

CRISIS, CONFLICT, AND CONSUMPTION: CASE STUDIES OF THE POLITICS  
AND CULTURE OF NEOLIBERALIZATION IN URBAN RESPONSES TO GLOBAL  
ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATIONS

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Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

CRISIS, CONFLICT, AND CONSUMPTION: CASE STUDIES OF THE POLITICS  
AND CULTURE OF NEOLIBERALIZATION IN URBAN RESPONSES TO  
GLOBAL ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATIONS

Presented by David L. Derosssett,

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## ABSTRACT

Urbanization in the United States since the 1980s has proceeded in an environment dominated by neoliberal policy. With provisions including federal devolution that places the burden of service provision at the local level, privatization, labor discipline, and selective laissez-faire governance, neoliberalization has accelerated the transformation of the U.S. economy through deindustrialization and the growth in cities of constituent industries of spatial commodification like real-estate and tourism. But neoliberalization has been unevenly implemented in cities with variation constituted largely by local culture. In three distinct articles I analyze the links between global, national, and local processes of neoliberalization and examine how these are shaped by local culture. Among other factors, local culture may constitute varying levels of acceptance of or resistance to neoliberalization. The first article uses these analytic constructs to explain variation in uneven urban concentrations of foreclosures during the U.S. housing market collapse beginning in 2007. I demonstrate that the crisis has been most severe and sustained in cities which most closely adhere to neoliberal principles and less so in cities where resistance to neoliberalization has been relatively greater. The second article is a case study which relies on these constructs to explain the nature of urban contestation over place-branding and development projects in Branson, a small tourist city in Southwest Missouri. Finally, the third article reveals contradictions in and examines how brand messaging and the built-environment in Branson are constructed by political elites to stimulate consumption and enhance profit.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The global recession beginning in 2008, catalyzed in large part by the bursting of a nationwide speculative housing market bubble in the United States, provides an ideal opportunity to develop studies that explore the ways agents in urban centers contribute and respond to global economic transformations. Millions of people in the U.S. have had their lives disrupted by the loss of status, pensions, jobs, and personal wealth, which for most Americans is wrapped up in their homes, and the physical impact is devastatingly clear in urban neighborhoods where banks or wealthy investors own more houses than residents. The concentration of real estate investment in urban centers ensures that the crisis is felt first and most acutely in cities.

Assessments of the global advance of processes of neoliberalism have focused largely on analysis of linkages between the global and localized political and economic mechanisms of neoliberalization (Brenner and Theodore 2003; Brenner 2004; Hackworth 2007; Peck and Tickell 2002). But relatively little research to date analyzes specific urban phenomenon by addressing the linkages between the forces of neoliberalization and their geographic manifestations and the forces of regional culture in producing both broad urban patterns and local variation of socio-spatial form and urban responses to global economic transformations.<sup>1</sup> These include varied urban responses to the devolution of federal assistance to cities, transformations in the strategy of federal urban development and housing policy, and to the housing market and foreclosure crisis which are structured by local culture, particularly constituent political and economic ideology.

The following studies utilize the broad analytic constructs of neoliberalization, spatial commodification, and culture, which I identify below as critical but not exclusive components in the production of space. Spatial commodification and culture operate prior to and independent of recent neoliberal transformations, but through the action and/or reaction of agents at all levels these three processes intersect in various ways to produce unique urban spatial patterns. These constructs allow me to develop primarily qualitative indices that measure variously, for instance, “Good Business Climate” [relative degree of government intervention in land-use policy, urban social service provision (including housing), secondary-circuit investment (including the relative metropolitan dependency on the real estate and tourism industries), business subsidies, and relative discipline of workforce]; political ideology and loosely concomitant urban policy mechanisms; and brand or theme narratives (especially through place identity marketing). The latter includes spatial contests and constitutions of ‘authenticity’ and hegemonic values. These three constructs are used in combination in the following three distinct studies which contribute to an understanding specifically of (1) uneven geographic patterns of foreclosure concentrations, (2) local particularities in land-use conflicts, and (3) the socio-spatial structuring of consumption.

#### A TYPOLOGY FOR URBAN HOUSING BUBBLES

In the first study I have developed a typology of speculative housing bubbles in the United States that contributes significantly to an understanding of both geographic patterns of foreclosure concentrations and of particular urban responses to regional housing market collapses. This study uses the national housing market collapse that began to appear in the U.S. as early as 2006 and the subsequent general economic

recession in the U.S. and around the globe beginning in 2008 as a backdrop for analyzing why some urban centers suffered catastrophic housing market collapses from which they have yet to fully recover (particularly cities located in the south and southwestern U.S.), while others appear to have been relatively insulated from the impact or to have recovered more quickly. Uneven development is a feature of the capital accumulation processes, generally, but appears to have been accelerated with neoliberalization beginning in the late 1970s.

This study relies in part on an analysis of aggregate data to establish foreclosure rates, housing price trends, and indexes for neoliberal governance, uneven development, and spatial commodification for nine cities representing different types, including Las Vegas, Miami, Houston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Portland (Oregon), Seattle, and San Francisco. This allows me to develop a picture of geographic foreclosure patterns which I fit into a conceptual typology of urban neoliberalization that provides an explanation for this patterning. This study also includes detailed case studies of Houston and Portland which more fully examine the role of local culture and politics in producing variation in patterning. The rationalization for their selection (and the omission of others) is explained in detail in the study.

#### **STORMING TOURISM'S 'CITY ON THE HILL:' FAMILY VALUES, NATURAL BEAUTY, AND LIMITS TO GROWTH IN BRANSON, MISSOURI**

The second study is designed to contribute to an understanding of the role of the processes of neoliberalization, spatial commodification, and local culture in the emergence of urban land-use conflicts and their resolution. For this analysis I have developed a comprehensive case study of the tourist city of Branson, Missouri, for which

I will primarily focus on two separate land-use conflicts: one over the proposed placement of a casino in the nearby community of Rockaway Beach, which failed in statewide referendum 2004, and a second over a racetrack development just beyond the Branson city limits in Hollister first proposed in 2010. Each of these conflicts were shaped in large part by local culture and spatial commodification in Branson, which is branded and marketed by local political and economic elites as a unique center for entertainment featuring Christian, patriotic, and family values themes.

Further, the conjoining of economic liberals and social conservatives in local governance in Branson profoundly affects the framing of the relatively few and isolated local struggles to restrict, or more accurately, to shape growth, particularly when the social and environmental consequences of growth are addressed. This produces contradictions when, for example, locally resonant principles of environmental stewardship or care for the poor encounter development strategies that foster environmental degradation and concentrations of poverty. All cities must develop and frame strategies to address the costs of growth, particularly those, like tourist cities, most characterized by spatial commodification and laissez-faire development principles, but specific responses are constituted by local political and cultural variation. The casino and racetrack battles in Branson provide very good sites for a deeper evaluation of the conjunctural character of important growth restriction and limitation variables, as well as a prime opportunity to unravel the systemic contradictions inherent in such a struggle. This article is rooted in urban political literature regarding variation in the organization of local power and relies on secondary data, key informant interviews, and media and content analysis.

## CONSECRATED COMMODIFICATION: CONSUMPTION, PIETY, AND PROFIT IN BRANSON, MISSOURI

Finally, the third study addresses the cultural constitution of urban consumption patterns in the context of neoliberalization and the historical commodification of social space. This article will also rely on the case study of Branson drawing specifically from features that evaluate the impact of cultural characteristics and spatial commodification. In this instance, Branson, and other tourist cities, represent an urban ideal type – the commodified city. Cities across the U.S. from Portland (OR) to Philadelphia have adopted tourism as a new economic growth industry, but some cities are more fully dependent on the tourist industry and present key sites for an analysis of this type. These cities represent the apotheosis of socio-spatial commodification in the U.S. and, as such, a unique instance of spatial consumption implied in the Marxian derived exchange value/use value continuum which underpins New Urban Sociology. This article focuses on strategies local elites engage in messaging and physical development of the built-environment to stimulate consumption and maximize profit through the branding of social conservative themes. This article is rooted in literature that addresses ‘theming,’ authenticity, consumption within space and of space, and the production of spatial meaning and culture and relies on a content analysis of the messaging implemented by opponents and proponents of the casino proposal in Branson and a semiotic analysis from field research of the built environment.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Relevant economic, political, historical, and cultural context is developed for the urban phenomena evaluated in each article with independent literature reviews, but these

are all broadly informed by New Urban Sociology and recent theoretical work on the neoliberal turn and urban form, which I very briefly outline here. Urban phenomena in sociology has commonly been treated by researchers from either an ahistorical and apolitical ethnographic approach or using a functionalist perspective inspired by a derivation of the Durkheimian organismic analogy that views cities as an aggregate of individuals or of groups serving particular functions in a pluralistically constituted equilibrium seeking system. The functionalist human ecology or “Chicago” school of urban sociology tends to use a market-oriented framework that emphasizes individual decision making and the demand-side of capital accumulation processes to explain urban form. Thus, in the current era explanations for the housing market collapse that first appeared in cities in the Southern and Southwestern U.S. would tend to focus primarily on the collective impact of decisions by individual homebuyers and mortgage lenders and on issues related to factors which impact the efficiency of the laissez-faire operation of the market

Widespread urban upheaval during the 1960s highlighted a reality of uneven development and concentrations of power in local governance that is structured significantly by race, class, and gender, which had been ignored or obfuscated in functionalist analysis. Critics of the traditional theoretical perspective in urban studies emerged among sociologists, geographers, political scientists and other urban researchers who highlighted the need to historically, politically, and economically contextualize ethnographic studies and to account for the inadequacies and contradictions of the functionalist perspective. These researchers adapted a Marxist oriented political economic analysis of cities to challenge the pluralist conception of urban governance

emblematic of the organismic analogy by demonstrating concentrations of decision-making power and influence geared toward the interests of a power elite which was identified as a more or less loose coalition of developers, financiers, industrialists, real-estate speculators, more or less activist working class interests, and allied local politicians whose primary concern was urban growth for profit. The Socio-Spatial Perspective draws heavily from urban analysis of class conflict (Gordon 1977, 1984; Castells 1977, 1983; Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1987; Storper and Walker 1983), capital accumulation processes (Harvey 1985), the growth machine (Logan and Molotch 1987), the real-estate industry (Feagin 1988; Feagin and Parker 2002; Gottdiener 1977, [1985]1994), government intervention (Feagin 1988; Gottdiener 1977, [1985]1994), the global economy (Feagin and Smith 1987; Palen 1991; Sassen 1991, 1994) and culture and “authenticity” and “branding” as structuring factors in spatial commodification (Gottdiener 2001; Grazian 2003, 2008; Wherry 2011; Zukin 1995, 2010).

Henri Lefebvre (1991) adapted Marx’s dialectical principles of use-value and exchange value to a study of social space, noting that space is a human product and as such implies certain social relations - that “space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things (objects and products).” He further theorized the secondary circuit of capital, encompassing capital circulating in real-estate and the built environment. Transformed in part by the decline of Fordist production and the emergence of neoliberalism, the historical rise of investment in the “secondary circuit” of capital now more directly impacts how cities are managed and how the built environment is constructed. An emerging accumulation crisis in Fordist organized production and Keynesian-based regulation and subsequent fiscal crisis at the state and city levels in the

1970s was used as leverage by capitalists to develop ways to (among other goals) reduce state barriers to secondary circuit investment to allow strategies that could enhance the profitability of real-estate as an independent investment. In the past several decades cities have been reorienting themselves around the rapidly transforming industries of finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE). Hackworth (2007:77) notes that “Real estate has become quasi-autonomous because cities and capital have become increasingly reliant on it as a sector independent of the rest of the regional economy.”

