followed in 1917 by the Seijo Academy (today Seijo University). In 1932 the Tokyo Takarazuka Theater Company, today known as Toho Company, opened nearby and together, these institutions attracted many young and creative people to the area. With the rapid expansion of the metropolitan railway network in the 1920s and 1930s, which connected Tokyo's core with the ever-moving edges of the metropolis, Shimokitazawa became a well-connected town.

Shimokitazawa was spared from the devastating air raids of World War II, which ended with the almost total destruction of Tokyo. With its basic infrastructure still intact, the town began to flourish after the war: a commercial center emerged around the railway station selling imported goods from the U.S., and with cheap restaurants and drinking places (Hanakata 2020, 263). One of those places was run by Kazuo Honda, a former Toho Studio actor, who recalls: 'Back then, Shimokitazawa was not that bustling. There were no neon lights and at night it was rather a bizarre atmosphere' (Okashima, Honda, and Honda 2001). With the beginning of the Japanese post-war 'economic miracle', Shimokitazawa became increasingly popular among young people who discovered the area as an alternative to Shinjuku, Tokyo's iconic main entertainment center, which faced intense re-development including the demolition of many popular gathering places, open spaces, and eateries. The first bars performing rock and jazz music opened in Shimokitazawa in the early 1970s and attracted a new generation of young, fashion-conscious people in a booming economy. Youth magazines featured Shimokitazawa as one of the new trendy places in the city (Takahashi 2012; Magazine World 2020). In the summer of 1979, owners of music clubs organized the first Shimokitazawa Music Festival, which contributed to the regional fame of the neighborhood as a place for music clubs and record stores. Shimokitazawa became a young and flourishing center, yet out of reach of the centripetal forces of the much larger centralities of Shinjuku and Shibuya shaped by mainstream culture and mass consumption.

In search of the non-commodifiable: With the increasing popularity, Shimokitazawa's commercial landscape changed, attracting a wider, leisure-seeking audience from the entire Tokyo region. This trend coincided with the collapse of the economic bubble in 1990, which ended Japan's long-standing economic boom and marked the beginning of a lasting economic stagnation. At the same time, a change of consumer culture emerged: exactly *because* everything was turned into a commodity during the economic boom, an increasing search for the non-commodified made places like Shimokitazawa with its vibrant, locally

embedded community, its original shops that were not yet replaced by chain stores, and its narrow alleys not overshadowed by skyscrapers an attractive and desirable place (Hanakata 2020, 265). The neighborhood responded to the desire for a nostalgic space, seemingly untroubled by economic crisis and ultimately untouched by 'modernization'. The historian Sand succinctly notes: *'Yet although the objects of late twentieth century Japanese nostalgia were various, they reflected a certain consistent sensibility that valued notions of rootedness and community preferred low-tech, small, and intimate spaces and sought to mark out territory outside the dominance of the state, capitalism, or global culture centered in the West'* (Sand 2006, 86). However, with the growing public attention and its representation in the media as an additional 'feature' in a diversified 'city portfolio', the unique, local atmosphere of Shimokitazawa itself became a commodity to be consumed in the same way as the famous illuminated streetscape of Shibuya. The distinct urban qualities that had been produced by local people were incorporated into leisure, shopping, and tourist itineraries complementing a comprehensive 'urban offer' for inhabitants and visitors.

Moments of incorporation of differences: In the early 2000s, Shimokitazawa became famous as the 'Greenwich Village of Tokyo'. Simultaneously, spaces of consumption encroached further into quiet residential zones. Homeowners converted parts of their detached houses into small commercial spaces accommodating shops, boutiques, or cafes which were celebrating a 'slow' and 'alternative' lifestyle, offering what people desired but could not find in the bigger centralities. Formerly distinct urban qualities were thus being reproduced to be sold. Waley describes this process as urban histories that are being *'wrapped up, bottled, translated into images and sold in a myriad of products appearing in shops all over the city'* (2011, 60). A resident who grew up in the area is the owner of the Toyo Department Store, a parking deck converted into a bazaar-like collection of stores or what he calls a 'retail incubator' that provides small spaces for cheap rent to young entrepreneurs who can test new product ideas and reproduce successful sales concepts. He highlights the challenge Shimokitazawa is facing today: *'Today, Shimokitazawa really is a brand' but 'what we are struggling with right now in this shopping area is that there are too many second-hand shops. [...] Many of the second-hand stores today are in fact run by large companies'* (Koshimizu 2013). His comment reveals the awareness of the growing popularity of Shimokitazawa, which larger companies leverage on. This popularity is leading to a growing consumption and results in a rise of commodification: urban values turn into exchange values, depriving Shimokitazawa of its initial quality as an alternative space. In this change of commercial spaces, popular ideas and venues are being copied and repeated with only minor differences. The result is a homogenized landscape matching mainstream demand and depriving local people of crucial conditions for an everyday life *within* the area: small corner shops providing daily necessities, which constitute an important element of the internal community network, slowly disappear. A traditional sweets shop, which opened after the war, was shut down by its second-generation owners after their retirement in 2014; now they are renting it out to yet another second-hand shop. A corner shop, established in 1927 on the ground floor of a two-story building, selling vegetables, fruits, and tobacco and forming a daily meeting point in the neighborhood, was redeveloped by the owner, who had run the shop for many

years, into a seven-story building with three commercial floors and apartments on top. The owner moved into the top floor of her redeveloped building. Like so many other property owners in the area, she has capitalized the increased value of her land and realized the rent gap by creating new commercial spaces while remaining as a resident in the place. This shows that the local property owners were directly involved in this process of commodification. However, the transformation of the neighborhood was largely limited to changes of its commercial landscape, while tenure structures remained unaffected. This was possible because of the strong legal protection of property ownership rights, which prevented large-scale acquisitions by private companies.

