How to preserve the identity of the Champs Elysées?

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Abstract

World-renowned urban places struggle to retain the qualities that made them famous as the fabric of the city changes. Often their specific charms and qualities, indeed, their identity, is threatened by organization changes of the urban environment. In this paper, we show how "The Champs Elysees" is fragmenting into anonymous subspaces that raise the risk of it becoming a non-place, as described by Augé. We show the role of a specific institutional influence, the Committee of the Champs Elysees, to preserve the site despite the heterogeneity of its members. Two strategies emerge from their actions: the deceleration of the flows of people is sought to slow down the flow, channelling people on the Avenue within a modernized iconic space, while the constitution of events seeks to combine different sights and make them coexist together as a mosaic of experiences. We conclude by showing the limits of influence of regulation that leaves the future of the space undetermined.

Introduction

Social life for over 50 per cent of the world's population takes place in the frame of a quickening urban space organized according to the objectives and representations of architects, planners, business, civil, and political elites. While the structuration of the large modern city is pragmatically translated in two dimensions through urban planning the aesthetics incorporated in its buildings, monuments and avenues, and their evolution, mirror the changing ideology of its designers through history as a three dimensional space. There has been a generalization of the urban, which, according to Augé (1994), should be considered a result of "a technocratic violence, an obsession with circulation and with achieving communications" (166, our translation). If such a trinity characterized the materiality of the early 1990s then it has surely intensified with the translation of violence, circulation and communication into the virtual spaces that are now entangled in the quickening materiality.

Not surprisingly, the growing importance and size of cities has long interested sociology. Simmel considered the city as the finest achievement of modern life, the frame in which modern humanity now has to live. According to Simmel, urban life allows the "modern Man" to preserve a style to living because great cities allow for individual autonomy. In the city we can escape the surveillance that makes of village life a total institution. Simmel suggests that the city air that makes us free liberates a personal subjectivity that can only flourish within an urban environment characterized by impersonality, which would be stifled by the gaze of conformity in closer knit, traditional, and circumscribed settlements. For Simmel, however, urban life also leads to a kind of alienation, a split in the self, that complex divisions of labour and organization exacerbate. Despite obvious changes since Simmel's reflections in the

architectural design of urbanity, its temporal rhythms, and in the diversity of people intermingling in the modern city, his intuitions remain valid. We will draw on them to analyze the urban phenomenon known as Les Champs Elysées. In this paper, we will study how the institutional action of the Comité strives to regulate the dynamics perceived as accelerating the increasing banality of this cherished space as a zone of mass-consumption. Such institutional action first uses deceleration of the flows within the space of Les Champs to facilitate socialization between individuals. A second line of attack lies in the organization of events that subsume, through symbolic and supposed shared values, the social and spatial fragmentation of the site. We will show how this regulation is constrained and how these constraints reflect the economics of globalization specifically expressed within this space.

The globalization of the space is, in this paper, seen empirically by looking at the distribution of organizational trademarks and brands that are now present in Les Champs and the different goals they represent. A drastic change in ownership regarding the Avenue has occurred and accelerated for twenty years: large private funds, banks and insurance companies have replaced the bourgeoisie who owned private hostelries a century ago. The space of Les Champs reflects the lost contest of the old capitalism while this new globalized financial capitalism, a capitalism that translates its overwhelming power by requiring increasingly higher rentals. The resulting transformation of the space is threatening the soul of Les Champs as a venerable site of the essence of French culture. Le Comité functions as an institution of regulation in its struggle to manage this space by trying to preserve a recognizable identity for Les Champs.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we indicate elements, which compose the iconic space of Les Champs; second, we show the fragmentation of the space with the substitution

of globalized capitalism for traditional, French, elite, capitalism, which, as we develop, third, turn out to be a microcosm of late modernity as the interviews made during our research suggest. Finally we discuss how strategies of organizing deceleration and events initiated by the Comité strive to preserve the soul of the place.

Iconic spaces

The development of contemporary empirical sociological research about the city started only with Park and the Chicago School in the early twentieth century. Not surprisingly, since the Chicago School, much attention has been devoted to the city because of its existence as a privileged locus of multiple interactions between people incorporated in its hypermodernity. Indeed, the city includes the coexistence of so many different and proximate spaces (specific districts, such as the docks, the central business district, the suburbs, the slums, all criss-crossed by the lines of travel that connect stations, airports, and car parks) that offer a heterogeneity and apparent openness suggestive of the potential of the city for restless engagement of diverse subjectivities. Under such a description the big city stands as the prototype of that liquidity that characterizes contemporary hypermodernity Clegg and Baumler 2011)

The liquidity of the city is illustrated not only in the flow and everyday commuting of both city inhabitants and those tourists who spend a couple of days as spectators of the city but also in its historical sites, such as les Champs. These places in the city are areas of changing light and shadow, as the urban environment framing, constituting and embedding them changes under the influx of diverse cultures, ethnicities, and social classes, interconnections of flux and space that illustrate liquidity in slow motion. In a snapshot they are hardly visible;

in a generation the changes can be massive. According to Bauman liquidity makes existing social links disappear. The application of the liquid metaphor is especially relevant if used to describe organizations that to some extent stand aside from conventional definitions of hierarchical space, that are constituted in the atmosphere of hypermodernity and its flows (Knox, O'Doherty, Vurdubakis and Westrup, 2008). Despite the structuration of urban space partially serving to identify and regulate the flux of its inhabitants, commuters, and visitors, the modern city partially escapes the rules that organize its constituent organizational parts: planning regulations, private property developments, changing patterns of residence and use, all make the city liquid (Lang and Knox, 2009). The regulation that occurs within each organizational space leaves marks, folds and scars on the urban landscape as well as creating spaces in which new forms of organization emerge, such as community based movements (Clegg 2011: 202-229; Pollard 2004; Black and Edwards 2000; Miles, 2005; Cowell and Thomas, 2002).

