

Night time studies, gentrification and Helsinki

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Introduction

The Helsinki City Museum photo archive currently consists of 50.000 pictures from Helsinki across its history. If one searches for 'yö' (night) in its database, the first pictures one comes across are of Securitas security guards in empty and illuminated settings across town. They are pointing torchlights, checking on doors and managing alarms and security systems. They take care of security and safety while 'normal' citizens sleep. For many, this is the apparent paradigm of the way the night has been planned, lived and understood in Helsinki too for a long time, at least in relation to commercial and residential areas.

Lately, the night has gained interest as a field of research within the urban studies. On the one hand, the night-time economy (NTE) has become a catchword and an instrument to examine contemporary post-industrial urbanization (see for instance: Shaw 2014; Yeo and Heng 2014). On the other, the 24-hour city paradigm (Crary 2013) has conquered and transformed the night into an experimental space for commodification, creative entrepreneurship and capital flows.

Recently, several cities around the globe hired or elected 'night mayors' and night commissions. Helsinki, too, is working towards the establishment of an *yöluotsi*, a night liaison. These institutional actors deal internally with issues ranging from the establishment of safe spaces to smart logistics, from noise complaints to public transportation, while externally assuming the role of soft diplomats to brand their cities as exciting creative hubs that never sleep.

However, night maintains complex and ambivalent features, which cannot be fully understood solely as economy (Shaw 2013). Popular music, for instance, works as a strong socializing instrument; noise can define new inequalities, under the apparent will to liberalise and loosen up old policies. The night reveals the artificiality of urban life and creates alternative ecologies and economies in ambiguous zones (Stahl and Bottà 2019). 'What goes on at night' plays a significant role in urban issues such as social exclusion, stigmatization, displacement, gentrification and precariousness. At the same time, it reveals how the night is an experimental field to test new forms of liberalisation and/or control as well as sanitization and/or festivalisation of urban living.

The 24-hour paradigm understands the city as an organism that never sleeps. It is a neoliberal project boosting urban consumerism and increasing the commodification of sleep. It basically presupposes the extension of daytime activities into the night. This is exemplified for instance by the sudden increase of supermarkets and gyms open 24/7. The 24/7 city accelerates urbanisation by requiring adequate transportation, housing, surveillance and trash collection updates to 'keep up' with it.

My attention in this article leans towards the night as a frontier and not as an object within the 24/7 urbanisation. In this regard, 'what happens at night' can be used as the 'canary in the coalmine', anticipating urban change and as a space to reflect on urbanisation at large.

Shifting Centres: Helsinki at Night

In Helsinki the night, as a time of sociability and leisure, has been for a long time a priority of the city centre and of its ability to accommodate theatre houses, restaurants, student unions, clubs and concert halls. However, a night-time ecology of Helsinki doesn't end with the city centre: there exists, in fact, a 'confetti' night-time ecology of *lähipubit* (neighbourhood pubs), karaoke bars and clubs, offering music entertainment across suburbs and neighbouring towns, initially often a side product of the *Lama* (the early 1990s recession) years and possibly also a form of segregation along racial and economic lines.

What Helsinki is witnessing lately is a quick and consistent expansion of the main night time function from the city centre towards the north-east, in Kallio and Vallila especially. This is not immediately noticeable, when looking at a city map. Traditional high culture is still very much a city centre business, and there are still plenty of restaurants and night clubs there too. However, the night 'scene' definitely moved elsewhere. With 'scene' I am referring to the tight and highly networked social ambience, which allows the performing of a 'good night out'.

This shift has manifested itself in five different ways. First with the clustering of new clubs altogether, targeting contemporary and hip EDM (electronic dance music), especially in the so-called *Elanto* block. The second strategy consists of opening of a subsidiary, like for instance in the case of Annankatu's *Bar Loose*, which in 2013 inaugurated a *Loosister* in Kurvi. The third possibility is to artificially move the place (and supposedly its atmosphere) altogether, like in the case of *Corona Bar*, which had to close in Eerikinkatu but reopened in the *Konepaja Bruno* complex in 2019.