The commodification of the urban: The state was not completely absent in the urban development of Shimokitazawa. Already in 1986, as a response to the oil crisis a decade earlier the national government had launched the *Urban Renaissance Policy* for the central area by relaxing zoning regulations. More planning measures followed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, attempting to revitalize the stagnating economy after the economic crisis from 1991. The 'Urban Renaissance Agency' (known as the 'Housing and Development Corporation' until 1999 and the 'Urban Development Corporation' until 2004) deregulated the housing market and offered the construction sector various incentives to increase the supply of central housing (Douglass 1988, 440). This deregulation led to a temporary increase of rental prices for commercial spaces in Shimokitazawa during the late 2000s. But, as most of the housing was owner occupied, most residents were not really affected (Sonobe 2001). As a result, however, more and more larger retail chains entered the neighborhood, particularly in the area of the South Exit. Small shops nevertheless kept emerging and continued to reproduce a unique atmosphere.

Today, all these new places, venues, and events are accessible for visitors through numerous channels: local merchant associations introduce new members, announce events, and give an overview of their various shopping streets on self-administered websites. Commercial web platforms such as *I love Shimokitazawa*, *Shimokitazawa Broiler* or *Burari Shimokitazawa* as well as various mainstream print magazines such as *Popeye*, *Anan*, *Tokyo Jin*, or *Setagaya Raifu* list (commercial) novelties to ensure that they get discovered by people hunting for new urban adventures. Alternative and free events produced by engaged local residents and shop owners are incorporated into these promotion schemes and absorbed by the mainstream. A curry dish for example, initially served by a few out-of-date diners, got personified in the Curry Man, who became an ambassador for the town and its annual Curry festival, first held in 2011.

Conclusion: Shimokitazawa serves as an example for the commodification and incorporation of 'something outside the mainstream' for the mainstream. These differences emerged in and through everyday life, created by a complex interplay of individual local shop owners and the theater and music communities, transgressing cultural sectors and producing a different culture. Importantly, the incorporation of these differences was initiated and advanced by the same actors, as well as by the larger metropolitan audience—creating a kind of 'new metropolitan mainstream' (see Schmid and Weiss 2004). This kind of urban transformation is fundamentally different from situations in which higher income groups enter a neighborhood and induce the displacement of former

residents and users: in Shimokitazawa, the long-established inhabitants and shop owners themselves were driving this process of urban transformation. This illustrates the contradictory dynamics of the production of urban differences, which were produced as an alternative to mainstream culture but became incorporated into the commercial entertainment apparatus of the metropolitan region.

Centro Histórico: the struggle for a popular center for Mexico City

Despite many attempts to turn Mexico City's Centro Histórico into a privileged and mainstreamed space of consumption, a major 'break-through' was achieved only recently. What used to be a vibrant and busy popular center full of people, is today in large parts a domesticized shopping zone closely monitored by hundreds of surveillance cameras. At the same time, a fundamental change of the urban imaginary could be observed: Centro Histórico, for a long time portrayed and stigmatized as run down, unruly, and unsafe, is now seen as a desirable symbolic and cultural centrality, and after many years of population loss, new residents and users are moving in (Streule 2006, 2008; Díaz Parra and Salinas Arreortua 2016; Delgadillo 2016). How could such a profound urban transformation be produced?

The emergence of a popular centrality: Only a few years ago, thousands of street vendors installed their booths every morning on the sidewalks to sell everything from household articles and clothes to DVDs and cheap electronic devices made in China. Around one million people known as a floating population (*población flotante*) came every day to purchase a wide variety of goods (Silva Londoño 2010; Alba Vega and Braig 2013). This specific urban quality of the central area of Mexico City known as 'Centro' was deeply rooted in its changeful history. After Mexico's independence in 1821, the Centro with its large colonial residential buildings became the favorite place for the criollo elite. In the late 19th century, Mexico City expanded beyond its colonial core, and in the 1920s, in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, the Centro slowly turned from a bourgeois city center into a *barrio popular*, notorious for its dancing halls, cantinas, and *vecindades*³ (Monnet 1995). The urban elites found open plots or new residential areas to the west of the Centro, close to the central axis of Paseo de la Reforma and the newly built tramway lines (Ward 1991), and the Centro became the principal space to integrate immigrants, poorer residents, and civil war refugees into urban society (Davis 2004; Hiernaux 2013, 380).

In the following decades, the housing stock gradually deteriorated, mainly because landlords stopped investment as a response to the rent control that was introduced in 1942 in central areas to calm down massive social protests against the housing crisis (Urbina Martínez 2009). Moreover, as part of an encompassing modernist restructuring plan for Mexico City, the city government relocated numerous factories from the Centro into new industrial parks, constructed a new campus for the national university UNAM and a number of market halls in order to concentrate former commercial activities scattered throughout the Centro in an unavailing attempt to remove street vendors from public space

(Streule 2018). At the same time, many working class people left the *vecindades* in the Centro and moved to self-built houses in the urban periphery.⁴ All these developments opened up spaces, which soon were taken over by shops and other commercial uses. As a result, the Centro turned into a popular meeting place for the entire region.

In 1985, a devastating earthquake hit the Centro. Large parts of the central areas of Mexico City were affected, thousands of inhabitants killed, and many of the poorly maintained old colonial buildings seriously damaged. Many residents, businesses, and institutions left the Centro, particularly major parts of the financial sector and of the government administration. However, many shops and venues for low-income people remained, and the residents, in organizing widespread social protests successfully fought for their right to centrality and resisted relocation to newly built state housing in remote areas (Massolo 1986). They even achieved that the government eventually rehabilitated and reconstructed buildings in the area (Esquivel Hernández 2016). Thus, in the late 1980s, the Centro consolidated its role as a popular centrality for low-income, mainly mestizo and indigenous people, and as a place to live and work (Oehmichen 2007).