As a metaphor liquidity includes the possibility of matter flowing out of those forms that channel it, reshaping the cityscape in unpredictable and messy ways. In specific zones of the city, the liquidity of hypermodernity has been enacted in and through processes respecting and also modifying traditional representations. Every space that is designed has an intention expressed in it by its designers but its designers are not its users. While an organization as materiality, such as a cathedral or bank headquarters, for instance, can prescribe roles, relations and aesthetics for those who worship or work (sometimes one and the same thing) in them, there is much less prescription at street level. How do people living inside or simply sightseeing in the city implement the projected function of specific spaces by expressing something that urban designers, politicians and marketers have figured out in advance?

Beyond “the mechanics of the city” and “the engineering of the city“, where social and topological landmarks are rather well known and stable, there are today many places that, by contrast, are ill-defined and messy. In such spaces encounters will be constructed and located through “mediaries and intermediaries that register and are aimed at providing very different possibilities” (Augé 1994, page 94: our translation). Airports and railway stations clearly belong to this category, as they are places whose function is to make commuting and moving between potentially indefinite combinations of destinations easier. They are crossroads for multiple spaces in motion that are spatially connected and thus relatively close to each other. The tension between the objectivity of huge and open spaces and the apparent subjectivity of closed spaces is consistent with the development of an ideology of intimacy that can encourage the closure of organizational spaces within the space of community. According to Tennet (1979: 197):

> ”We believe today that intimacy between people is a good thing … We look for warmful experiences and close relationships. All of us entertain the myth that all the social problems are due to impersonality, to alienation and coldness. We cope with an ideology of intimacy. Social relationships are only real, true, authentic … when they take account of individual psychology. This ideology transforms the political categories into psychological categories …Instead of God, human warmth has become our true god”.

The modern *Gemeinschaft* flourishes with this thinking inside organizations, which train, induct, promote, envision, and purposefully state their community, while the imagined community of the neighbourhoods that house them, especially in those iconic spaces such as the City of London and the Champs Elysées of Paris, have become much more alienated and

fragmented, as Simmel proposed they might. In such an urban condition it should be no surprise that there are many specific attempts to organize the spaces outside the organizations that cluster in these iconic locations.

Today, the organization of iconic urban sites is anthropologically, historically, sociologically, and economically connected with the multi-faceted era that has been described as "supermodernity" through the lenses of organization studies (Suddaby, Hardy and Huy, 2011). The Champs Elysées, as an organizing site, a fragment of space, is such an icon and one of the most densely signified spaces of modern urban life (Pozzo di Borgo, 1997). The Avenue des Champs-Élysées is one of the most prestigious and expensive streets not only in Paris, but the world. The avenue runs for 2 kilometres (1.25 miles) through the 8th arrondissement and has been a fashionable avenue since the late 18th century. It was the Duke of Antin who pursued the Grand Cours or 'Perspective' from the Tuileries up to the mound of Chaillot (Butte de Chaillot) where the Arc de Triomphe now stands. In the 18th century, the promenade was bordered with trees formally planted in a straight line and English gardens were laid out on each side, from the Place de Concorde up to the Rond Point des Champs-Elysées. The name was adopted in 1709 and derived from the Elysian Fields, a place of final resting for the souls of the heroic and the virtuous in Greek mythology. "Les Champs" (as the Parisians called the avenue) is a glamorous thoroughfare cutting through Paris' most exclusive district where tourists, strollers and businessmen mingle.

Anthropologically, a world-renowned site such as Les Champs Elysées has been a symbolic space able to generate multiple and complementary representations (luxury and night life, monumental tradition and mass consumption). Historically, Les Champs Elysées has been a site of events (cultural events, national feast days, end of year celebrations, special events)

that appear as landmarks in its historical evolution. Economically, it is a place in which people can be flâneurs and consumers, strolling aside the manifestations of a traditional site transformed to become a key node in international property markets. Sociologically, such a site stands at the crossroad of single, subjective identities, shared and objective professional and consumerist universes, and the fragmentations that their overlap creates.