Growth coalitions focus on growth, because real estate investment is subject to the similarly generated boom-bust profitability crisis that Marx analyzed in primary circuit investment. Just as traditional industry must find ways to regulate the factors in the falling rate of profit, so must cities that are dependent on real estate investment for revenue and defined by the production of space for exchange. This has included the elimination or reduction of traditional barriers to growth including rent control, high taxes, relatively expensive labor, restrictive zoning laws, uneven development, and other developer restrictions that were often put in place to contain the social costs of rapid growth. Lewis Mumford (1961) noted that the movement of industry to Sun Belt states and eventually outside of the U.S. which began in the late 1950s is the result of capitalists following the logic of capital investment that seeks regions with the greatest commitment to an unregulated “free-market” (p. 452). So growth strategies in cities competing for federal and corporate investment dollars have included restructuring to reduce these barriers while simultaneously expanding marketing functions and boosterism in an effort to achieve a “good business climate.”



Examples of strategies include relaxed zoning regulations; expanding tax subsidies, abatement, and land giveaways; creative and expansive urban marketing; public-private partnerships; reduction or elimination of developer impact fees; reduction of taxes and cuts in provision of social services; alliance with employers to undermine unions and neighborhood activists; and relaxing long standing restrictions on concentrated secondary circuit investment by urban development corporations. These strategies have changed the way the built environment looks and operates, notably increasing uneven development as a consequence. Mollenkopf and Castells (1991), for example, developed the concept of “dual cities” that referenced the impact of capitalist economies on the uneven development of spaces within urban boundaries. This refers to a development discrepancy where some regions are characterized by high investment and growth while others assessed as high risk or low-profit potential are essentially devoid of either and, consequently, characterized by high concentrations of poverty, foreclosures, substandard housing, and relatively few typical urban services like grocery stores.

The rise of secondary circuit investment and the increased use of neoliberal policy strategies are the key operative factors in the accelerated commodification of urban space, constituting space that is produced primarily for profit extraction. But as the following studies will demonstrate, culture operates both as a key force in the construction of consent for and resistance to neoliberal policy shifts [impacting, for instance, public participation in urban governance, the strength and importance of neighborhood coalitions, housing activists, and non-profit housing agencies, and the force of cognitive locking in directing policy initiatives] and in the constitution of symbols and practices which structure spatial consumption and the meanings attached to different

spaces. This is the source of geographic variation of neoliberal and commodification processes at the local level. Among those who advocate a socio-spatial perspective Gottdiener and Hutchison (2011) and Zukin (2009, 2011), in particular, argue that culture is not simply another add-on variable for understanding cities, but is a key intersecting factor.

The following three studies begin to reveal the complex ways that these three constructs - neoliberalism, commodification, and culture - are inextricably linked in the constitution of variable urban space. In the first article I examine the role of neoliberal governance, the promotion of commodification and pro-growth agendas, and historically constituted local culture to develop a theory for the complex causality of urban concentrations of foreclosures during the current housing market crisis. What is clear from a cursory analysis is that the cities which were hit first and hardest by the housing market collapse tended to be previously high-growth cities featuring predominantly laissez-faire regulatory structures for development and other features of an urban “good business climate.” These cities, including Las Vegas, Houston, and Miami, were among the fastest growing cities in the nation since the late 1970s, at which point, I argue, they were poised to take advantage of neoliberal political and economic transformations which initially benefitted “free-enterprise” cities. Other cities hard hit by the housing market collapse tend to be former industrial cities, particularly in the “Rust Belt” region, which have experienced economic decline in recent decades. Some cities with a history of progressive governance, including San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland, Oregon, have managed to maintain regimes of local resistance to neoliberalization and also appear to have experienced a less severe impact from the housing crisis. In this article, I develop

an analytic typology to categorize these three types of cities and the locally variable but patterned housing markets which they tend to produce.

The second and third articles evaluate the historical regional linkages to the national process of neoliberalization in the small tourist city of Branson, Missouri. Like Las Vegas and other cities where the tourist industry dominates, Branson has no history of industrial production and its growth has occurred primarily during the neoliberal era, since the late 1970s. This is space produced primarily for the extraction of profit. Tourist cities, in particular, are produced first and foremost for tourists, so that features of the built-environment can be identified which are consciously designed to stimulate consumption and enhance profit. The benefits of growth are not evenly distributed and the needs of local residents are often considered secondarily as tourist cities tend to be characterized by predominantly low wages, a lack of affordable housing, and environmental degradation from unfettered growth. In Branson, local culture, informed by an Ozark's variation of evangelicalism, an individualistic frontier mentality, and distrust of government, has developed in conjunction with broader historical transformations in evangelicalism and neoliberalism, producing a unique social space which shapes local development. The first article focuses on the dynamics of two campaigns, one to develop a casino and another to construct a large racetrack in Branson. In each instance, the entanglement of the region's local cultural identity and its transformed commodified form as an urban "brand" impact the ultimate outcomes. The second article addresses the ways that local messaging and the construction of the built-environment are shaped by the intertwining of neoliberalization and local culture and tacitly designed to stimulate consumption and enhance profit and, more subtly, to

reconcile potential contradictions which arise when evangelicalism encounters capitalism in social space. For the purposes of this manuscript, the articles are labeled as chapters.

## METHODS

In order to establish the efficacy of the analytic typology I have constructed, I develop individual profiles for a nine city sample, including Las Vegas, Miami, Houston, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Portland, Seattle, and San Francisco, by analyzing foreclosure and housing market trend data from national data sets drawn from reports from Foreclosure-Response.org and the National Association of Homebuilders Housing Opportunity Index. I subsequently establish indices from public data sets and secondary data sources for each of three neoliberal components which I identify in the study as critical to the production of housing market types: neoliberal governance, uneven development, and spatial commodification. These include urban “competitiveness” ratings from Beacon Hill Institute, urban “high-cost” or subprime loan rates from Foreclosure-Response.org, and rates of spatial commodification which I compile with regional industry data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Commerce. Finally, to more fully explore the complex interrelationship between these components in creating speculative housing bubbles and the current crisis and to evaluate the role culture and ideology play in constituting local variation, I have selected two of the cities from the sample, Houston and Portland, for a more comprehensive analysis. Drawing from secondary data and media and content analysis, detailed study of these two cities provides an opportunity to more thoroughly explore the historical and contingent ‘internal dynamics’ and ‘external forces’ that contribute to the formation of housing market types and to begin to account for contradictions which lead to deviations.

The second and third articles, which focus on Branson, draw primarily from qualitative data sources including archival documents, secondary data, particularly to develop historical context, and content and media analysis of regional newspaper articles, local government documents, and flyers, newsletters, and internet advertisements for specific Branson attractions. In an effort to unravel the role of local elites in development decisions, these two articles also draw from interviews I conducted with key informants. These include Robert Low, casino investor and owner of Prime, Inc., headquartered in nearby Springfield; Rick Todd, Silver Dollar City (a major Branson attraction) senior vice president and member of the Branson Board of Aldermen; Branson Mayor Raeanne Presley; Ross Summers, Branson Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau President; and Dave Coonrod, former Commissioner in nearby Greene County (Springfield) and consultant with the regional water quality assessment company Ozark Underground Laboratory (OUL) which produced data for the race track project. For article two I also attended two prominent Branson attractions and conducted field analysis of messaging and the structure of the built environment.

Combined these studies offer an in-depth analysis of the ways local culture produces variation in broader political and economic transformations like those initiated by agents promoting the neoliberal project. This provides for a better explanation of the patterns of urban foreclosure concentrations, of the role of spatial commodification and branding in shaping local growth politics, and of how urban places, tourist cities in particular, are formed when market-principles are prioritized in development decisions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For notable exception see William Flanagan (2010). Sharon Zukin (2009, 2010) identifies some of the urban mechanisms of neoliberalization in her analysis of urban culture and commodification, but Zukin's project is to develop culture, specifically authenticity, as an analytic construct. As such, her work is invaluable to my own project, but I seek a more balanced analysis of the structural forces of neoliberalism and cultural forces of ideology, authenticity, and symbolism. A rationale and model for this analysis is also developed in Gottdiener (2011) and outlined in more detail in section on theoretical perspectives.

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## CHAPTER 2

### ARTICLE 1: A TYPOLOGY FOR URBAN HOUSING BUBBLES

The implosion of the United States housing market bubble that first appeared in localized markets in Florida and states in the American Southwest in 2007 generated what some called the first U.S. housing market slump with national scope. Nearly 2 million people lost their homes by 2007 and the number of U.S. properties in default or foreclosure increased every year until 2011. In 2010 a peak number of nearly 3 million U.S. properties had either received default notice or were in some stage of foreclosure, a 23 percent increase from 2008 (RealtyTrac 2011a). The number would have actually been higher were it not for a slowdown late in 2010 due to a nationwide foreclosure documentation and procedure scandal, which also slowed filings slightly in 2011, but promised to pick up again in 2012. The impact in previously rapid growth cities like Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Miami, has been especially profound and persistent, where new construction slowed to a standstill, many buildings were abandoned in mid-completion, and whole neighborhoods were emptied of homeowners, though the crisis came to affect nearly every city in the U.S. to some extent.

The turbulence these market collapses created reverberated around the globe as the "...tightly networked financial and trading system..." which had come to rely heavily on relatively new mortgage-based financial products, was undermined and profoundly disrupted (Harvey 2010:140). Housing foreclosures quickly wiped out wealth gains accrued by middle and working class Americans, disproportionately impacting minority homeowners, and subsequent bank failures, historic stock market drops, and

global business declines led by the consequent credit crisis generated historic rates of unemployment, poverty, and inevitably homelessness in the U.S. A recent Federal Reserve report indicates that the median family's net worth dropped by 38.8% from 2007 to 2010, a decline representing approximately \$50 trillion (Reuters 2012). The unemployment rate reached 10% by late 2009 (U.S. Department of Labor 2012), constituting more than 15,000,000 people, while the poverty rate hit 15.1%, in both instances the highest rate since 1983 (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2011). Also, the impact of both foreclosures and unemployment appears to be racialized, as minorities, particularly African Americans, have been especially hard hit. The Center for Responsible Lending noted that "...black (sic) and latino (sic) families have been almost three times as likely as whites to lose their homes..." since the crisis began (qtd. in Ross 2012). And while the white unemployment rate began to fall, black unemployment hit over 16 percent in 2011, the highest since 1984 (Censky 2011).

The impact of the crisis has been widespread, but the full severity has been unevenly distributed, concentrating more in certain regions and metropolitan centers than others. For instance, Florida, Nevada, and Arizona have been referred to as 'ground-zero' for the housing market collapse and the affect has persisted. In 2010 five states accounted for more than half of the national total of foreclosure activity, including California, Florida, Arizona, Illinois, and Michigan (RealtyTrac 2011a). A May 2011 monthly 'economic stress' analysis by the Associated Press (2011), which indexes a calculated score from measurements of unemployment, foreclosure, and bankruptcy rates, showed Nevada with the highest level of stress, followed by Florida, Michigan, and Arizona.