Cultural heritage and incorporation: In the 1990s, the urban imaginary of the Centro changed, and a process of incorporation slowly unfolded. A decisive starting point for this process had been the establishment in 1980 of the ‘Centro Histórico’ by the city government, a conservation zone covering only a fraction of the entire central area. UNESCO supported this strategy by declaring the Centro Histórico a World Heritage Site in 1987, thereby also imposing traditionalist conservation strategies, in which street markets or the alteration of façades are strictly forbidden. Soon thereafter, the city government launched the large-scale urban regeneration program *¡Échame una manita!* (Lend me a hand, 1991–94) (Delgadillo 2016, 1166). A program to resolve the earthquake damage was widely seen as necessary, but the proposed program, and particularly the production of heritage as its main strategy, was strongly disputed (Audrefoy 1998; Mantecón 2005; Melé 2006; for a similar case in Puebla, see Jones and Varley 1999). Furthermore, in the wake of a neoliberal political turn in Mexico, the city government deregulated the rents in 1992, and established the public-private ‘Historic Center Trust Fund’ to promote private investment. Another attempt to relocate street vendors failed. Despite all these efforts to attract investors, only a few real estate projects were realized, mainly in the Alameda corridor in the western part of Centro Histórico (Streule 2006; see also Parnreiter 2015).

From integral regeneration to selective investment and festivalization: In the wake of the rise of a strong urban social movement in Mexico City, which was also very active in the Centro since the successful struggles for housing in the mid-1980s, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas became the first elected mayor of Mexico City in 1997 (before, the city mayors were appointed by the President of Mexico). Cárdenas succeeded in involving activist groups and tenant organizations, which had mobilized for political change for many years, into an ‘inclusive city’ agenda. Many leaders of the social movement – like *Superbarrio Gómez*, the charismatic fighter for affordable housing in the Centro – even accepted government positions. Cárdenas envisioned an ‘integral regeneration’ of the Centro, which

sought to avoid social exclusion and prevent displacement of local residents (Coulomb 2004, 75). However, the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as city mayor in 2000 (he was elected president of Mexico in 2018) resulted in another decisive turn for the Centro. While pretending to continue Cárdenas' strategy for an inclusive city, he introduced in fact a neoliberal agenda, and forged a close collaboration with Carlos Slim, one of the most powerful Mexican entrepreneurs. Together, they created an 'Executive Consulting Council' for the recovery of the Centro Histórico, which claimed to represent civil society, but was headed by Slim and assembled other conservative celebrities of the political, scientific, and media establishment, such as the cardinal of Mexico City (Walker 2013, 177). Complementarily, the city government launched a new 'revitalization' program, which also established a cultural and touristic corridor in the southwestern part of the Centro Histórico, in the same area, in which Slim had purchased 63 buildings between 2002 and 2004 (Delgadillo 2016, 1167). Slim also created two foundations that worked closely together to manage his investments: the *Fundación del Centro Histórico*, a non-profit organization aimed at enhancing living conditions through social, artistic, and cultural programs and the *Inmobiliaria Vivir en el Centro*, a for-profit corporation that bought and renovated buildings for housing and commerce, with the goal to reactivate the real estate market in the area (Leal Martínez 2007, 29; Streule 2006). By sponsoring novel touristic and artistic spaces or providing art scholarships, both foundations attracted young people from all over the world. Additionally, micro credits were granted for small entrepreneurial activities, promoting the local production of artisan and popular products, which had so far not been part of the tourist market in the Centro Histórico. Meanwhile, the government launched a strategy of *festivalization* (Streule 2008) by organizing massive free events in public space 'sought to foster a collective identity' (Coulomb 2004, 82). This was complemented by a 'zero tolerance' strategy (Davis and Luna Reyes 2007) including a massive police presence and the installation of CCTV. A beautification program further promoted street cleaning, refurbishing parks, and an illumination plan. Many of these projects, e.g. a new police station, were financed by Slim (Streule 2006).

Mainstreaming Centro Histórico: All these massive urban regeneration efforts went in parallel to a fundamental change in the real estate market: landlords started to promote lofts in renovated buildings and also transformed upper floors of former warehouses to apartments. While low-income residents are generally aiming for ownership, this new rental market was addressing explicitly a new type of resident: well situated young couples or singles not (yet) interested in property with the desire to live in an 'attractive urban environment'. They are 'tolerating' certain inconveniences in exchange for the 'lifestyle offered by the centrality' (Coulomb 2004, 80; see also Hiernaux 2003). The revitalization strategy and the change in the real estate market had massive effects: after decades of population loss, a new urban milieu entered the Centro Histórico. Fancy cafés, bars, and galleries opened, and new cultural and touristic corridors on recently pedestrianized streets were created, often triggering conflicts between established and new residents or visitors (Leal Martínez 2007). As a result of this process, the privileged southwestern area of the Centro Histórico turned into a trendy neighborhood in the mid-2000s, while other parts still

escaped the massive public-private investments as tenants and street vendors challenged the official recuperation programs.

In 2007, with the creation of an 'Authority of the Centro Histórico' under the mayor and former police chief Marcelo Ebrard, urban regeneration policies became more generalized: reinvestments had affected less than 10% of the Centro Histórico so far (Delgadillo 2016, 1167), and the new program targeted particularly the northern and eastern neighborhoods, which had escaped renovations. For the first time street vending was effectively banned from the Centro Histórico (Crossa 2009; Silva Londoño 2010). At Plaza Garibaldi, famous for its Mariachi bands, a Tequila museum opened in 2010, while homeless street kids and prostitutes were displaced (Becker and Müller 2011; Moctezuma Mendoza 2016). In contrast, regeneration plans for the huge public market La Merced have been delayed by protests since 2013 (Delgadillo 2018; Lara-Hernandez et al. 2020).