Fragmentation of the Space

Following the Kantian perspective which stresses the key role played by space in our understanding of the world, we recognize that the "act of producing space is recognized as fundamental to our experiences of the world, and as such should be the focus of our attempts at appreciation of that experience" (Watkins, 2005). The avenue is very much a designed space, as we have stated. While much of its physical design remains intact what has changed is the use and functionality of the space. These changing uses and functions have not been unchallenged: Les Champs has long been a site of collective organization since 1860, when its merchants joined together to form the Syndicat d'Initiative et de Défense des Champs-Élysées, which by 1916 had morphed into the Comité Champs-Élysées. The committee was founded to uphold the retail quality and standards of the avenue. The broad and elegant avenue bespoke high society, glamour and success. While the avenue was once the preserve of exclusivity it has been the site of a seemingly losing battle against 'banalisation' as mass retailers such as Virgin, Gap and Disney have moved in. In many respects, these firms represent the materialization in the avenue of what Ritzer (2004) refers to as the globalization of nothing. Nothing refers to "a *social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive or substantive content*" (2004: 3; italics in original). When Les Champs was at its height of elegance it meant something rather more than nothing,

when it was “generally indigenously conceived, controlled and comparatively rich in distinctive substantive content” (Ritzer 2004: 7; italics in original). As Ritzer is at pains to express, his definition is not judgemental but merely descriptive. Phenomena that fall towards the nothing end of the continua are largely devoid of individuality and specificity, while those that fall towards the something end are highly specific in terms of place, thinghood, persons, and service; by contrast, phenomena that tend towards nothing are offered anywhere, for anything (non-things), by anyone (non-persons), and in such a way that they largely displace service elements on to the customer (non-services). Ritzer's argument is that what is increasingly being marketed and consumed globally is the proliferation of generic and interchangeable goods and services that lack any specificity and embeddedness in place, are relatively time-less (lacking in temporal specificity), dehumanized and disenchanted.

In the past we might have thought that the essence of nothing was to be found in non-places such as shopping malls – relatively anonymous capsules of controlled space and strictly regulated time. Far from being limited to structurally impersonal, functional and entrenched places, however, the concept of “non place” can today be extended to historical, traditional places. The Champs Elysées in Paris has progressively changed, losing some of its symbolic prestigious status. Changes in urbanism of places such as Les Champs Elysées have seen their progressive restructuration according to neo-liberal rules. Today, with its many restaurants and coffee shops, mass consumer shops, banks, car showrooms, a few cultural spaces and the occasional luxury shop, the Champs Elysées has become a concentration of different subspaces.

If some research stresses the strength of iconic status in regenerating declining urban cultures and communities (Miles, 2005; Cowell and Thomas, 2002), in the case of Les Champs

Elysées, the iconic status seems to be threatened by an overwhelming global modernity. We will argue that what the Champ Elysées signifies today is a tension between these different fragmented subspaces (luxury shops, mass consumer goods shops, theatre, some cinemas, car showrooms). The fragmentation of the space between these closed organizational subspaces has meant that the Champs Elysées has progressively lost its specific identity. It is losing two fundamental characteristics: its capacity to make sense for those who work there and its ability to be understandable by people outside les Champs Elysées who visit it as an icon. These two capacities, however, require an anthropological point of view; as Augé (1992) observes, "the anthropological locus is simultaneously a principle of sense for those who live there and principle of understanding for those who observe it" (68, our translation).

The evolution of Champs Elysees between the 1970s and the 1990s has indeed been characterized by a significant change from the classic image of an avenue of deluxe shops and wealthy and fashionably dressed people inherited from past tradition (Pearce, 1998). As early as 1970, a document (Anon, 1970) about the future of Paris observed the Champs Elysées seen as a typical Parisian spectacle organized around luxury and fashion shops and famous bars as under threat. Those engaged in the politics surrounding the space tried to reorganize it to keep it still in line with the historical image of the Champs Elysées. Key political actors sought to reorganize the space in order to make things easier for pedestrians and to enhance the architectural perspective from l'Arche de la Defense to Place de la Concorde through l'Arc de Triomphe.

> The main elements of the project were: enhancing the perspective of the avenue by removing streetside car-parking (and the creation of a new 850 place underground car park), widening the footpaths (which also lessens the opportunities for pick-

> pocketing), planting a second row of trees and reducing and realigning the street furniture; upgrading the shop frontages by new regulations governing publicity, signs, and terraces; changing the land use zoning (plan d'occupation des sols) to encourage the return and development of such functions as hotels and cinemas so as to generate some of the activity for which the avenue was previously known (Pearce, 1998).

In 1990, one year after Jacques Chirac, mayor of Paris, had committed APUR (the agency for the urban planning in Paris) to work on the Champs Elysées, a report describing the implementation of these orientations was published and in 1994 the renovation of Champs Elysées was over and was completed in 1995 by the first tourist plan for the city. But far from succeeding in recovering the symbolic prestige attached to Les Champs Elysées the evolution kept on following the same tendency that Lacaze described in 1993: "jeans are chasing away more sophisticated dresses, those dressed untidily are on the increase at the expense of the traditional customers who are no longer reflected in the sidewalk crowds … crime is growing on the famous avenue ... fast-food outlets, medium-price ready to wear shops are gradually chasing the more elegant shops because they are more profitable due to this huge potential of customers" (:243, our translation).