Urban data indicates that the impact, particularly of the foreclosure crisis, is further concentrated at the metropolitan level. A RealtyTrac (2011b) report compiling properties receiving a foreclosure filing indicated that while rates increased in 72 percent of major metropolitan centers, Las Vegas, Miami, Phoenix, and six other cities in California and Florida still featured the top ten highest metro foreclosure rates in 2010. A December Foreclosure-Response.org (2011) analysis by the Local Support Initiatives Corporation (LISC) reported that 16 of the top 20 metropolitan statistical areas ranked by foreclosure rate were in Florida, featuring Miami at number one, with two cities from New Jersey, one from Illinois, and Las Vegas, Nevada filling the remaining slots. For some of these cities the change in economic fortunes has been catastrophic. Las Vegas, one of the fastest growing U.S. metropolitan centers through the 1990s and early 2000s, ranked as the 14th best economy in the world from 1993 to 2007, but dropped to 146th of 150 in the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings (2010) “Global Metro Monitor” report.<sup>1</sup> Further, homeowners in many cities including Las Vegas, Miami, and Riverside-San Bernadino, who have managed to stave off foreclosure to date, have watched their home values decline by as much as 50 percent since their peak in 2006 (Sauter and McIntyer 2011). In the following, I analyze the link between local and global political and economic transformations and what role this played in generating geographic concentrations of speculative housing bubbles. Specifically, I explore explanations, and develop a conceptual typology, for variation in the impact of and responses to the housing market collapse and subsequent economic recession.

## UNRAVELING THE BOOM AND BUST

To understand housing market variation at the urban level it is critical to first explain the structural origins of the crisis at the national and global level. The national housing market collapse and subsequent economic decline have spurred rampant speculation in the popular press by political leaders and pundits seeking explanations and solutions. These suppositions have tended to focus on the cumulative impact of atomized decision makers, particularly individual home-buyers, predatory lenders, corrupt Wall Street operatives, or the relative impact of federal regulation on the housing and banking industries. Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke, for instance, declared that regulatory failure created the housing market bubble and subsequent crisis (Rampell 2010). Michael J. Williams (2010:294), President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the mortgage broker Fannie Mae, cited “low mortgage rates, easy mortgage credit, investor demand for mortgage-related financial products,” and public policy designed to increase homeownership. But he also narrowed in on the decisions of individual homeowners and mortgage lenders suggesting that

The lesson learned here is that if too many borrowers are in the wrong loans, it doesn't just endanger them--it endangers the entire housing and mortgage market and the economy. Since the collapse, the industry--including Fannie Mae--has strengthened lending standards to ensure borrowers can make their payments long term. That may mean some prospective homebuyers have to take steps to build up their eligibility for a loan, and wait until they can qualify for a sustainable loan (Williams 2010: 295).

Others focused primarily on federal government housing policy programs which encouraged an expansion in homeownership opportunities. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, in defense of big banks, cited Congress' push to house “...people who were on the cusp,” a reference to low-income or bad credit borrowers (Paybarah 2011). Peter J. Wallison (2009), a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, targeted the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) for its front-end push for homeownership

expansion to low-income borrowers and its back-end support of the system through mortgage guarantees of subprime loans. Lawrence H. White (2009:115), writing for the Cato Institute, similarly blamed the housing crisis and financial turmoil on misguided federal regulation, particularly from HUD, which imposed affordable housing mandates on the mortgage lenders Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac and on "...the Federal Reserve's expansionary monetary policy (which) supplied the means for unsustainable housing prices and unsustainable mortgage financing." In this scheme, the lowering of short-term interest rates created a credit bubble that increased the amount of mortgage lending and expanded the use of riskier subprime mortgage products.

Other analysts document the intertwining effects of federal deregulation of the banking and finance industries and the subsequent growth of new financial products and subprime loans. Immergluck (2009a) attributed the bubble to the influx of capital from wary dot-com investors in the early 2000s, federal deregulation of banking, favorable tax and securities policies, and the attraction of up-front profits in subprime loans.

Documentarian Charles Ferguson (2010) reported in "Inside Job" that banks actually preferred subprime loans because they carried higher interest rates. The Glass-Steagal Act, which had restricted the ability of banks to use deposits for speculation by effectively separating the interests and activities of investment and mortgage banks, was repealed in 1999. One impact was a rapid rise in speculative investment by banks with mortgage deposits. Investment banks like Goldman Sachs began to package loans and sell them to investors as mortgaged-backed securities in the form of Collateralized Debt Obligations (CDOs). Increasingly, CDOs featured high concentrations of subprime loans. Increased default rates were temporarily kept at bay for a period by the housing

bubble itself, and through the continual exchange of these securities. But as investment risk increased, some banks began to once again tighten underwriting standards, slowing the availability of mortgage lending and contributing to the rapid decline in housing prices. Eventually banks with high concentrations of bad mortgage bundles began to fail. Finally, a U.S. Congressional report released in 2011 linked the mortgage market collapse to credit rating agencies, which continued to give subprime-heavy mortgage-backed securities top ratings even after the housing market collapse (Younglai and Lynch 2011).

These accounts expose features of the creation of housing bubbles and their collapse, but offer little comprehensive theoretical analysis of the links between transformations in global capitalism and local communities. Considering that the U.S. economic crisis quickly encompassed nations throughout the globe, such an analysis is critical. Gerald D. Suttles (2010) argues that the focus of explanations for major economic crisis, by both the left and the right, tends to be on behind-the-scenes wrangling and collusion among individuals in the political system, with particular attention paid to greed and corruption, and less on the systemic character of financial collapse. Ferguson's "Inside Job," for instance, focuses primarily on U.S. regulatory mechanisms and on greedy bankers, lascivious Wall Street professionals, allied politicians, lax regulators, and inept decision-makers who failed to consider warnings offered by critics. Wallison and White (and even Williams implicitly) charge overreaching liberal activists who pushed the federal policy for the expansion of housing to unqualified (undeserving?) borrowers and, in essence, compelled banks to alter their underwriting standards. In order to move beyond accounts of day-to-day political wrangling, and more critically to explain

geographic variation in housing bubbles and their collapse, it is necessary to theorize the linkages between global capitalist exigencies, particularly regarding the secondary circuit of capital (real-estate), and their local political, economic, and cultural manifestations.

Harvey (2010) observes that beginning in the 1980s increased global competition in the primary circuit of capital (productive industry) caused profits to decline, leading to increasing investments in speculation on asset values, including technology stocks and mortgage securities, where profits were higher and more assured. This undoubtedly drove the growing supply of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) poured into the U.S. housing market (Davidson and Blumberg 2008). Productive growth in the past several decades especially in non-western nations like China have generated enormous amounts of capital chasing a limited amount of global investments. As real estate in the U.S. is viewed as relatively secure, FDI began to flow into the U.S. mortgage market, eventually outpacing the growth in prime mortgages. The resultant massive infusion of capital in mortgages and speculative lending led to the overvaluation of real estate.

Foster and Magdoff (2009) reference the influx of high-risk capital from the dot-com bubble, but like Harvey they observe that the housing bubble had been developing long before this period and has historically served as a crucial counter to economic stagnation and crisis, which are endemic to capitalism. The housing bubble grew more rapidly after the collapse of the dot-com bubble as wary investors transferred capital to real-estate, but it was precisely this fact which allowed the emergence from the post dot-com bubble recession. Gotham (2009) analyzed the housing collapse in the context of a basic contradiction associated with the spatial fixity of real-estate. Profit from real-estate can be realized through speculation or rent, but real-estate is by definition illiquid as it is

imbued with idiosyncratic characteristics that make assessment of its value difficult, and it is durable and costly rendering it difficult to exchange or transfer; all conditions that lead to long turnover times between investment and profit. By contrast, capital is “abstract, nomadic and placeless” and seeks to eradicate localized barriers to capital circulation, including those which structure real-estate (Gotham 2009:359). According to Gotham, the creation of standardized transparent securitization, including mortgage-backed securities, represents a mechanism to ‘create liquidity out of spatial fixity,’ though it may also speed up and amplify the boom-and-bust cycles of real-estate investment. Because the secondary-circuit is by its nature constituted by place, these analyses offer a context for decisions and mechanisms associated with local housing bubbles. The forces of capital accumulation drive local real-estate markets, but cannot fully account for local variation of housing bubbles or uneven experiences with their collapse. I now turn to an analysis of patterns which emerge in the variation of local housing markets for which I develop an explanatory conceptual typology.

#### NATIONAL CRISIS/REGIONAL DEVASTATION

How can we account for the initial and persistent concentration of extremely high rates of foreclosure and the economic devastation this causes in select cities, particularly in the Sun Belt region of the U.S.? Rust Belt cities in the Midwest and Northeast have also experienced extremely high rates of foreclosure, but this is at least in part explained by the fact that these cities have for decades struggled with the ongoing consequences of deindustrialization and many featured depressed housing markets before the recession began, particularly in inner-city neighborhoods with high concentrations of minorities. For cities like Detroit, Minneapolis, or Cleveland, rapid growth and ballooning housing



values do not explain high local foreclosure rates as these cities were caught up in an ongoing economic transformation that shifted investment and population to the Sun Belt and outside of the U.S. In fact, Great Lakes states collectively lost 1.1 million manufacturing jobs from 2000 to 2005, with especially high concentrations in cities in Michigan and Ohio, while cities in the South and Southwest boomed (Wial and Friedhoff 2006). More than 50 years ago Lewis Mumford (1961:452) noted that the initial movement of industry to Sun Belt cities and eventually outside of the U.S. was the result of capitalists following the logic of capital investment that seeks regions with the greatest commitment to an unregulated free-market. Cities like Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Houston were among the initial beneficiaries of this transition and have been among the fastest growing cities in the nation in the past two decades. Political and economic observers alike, at least before the collapse, frequently touted these “Free Enterprise” cities as the models of post-industrial metropolitan success.

The processes which fed early Sun Belt growth have expanded since the 1980s as capital accumulation has proceeded in an environment dominated by free-market oriented neoliberal policy and ideology. At the federal level this has included an enhanced government role in monetarist policy to control the circulation of money, the deregulation of industry, and the roll-back of protectionist barriers and social welfare systems. But this has also increased and restructured uneven geographic development. Cuts in federal investments (and challenges to national policy creation and implementation generally) have shifted the burden of service provision to states and cities. In this environment, cities become increasingly competitive in the search for revenue, which has been used by political agents as leverage for regional pressure to ‘liberalize’ local economies and to

accept neoliberal redefinition of social problems as individual problems necessitating consumption oriented market solutions. Harvey (2010:161) suggests that geographical differences now matter more than ever, noting that “highly mobile capital pays close attention to even slight local differences in costs because these yield higher profits.” Because of a regional tradition of ostensibly free-market governance and growth in post-Fordist industry, many Sun Belt cities were poised to take advantage of the growing acceptance of neoliberal tenets for continued competitive advantage. But consequences have included stark uneven development and the acceleration of crisis tendencies.

Harvey (2005) has developed an analysis to explain uneven economic outcomes among nations, referencing the specific ways in which different countries have responded to neoliberalization, which can be usefully adapted for the creation of a typology of urban housing markets. He describes three ideal-typical conditions for neoliberalization which appear applicable to U.S. cities. In some instances Western states have directly or indirectly imposed a neoliberal state “. . . whose fundamental mission was to facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation . . .,” first in Chile and more recently in collapsed Soviet Bloc states and in Iraq (Harvey 2005:7). Sustained neoliberal state formation could proceed by main force or with little resistance in states where capital constraints were historically less well developed. In other states formerly featuring ‘embedded liberalism,’ like the U.S. and UK with uncoordinated economies or the social democracies of Scandinavia with more coordinated economies, neoliberalization has been characterized as an effort to disembed capital from the social and political constraints imposed by the Keynesian compromise (Harvey 2005:11). Harvey here references two types of post-Keynesian neoliberalization distinguished by relative historical level of

capital embeddedness and by subsequent levels of resistance. In the U.S. and UK capital constraints were relatively less restrictive, welfare provisions were parsimonious in comparison to many European countries, and stagnation and strong free-market forces led to more expansive neoliberalization. In social democratic states capital constraints were broader and resistance has been more pronounced and effective, leading to a ‘circumscribed neoliberalization’ (Harvey 2005:115). In sustained neoliberal states and those featuring expansive neoliberalization uneven development and economic crisis have been more severe, while where neoliberalization has been circumscribed, like in Sweden, there is a greater continuance of social provision and lower poverty.