Conclusion: Mexico City's Centro Histórico stands for the constant struggle for maintaining a popular centrality in a situation in which the globalization and metropolization of the urban region created a conflict between the extant low-income inhabitants and users and the ambitions of the government and investors to create a commodified centrality for tourists and visitors. These long-standing attempts to incorporate the historical center of Mexico City proved to be highly ambivalent. On the one hand, they have clearly diminished the vitality and openness of large parts of the Centro. As in many other Latin American cities, such as Lima, La Habana, or Bogotá, this kind of recuperation of historic colonial centers has been strongly linked to an urban heritage discourse, which was then instrumentalized for fundamental urban transformation. On the other hand, despite all these attempts by private and state actors, through various forms of everyday struggles the Centro has to this day remained an important economic, social, cultural, and symbolic centrality at a metropolitan scale. It is one of the few urban spaces in the increasingly socially segregated metropolis of Mexico City that is still visited by a remarkably wide range of different users and enables encounters and appropriations. Centro Histórico is a highly contested urban space, in which access to centrality is essentially at stake (Streule 2008; 2018).

Downtown Los Angeles: a metropolis in search of a center

After more than a century, Los Angeles finally seems to get a 'real' downtown. A place that has been seen to embody the definition of placelessness and be the very symbol of a core without content (Bogart 2006, 13; Banham 1971, 208; Lynch 1960, 1:35; Mollenkopf 1983, 31), has come roaring into a condition of urban transformation. A significant marker of this change might be the relocation of high-tech companies from Silicon Beach (Santa Monica, Venice, Manhattan Beach and Redondo Beach) into Downtown L.A. in the mid-2010s. Their explanation for this move was that the rents were cheaper, 'cool and creative' spaces abounded, and their employees wanted an 'urban experience' (Chang 2015). How can this significant urban change be explained?

A horizontal metropolis: The struggle for metropolitan vibrancy, and its corollary, the displacement of those left out of the vibrancy equation, is not

something new in Los Angeles. For over a century, civic leaders and urban planners have been grappling with the scattered urban form the metropolis had assumed. Los Angeles' polycentric structure was primarily the consequence of the construction of electric urban and inter-urban railways connecting the dispersed settlements in the vast area between the San Gabriel Mountains and the Pacific Ocean, which opened up huge tracts of land for real estate operations—yielding massive profits for the railway owners (Fogelson 1967, 86). This decentralized urbanization model had massive implications for the development of Downtown: by following a horizontal rather than a vertical urbanization pattern, Los Angeles developed many cores instead of one. However, in the first three decades of the 20th century, efforts to build a strong city center proved to be at least partly successful, as is testified by a range of representational buildings and dense neighborhoods: the City Hall with its Art Deco tower from 1928, which replaced the old CBD; the financial district at Spring Street with its high-rise buildings; and Broadway Street, which developed into a vibrant shopping, nightlife, and entertainment district where a whole range of movie palaces attracted thousands of people. But already in the 1920s, Downtown L.A. showed first signs of decline: new department stores opened along Wilshire Boulevard west of Downtown, which, over the following decades, developed towards a new 'horizontal downtown' (Keil 1998: 145); Hollywood Boulevard became the new movie district and tourist attraction; and further new downtowns developed in Pasadena, Beverly Hills, Westwood, Santa Monica, and Santa Ana (Fogelson 1967, 147; Garvin 2019, 28 f.).

Decentering the metropolis: Los Angeles' decentralized growth pattern was strongly reinforced after World War II, when the railways were replaced by boulevards or freeways and the 'Los Angeles Model' of car-oriented urban sprawl fully unfolded. This decentralized model was not only pushed forward by powerful landowners and developers but can also be seen as the result of a Fordist-Keynesian compromise in which the predominantly white trade unions supported suburban housing and metropolitan freeways (Parson 1982, 406). Soon, businesses and retailers followed white middle-income families to the growing suburbs scattered all over the metropolitan region, and shopping malls mushroomed. The new freeways did not only push further decentralization, but also constricted and suffocated Downtown, which was turned into a kind of lost island in between main traffic arteries. It experienced a slow but steady decline for several decades, leaving under-used and vacant buildings. But at the same time, it also developed into a centrality for a wide variety of low-income people (Sambale 2007). At Broadway Street many of the movie palaces became venues for Spanish-language movies and variety shows, and the neighborhood developed into a lively area for Latino Americans (Roseman and Vigil 1993). Skid Row, the adjacent neighborhood in the northeast of Downtown, close to the terminus stations of the transcontinental railroads, became an important entry point for migrants with low-price hotels, apartments, and retail stores and developed into the main place for homeless people in Los Angeles. These central areas were surrounded by several labor-intensive, low-wage industrial clusters, such as the fashion, the toy, the flower, the warehouse, and the central industrial districts. They formed specific agglomeration economies connected to global markets and also to a local network of firms and shops (Sims 2016,

35). Thus, Downtown might not have developed into a metropolitan centrality, but became an important and popular centrality for a broad mix of middle- and low-income people.

Citadel and ghetto: The slow but steady decline of Downtown did not remain unchecked: The Central City Association of Los Angeles, founded in 1924, became a key player in the efforts to ‘recenter’ the rapidly suburbanizing region in the 1960s (Davis 1990, 72). They initiated the redevelopment of Bunker Hill, a once wealthy residential area in the northwest of Downtown, which had developed into a vibrant mixed neighborhood. In what was a classic modernist urban renewal project, the newly founded Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) began to acquire property, and by the late 1960s Bunker Hill had been cleared of more than 7000 low-income homes and a large number of small businesses, while in their place rose an ‘acropolis of corporate headquarters and culture complexes’ (Parson 1993, 235). But this business satellite with skyscrapers directly linked to parking structures and freeways did not generate any form of ‘vibrancy’. The opening of the postmodern Bonaventure Hotel in 1976, highly debated by urban thinkers and postmodern theorists (Davis 1990; Soja 1989; Jameson 1991; Soja 1996; Baudrillard 1996; Joseph-Lester 2008) also did little to create a sense of a viable downtown but rather resulted in what Soja called ‘Citadel LA’: an almost pure spectacle of business, commerce, and power. As he argued, ‘many residents of the City of Los Angeles have never been downtown and experience it only vicariously, on television and film’ (Soja 1996, 297).