The aim was not to return to the past (Lowenthal, 1985:151-159) but to associate modernity with symbolic prestige in the Champs Elysees, an objective that has not been reached. Nonetheless, this zone remains an area for wealthy inhabitants with the price for one square meter of space the highest in Paris, at between 12000 and 15000 euros per square meter. Most of the 4000 to 5000 inhabitants who remain residents are foreigners, even though, according to the General Delegate of Le Comité des Champs Elysées, there are still a few French owners of old families at Rond Point des Champs Elysées and between 120th and 123rd. With

the RER directly connecting to distant suburbs, it now hosts a socially varied population composed of young people of different ethnicities, as well as employees, who converge and flow through the space every weekend, just to walk and consume the spectacle on the Champs Elysees, a place where unattainable wealth is obvious. According to documents from the Comité des Champs Elysées, around 600,000 people are walking on the Champs Elysées during the weekends, twice as much as during the week. Convergent figures assess that 100 millions people come on to the Champs Elysées a year, amongst whom are 20 million tourists.

The space they move though is much altered from its heyday. Only two cinemas remain with an address directly on the Champs Elysées (with four in the immediate vicinity). The Theatre des Champs Elysées built by Garnier in the XIX century remains active but on the whole the Champs Elysées is no longer a cultural place, this inflexion being especially noticeable from the nineties onwards (referring to historical maps from the Comite des Champs Elysées). Medium and low priced shops have invaded the space: Starbucks Coffee now trades at the former address of Uzes Hotel; Leon de Bruxelles, a chain restaurant, resides in the former building of the Aero Club de France, nestling close by are MacDonalds and Pizza Pino for other fast food, as well as Swatch and Grand Optical for global standardized and affordable products. The images of cars in luxury show rooms have substituted for the images of the cinema: Citroen, Renault, Toyota, Fiat, and other brands are arranged on one side of the avenue. Some luxury places remain, however, a kind of luxury that can also be affordable: the old shop of Guerlain or the restaurant le Fouquet's. It was this space that we entered as researchers, initially through the institution of the Comité des Champs Elysées.

The Comité des Champs Elysées and the Limits of Influence

The Comité des Champs Elysées remains a select and quite closed club since only those organizations that can afford to pay the rentals on the Avenue can be members. Legally, it is an association formed in 1901 that gathers all the businesses and institutions located on the Champs Elysées or very close by. It is a social network connected with the Mayor and, in some episodes, with the French presidency (Pozzo Di Borgio, 1997), which influences the social geography of Les Champs Elysées (Castell, 1996). In 2011 it composed of 163 members, according to one of its internal documents. Its governance is composed of an Executive Committee of four members and a Board of Directors of nineteen members. General Meetings between the members and the governing body of the Committee take place between 3 and 4 time a year, sometimes with the Mayor of the 8th arrondissement and sometimes the Préfet de Police of Paris in attendance. The Comité's vocation is to be committed to the promotion of the "Champs Elysées" trademark (internal document), as well as to providing services and information for its member. The Comité is also committed to keeping a balance between modernity and tradition and between the types of enterprises that are allowed to settle on the Champs.

Some of the Comité's more recent initiatives include the decision, initiated in 1980, to illuminate the Avenue for the end of year celebrations. In1994 the Comité initiated the widening of pavements to make walking easier for the increased flows of visitors. In 2007 a new direction was chosen as the spur to action of the Comité. Low powered, greener illuminations, as well as a Christmas market, have been some of the achievements of the new direction. After 20 years of lobbying the Comité achieved the right for shops to be opened on Sundays in 2009, something still very rare in France, where Sunday is a designated day of rest for most employees in most retail outlets. Events planned and organized for July 2011

include the Tropical Carnaval with a Cinema Event being planned for 2012. These different actions have contributed to an increase in the flux of tourists on Les Champs Elysées during the last four last years.

Methodology

As an iconic space, the managers of Les Champs Elysées are concerned with a specific sense of aesthetics as well as conflicts with their sense of aesthetics. That is why we used different materials (postcards, pictures, maps) longitudinally and partially that represent Les Champs Elysées to gain an understanding of what it had been. In so doing, we have completed the reflexive pragmatism expected from interviews with a "sensual methodology" as Warren (2008) has labelled it, developing a methodology that, literally, shows what is embodied in the urban life but which escapes discourse. Research began by consulting iconographic documents sourced from the Internet. These enabled us to study ancient photos (postcards of monuments and people) dating from the end of the XIXth and the XXth centuries. We were able to contrast these earlier streetscapes with a map issued in 2000 by the "Comité des Champs Élysées" that represents the opening dates of 20 shops and institutions located between numbers 27 and 127 on the Avenue, showing the new implantations occurring during the 20 last years of the XXth century. An updated map that we produced in July 2011 showed the repartition of shops and institutions according to the kind of industry.