I argue that there are urban corollaries in the U.S. for each of these types. *Sustained neoliberalization* is characteristic of the process in cities like Las Vegas, Miami, and Houston, which have historically touted a relatively high degree of commitment to free-markets and individualism and have accelerated spatial commodification for economic growth. Cities like Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland have featured *expansive neoliberalization* where until the 1970s workers had achieved a high standard of living and state provisions of vital services; industry thrived but with protective restrictions. Deindustrialization weakened labor and provided leverage to remove constraints on capital and to redirect limited local tax revenues to economic development and away from social services and protections. And, finally, what Harvey terms *circumscribed neoliberalization* is the general form in cities which have relatively more successfully resisted neoliberal trends and maintained some variation of progressive governance due to long-standing progressive cultures, like Seattle, San Francisco, and Portland (Oregon). In these cities, elements of the neoliberal project have been

implemented but often less directly and with significant modifications for social and environmental protections. Each of these types are defined by the relative degree to which they exhibit four interrelated primary components of neoliberalism which are especially relevant to the present discussion including laissez-faire market-oriented governance, spatial commodification, uneven development, and culturally constituted resistance. In the following I argue that differing levels of these components combine in patterned ways producing ideal-typical conditions of urban neoliberalization to produce varied local housing markets and explain foreclosure concentrations, with the highest in sustained neoliberal cities and the lowest in circumscribed. The types and their relation to these components are highlighted in table 1 at the end of the next section.

#### *Components of Urban Neoliberalization*

In former industrial cities, especially in the Midwest, economic decline had weakened housing markets before the national bubble collapse. But rapid growth and land speculation fueled the housing market bubbles in Sun Belt cities and to the extent that it was inevitable that they would burst, their collapse was predictable. A study by Immergluck (2009b:6) which analyzed the role of pre and post density of Real Estate Owned (REO) properties, demonstrated that previously “hot market metropolitan areas” now have the highest concentrations of REOs. New York Times writer Edward Glaeser (2010) surmised that “For decades growth has gone to places with sunshine and unfettered housing supply. A cyclical downturn is unlikely to undo that long-term trend.” But, growth in the Sun Belt in recent decades was never inevitable nor can it be fully explained by demand-side factors like sunshine, employment, or wages. These cities, in fact, have actively ‘boosted’ regional growth with business-friendly political and

economic environments. Strong local growth coalitions, for instance, use regional and national marketing tools to tout low levels of government intervention in business and land-use regulation, provision of tax abatements and subsidies for development, and willingness to engage in public/private urban development investment. And the federal government has played a crucial role with significant investment in Sun Belt cities (Logan and Molotch 1987). Harvey (1989:3) observed that in the 1970s, partially in response to reductions in federal redistributions, cities began to transition from a ‘**managerial**’ approach to local governance “. . . focused on the local provision of services, facilities and benefits to urban populations,” to ‘**entrepreneurial**’ governance guided by free-market principles and a focus on efforts to market and sell the city as a spatial commodity. It is assumed that the needs of urban populations will be met through the economic growth generated by this new characteristically neoliberal approach.

Rust Belt cities like Detroit historically featured managerial governance but expansive neoliberalization politically leveraged in part by economic decline has made them more entrepreneurial in recent decades while Sun Belt cities adopted the market-oriented entrepreneurial approach early. Under the direction of city managers and local growth coalitions most cities have initiated deep cuts to welfare revenues and committed to privatization of urban services, disciplining of labor, and investment in profit generating redevelopment projects, but these processes are more advanced in these cities (Brenner 2004; Brenner and Theodore 2003; Hackworth 2007; Peck and Tickell 2002). While there is not a widespread sustained social-democratic tradition in U.S. cities (The early 20<sup>th</sup> century experiment with socialism in Milwaukee and a few other cities, not supported nationally, quickly devolved into a managerial approach), the strength of the

progressive cultures in some cities, like San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland, have provided impetus for the continuation or strengthening of elements of the managerial approach.

Neoliberalization has also entailed the acceleration of **spatial commodification** driven in part by the reorientation of cities around the rapidly transforming industries of finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE). Hackworth (2007:77) notes that “Real estate has become quasi-autonomous because cities and capital have become increasingly reliant on it as a sector independent of the rest of the regional economy.” In fact, Harvey (2010:182) estimates that in aggregate in many advanced capitalist countries circulation and accumulation of capital in real-estate accounts for as much as 40 percent of all economic activity. Cities have focused more intently on real-estate development through gentrification, housing consumption, and tourism (the ‘economy of the spectacle’) for economic growth. Where these industries dominate, particularly in ‘tourist cities’ in the Sun Belt, the foreclosure crisis has been more pronounced.

While uneven development is a feature of all U.S. cities it tends to be especially pronounced in high growth “sustained” and declining “expansive neoliberal” cities in the Rust Belt, exhibiting neighborhoods or districts with high investment activity and concentrations of wealth and those with very little investment and high concentrations of poverty, often side-by-side (Gottdiener and Hutchison 2011; Smith [1984] 2008; Squires 1994; Squires and Kubrin 2005; Sugrue [1996] 2005; Wilson 2007). Race, class, and gender are key factors in the structuring of uneven social space and, thus, critical to an understanding of concentrations of foreclosures. For example, recent studies have linked racial discrimination with subprime lending, indicating that cities with high levels of

racial segregation have also had very high concentrations of foreclosures (Rugh and Massey 2011; Mayer and Pence 2008; Squires et al 2009). And an increasing number of scholars and activist groups have begun to highlight the marked effect of housing discrimination and the foreclosure crisis on women, particularly women of color.<sup>2</sup>

The transformation of federal housing policy and the destruction of public housing in the U.S. have especially impacted minority populations and help explain geographic concentrations of foreclosures (Goetz 2011). Rust Belt cities often contained the highest concentrations of public housing and have, thus, suffered the greatest losses during the neoliberal roll-back. Gottdiener and Hutchison (2011:224) insist that in the U.S. “. . . the [housing] crisis derives from the government’s failure to provide for affordable housing.” The dramatic decline in affordable housing has been largely the result of the widespread sell or demolition of public housing units in major metropolitan centers which has accelerated dramatically in the neoliberal era since the 1990s (Goetz 2011). Goetz (2011:270) notes that "Some of this is 'incentivized' by the federal government and some is driven by local conditions and initiated by local officials," as federal housing policy beginning under Reagan moved away from social solutions toward individualized market-based solutions, including a focus on expanding homeownership through Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers. Further, when the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development abandoned ‘one-for-one’ policies in 1995, urban centers were free to focus on gentrification as an economic growth strategy without the necessary burden of replacing public housing units.

In Goetz (2011:283) assessment "...public housing redevelopment resembles nothing so much as another round of urban renewal; a means of removing a racially

identified subgroup of the poor away from land that has become ripe for investment and a new round of profit-taking." In fact, he argues that the local level of gentrification and urban redevelopment pressures are the 'leading indicator' of the scope and aggressiveness of the removal of public housing. A study of redevelopment of public housing in New Orleans (Gotham et al 2001:314) argued that the process there and elsewhere in the U.S. ". . . is an attempt by federal and local officials to recommodify space, to enhance its exchange-value through privatization while reducing its use-value for low income people."

Especially in cities featuring sustained neoliberalization which are dependent on growth and spatial commodification, a lack of affordable housing threatens to slow growth and catalyze economic decline (Feagin and Parker 1990: Judd and Fainstein 1999; and Rothman and Davis 2002). Such cities, like Las Vegas, are typically characterized by relatively low rates of unionization and low wages in service sector jobs so that housing affordability can be an issue even for the non-poor, but these cities also feature traditionally low public housing stock. Among political elites in many of these cities ensuring affordable housing is a concern to the extent it threatens growth, in part because rapid land and property price increases put upward pressure on local wages, threatening to force out some producers (Harvey 2010:182). In the post-public housing era, the state now may temporarily relieve this pressure and increase local demand with housing affordability programs and low-interest mortgages targeting low-income families. Without a 'social' housing policy and in the face of growing uneven development the primary response to the tensions created by the housing market bubble has been private-



sector consumption based solutions, including expanding the market through risky subprime loan products.

Finally, while institutionally implemented, the processes of neoliberalism are culturally constituted, thus the relative advance of the components mentioned above is dependent on particularistic intersections of national and local culture. Harvey (2005:42) observes that “neoliberalization required both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism.” Neoliberalism entails the acceleration of commodification and this requires the destruction of cultural barriers which historically protected some realms of social life from inclusion in markets. Ultimately, the process of commodification and expansion of consumerism applied to culture itself (Bourdieu 1998; Rifkin 2001). Urban centers, in particular, have developed what Sharon Zukin (1995) calls the ‘symbolic’ economy, which entails the restructuring of urban space for the consumption of culture. The economic dependence on consumerism these processes generate has led to largely debt-financed economic growth, which played a significant role in the differing levels of economic crisis in cities.

Neoliberalism’s cultural constituent *ideology* constitutes elements which constrain alternatives and undermine challenges. Blyth (cited in Harvey 2005:114) suggests that a hegemonic, if unevenly applied, political and economic project like neoliberalism can delimit policy options in the form of ‘cognitive locking,’ which references ideological constraints, and ‘path dependency,’ which constrains decision-making in part through the elimination of alternatives. In Harvey’s assessment, ‘cognitive locking’ and ‘path dependency’ operate independent of ‘political orientation and national context,’ which

ensure that even nations that generate significant challenges to the neoliberal project adopt some neoliberal policies, if in sometimes modified forms. Giroux (2004:106) argues that a prominent feature of neoliberalism is its use of “. . . the educational force of culture to negate the conditions for critical agency,” including negating the *social* as a basis of understanding and for response to urban problems. But hegemonic forces are everywhere challenged and the ability of the agents of neoliberalism to capture ‘the educational force’ of culture in this way has been variably resisted and constrained (Leitner et al 2007). Harvey (2005:116) suggests that “cultural and political traditions that underpin popular common sense have . . . had their role to play in differentiating the degree of political acceptance of ideals of individual liberty and free market determinations as opposed to other forms of sociality.”

In sustained neoliberal cities, like those in the Sun Belt region, enduring regional cultures characterized by individualism and faith in free-markets have engendered a shift of the burden of social and environmental costs of growth away from business interests, while catalyzing predominantly atomized local resistance to processes of commodification and uneven development (Feagin 1988; Capek and Gilderbloom 1992). But in cities featuring circumscribed neoliberalization, and to a lesser extent in those featuring expansive neoliberalization, cultural factors, sometimes fostered by the presence of a sizable nontraditional subculture, shape more collectivist urban policy (Rosdil 2010). In the former, politicians and neighborhood activists often coordinate efforts designed to foster sustainability and minimize uneven development, while in the latter groups concerned with improving deteriorated neighborhoods and eliminating poverty sometimes emerge from the roots of progressive coalitions formed prior to

economic decline. A more progressive approach may include alternative solutions to urban problems like affordable housing trusts or strategies which impose some degree of financial and administrative burden on business owners and developers for redistributive purposes or to cover the costs of growth. These cultural factors have determined the extent to which neoliberalism is locally implemented, which in turn largely explains varying housing markets and concentrations of foreclosures.