The ‘citadel’ remained architecturally separated from the adjacent Hispanic district on Broadway Street and guarded from the homeless in Skid Row (Parson 1993, 236). The epic battle for Skid Row cannot be told here in detail (Reese, Deverteuil, and Thach 2010; Gibbons 2018). During the 1980s, the relatively small group of mixed, but mainly white male homeless at Skid Row grew to a much larger number of predominantly African American men—a consequence of the massive wave of de-industrialization after the crisis of Fordism and the ‘collapse of affordable housing’ following the neoliberal change in Los Angeles (Wolch 1996). Plans for bulldozing parts of Skid Row were prevented by homeless advocates, support groups, and community organizations as well as by bordering communities fearing to become the ‘new’ Skid Row. It followed a dual ‘containment strategy’: on the one hand, the LA Police Department launched aggressive ‘sweeps’ to remove homeless people from public sidewalks and open spaces, while on the other, activists successfully campaigned for improvements to provide support structures, services, and shelter (Deener et al. 2013). The shocking contrast between the ascending towers on Bunker Hill and the depressing reality in Skid Row is well expressed by the metaphor of ‘Citadel and Ghetto’ so powerfully evoked by Friedman and Wolff (1982) in their seminal paper on the world city hypothesis.

The ‘success story’: The situation of Downtown changed gradually during the 1990s, in which the proverbial non-urbanity of L.A. slowly gave way to an increased interest in ‘urbanity’. A range of new cultural venues and flagship projects, such as Frank Gehry’s Walt Disney Concert Hall on Bunker Hill (1997), the Staples Center, a multi-purpose sports and event arena at the western edge of Downtown (1999), and the adjacent entertainment complex L.A. Live (2009)

gave the entire downtown a new sense of centrality. Trendy bars, restaurants, and hotels opened, while 'urban parks' were built to emanate some sense of 'urbanity'. Meanwhile, art galleries moved into the former financial district of South Spring Street, which soon became known as 'Gallery Row'. Broadway Street also experienced strong changes and the mix of stores for Latino Americans came under serious pressure. In the 1990s, Downtown became a hot spot of evictions and displacements of homeless and low-end merchants (Sims 2016, 37). A decisive turning point was reached, when the city passed the 'Adaptive Reuse Ordinance' in 1999, permitting developers to convert vacant office and commercial space into residential use. In the following years, many former bank, storage, and factory buildings, but also low-price single room apartment hotels were converted into upscale lofts and luxury residences (Deener et al. 2013). A critical moment seemed to have been reached when *Los Angeles Magazine* ran a front-page story in 2011 on the glories of downtown living (Sullivan 2014, 87).

A key role in this 'urban renaissance' was played by coordinated and orchestrated planning efforts, led by the CRA, which brought together government actors, planners, developers, property, and business owners around various projects. The main instrument for 'urban revitalization' became the creation of 'Business Improvement Districts' (BID), a model imported from other cities in North America (Garvin 2019, 99 ff.). The first BID in Downtown was 'Miracle on Broadway', founded in 1987. At the east side of Downtown, in the former Warehouse District, an 'Arts District' BID was installed in the mid-1990s. In this area, a lively art scene had developed as early as the 1970s, epitomized in the legendary punk venue in the American Hotel. The scene consolidated, artists became developers and started to rehabilitate industrial buildings, and the city launched an artist-in-residence program. Since the 2000s, more and more expensive residential and 'mixed-use' projects were fundamentally changing and streamlining the district (Darchen 2017). Today, Downtown L.A. forms a patchwork of nine officially recognized BIDs, each with their own private security guards, trash collection, marketing, and beautification efforts. Partially funded by public subsidies, they offer advice and support for commerce and real-estate developers, promoting a safe and clean space with a unique 'edgy urban atmosphere' (Marquardt and Füller 2012, 156 ff.). This includes also constant pressure on small and low-price businesses and on all those people who disturb the idealized picture. Many of those pushed out from Downtown ended up in the streets, emergency shelters, and transitional housing of Skid Row.

Recentralizing Los Angeles: In about two decades, Downtown L.A. has been transformed into a new magnet for 'urban middle-classes'. Between 2000 and 2018, the number of residents almost tripled from about 24,000 to 65,000. In 2018, its inhabitants had a median age of 36 and a median income of almost \$100,000 (City of Los Angeles 2018). Why did this 'urban renaissance', after so many failed attempts for almost a century, finally take hold? From the wider perspective of the metropolitan region, this change might be interpreted as Los Angeles turning to a denser urbanization model, as some researchers are suggesting (Soja 2014). However, this transformation also reflects a paradigm change from a decentralized and polycentric urbanization model to one that

is much more oriented towards the production and commodification of urban value based on massive interventions and concerted efforts of state and corporate actors. This recentralization of Los Angeles is thus much more than gentrification in the classic definition of the term: it can be understood as the production of an entirely new urban configuration, serving as the new strategic center for the restructuring of the entire region with far-reaching effects: an arc of gentrifying neighborhoods developed north of Downtown in recent years, stretching from a western outpost in Silver Lake to Echo Park, Cypress Park, and Lincoln Heights to an eastern outpost in Boyle Heights (Schmid and Sullivan 2020).⁵ As Scott (2018) has argued for the 2000–15 period, these gentrification processes followed the concentration of white collar jobs in central areas, which in turn reflects a fundamental change in the socioeconomic structure of Los Angeles: the center of gravity has moved along the central axis of Wilshire Boulevard eastwards towards Downtown.