In addition to documentary analysis we conducted an initial face-to-face interview (one hour) with the General Delegate and member of The Executive Committee, who has been in charge for four years, M. Edouard Lefebvre, whom we had previously contacted by mail and direct phone call. The interview, most of which was digitally recorded, started in his office in the

Champs Élysées (for ten minutes) then continued (during the rest of time) in the brasserie called L'Alsace situated in the same building. Subsequent to this we conducted and recorded five direct interviews with other key members of the "Comité Des Champs Elysées" at the office of the members, with the average duration of these meetings being one hour. A further face-to-face interview of an hour's duration was recorded with with Virginie Gomez, Manager of a cellular phone operator "The Orange shop", established on the avenue in 2007 and who previously worked at Louis Vuitton on the Avenue. We also conducted a face-to-face interview of one hour with M. Giudicelli, Director of "Giudicelli International Executive Search", a business established on the Avenue in 2007. The interview was conducted in his office. Further interviews (again, of one hour's duration) were recorded with Bernard Etienne, former Director of Communication of Lido (a typical French Cabaret established on the Avenue in 1946 and known world-wide) who also belongs to the four member Executive Committee and has worked on the Champs for more than twenty years; with M. Jean-Jacques Schpoliansky, Director of the Cinema "le Balzac" since 1973, one of the last cinemas on the Avenue and a member of the "Board of Directors"; with Guillaume Legeay, managing director of the Sephora shop for four years, and with M. Gadweil who manages events and has organized special events on the Champs Elysées. All these interviews were qualitative, using the same types of open and semi-closed questions, except with M. Gadweil (the detailed questions are available from the first-named author upon request).

The questions were structured around seven topics: the organisation of the Comité; the spatial organization of the Champs Elysées; the organization of day/night on the Champs Elysées; events on the Champs; population and flux; your organization as a member of the Comité, and finally, looking into potential scenarios. The variety of the individual's experiences and

personal trajectories according to the age, gender, position, career, kind of institution and industry was deliberately chosen to understand the tensions between the different subspaces and the ability to regulate them. Following Alvesson (2003) we adopted a "reflexive pragmatism", seeking to balance reflexivity and radical scepticism with a sense of teleo-affective direction.

As well as documentary analysis and interviews, we also directly observed a special event organized on the Champs Elysées, Tropical Carnaval, on the 3rd July 2011, at which we recorded images to provide supplementary elements concerning the ethnic composition of people attending this event. On this occasion we were informally invited to a private reception organized by Le Comité.

A Microcosm of Late Modernity

Where the organization of urban space is at stake, organization studies needs to intertwine analysis of those hierarchical and profit oriented organizations whose strategies intersect with local networks of influence that are far more indeterminate, far more specific and local in their practices. As they are rooted within the local social ecosystem these networks take into account both the historical culture and the contemporary socio-economic equilibrium and disorganization of the place. Historically, as a non-profit association, Le Comité has used its influence to weigh on the evolution of Les Champs, seeking to maintain its global uniqueness in the midst of standardizing modernity.

The Comité, fired by a strong sense of tradition and continuity, is quite clear about its preferences. Its actions regarding the structuration of social life on the Avenue remain constrained by de-territorialized strategies on the part of the building owners whose actions

are oriented towards rent maximization. Building owners are not entitled to be Comité members. Accordingly, brand merchandisers offering low and medium priced clothes have been attracted to and recently located on the Avenue. These firms are able to achieve the high levels of absolute profit that are needed to pay the rentals required by the owners. With the owners of the building, these brands exploit the historical prestige of the place for immediate and massive returns while jeopardizing its long-term reputation. The monadic, non-elitist and speedy consumption characterizing their flagships is opposed to the decelerated, smarter and quieter spaces of expensive brands. Nevertheless, these brands' managers can be members of the Comité as they are located on the Avenue and pay annual dues; thus they benefit, as do all the shops and businesses, from the actions of the Comité to maintain the historical magnificence of the area in a modernity that they are purveying. Despite the apparently overwhelming trend towards a form of standardization and nothingness, in Ritzer's terms, our findings show that Les Champs Elysées still remains a contested space. Indeed, the actions of Le Comité, as managers of cultural activities, in targeting high-level customers of the flagship businesses, their managers, and business-to-business relations, remain committed to contesting the apparently overwhelming trend of banality. For Le Comité the specificity of the space must be preserved, even though the utopia of Les Champs as a part of the old city, remembered through recollections of times past, is diminished by the increasing globalization of nothing that is occupying the space (Ritzer 2007; also see Sennet, 1970; Miles, 2005).

We will draw on social anthropology and economic geography (Taylor and Spicer, 2007) in analysing the tensions characterizing the strategy of the Comité to show that the evolution of Champs Elysées still remains open. Although the global forces of standardization, of nothingness, are strong, there is not a one-way street to a future of cultural uniformity,

contrary to macro ideological arguments (Harvey, 1990) or abstract representations (Watkins, 2000) from elsewhere in social science. Different from the narratives of more recent modern cities, such as Singapore (Knox et al, 2008), which constitute them as spaces without history (more correctly, they are spaces that are constantly re-inventing their history in the changing fabric of the built environment) or even from older cities such as Warsaw, hesitating between automorphism and isomorphism (Czarniawska, 2002), the will to maintain the cultural history of les Champs Elysées into modernity, respecting its iconic status, percolates numerous and diverse influential individual and institutional actors.