Based on the analysis of components above I submit that cities characterized by ‘sustained neoliberalization’ should have strong housing markets prior to the housing market collapse, relatively more features of entrepreneurial governance, high spatial commodification, pronounced uneven development, and high post crisis foreclosure rates. Those characterized by ‘expansive neoliberalization’ should have weak to stable housing markets prior to collapse, relatively more managerial governance, moderate to high spatial commodification, pronounced uneven development, and high post-crisis foreclosure rates. And cities depicting ‘circumscribed neoliberalization’ are expected to have stable or strong housing markets prior to collapse, more features of managerial governance, moderate spatial commodification, moderate uneven development, and low post-crisis foreclosure rates. This conceptual typology is represented in table 1.

**Table 1: Urban Housing Market Typology**

Type	<u>Sustained Neoliberalization</u>	<u>Expansive Neoliberalization</u>	<u>Circumscribed Neoliberalization</u>
	Las Vegas, Miami, Houston	Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago	Portland, Seattle, San Francisco
Housing Market Strength (pre-2006)	Strong	Weak/Stable	Stable/Strong
Urban Governance	Entrepreneurial	Managerial/Entrepren	Managerial
Sp. Commodification	High	Moderate/High	Moderate
Uneven Develop.	High	High	Moderate
Foreclosure Rate (post-	High	High	Low

2006)			
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These cities do not represent all of the largest conurbations in the U.S. Most major cities in the U.S. today have become multi-centered, but cities like Los Angeles and New York tend to be extremely denucleated. The sample I have chosen allows ideal types to stand out more clearly in my analysis.

## METHODS

To assess the appropriateness of the typology and to determine comparative placement for each city I first develop individual profiles by analyzing foreclosure and housing market trend data from national data sets described in detail below. Results are listed in tables 1 and 2. I subsequently establish indices from public data sets and secondary data sources for each of the three neoliberal components: neoliberal governance, spatial commodification, and uneven development. The rationale for each index is provided below and results are listed for each city in tables 4-6. Finally, to more fully explore the complex interrelationship between these components in creating speculative housing bubbles and the current crisis and to evaluate the role culture and ideology play in constituting local variation, I have selected two of the cities from the sample, Houston and Portland, for a more comprehensive analysis. As the data reveals, Houston's foreclosure rate does not cohere with the model and while Portland's does it is higher than anticipated. Drawing from secondary data and media and content analysis, detailed study of these two cities provides an opportunity to more thoroughly explore the historical and contingent 'internal dynamics' and 'external forces' that contribute to the

formation of housing market types and to begin to account for contradictions which lead to deviations.

In Table 2 I compare foreclosure rates for metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) from December 2011 report by Foreclosure-Response.org (2012). A comparison of rates for each city between March (the first report of 2011) and December reveal that no city experienced a change in rate of more than 2 percentage points either direction. With data analysis by Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), this report calculates foreclosure rates for MSAs (from zip code level U.S. Census Bureau data) by dividing total housing units by the total units receiving foreclosure filings (excluding Real-Estate Owned (REO) properties) in a given month.<sup>3</sup> I have chosen to categorize foreclosure rates as high if above the mean of 5.2 percent for the full 366 city LISC sample and low if below this mean. All of the cities in the “expansive neoliberalization” category have foreclosure rates above 5.2 percent while Miami and Las Vegas have among the highest rates in the full LISC sample and San Francisco and Seattle have among the lowest. Not predicted by the model is Houston’s low rate of 3.1 percent. And while Portland’s rate coheres with the model, it is much closer to the mean value than anticipated based on its reputation for progressive governance.

**Table 2: Select Metropolitan Foreclosure Rates for December 2011 (full LISC sample mean value = 5.21)**

Type	Sustained			Expansive			Circumscribed		
	Las Vegas	Miami	Houston	Cleveland	Detroit	Chicago	Portland	Seattle	San Fran.
Foreclosure Rate	11.2% (19) High	18.9 (1) High	3.1 (308) <b>Low</b>	8.4 (36) High	5.6 (119) High	9.0 (27) High	4.4 (208) Low	3.2 (298) Low	3.7 (259) Low

Note: Rankings from 366 city sample in parenthesis

Table 3 contains data for the median priced house in each MSA for the period 2000 to 2006 with the calculated percentage change listed. For present purposes I do not conduct an analysis of ‘hot-markets,’ which may entail an assessment of price trends, inventory, and other factors, but of relative housing market bubbles. Generally markets with housing price values trending down are considered weak, remaining relatively even are considered stable, and trending up are considered strong. I assign percentage changes of less than 0 percent as weak, 0-10 percent as stable, and 11 percent or higher as strong, but it should be noted that while the typically recognized bubble markets in Las Vegas and Miami far exceed the home price increases in the other cities in this sample as expected, Houston registers among the lowest increase.

**Table 3: Median Priced Housing Trend 2000-2006 (price values in thousands)**

Type	Sustained			Expansive			Circumscribed		
	Las Vegas	Miami	Houston	Cleveland	Detroit	Chicago	Portland	Seattle	San Fran.
1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter 2000	136	115	120	113	140	169	162	214	464
4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter 2006	308	285	169	118	92	254	269	364	750
Percentage Change	126.47% Strong	147.83 Strong	<b>40.00</b> Strong	4.42 Stable	-34.00 Weak	50.30 Strong	66.05 Strong	70.00 Strong	61.64 Strong

Source: National Association of Homebuilders Housing Opportunity Index “Complete history of metropolitan area (1991-current).”

#### *Neoliberal Component Data*

There are few and generally only incomplete existing indexes of urban governance. In an analysis of progressive urban policy, Rosdil (2010) combined an index of urban strategies from a survey reported by Edward Goetz with evidence for living wage ordinances. The Goetz data was collected in the late 1980s and while Rosdil makes an argument for their enduring usefulness, I believe the scope of neoliberal transformation in the past two decades calls this into question. And alone an index of

living wage ordinances is not sufficient, particularly as it may or may not signal the strength of local labor. For these reasons, I have chosen to rely on “business climate rankings,” which admittedly provide only a limited picture of governance policy.

Business climate rankings are overwhelmingly sponsored by conservative think tanks like the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and Pacific Research Institute.<sup>4</sup> The mission statement for Beacon Hill Institute (2012), for instance, includes commitment to “. . . principles of limited government and fiscal responsibility,” which signals the meaning of their measures. Most ranking reports tend to focus on limited variables, like tax policy, combined variables indexing a wide variety of urban characteristics, or they do not offer metropolitan level ratings.

To address this, I have chosen to isolate two categories from Beacon Hill Institute’s “Metro Area and State Competitiveness Report 2005,” at the height of the housing bubble. The category “government and fiscal policy” includes the variables state and local taxes, compensation, benefits for the unemployed, and relative percentage of state and local government employees, among others, with higher values on each assumed to be negative. “Business Incubation” includes rates of unionization, minimum wage, and business costs, where high rates are again assumed to be negative. In combination these categories loosely indicate roll-back features - decline in tax redistribution and unionization - and roll-out features of neoliberalism – city entrepreneurialism. I calculated a combined index and ranking for each city in the Beacon Hill Institute’s full 50 city sample and determined a median index value of 24. The combined rankings listed in Table 4 are consistent with expectations if we assume that cities with a rank above the median feature more entrepreneurial governance (lower

number is higher rank). However, Portland's index of 25 places it much closer to the top half of the rankings than predicted considering its reputation for progressive governance.

**Table 4: Neoliberal Governance Indicators**

Type	Sustained			Expansive			Circumscribed		
	Las Vegas	Miami	Houston	Cleveland	Detroit	Chicago	Portland	Seattle	San Fran.
Government & fiscal policy	22	25	24	37	39	34	21	26	49
Business Incubation	7	20	15	43	46	35	29	30	14
Combined Rank	14.5 (11) Entrep.	22.5 (24) Entrep.	19.5 (20) Entrep.	40 (45) Manag.	42.5 (48) Manag.	34.5 (34) Manag.	25 (26) Manag.	28 (28) Manag.	31.5 (29) Manag.

Note: Listed in rank order based on the mean for the two scores. Rank for these combined categories among Beacon Hill Institute's 50 city sample listed in parenthesis.

There are a variety of ways to begin to index uneven development in urban centers, including the Gini index of inequality from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) and segregation data from the U.S. Census Bureau's index of dissimilarity. But for the purposes of this study, I utilize data which calculates rates for 'high cost loans' (subprime) from a report by Foreclosure-Response.org (2010), as aforementioned literature has demonstrated the link between subprime loan origination, poverty, and minority segregation. This report calculates high cost loans as a percentage of total mortgage loans for 369 metropolitan areas and 29 overlapping metropolitan divisions (conurbations) for a total sample of 398. The median rate for the entire sample is 19.59 percent and the range is 4.17 percent to 49.57 percent. I assign percentage rates above the median value as high and those below as moderate, though some critics may reasonably argue that the lowest value of 15.5 percent in Table 5 represents a high concentration of subprime loans.



**Table 5: ‘High-cost loans’ (other than prime) for the period from 2004-2006 as percentage of total mortgage loans**

Type	Sustained			Expansive			Circumscribed		
	Las Vegas	Miami	Houston	Cleveland	Detroit	Chicago	Portland	Seattle	San Fran.
‘High-cost’ loans	22.7% (224) High	29.1 (320) High	30.7 (339) High	24.3 (264) High	32.8 (353) High	23.5 (254) High	16.4 (113) Low	15.5 (90) Low	15.6 (102) Low

Note: Rank out of 369 MSAs in parenthesis

Data in Table 6 lists the percent of metropolitan Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for select industries related to consumerism and spatial commodification. This allows for comparisons of the relative portion of metropolitan GDP represented by these combined sectors. I could not locate a full ranking list or analysis of rates of spatial commodification for a large sample, thus I assign cities with rates above the mean for the nine city sample of 35.7 percent as exhibiting high spatial commodification and those below as exhibiting moderate spatial commodification, rationalizing that the industries listed have grown in share and importance in all U.S. cities. With the notable exceptions of Cleveland and Houston, the combined shares are consistent with expectations. Not surprisingly, the highest rate is registered by Las Vegas, where tourism is the primary industry. Tourism has also historically been the primary industry in Miami and it is notable that nearly one third of its GDP comprises retail consumption. In recent decades international trade and banking have grown into significant industries in Miami, with the latter indelibly linked to the housing market crisis.

**Table 6: Industry Percentage of Metropolitan GDP**

Type	Sustained			Expansive			Circumscribed		
	Las Vegas	Miami	Houston	Cleveland	Detroit	Chicago	Seattle	Portland	San Fran.
Retail Trade	26.9%	32	18.8	23.4	24.4	24.7	25.4	25	17.7
Real Estate	5.3%	4.2	3.0	6.1	4.5	3.8	3.5	3.2	3.8

Leisure & Hosp.	27.7%	5.0	3.4	4.9	5.0	5.3	5.1	4.3	4.9
Combined (level of spatial commod.)	59.9% High	41.2 High	24.5 <b>Low</b>	35.9 <b>High</b>	33.9 Low	33.8 Low	34 Low	32.5 Low	26.4 Low

Note: Key industry data from U.S. Census Bureau's 2007 "Economy-Wide Statistics" for each city. This is divided by full metropolitan GDP from the U.S. Department of Commerce (2010). Mean 'combined' values for sample is 35.7.