The fourth option is developing a completely new project, like in the case of *M-Bar*, which shut 2015 on Mannerheimintie in Kamppi, while the owner decided to open a floating club in Merihaka called *Merikerho*. The last possibility is based on temporary experiments, like those that *Kalasadataman vapaakaupunki* (Free City of Kalasatama) ideated first in the *Suvilahti* premises and later in the *Redi* mall close-by, where some shows have taken place until 10:00 PM.

What is more, recently, city centre live music clubs like *The Circus*, *Virgin Oil* and *Nosturi*, active since the early noughties, announced closing their doors altogether in the near future, putting into question the historical role played by Helsinki city centre, in regards to the night time.

Night and Gentrification

This shift of the night centre has of course not happened in a vacuum. Parallel to this, the much announced (Tani 2001) gentrification of Kallio and Vallila became noticeable, for instance in the rising rents and real estate value, change of population, but also in the way these districts began to be branded. For some years, at least since 2003 when the City of Helsinki Tourist and Convention Bureau launched the *Nordic Oddity* campaign (Bottà 2010), 'bohemian' has been used as an adjective to signify a certain vintage cinematic *noir* atmosphere to be experienced in Helsinki. This label, formerly addressing the centre and later Punavuori, has slowly sharpened its attention towards the district of Kallio while being forgotten elsewhere. This has happened in connection to the redevelopment of Kalasatama.

Often pioneers, evicted inhabitants and activists resist gentrification through squatting, demonstrations and debates (Mele 2000), while in Helsinki the upscale transition seems to be happening undisturbed. There are interesting studies addressing Helsinki's gentrification from the point of view of lifestyle, housing preferences and consumption habits: for instance looking at young families moving back to the inner city (Lilius 2019). However, the term *gentrifikaatio* has mostly an uncritical when not overtly positive meaning, in relation to revamped urban activism, cultural life and public festivalization. Real estate agents,

municipalities, activists and artists all welcomed gentrification and are celebrating its most visible signifiers: the cappuccino bar, the cutting edge restaurant, the odd bearded cyclist and most of all, the buzzing nightlife.

Conclusions: Why Land Matters

What the night reveals is the artificiality of urbanisation. The night 'ecology', from illumination to opening hours, from the promise of something forbidden to alarm systems, is artificial and therefore reflects material forces involved in its planning, execution and control.

Municipalities and the state in Finland own a great portion of urban land. This has had an impact on how the social mix, welfare and planning have been implemented and preserved through the years and how urban inequalities have been tamed. However, lately, Helsinki has often taken up other more entrepreneurial roles, studied for instance in the creation of housing hubs to attract wealthy residents (Hyötyläinen and Haila 2018) or in the mobilisation of 'culture' in dedicated incubators as a planning strategy (Krivy 2012).

The webpages of *M-Bar*, which closed in 2015, are still active. In the news section we can read that:

City of Helsinki has ended rental contract of land that mbar terrace stands on. mbar terrace closes at the end of September and will be deconstructed. Lasipalatsi building faces renovation that lasts up to two years. mbar indoors space is open until the end of October 2015. mbar warmly thanks its customers, artists and staff for amazing years together. <http://mbar.fi/>

In all its partiality, this message hints that the city played a role in shifting the night function of the centre, at least in this particular case. The centre is slowly turning into a daytime tourist paradise of gigantic buses and instagrammable architectures. Commerce and retail have successfully developed their own new centres and hearts outside of the *keskusta*, however, the shift of the night time centre towards the buzzing gentrifying Kallio and Vallila is more problematic.

First of all, this is because the night is an arena of desires and increased sociabilities. The city centre has represented, for centuries, the place where power, history and politics are visible but are also available to everybody. It is the place of public assembly and of spectacle, where the true intrinsic nature of the city resides.

The city centre is also the most connected from the point of view of transportation. Kallio and Vallila are out of some citizens' mindscapes, and are more difficult to reach from certain areas, which is why their nocturnal function might increase economic, identity and social divides.

Moreover, this shift has made nightlife more disposable and temporary. Once gentrification will settle in privileging residents and their good night sleep, the nightlife will have to move again, probably towards the east, prey to the value of the land dictating its beat.

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