Jean Jacques Schpoliansky, of the Cinema Le Balzac founded by his grandfather in 1935 and a a co-opted member of the executive committee of Le Comité, underlined traditional sentiment: “Le Comité and its members are very aware that the equilibrium of Les Champs Elysées is precarious…The President of Le Comité is a man of culture and his general secretary is deeply committed to maintaining this equilibrium”. However, this desire to preserve equilibrium through the preservation of a renewed tradition is unstable, especially with regard to the organization of culture and cinemas. “ If the owner wants me out, he can” says Schpoliansky. Twenty-one years ago the owner tried to make Le Balzac disappear so as to extend the surface area of the Peugeot flagship showroom located in the next building, one that he also owns. “ But he has given up the project because the business model of big malls was decreasing … however if he changes his mind, what can I do? “ Les Champs Elysées is a contested space between owners and renters. The owners are, as he says, “interested in profitability which could be higher with other kinds of activities able to pay higher rentals.” For Le Balzac, argues Schpoliansky, there is only one option: “The state has to intervene through regulation to protect cultural activities. The state could, for instance, prevent the rent

of buildings for other activities where cultural activities are ensconced". Of course, the interventions of the state to maintain the specificity of French culture in areas such as cinema are well established.

Classes, otherwise segmented by distinctions, (Bourdieu 1984), mingle on the Champs: capital owners and renters; the fashion-conscious of all classes, and the leisure class (Veblen 1899). The opposition of interest between owners, seeking to maximize revenues, and renters who are much more concerned with maintaining the balance between modernity and tradition, has in fact to be completed by an account of the opposition between renters distinguished according to the trademarks and types of businesses that they manage. Among the renters, a distinction can be made between more or less volume-oriented strategies targeted at social classes and demographics for whom price-points are crucial, and the traditional luxury market. The search for profitability from owners, translated into the search for an increasing number of renters in the high volumes/high margins space, means that the middle and lower classes now contest the space formerly devoted to leisure for the wealthy leisure-classes with whom the iconic image of this space and its identity have been traditionally associated.

In fact, in current times, the intensity of the structural opposition rooted in class relations can be distinguished according to the geography and the topology of Les Champs Elysées. Down the avenue, between Le Rond Point des Champs Elysées and Place de la Concorde, there are open gardens and trees in which it is possible to walk quietly, escaping the crowds of the upper side of the avenue. The area is free of buildings except for one famous restaurant and a theatre, le Rond Point. It is only on the upper side of the avenue, between Rond Point and Place de Charles de Gaulle that Les Champs Elysées confronts socio-economic evolutions.

On this upper side, the space is differently distributed, according to the sunny and the non-sunny side of the street. The topological and geographical dimensions explain differences in the volume of the flux of traffic and of rentals. While the sunny pavement is most of the time overcrowded, that which is not sunny means that people discuss and walk more quietly: the spatial distance between people is enough not to threaten intimacy (Hall, 1959), contrary to the denser and more packed sunny pavement. The density on the sunny pavement also results from the RER and Metro exits, which are on this side of the Avenue, which goes a long way to explaining why most of the big volume trademark organizations have their retail outlets on this sunny side (Virgin, H&M, Gap, Fnac, McDonald's), displacing some prestigious trademark organizations, while others still locate their prime retail outlets there (Guerlain and Cartier, for instance). These ‘quality’ outlets are well aware that they have to cope with economic and environmental constraints, which, if they were considered too costly in headquarters, would lead to their departure from the Champs, just as, before them, La Poste or Flight Companies have fled.

According to the kind of business activity, firms located on Les Champs Elysées do not share the same representation of the evolution of the place. Some are very recent arrivals, largely the volume businesses. The very high rentals (around one million Euros for 100 square meters) constrain all but businesses that are world-renowned brands. Some activities, such as legal activities or mobile phone operators are oriented towards business-to-business activities and French business customers; others, such as the clothes shops, are oriented to lower or middle classes, while there remain a few resolutely oriented to the middle and upper class, retailing jewellery and luxury gifts. All these outlets are representatives of organizations with a global brand but the preservation of those with a luxury and upper class identity is difficult

in any kind of social and iconic environment such as Les Champs. If all members of the Comité agree that they want to increase the flow of people and potential consumers on the Avenue, they disagree about the mix of socio-economic representation in these flows which would best fit with maintaining the uniqueness of the Avenue, since the divergent nature of these flows is required by the specifity of their businesses. Consequently Les Champs Elysees is a contested space where acceleration of the flows threatens to engulf the iconic image of the site.

Acceleration enacting space

One of the most outstanding structuring features of modernity is to have modified our perception of time and our relation to space. Acceleration of time is indeed characterizing modernity as Rosa (2011) underlines it. However, as we all know, the acceleration of time cannot occur without consequence for and on the spaces in which we move as individuals. Acceleration deeply alters relations to time so that "time compression" becomes associated with modernity (Harvey, 1990: 240-267). Time compression tends to abolish space by reducing distances (through the Internet, through ever faster means of transportation). This feeling of an "astonishing immobility" (Rosa, 2010: 373) goes beyond the merely formulaic, when cherished urban places in different cities mimetically repeat trademarks and areas of mass consumption, thus eroding their difference and identity.

The issue of acceleration has been discussed within the Comité. The General Delegate recalls that the enlargement of the pavements was integrated with the Comité's strategy of making walking on the Avenue easier, so that it allows an increased number of people to walk at the same or at an accelerated speed. Conversely, however, deceleration is required to preserve

some of the character of Les Champs. There are zones that prevent the complete transformation of a lieu into a non-lieu under the reign of a general acceleration through their calm and subjective slowness, also associated with the available time the rich, leisured classes can afford.