None of the indicators I have chosen are sufficient for a full understanding of the neoliberal components associated with the housing crisis, but for culture and ideology, in particular, there simply is no existing or logical quantitative index for the specific variables I am evaluating. Thus the role of culture in effecting relative urban neoliberalization and concomitant housing bubbles will be addressed in the case studies which follow the index findings. These indexes offer a preliminary assessment of housing bubble types listed in Table 7.

**Table 7: Combined typology Indicators**

Type	Sustained			Expansive			Circumscribed		
	Las Vegas	Miami	Houston	Chicago	Cleveland	Detroit	Portland	Seattle	San Fran.
Housing Market (2000-2006)	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Stable	Weak	Strong	Strong	Strong
Urban Governance	Entrepreneurial	Entrepreneurial	Entrepreneurial	Managerial	Managerial	Managerial	Managerial	Managerial	Managerial
Uneven Dev. ('high cost' loans)	High	High	High	High	High	High	Mod.	Mod.	Mod.
Spatial commod.	High	High	<b>Mod.</b>	Mod.	<b>High</b>	Mod.	<b>Mod.</b>	Mod.	Mod.
<b>Foreclosure Rate</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>

Cleveland is the only city featuring expansive neoliberalization in this sample with a high commodification rating and analysis supports the supposition that it has been more proactive, and to some degree more successful, in transitioning from a manufacturing based economy to one based on retail and entertainment consumption

(Warf and Holly 1997; Wilson and Wouters 2003). Houston, alternatively, features an index ratings which represent critical deviations from the expected type. Portland, which has a national reputation for progressive governance, had a December foreclosure rate of 4.4 percent: the highest among the “circumscribed” cities. In 2010, at the height of the crisis for many cities, Portland ranked 63<sup>rd</sup> highest out of 206 metropolitan areas for foreclosures, while its progressive Northwestern counterpart Seattle ranked 84<sup>th</sup> (Law 2011). Portland also features a “neoliberal governance” index value very close to the median for the full sample, suggesting relatively more entrepreneurial governance features than expected. Houston rated lower on the commodification index than might be expected, experienced stable housing prices during the period of analysis, and also features the lowest foreclosure rate among those in the sample (and one of the lowest in the nation). In the following case studies, which include evaluation of the role of culture and ideology in local experience of the crisis, I offer an analysis which begins to account for Houston’s deviations from the model expectations and Portland’s relative distinction from progressive cities Seattle and San Francisco to more fully unravel the relationship between housing bubbles and neoliberalization.

## HOUSTON

A report from the neoliberal think-tank the National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA) authored by Wendell Cox (2011) suggests that cities like Houston suffered fewer foreclosures during the recent crisis because they are less restrictively regulated. To support his claim, Cox examined housing affordability trends using the “2010 Demographia Residential Land Use & Regulation Cost Index,” which used an 11 city sample to indicate that housing costs rise with increases in the costs of land-use

regulation. Steffy (2008) also reported that in Houston increasing demand from growth was met by new housing, which was available and presumably affordable because of a lack of planning and zoning restrictions. But these accounts assume first that the only predictor of housing affordability is availability of sufficient supply and second that there is a direct connection between housing affordability and foreclosures.

The evidence regarding affordability and foreclosure rates suggests the link is more complex. Examining subprime mortgage concentrations, Mayer and Pence (2009) observe that there is only a partial correlation with house price appreciation. Many cities in the Northeast have registered high price appreciation and low housing affordability, but were less targeted for subprime loans and have experienced relatively low foreclosure rates. Furthermore, the assessments by Cox and Steffy reject redistributive urban policies designed to address affordable housing which are not directly dependent on new housing supply, and they fail to consider the role of the high rate of subprime loan originations in Houston, which undoubtedly was the de facto neoliberal affordable housing solution. Houston had the second highest rate of subprime originations of the cities in the sample used above and ranked 339<sup>th</sup> out of 369 total MSA's in the Foreclosure-Response.org "high-cost loans" sample, which suggests that affordable housing was certainly not available to all residents.

Following years of misallocation of funds and tenant "abuse," in 1995 the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) gave the city authorization to dismantle Allen Parkway Village, a 1000 unit public housing development in the city's Fourth Ward and the site of its oldest black settlement, to make way for luxury apartments (Perez 2001). Despite collective efforts from public housing residents and

community activists, the redevelopment destroyed nearly half of the city's public housing and eventually added hundreds of additional homes to the demolition (Goetz 2011; Sparks 2012). While some low-income housing was included in the new development, Perez (2001) notes that the bulk of these units have not been replaced by the city or the private sector. Though the index analysis above suggests that Houston's economy has limited dependence on traditional spatial commodification, gentrification and other redevelopment strategies in the Fourth Ward and throughout Houston have reduced the stock of affordable housing (Podagrosi and Vojnovic 2008).

By 2005 the state of Texas had the highest foreclosure rate in the country, a fact only obscured by the scope of the national housing market collapse a year later when it was surpassed by other Sun Belt states (Pesquera 2005). Ironically, one observer blamed the high rate in Houston at the time on the fact that troubled buyers in the area were unable to sell their homes for a profit like those in hot-markets (Sarnoff 2005). And despite the appearance of being insulated once the crisis had spread, in 2010 Houston's foreclosure rate jumped 29 percent, the largest increase among the top 20 metropolitan markets (Associated Press 2011).

Houston has an unusual mix of a stable housing market and relatively affordable housing prior to the crisis, high subprime loan origination, and indicators of only moderate spatial commodification. Houston has been widely regarded as a model "free-market" city for decades. This identity is assumed in a congratulatory report from the booster organization Houstonians for Responsible Growth (2012:1), which attributes a collection of assessments of quality of life and economic success in Houston to ". . . elected representatives [who] have allowed market forces to determine the highest and

best use of nondeed restricted land over the past century.” Mario Loyola (2011b), writing for the Texas Public Policy Foundation (a free market institute from Austin) applauds the “Texas Model,” suggesting that economic success in cities like Houston is linked to the ‘frontier mentality,’ which entails a vision of the government he colloquially concludes should “. . . Defend our shores, deliver the mail, and get the hell out of the way.” This ‘frontier mentality’ and the free-market governance approach which it presumably constitutes is a strong force in framing local issues, including the apparent reality of Houston’s immunity to the housing crisis.

Advocates claim Houston’s free-market governance approach has led to a relatively high quality of life, but there is ample evidence to refute this claim. Feagin (1988) documented significant environmental and social problems in Houston, including toxic waste, air pollution, severe traffic congestion, stark segregation, and a lack of quality affordable housing. There is apparently an adequate amount “. . . of substandard housing without adequate plumbing, heating, and water lines” (Feagin 1988:262). Today, Harris County, containing Houston, has the third highest Gini coefficient (indicating inequality) among the 25 most populous counties in the nation.<sup>5</sup> While black-white segregation has dissipated some since 1980, in 2010 Houston still had a relatively high dissimilarity index of 60.6 and Hispanic-white segregation has actually risen slightly in the same period (Logan and Stults 2011). According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, in 2010 Houston had a poverty rate of 14.9 percent, while the rate for the black population was 22.1 percent. And the homeless day shelter The Beacon (2012) estimates that there are 10,000 homeless on the streets of Houston on any given night.

Feagin (1988) also effectively debunked the myth of Houston's free-enterprise identity. First, he documents Houston's historical dependence on the international economy and federal subsidies, first with cotton, and more recently with oil and aeronautics. This dependence has been sustained in recent years. The Milken Institute's (2010) "Best-Performing Cities of 2010" listed Houston as the tenth best-performing large city, but revealed that this was largely due to continued growth in the energy industry (dominated by oil), trade and export, and the biotechnology industry. Each of these industries is heavily reliant on federal and state subsidies, problematizing their free-market pedigree. The oil industry has been the subject of much legislative debate in recent years due to large tax subsidy outlays despite enormous profits. And biotechnology in Houston is subject to significant funding from both public universities and a variety of state initiatives.<sup>6</sup> Growth in the combination of these dominant industries in Houston has allowed the city to weather the recession relatively better than other major cities.

Also, the claim that Houston features unregulated land-use has been disputed, but from contrasting angles. Lewyn (2005:1207), after documenting various ways that Houston manages to regulate land-use without an actual comprehensive government zoning ordinance, surmises that

In fact, Houston regulates land use almost as intricately as cities with zoning by mandating suburban-style low densities, ordering businesses to hide their stores behind an asphalt ocean of parking, encouraging segregation of land uses, and forcing pedestrians to cross wide streets and to trudge through long, intersection-free blocks to go from one place to another. These policies have helped to make Houston as sprawling and automobile-dependent as other American cities (if not more so).

But Lewyn, who apparently is unable to envisage what non-governmental forces might be directing the haphazard land-use regulations which do exist, comes to the conclusion that even less regulation would solve the problems of sprawl which beset Houston. Feagin (1988:173) concluded that “Houston is indeed the planless city, if by planning we mean significant governmental planning and zoning in the public interest for a broad range of infrastructural and socioeconomic problems of development.” This assessment is echoed in more recent analyses by Kapur (2004) but he also demonstrates, contrary to Feagin’s analysis, that the ‘frontier mentality’ among voters does not explain why comprehensive public zoning ordinances have been repeatedly defeated. According to Kapur, constituents, blacks in particular, who might have been thought to be in favor of zoning voted to oppose it as recently as 1993, but these constituents were targeted by an anti-zoning campaign which involved scare tactics. Blacks in 2010 make up 17.3 percent of the Houston MSA, but 54.8% of the city, so this constitutes a significant voting population.

This analysis does support Feagin’s thesis that much of the public in Houston is forced out of the decision-making process and the minority community has been systematically cut-off from the services and benefits which the perpetually thriving economy has to offer. Capek and Gilderbloom (1992) determine that the lack of an effective progressive urban grassroots organization has *caused* Houston’s poor quality of life. As they document, this has not been without citizen attempts, but while they (and Feagin) credit the dominance of business elites in decision-making, they fail to fully account for the role of free-market (and neoliberal) ideology in constituting the atomized responses to social problems in the city.



In response to the apparent insulation of Houston from the economic crisis, Mario Loyola (2011a) triumphantly proclaimed that “Tolerance of cultural diversity has become a hallmark of Houston’s ascent, despite the state’s checkered history of race relations. Texans take individual freedom and individual responsibility very seriously, so meritocracy comes naturally to them.” But in the light of the subprime loan crisis and continued segregation and poverty among blacks, this is more a reflection of ideological framing than of reality. A quick survey of the articles collected in the Houstonians for Responsible Growth report reveals that many of the writers have some link to a self-identified conservative or neoliberal think tank. The city’s free-market frontier identity is primarily a construction of powerful local AND national economic elites who continually reinforce it and use it to shape local decisions and assessments of the city’s condition, according to their interests.