Conclusion: The example of Downtown L.A. shows the contradictory process of creating centrality and urbanity through state strategies, a process that not only results in a commodified and domesticated urban space, but also destroys existing forms of popular centrality. The ‘urban renaissance’ of Downtown L.A. could be understood as the simultaneous production *and* incorporation of urban differences as part of a top-down strategy of the production of an urban space that enables ‘urban experiences’ in a ‘secure and clean’ urban environment. This is a classical form of ‘bourgeois urbanism’ that tries to produce ‘urban’ spaces without contradictions. This strategy deprives many communities of their access to centrality and impedes their efforts to create distinct forms of urban value. The remaking of Downtown L.A. is a striking example of both the incorporation of differences and its opposite, the rejection of differences.

Incorporation of urban differences in comparative perspective

The comparison of the three centralities in this article reveals that the process of the production and incorporation of urban differences may take very different forms and trajectories. In the 1950s, Shimokitazawa was a small regional center and marketplace, located at a node of the metropolitan railway system of Tokyo. Differences originally emerged from the presence of a variety of institutions and venues, such as university departments, a theater company and film studios, which attracted a mix of young, curious, and adventurous people. In contrast, Mexico City’s Centro, which constituted the entire city until the late 19th century, developed towards a popular neighborhood after the Mexican revolution, when bourgeois families relocated to suburban neighborhoods and increasing numbers of immigrants from rural areas moved in. Downtown L.A. was a thriving and mixed North American downtown at the beginning of the 20th century, but soon faced a slow but steady loss of importance due to the decentralized urbanization model of Los Angeles.

During the postwar boom, all three places developed into specific centralities with characteristic differences. In Shimokitazawa, these differences were of rather subtle quality: resisting the proliferation of global influences over decades, and largely unnoticed by a broader public, venues, shops, and meeting

places created a new productive ground for differences to emerge, and the neighborhood became an alternative cultural center for a small, mainly young segment of Tokyo's cultural milieu. At the same time, Mexico City's central zone developed into a lively and popular centrality, with all sorts of shops and venues and thousands of street vendors selling a great variety of mainly low-price goods. These places constituted nodes in various social networks, offered possibilities for encounter and exchange, and played important roles in the everyday life of the entire region. As a result of the massive destruction caused by the earthquake of 1985 the Centro turned into a place for mainly low-income people. While many left the Centro, others were fighting for their right to centrality and resisted relocation to peripheral neighborhoods. Meanwhile, Downtown L.A. did not turn into a mainstream centrality despite many new building projects put forward by private companies and state actors. Instead, it developed into a centrality for low-income people, and a place for the homeless. There were many urban qualities in this center, but they were not recognized by the mainstream discourse. Until the 1990s, specific urban differences developed in all three centers, and all of them formed accessible and affordable places for encounter and exchange. In collective everyday processes, inhabitants and users generated urban values that formed important resources for various social groups living in these vast metropolitan regions.

Incorporation processes

In the course of the 1990s, incorporation processes intensified in all three urban centers. Ironically and significantly, one starting point of incorporation was the seemingly 'non-commodifiable' that was turned into a 'cultural heritage asset' offering nostalgia and identity as a consumable product. In Shimokitazawa this process of incorporation was based on specific material artifacts: narrow alleys and low-rise buildings evoked an early modern time, and small, local shops run by their owners offered unique 'pre-loved' items. Similarly, the Centro Histórico was 'officially' proclaimed the cradle of authentic local culture, in the wake of UNESCO officially declaring the area a world heritage site. In the following years, several consecutive mayors implemented policies of urban regeneration with the classical arguments of 'rescuing Centro Histórico from decay' and 'conserving its colonial heritage'. In contrast, the construction of postmodern icons and flagship projects in Downtown L.A. did not succeed in creating 'urbanity' and 'vibrancy'. The difficulties to 'produce' urbanity and urban life through upgrading strategies and architecture projects is a lesson that planners and developers in many regions of the world experienced. Urban value is generated by the people, by inhabitants, users, and producers, which together are creating places of encounter and exchange.

In the 2000s, attempts and efforts to incorporate differences intensified in all three places. Shimokitazawa became a 'brand' and attracted more affluent people and large retail chains. Local shop owners and residents actively sought to benefit from this increased popularity and participated in the development of entertainment and shopping facilities for a leisure-seeking audience. As a result, Shimokitazawa turned from an underground off-place into a mainstream consumption space offering a 'different lifestyle' and was gradually deprived of its specific urban values. Nevertheless, displacement of

residents has been limited, largely because homeownership is so widespread. At the same time, after intense struggles, large parts of Centro Histórico were fundamentally transformed: successive city governments, in partnership with private investors, implemented a range of revitalization, beautification and security measures, leading also to active displacement and eviction of people, and – after several earlier attempts – to the banning of street vending. With the conversion of warehouses into lofts, the opening of new cafés, bars, and art galleries, and the influx of young professionals, entrepreneurs, and artists, a part of the Centro Histórico became a mainstreamed centrality, a commodified and strongly policed shopping, leisure, and tourist zone. Nevertheless, through various forms of everyday struggles another part of the Centro has to this day remained an important economic, social, cultural, and symbolic centrality for the metropolitan region. Finally, Downtown L.A. experienced a kind of a ‘take off’ after the great economic and financial crisis of 2007. The urban region of Los Angeles experienced a strong socio-economic change, which led to a revaluation of ‘urban qualities’ by companies and employees of the knowledge-intense economy. Strong incentives and curatorial efforts by public and private actors aiming at generating an ‘urban experience’ attracting visitors and investors, proved finally to be successful, resulting in a rapidly increasing number of new luxury housing, arts projects, fancy restaurants, and venues for affluent inhabitants and visitors, while streets were cleaned up and kept under surveillance to meet what is expected of a ‘metropolitan downtown’.