It is one of the reasons explaining the recurring preoccupation of the members of the Comité des Champs Elysées to preserve cinemas, luxury shops, flagship shops like Peugeot, Renault or Fiat, which integrate lounge bars and restaurants, or even shops such as Orange, which has a specific and large interior architectural design which, according the manager, is “the only Orange shop to have people only oriented to welcoming, regulating and guiding customers”. Creating a decelerating place in shops is obviously linked with commercial purpose to increase consumption; however, deceleration is also associated with some specific and unique forms of socialization that cannot be found in other shops of the same brand.

"Only in this shop, we have there 450 people working on 1600 square meters with 22 spoken languages for 125 different nationalities a month to spend more time and give an exclusive service" says Guillaume Legeay, the manager of the Sephora Shop, a perfume retailer. In the public space, the zones of deceleration, illustrated by enlarged permanent terraces, preserve the socialization and the identity of the place while the large consumer zones of affordable clothes or quick food reduce it into an anonymous *non-lieu* shaped by an exciting and stressing acceleration of movement aimed at wandering (and consuming) at greater speed.

The usual business strategies of volume and differentiation can be revisited through the acceleration/deceleration divide to understand the evolution of Champs Elysees and the issues that the Comité des Champs Elysées has to deal with. The Champs Elysées is a place

where strategies of acceleration (volume strategies) practised by affordable shops have progressively adapted to the very high cost of renting, compared to the stores premised on differentiation as something substantively specific and different, a phenomenon that is perceived as a threat by the managers that we have met and talked with. With so many people going to the Champs Elysées to buy cheap and readily available items, "the Champs Elysées are going to look like les Halles", said the manager of Orange's flagship, a fear shared by the Sephora manager who considers that the kind of shops settling on the Champs must be considered carefully.

Events and flows

In fact, all these fragmented flows of different people, stimulated by the wish to be part of the Champs Elysées and to experience being there, share very little. The objects that are overwhelmingly consumed do not support any common value but are increasingly the projection of narcissistic values, an extreme concentration of nothing (substantively specific) in one privileged space. The flow of separate meanings has substituted for a common meaning, creating the Champs Elysées as increasingly a non-place. Nevertheless, during some special events the symbolic power of the Champs Elysées reappears.

Every year on the 14th July, a ritualized event, the anniversary of the French revolution, there is a military parade that attracts people to watch the parade with a common gaze. In 1998, when the French soccer team won the World Cup, there was an unbelievable and spontaneous meeting on the Champs Elysées, with some older people saying that the only thing to be compared with it were the manifestations of happiness at the end of World War II. On a minor level, the Champs Elysées remains a privileged place in which to organize events

which gather together a projection of common values: this was the case when grass was put on the pavement to express the need for attention to be paid to the environment. On other occasions, these special events communicate messages about nature, culture, social and ethnic diversity. At such times the Champ Elysées becomes a place where events drive people to express shared values, feelings and emotions once again. As an urban space the Champ Elysées has played such a role throughout its history: on these special occasions it displays its ability to create symbiotic interactions. As a locus loaded with a common history the Champs Elysées has become a performative place for the emergence of spontaneous events as well as for planned events involving shared values of the community (democracy, art, the future of the earth and humankind).

In those events the anonymous circulation of flows and their deliberate or emerging conception are stopped; the events bring together individual and community in a linkage, one that causes a feeling of collective and individual enjoyment that the reception of the spectacle makes visible. These kinds of visible events exist as something real for observers, changing the multiple flows constituted by monads going about their everyday circulation.

Visible events contrast with the uniformity of flows determined by the structuration of the avenue's space as a means of facilitating mass consumption. In the latter, the pursuit of non-specifically signified nothing, what is important for the major branded commercial interests is the absence of events that, commercially, can only be defined as an interruption to the flows of consumers. There is, however, considerably more potential than merely shopping contained within every flow, for not all components of the flow are consumers. As well as consumers there are tourists, commuters, inhabitants, homeless people, and people working in shops weaving their way amongst the flows of consumers. The Champs functions as a

relevant expression of the generative space described by Kornberger and Clegg (2004), in which different levels of interpretation and order are possible at the same time. The composition of fragmented micro spaces and enacted micro events disappears into the macro representation of the Champs with which the Comité struggle, one that always simplifies organizing as it occurs by the use of pre-patterned categories (globalization, *non lieux/lieux*) and framed descriptions couched in macro terms.

Events are composed of repetition and difference (Deleuze, 1968, 1988) and, structurally, include potentialities. They can be considered as moments of de institutionalization and reinstitutionalization (Deroy, 2010; Deroy and Clegg, 2011) owning "a double structure; On the one hand there is necessarily the present moment of its actualization: the event "happens" and gets embodied in a state of affairs and in an individual … On the other hand, the event continues to live on, …events enjoy an independence of expression in relation to their actual incarnation in bodies and states of affairs" (Ansell-Pearson 1999: 124). Their repetitive dimension allows the re-affirmation of the identity of the site as it re-asserts its specific history embedded in its specific space and strengthens the preservation of its iconic image.