## PORTLAND

Portland is widely regarded as a progressive city largely due to its extensive Urban Growth Boundary (UGB), administered by the land-use and transportation planning agency METRO, which has broad authority to control development throughout the region. With a large stock of high-density housing, a high level of urban services including renowned coffee shops and microbreweries, an extensive metropolitan rail system, and a high degree of civic engagement, the city exhibits many “liveability” features associated with European cities. Multnomah County, which contains Portland, was recently listed as the 16<sup>th</sup> most ‘liberal-friendly’ city in the nation by the conservative website The Daily Caller based on criteria which included voting patterns, unionization laws, and status of same-sex partnerships. In the article, writer Palko (2010)

refers to Portland as “. . . the design model for every left-wing urban strategist. . .” where “. . . environmentalism verges upon being a religion.” In an analysis of voting patterns in all cities with populations over 100,000 by Alderman et al. (2009) Portland ranked as the 29<sup>th</sup> most liberal city in the U.S., despite having a relatively small minority population (one predictor of liberalism). Portland was also ranked the 3<sup>rd</sup> most sustainable city in a report by the Natural Resources Defense Council’s (NRDC) “Smarter City” (Thompson 2009). And Portland is regarded as a prime destination for Richard Florida’s (2002) young progressive ‘creative class.’<sup>7</sup> This subcultural identity is so widely regarded that it became the subject of a satirical Independent Film Channel television program in 2011 called “Portlandia,” in which the progressive character of the city, and its attraction to the ‘creative class,’ is the central comedic focus.

Despite progressive credentials, Portland has experienced many typical urban social problems from concentrations of poverty (Burnham 2010) to low wages and high cost-of-living (Redden 2010). And beginning in the 1990s displacement became an issue in the wake of gentrification pressure in many older Portland neighborhoods, contributing to the rapid decline in affordable housing (Gibson and Abbott 2002). To understand these apparent contradictions, and the role they play in Portland area foreclosure patterns, it is necessary to explore the history of progressivism in the city and, in particular, the development and mechanisms of its signature UGB.

Portland’s history of urban activism dates at least to the Progressive Era and, as Johnston (2003) argues in a positive reconstruction, its particular character is rooted rather surprisingly in a middle-class variant of anti-capitalist populism. According to Johnston, Portland’s early middle-class reformers focused on ‘classic middle-class

issues,' but went further than might be expected based on the evidence from other research.<sup>8</sup> He notes that in particular in Portland the “. . . working class and the middle class would meld into ‘the people,’” for which labor issues emerge as one of the central concerns (Johnston 2003:17). Johnston’s appraisal is fairly optimistic, but the degree to which modern Portland has continued the tradition of a class-blended progressivism, in ways that might serve as a model for an alternative to the entrepreneurial city needs to be assessed to better understand its housing bubble.

First, it is important to note that deindustrialization impacted Portland much like traditional Rust Belt cities as the labor intensive industries of shipbuilding and timber which dominated Portland’s economy through the early post-war era began to decline in the late 1970s. Hagerman (2006:285) observes that following industrial decline “the city and the region have pinned their hopes for the future on real estate development, biotech, and the creative economy.” Beginning in the early 1960s the city worked to attract new industry, focusing in particular on high-technology. Intel developed its first Oregon plant in 1976 in “Silicon Forest” (Portland’s counterpart to Silicon Valley) and by 1997 the metropolitan area employed more than 70,000 workers (Gibson and Abbott 2002). It was early in the period of economic transition in the 1970s that Portland implemented the nation’s most restrictive and comprehensive UGB. And while leadership in many Rust Belt cities responded to declining fortunes and municipal revenue with drastic cuts in urban services (despite hanging on to a lingering ‘managerial’ governance style), Portland has remained committed to comprehensive growth management and improving quality-of-life and services by continually updating and broadening the scope of its UGB.

*Urban Growth Boundary*

According to Gibson and Abbott (2002:426), by the early 1970s Portland was experiencing typical “problems of ‘urban crisis’ including inadequate downtown parking, a bankrupt bus system, and a “super regional-mall [which] threatened to kill off downtown retailing.” The UGB in Portland (and its Metro land-use governing body), established in response to state planning standards adopted in 1973, was designed to preserve and recycle older neighborhoods, draw investment back downtown, to enhance urban quality of life, and ostensibly to restrict business interests in land-use. With primary goals to increase citizen participation, ‘encourage’ availability of affordable housing, and to incorporate principles of environmental preservation, early successes included the dismantling of a six-lane freeway to develop a riverfront park and rejection of a new radial freeway which threatened to destroy a community and affordable housing stock (Gibson and Abbott 2002).

But the growth of real estate development and the symbolic (‘creative’) economy, which are variably linked to both spatial commodification and entrepreneurial governance, are integrally connected to Portland’s UGB. First, despite persistent vocal resistance to restrictive land-use policies by groups like the Portland based neoliberal think-tank Cascade Policy Institute, business groups were critical in the early adoption and maintenance of the UGB. A report by the National Association of Local Government Environmental Professionals (1999) compiled profiles of 19 corporate and local businesses and business coalitions (including Chambers of Commerce) which support smart growth policies nationwide. The profiles included prominent business supporters for smart growth in Seattle, San Francisco (Silicon Valley), and Portland. In an assessment of Portland’s ‘growth management regime,’ Leo (1998:370) stresses that

“land management is not an antigrowth system designed simply to place limits on development. The intention, rather, is to promote economic development by maximizing the attractiveness of the environment.” “Liberal growth coalitions,” according to Swanstrom (1988[1985]), are founded on the belief that improved quality of life for urban residents will generate more productive workers and urban services, which should attract new business and general economic growth. To whatever degree the broadly encompassing UGB and progressive subculture in Portland may produce a heightened consciousness of social justice it does not inevitably result in redistributive policies. Rosdil (2010:111), who found a link between concentrations of nontraditional subcultures and progressive urban policy, argues that “. . . progressive cities will extract financial concessions from business to benefit the underprivileged not only because it is morally justified from their perspective but also because they can do so without diluting the community’s strengths as an investment location.”<sup>9</sup> But this implies an ordering of priorities and, thus, when investment is threatened these benefits are subject to reduction or dissolution.

Cities engage various framing strategies in the construction of spatial identities and to legitimize urban redevelopment projects. Zukin (2010) deconstructs the frame of ‘authenticity’ which has meaning for urban residents but also is incorporated into the ‘rhetoric of growth’ of developers and government officials. In Portland, urban planning and redevelopment is framed especially through reference to nature and liveability - common themes attached to the massive River District project beginning in the late 1980s. Movements with appeal to the middle-class, like environmentalism, can and have fostered redistributive policies.<sup>10</sup> But according to Hagerman (2007:293), in the River

District the particular cultural framing of environmentalism diverted from the reality that public money was being used to develop space for elite consumption and it served to “. . . soften criticism of other aspects of the development plans, such as views blocked by new condominium towers, increased traffic congestion, lack of schools or services, little planned affordable housing, relocation of social services for the homeless and the creation of exclusive areas for marginalized populations. . .” Further, it is clear that the features in this new space are designed for the symbolic economy. The addition of streetcars “. . . freighted with heavy symbolic capital. . .”, for instance, has been acknowledge as serving primarily as “. . . a marketing tool, stimulating investment dollars and consumer interest along the route” (Hagerman 2007:290). The use of ‘liveability’ for cultural framing of waterfront development, even in progressively conscientious Portland, “. . . work[s] to mitigate anxieties of social and ecological dislocation, but also marginalizes issues of social justice” (Hagerman 2007:286). Portland’s environmental identity extends this framing to all redevelopment in the city producing a unique, often contradictory, mix of spatial commodification and progressive land-use constraints.

Even in the event the city does manage to secure more ambitious concessions from developers, the contingent nature of such provisions can derail its aims. The 2003 contract for a public/private apartment/condominium partnership in Portland’s South Waterfront district included a requirement to include more than 400 total affordable units in the final project (Frank 2010). But by 2010, following a series of funding complications (in part from declining investments due to recent falling real-estate prices) and priority shifts through which the city spent millions on property improvements and transportation links and subsidizing the lead developer, not one of more than 1,000

luxurious units completed by the developer was designated affordable. And there is evidence that broader challenges to some of the progressive features of the UGB could further undermine its regulatory power. Oregon Ballot Measure 37 approved in 2004 ensures owners of property which loses value as the result of land-use regulation can either be compensated for the loss or have the regulation waived. Its impact was reduced in 2007 with some restrictions approved in Measure 49, but many features of this ‘liberalization’ of the UGB remain in place (Orfeld 2009).

### *UGB and Housing Affordability*

Housing affordability alone does not explain the housing bubble collapse or high foreclosure rates, but it is a significant contributing factor. To whatever extent Portland’s UGB contributed to a decline in affordability (Cascade and other anti-smart growth challengers attribute the foreclosure crisis in Portland entirely to land restrictions), there was a rapid drop by 69 percent between 1991 and 1996 and affordability did not increase for a significant stretch after that period (Phillips and Goodstein 2000). The original Oregon Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) goals (the mandate which prompted the UGB) simply include a provision for plans that *encourage* affordable housing (Leo 1998). This provision was critical to support for growth management in Portland, but since the early 1990s it has not translated into policies that have ensured affordable housing. According to the Housing Opportunity Index data from National Association of Home Builders (2012), for most of the period from 2000 to 2009 less than 50 percent of Portland residents could afford the median priced house. By 2007 both renters and homeowners were paying more than the national average. Though the difference was slightly smaller for renters, officials have admitted there is not enough

subsidized rental housing to meet local demand and some of the supply in privately owned developments are near expirations of the federal and state contracts which required affordability (Krishnan 2011:11). And further, the region-wide boundaries for Metro's UGB have ensured that property values have increase throughout the metropolitan area.

In Portland, with a black population in 2010 of only 2.8 percent, there appears to be a decided race component in affordable housing failures. Blacks remain the most concentrated in older neighborhoods of the ethnic and racial subgroups in Portland and it is these neighborhoods which have increasingly been targeted for gentrification. A recent analysis reported by the Oregonian (Hannah-Jones 2010) indicates that downtown Portland has become significantly whiter as nearly 10,000 blacks had moved out because of gentrification pressures since 2000. The concerns have been the subject of recent discussions as part of Portland's Restorative Listening Project, with some blacks observing that neighborhood improvements ". . . do not seem designed for them, but more to raise housing prices and lure in newcomers," decrying Portland's ". . . upper-middle-class progressivism . . ." (Yardley 2008). Additionally, demolitions of public housing increased after 2000 in cities like Portland where the representation of African Americans within public housing is much higher than the metropolitan population. Portland did not eliminate any public housing until after 2000 when it took out 456 units (Goetz 2011:282).

The relatively small black population in Portland probably partly explains why the city had a relatively small proportion of subprime loan originations, but this population was still disproportionately targeted. The city acknowledged in a 2011 report



that reductions in the number of unconventional mortgage products are likely to “. . . adversely affect the City of Portland’s objective of increasing the homeownership rates of minority households, which often have lower incomes than Portland households as a whole . . .” (Krishnan 2011:11). Further, Portland has had a high rate of ‘Alt A’ mortgages, described as “. . . a middling category between traditional prime loans and subprime loans sold to people with weak credit” (Law 2009). The combination of a high percentage white population and a lack of affordable housing may very well have made Portland a target for these ‘middling’ mortgages which do not appear in most reports of concentrations of subprime loans.

There is other evidence that progressivism in Portland is not fully committed to redistributive policies. Portland has the relatively high rate of union membership of 15.9 percent (Krumenauer 2012). Workers struggle with relatively low wages and a high cost-of-living. Beginning in the late 1990s firms began moving technology manufacturing operations overseas, with employment in the Silicon Forest declining since 2001 (Rogoway 2008). And while there is a living wage ordinance in Portland, it applies only to public contracts (National Employment Law Project 2010). The balance for economic growth and employment has shifted to real-estate and consumerism. The share of the metropolitan area’s economy constituted by retail (which features lower wages), for instance, is the third highest in the sample, just below that of Las Vegas. A study sponsored by the Brookings Institution and the London School of Economics surmised that “. . . an over-reliance on residential real estate made it [Portland] particularly vulnerable when the sector crashed” (Manning 2010).