As these examples show, the process of incorporation is marked by unevenness and non-simultaneity. In Shimokitazawa it was nostalgia and alternative culture, in Mexico City heritage, real estate and tourism, and in Los Angeles the political project to create a ‘vibrant downtown’, which marked the starting points of the ‘revalorization’ and commodification of these places. The main actors in these processes were quite different. In Shimokitazawa, incorporation was mainly an endogenous process, driven by owners of houses and shops who also lived in the neighborhood, as well as by the visitors and users themselves. In contrast, in the Centro Histórico as well as in Downtown L.A., strong alliances of local governments and corporate stakeholders implemented strategies of upgrading and commodification with remarkable efforts and intensity. There are striking parallels: both places were transformed by an openly declared strategy to control and exploit centrality to produce a ‘new’ urban center as a space of representation that re-presents and re-constructs the urban according to a template of an idealized bourgeois ‘urbanity’ that is at the same time strongly controlled and ‘safe’.

This process of incorporation of differences has important effects, not only for the concrete locations, but also for the wider urban regions. It deprives large parts of the metropolitan populations of unique, place-specific urban values, as in Shimokitazawa and Mexico City. Additionally, it often has far-reaching restructuring effects, particularly in advancing urban transformation in surrounding low-income neighborhoods, as shown for Downtown L.A. The production of a ‘vibrant downtown’ thus reveals the full ambitions of incorporation: the reorganization of the entire urban region.

In this process of incorporation, urban differences are absorbed and commodified, with the result that places and venues open for the unexpected,

unplanned encounter and interaction for a wide range of different people are transformed and mainstreamed, whereby maximal differences are reduced to minimal differences. This is not a practice of political inclusion of neglected areas or an opening of neighborhoods for more diverse social groups, as is often pretended by policymakers and journalists. It is on the contrary a process that creates new forms of exclusion and deprives large parts of the population of their centralities. The consequence is not only that differences are deprived of their potential revolutionary power, but also that hegemonic alliances are defining the conditions and modalities of urban life.

Gentrification and the production of urban value

In a final step, we discuss the concept of incorporation of urban differences itself. Do our observations justify the elaboration of a new concept? Are they not already grasped and explained by other concepts? As has become clear during this discussion, concepts such as 'urban renaissance', 'urban regeneration', 'urban revitalization', or 'creative city' are not analytical concepts to better understand and address the question of urban differences, but they are strategic concepts to promote and implement planning instruments that are aiming to reduce differences and are thus part of the incorporation process itself (Peck 2005; Porter and Shaw 2009).

It also has become obvious that the incorporation of differences goes beyond the conceptual reach of 'gentrification'. We cannot enter here the broad debate on this widely used concept which is applied in very different contexts and covers a wide range of aspects. Its most general definition comprises (1) a physical upgrading of the built environment; (2) a change in the social composition of land-users, whereby the new users have a higher socio-economic status; and (3) related displacement of people and users (Clark 2005; Lees et al. 2016). However, such a broad definition fits to so many situations that it makes gentrification almost identical with the generic term 'urban restructuring' and thus loses much of its explanatory and generative power.

Originally, the concept of gentrification was developed to address a specific process of socio-economic urban change: the gradual and piecemeal takeover and transformation of working-class neighborhoods by predominantly white middle-class residents and users in western cities (Glass 1964; Smith 1996; Slater 2009). A considerable part of the earlier literature conceptualized this process explicitly as a form of class struggle. This aspect became more blurred in recent years with strong de-industrialization affecting many urban regions and also with the widespread attempts to make invisible the working class and the urban poor (Wacquant 2008).

Economically, the concept of gentrification basically grasps one important process: the realization of the rent gap, which measures the difference between the current ground rent and the possible rent that could be achieved by the most profitable use of the land (Smith 1996; 2002). However, as some scholars note, the concept of the rent gap only illuminates one side of gentrification, while the sometimes strong interventions of state actors to support and advance gentrification remain under-studied (Wacquant 2008; Bernt 2016). This observation opens up further questions: what motivates state actors to support and even initiate gentrification? What makes certain areas desirable for affluent

people and businesses? And finally: how is the rent gap produced? A range of answers to these questions have been put forward in gentrification studies so far. One line of argument highlights the importance of the fundamental socio-economic transformation of urban regions and the concomitant change of middle-class lifestyles towards a type of 'urban gentry' (Zukin 1987; Hamnett 1991). A second line is focusing on the growth of the knowledge economy in central urban areas, which leads to 'a major social re-evaluation of inner-city locations as sites of white-collar housing and neighborhood formation' (Scott 2018, 20). These conceptualizations allow for a more precise definition of gentrification as a specific urbanization process in which urban middle classes are turning certain areas into privileged spaces, thereby displacing lower income groups—a process that has become widespread in many urban regions across the world. We already mentioned the arc of gentrification developing north of Downtown LA, and also a range of former working class neighborhoods in the more central parts of Mexico City that would match such a definition.

In recent years, however, the concept of gentrification has been further extended and applied to processes such as urban renewal, urban mega project development, transformation of peri- and ex-urban areas, and also upgrading of informal and popular neighborhoods (Lees 2014; Lees et al. 2016). However, it is questionable how useful it is to stretch the concept of gentrification to the point where it could be applied to all sorts of urban transformations, as this not only reduces its explanatory power but also leaves many related, but nevertheless distinct urbanization processes unnoticed (see Schmid et al. 2018). With reference to experiences in Hong Kong, Tang (2017) and Smart and Smart (2017) argue that the mainly state-driven, large-scale process of 'urban renewal' cuts across class distinctions and that its framing as gentrification erases alternative conceptualizations. In a similar vein, Shatkin (2017) criticizes the application of gentrification to urban real estate mega projects in southern urban peripheries where state actors use the generation and extraction of the rent gap to consolidate and expand their power (see also Sawyer et al. 2021). Ghertner (2015) mentions that the application of the concept of gentrification to processes of urban upgrading in informal and popular neighborhoods in mainly southern urban regions neglects the regulatory and legal changes that underpin the most violent forms of displacement and diverts attention away from more fundamental changes in the political economy of land in much of the world. Another process that is sometimes framed under gentrification is 'plotting urbanism', a process which involves physical upgrading and reinvestment; however, in most cases this process does not lead to displacement, but creates additional housing for low-income people (Karaman et al. 2020).