The difference indexed by events allows interpretations of the site, expressions of its potentialities and socialized appropriations: by ethnic groups, sports supporter groups, ecological groups, cinema patrons, as well as middle class and suburban inhabitants (Tropical Carnaval) or upper class Parisian groups (Cinema Week). Events recall the shared values structuring the appreciation of the site where they occur (Sewell, 1996: 264) and, as they unfold, their potentialities renew actualizations of the site whilst simultaneously creating a symbolic barrier of highly signified sensemaking against the unstructured flow of nothing (Ritzer, 2007). Symbolically, ritualized or not, these events resemble those repairing

exchanges described by Goffman (1973: 147-158) that link a site and people. They act to contrast and contain the frantic modernity unfolding in the site.

Planned major events are deliberately organized by the Comité to build and evolve incrementally the identity of the Champs. Events appear to be a very significant tool used in the policy of the Comité to create a more multifaceted community and to enact the identity of the Avenue in an attempt to preserve its specific attractiveness. However, such diversity in the organizational aesthetics of events underscores some contradictions in the definition of the identity of the Avenue, in a way that is signalled elsewhere by Wasserman and Frenkel (2011) in their analysis of the production of space in Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Indeed, according to a member of the Comité, the "Tropical Event" of July 2011 was planned to promote the idea of diversity and promote the appropriation of space by different ethnicities. This popular event has attracted many people from Caribbean and African communities, often coming from the banlieues, in which little significant ethnic or social mixing occurs (see picture). Among the members of Le Comité themselves, some questions arise regarding the Tropical Carnaval. On the one hand it is viewed by some as "catastrophic for business during the day it is held since the Champs Elysées is closed to cars and because pavements are overcrowded; for luxury hotels, it could be worse since clients cannot go out from there", said one manager. However, another manager whose perfumery flagship was opened this very day expressed the opposite point of view. The diversity of views underscores some of the difficulties for the Comité members in precisely defining the identity of the Avenue and the associated content of the events that should occur there. Despite the criticisms made by some members, and by some Parisians more generally, such an event as the Tropical Carnaval connects with the popular traditions of the Avenue. The tradition of the

Avenue is also rekindled since this kind of event allows people to walk quietly around the Arc de Triomphe (see picture) as cars are prohibited. Among the members of the Comité, there is more unanimity about the Week of the Cinema planned for 2012, which is designed to restore the cultural identity of the Champs and attract well-educated people and inhabitants of Paris who do not go usually to Les Champs for their leisure.

While the events are highly significant in terms of life on the Avenue, the kind of trademarks or enterprise brands settling on Les Champs Elysées appear to be a key determinant in its evolution. Nevertheless, from this point of view the role of Le Comité appears quite limited since, as the General Delegate recalls it, "obviously, in France, the law is that of free enterprise (….) there are some possibilities of filtering new implantations and of having recourse to suit against them but these remain very limited". Some managers of flagship enterprises and law firm managers echo and amplify worries about the growing number of middle range shops selling cheap fashion clothing as an economic response for dealing with the high level of rentals. "On Les Champs Elysées either you have a lot of volume or you are doing a great unit margin to cope with the increasing high rentals" says Orange's manager, who is committed "to keeping the diversity of the Champs Elysees shops, otherwise Champs Elysées could lose its status –see the flux which had decreased before re-increasing the last years … with H&M we just are at Les Halles, [but] this is another atmosphere and not the same customers". Despite these views, the members of the Comité that we have met and talked with share a common passion for promoting the place, beyond strict utilitarian interests. Members whose diversity and personal trajectories are so different all believe in the necessity of a private institution such as the Comité to regulate the evolution of the Avenue as a public place and counterbalance the de-socialization which can result form the sole logic of

utilitarianism.

Conclusion

For the future, the Comité occupies a troubled institutional space. Its legitimacy resides in its role in accelerating the volume of retail activity in the Avenue whilst maintaining Les Champs as a prime site of quality, uniqueness, and 'class'. The tensions represent the contradictions of institutional theory writ small. On the one hand, the Comité clearly charges itself with normative isomorphism: its success is seen in the extent to which it reproduces a unique and privileged space. On the other hand, the owners of the capital that is vested in the bricks, mortar and concrete of the streetscape seek to accelerate the volume and speed of capital's circulation through the rental market. As rents drive upwards, increasingly it is only global retail organizations offering heavily branded, high volume and relatively low-cost goods that can afford to pay them. Thus, capital drives out the quality that the Comité seeks to maintain. While the ethos of the Comité is one of instituting legitimacy through exclusivity the strategies of rentier capital serve as the institutional entrepreneurs of relative retail democratization. Being spatial, the Avenue is circumscribed not just by the social organization of its space but its physical manifestation, seen most closely in terms of the distribution of organizations according to the sunny side of the street. The Champs is a microcosm of late modernity, where its minders are struggling with the globalization of high volume nothingness, while its owners seek to enhance the volume of capital's circulation through driving up rents to a point at which only the global purveyors of nothingness can afford. The special, the idiosyncratic, and the cultural cannot compete. However, it is precisely these special, idiosyncratic and cultural organizations that helped make the Champs a prime site in the first place. Today, the space is disaggregating rapidly as contemporary

images of it show. Its two ends are travelling further apart socially; spatially its two sides are also diverging. The Comité is aware of this but lacks strategies and tools for their implantation that could radically change the situation.

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