Another example is the French concept of *embourgeoisement*, which often is translated as 'gentrification' into English. This concept is clearly distinct from gentrification, as some scholars argue (see e.g. Préteceille 2007; Clerval 2016). It highlights the role of centrality as an economic, social, and symbolic value that attracts middle and upper-class groups, who aspire to be in the center, and to be part of the center. This term was also used by Lefebvre in his famous argument that the bourgeoisie took over the center and relegated the proletariat to the peripheries, exemplified by Haussmann's radical transformation of Paris in the middle of the 19th century (Lefebvre 2003, 109–10). Following this argument,

Merrifield (2013) sees similar processes unfolding in many contemporary urban regions across the world that he calls 'Neo-Haussmannization'. Lefebvre, however, had insisted on the dialectics of centrality. It is, on the one hand, a productive force that constitutes a crucial resource for the people, but on the other, it might also be monopolized by certain affluent social groups who turn centralities into privileged spaces from which many people are excluded. In a similar and related way, the 'dialectics of difference' can be understood as the contradiction between the production of urban value and its dispossession. The process of the incorporation of urban differences, therefore, goes far beyond gentrification, because it analyzes the production and appropriation of urban value.

All these concepts and the related debates indicate that a range of different processes could generate and realize rent gaps, involving different actor constellations and resulting in quite different urban outcomes. The term 'gentrification' might not be adequate for all of those processes. The point, therefore, is not to give up the concept of gentrification. It remains an indispensable concept for the understanding of a specific process of urbanization, and it is a politically highly charged term that has mobilized innumerable protests and actions across the world since decades. However, gentrification might be used in a specific sense, with a more focused definition: as a gradual and piecemeal urbanization process, in which the rent gap is realized and captured mainly by market mechanisms, whereby state actors play important roles, but are not the main drivers (and beneficiaries) of the process.

The rediscovery of the urban

In a broader historical perspective, the question of incorporation of differences is linked to the long-standing process of the rediscovery of the urban or the 'reinvention of the city as a positive socio-cultural category' (Kipfer et al. 2008, 293). For a long time, modernist planning has tried to dissolve the urban in a functionalist and rationalist approach to demolish inner-city neighborhoods and to replace them with new city centers, as the example of Bunker Hill in Downtown L.A. illustrates. Against such attacks to centrality and difference, a wide range of urban social movements formed in many places, demanding and fighting for urban life, centrality, exchange, encounter. However, the rediscovery of the urban proved to be a very contradictory process, as the demands, efforts, and struggles for difference were constantly confronted with the double process of homogenization and commodification. As has become clear in our case studies, it is not only the search for profits that pushed this process forward, even if this might often be a strong motivation, but it is also the intent to control and reduce the unpredictable power of the urban. It is a constant battle for access to the urban, and also a struggle on the very content of the urban.

The concept of incorporation of differences focuses exactly on these contradictory processes of the production of urban value and the transformation of use value into exchange value. It thus problematizes the extraction of urban value, and links it to debates on 'urban extractivism' (Viale 2017; Streule 2022). It also highlights the crucial role of state actors. The cases of the Centro Histórico and Downtown L.A. show clearly that there is no general force that attracts affluent social groups to places full of difference. Such places are not

as desirable for middle-classes—it needs massive interventions and efforts of state and corporate actors to not only turn them into spaces of consumption, but to prepare them for the consumption of space, as Lefebvre (1991, 353) noted. This implies a fundamental change of the quality of urban spaces for encounter, exchange, and interaction. These spaces are important for many people, who are not only visitors and consumers, but participants in the production of an urban space which forms a resource, a meeting point, a node of social networks, an urban commons, where people can find things, jobs, friends, and manifold opportunities. Often, such places are not replaceable, they vanish and with them the social qualities they embodied.

With the concept of the production and incorporation of differences we would like to direct attention to precisely these aspects so crucial for the everyday qualities of urban areas: who has access to the main centralities, who has a right to difference? This is a question of social justice, in a broad sense: not only individual houses, streets or even neighborhoods, but the entire urban region is targeted and affected by such strategies. We hope to provide with this concept a useful contribution to the development of an enriched urban vocabulary to understand processes of urban transformation in a comparative perspective.

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Notes

- 1 For reasons of length we do not present the case study of Hong Kong, Istanbul, and Paris in this article (see Schmid et al. 2018).
- 2 These considerations on urban value are directly related to the distinction between use and exchange value based on Lefebvre's conception of the commodification of space (see Schmid 2012). A different conception was developed by Theurillat (2015).
- 3 *Vecindades* are Mexican tenement houses mostly located in former residential colonial buildings with simple rooms with shared facilities for rent to extended families.
- 4 For a detailed analysis of this process of *popular urbanization* see Streule et al. (2020). Cf. also Gilbert und Varley (1991).
- 5 See Scott (2018, 16). See also Ahrens (2015), Huante (2019), Kahne (2019), and Roy (2019). There is also recent gentrification close to the centrality of Pasadena, in Eagle Rock and Highland Park (Lin 2019).

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Naomi Hanakata is Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture at the National University of Singapore. Email: hanakata@nus.edu.sg

Monika Streule is a Marie-Sklodowska Curie Fellow at the Latin America and Caribbean Centre of the London School of Economics. Email: m.streule@lse.ac.uk

Christian Schmid is Professor in the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich. Email: schmid@arch.ethz.ch