Housing affordability has been included as a goal in various Portland planning documents and is supported by coalitions of residents, yet to date policies have had only a limited impact. For instance in 1999, in response to displacement and declining housing affordability from gentrification, the city created the Proud Ground Community Land Trust, which is designed to assist low-income first-time homebuyers. While the land trust was the result of a broad coalition of politicians, community residents, and affordable housing groups, its design offers a market-oriented approach to housing issues which, ultimately, serve the interests of real-estate investors. As of 2012 only 125 first-time homebuyers had been served (Proud Ground 2012). There is some evidence that the city has responded more aggressively since the crisis began. The Portland Housing Bureau partners with government entities and the private sector and has rehabilitated more than 7,000 affordable apartments since 2009, but they estimate that at least 15,000 households cannot find affordable housing (Fish and VanVliet 2011).

Progressive culture in Portland, framed primarily by nature and sustainability and often co-opted by business interests, has rendered redistributive policies contingent on economic growth. This has not rendered growth management in Portland and resistance to neoliberalization entirely ineffective. To some extent the UGB has allowed Portland to mitigate some of the effects of increasing spatial commodification from its growing dependence on real-estate. Growth management policies can have an impact on the growth and collapse of housing bubbles. Glasgow et al. (2011), for instance, determined that the foreclosure crisis was moderated among cities in California which featured local residential growth management policies. The policy themes of environmentalism and sustainability in Portland do constrain developers and land speculators in the city building

process. But to date they do so in a manner which gives primacy to the enhancement of property and, thus, the accumulation of capital. UGB and Metro policies are not anti-growth, nor explicitly slow growth. Instead they have attempted to marry progressive concerns regarding sustainability with a growth agenda in ways which have to some extent undermined resistance to neoliberalization. Undoubtedly, some of these trends also manifest in various ways in other progressive cities, but with their own unique combination of factors Seattle and San Francisco have managed to weather the crisis relatively better. Metro-wide gentrification in Portland, which has caused rapid housing price increases, combined with relatively weak affordable housing provisions and changes in local employment patterns to expand its foreclosure crisis.

## DISCUSSION

The model for housing bubbles which I have proposed appears to have efficacy in consideration of the analysis of variation in the cases of Houston and Portland. Houston does not fit the model perfectly, but deviations are related to the free-market emphasis in local culture and political ideology, which effects local policy, but also the framing of issues and of crisis responses, including the obfuscation of the role of federal investment in local industry. Houston also has benefitted from linkages to international markets which have either restructured or simply continued to provide regional economic stimulus, but this factor alone cannot explain housing market bubbles or foreclosure rates, as demonstrated by cities like Portland, Atlanta, Miami and Los Angeles, which also have significant ties to the international economy and experienced housing bubbles and much higher foreclosure rates. Further, were it not for the dramatic housing bubble collapse in other cities, Houston's foreclosure rate would likely place it among the highest in the

nation, suggesting that Houston's housing problem is chronic but less subject to business cycles. In Portland progressive culture constitutes a distinct set of policies which offer the benefit of environmental sustainability and broader attention to quality-of-life for residents in the built-environment, but this factor actually appears to contribute to increases in property values which, absent comprehensive housing affordability policy, has led to foreclosure rates higher than some of its prominent progressive neighbors. There is a distinct middle-class character to progressivism in Portland which undermines efforts to develop more redistributive policies which may have further attenuated its experience of this crisis.

While, as this analysis demonstrates, variant local cultural and political-economic characteristics linked to the processes of neoliberalization, spatial commodification, and uneven development largely explain the severity of geographic concentrations of foreclosures, there is some evidence that policy responses to the crisis are also impacted by these factors. Immergluck (2008) discusses two primary categories of local foreclosure responses - "foreclosure prevention," including outreach, counseling, and obtaining loan modifications, and the "mitigation of community impacts and recovery," which includes property reclamation and recovery and household recovery. An example of the former is Chicago's Homeownership Preservation Initiative (HOPI), which formally began in 2003, while the "Neighborhood Housing Services of Minneapolis" is an example of the latter. Las Vegas, for example, has implemented foreclosure prevention forums and created an ordinance to protect neighborhoods and manage foreclosed properties through penalties for owners with properties in disrepair (City of Las Vegas 2009; Spillman 2011). Harris County (containing Houston) has developed the

Homeownership Made Easy (HOME) program through which the county purchases foreclosed homes and resells them at reduced prices, not unlike community land banks which have operated in many cities for years (Harris County 2012). Essentially all cities which have experienced high foreclosure rates have developed some local programs falling into one or both of these categories. Most of these are dependent for funding and even initiative on the federal Housing and Economic Recovery Act (HERA) of 2008 and the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) of 2009 and they do not fundamentally alter the structures which led to the housing crisis in the first place. And for that matter, Houston's free-market identity and political culture ensure that it does not define local foreclosures as a social crisis at all.

But some cities, including Portland, Seattle, and Minneapolis, have made efforts to develop more comprehensive plans to address both foreclosures and affordable housing with support from growing coalitions of residents, anti-poverty activists, and affordable housing agencies. These cities have added additional local funds to strengthen existing community land banks to stabilize neighborhoods hit hardest by foreclosures. In many instances the land banks specifically target minority homeowners. But they are also developing "shared equity land trusts," which target low-income families and maintain the affordability of the constructed housing permanently (Treuhaft et al. 2012). The progressive Burlington Community Land Trust in Vermont has been a critical mechanism in the city's commitment to provision of affordable housing (Fireside 2005; Soifer 1990). A recent study by Temkin et al. (2010) found that low-income homeowners in the Champlain Housing Trust (the result of a merger between the Burlington Community Land Trust and Lake Champlain Housing Development Corporation in 2006)

had a foreclosure rate that was half that of the surrounding region (which was among the lowest in the nation). In fact, in 2010 the foreclosure rate among homeowners in the nation's 250 Community Land Trusts (CLT) was one-tenth the national average (Case 2012). While three of the four CLTs in the state of Texas are located in more progressive Austin, there is a single CLT in Houston, but obviously the degree to which CLTs can provide a counterweight to the foreclosure crisis is dependent on the number of residents they encompass relative to the community.

In an effort to begin to address some of the structural causes of the housing crisis, the mayor and city council of Portland recently joined those of Seattle, Berkeley, and Los Angeles in supporting the "Responsible Banking Resolution," which calls for the transfer of some or all city funds from megabanks like Wells Fargo and Bank of America to local credit unions (Rubenstein, 2012). The resolution is being supported in Portland by community groups like We Are Oregon, a progressive organization launched by Oregon's SEIU Locals 49 and 503 which emphasizes workers and 'fighting for a fair economy.' If approved, this resolution could significantly reduce future predatory loan activity, as local banks have historically featured more conservative lending and investment practices. These communities, and others like them, are also calling for more comprehensive and targeted federal responses, like government-supported mortgage credit or rental financing structured to direct credit to all communities, in part to prevent re-segregation through new mortgage redlining activity (Treuhaft et al. 2012). Solutions like these would reduce the private market for subprime mortgages.

Efforts like these may signal a growing interest in some cities to revisit issues of social justice and redistributive policies. At first glance, it appears the primary

distinction in foreclosure responses among cities is related to their degree of willingness to implement more progressive programs, but it may be more significantly impacted simply by the extent and number of programs which include mechanisms for revenue to supplement federal government funding, which in turn is influenced by the degree of pressure and collaboration from neighborhood organizations and local agencies. The relative impact such programs can have is limited by their scope and the national and global structure of the crisis. Gottdiener and Hutchison (2011:341) caution that “. . . the problems of the metropolitan region have societal roots that are not easily addressed by technical recommendations without massive social change.” But collectively the plans initiated in communities with a history of progressive governance and those which have been most devastated by the impact of the housing crisis may offer an important countertrend to those cities bolstering their commitment to neoliberal policies in ways that may prevent future real-estate fueled bubbles or, at least, reduce the scope of their impact.

Finally, it is necessary to briefly address Harvey's (2005) suggestion that the relative success or failure of processes of neoliberalization to generate economic growth or crisis must be further framed by the evidence that the political project of neoliberalism has always been at its root an effort to reconstitute class power. The mechanism by which this process occurs Harvey calls 'accumulation by dispossession.' Thus changes in the U.S. tax structure have shifted revenue and resources from the working and middle-class to wealthy elites. There has been an enormous shift in wealth from the working and middle class to wealthy bankers and real-estate investors. Said (2011) recently recounted that while federal incentives and deflated housing values should benefit first time

homebuyers and working class families, in San Francisco this has been stymied by competition with professional property ‘flippers’ and large real estate investors who can outbid regular home seekers in efforts to accumulate large stocks of reduced value real estate. In Las Vegas and Miami cash deals from investors represent about half of foreclosed property sales (Kravitz 2011). Conlin (2012) documents instances of investors, often simply wealthy individuals, buying stockpiles of foreclosed properties for speculative purposes. The growth of these trends has fostered reactive local responses, including new ordinances in communities like Minneapolis to prevent speculative activity from investors from destroying neighborhoods (Treuhaft et al. 2010).

When Republican presidential contender Mitt Romney suggested that the solution to the housing market and foreclosure crisis was to “Let it run its course and hit the bottom” he contributed to the narrative normalization of both economic crisis and neoliberalism (Hunt 2011). In this view, the economy is treated like a machine that requires minimal ‘tinkering’ and business cycles are considered both necessary and beneficial. For the neoliberal project ‘tinkering’ is defined as market regulation and social welfare. There are signs that since the housing market collapse some cities are perpetuating or even accelerating neoliberalization. In 2010, two years after Fort Lauderdale (Florida) registered the highest foreclosure rate in the state and the 8th highest in the nation, mayor Jack Seiler reiterated his commitment to making local government more “business friendly,” in part by keeping taxes low and continuing efforts to use public funds for marina improvements with the intention of developing the “Riverwalk into a premier destination for tourists and residents” (Wyman 2010). It remains to be seen whether growing local and national resistance catalyzed by the



housing and economic crisis can reverse decades of neoliberal policy and ideology development, particularly in federal housing policy, or whether agents of neoliberalization will determine new ways to circumscribe conflict to continue its implementation and the project of “accumulation by dispossession.”

The approach I have used is both conceptually and empirically valuable, but it does not offer broad representativeness, thus a project to further empirically validate my conceptual framework is recommended. This may include a larger sample for multiple regression and additional case studies of the local experience. While the neoliberal project has been unevenly geographically implemented, this analysis identifies critical patterns in its regional impact and in responses to the foreclosure crisis.

#### Notes

1. Las Vegas ranked 179th in the 2011 Global Metro Monitor report, which featured an expanded field of 200 cities.
2. See for example Brown, Karen E. and Sarah E. Bolling. 2008. “Why the Mortgage and Foreclosure Crisis is a Women’s Crisis.” Presented at the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Georgia Women’s Assembly, November 12, 2008. Retrieved March 12, 2012 (<http://www.gwomen.org/pdfs/WPG.Mortgage.and.Foreclosure.Crisis.is.a.Womens.Issue-11.24.08.pdf>); Jones-DeWeever, Avis. 2008. “Losing Ground: Women and the Foreclosure Crisis.” National Council of Jewish Women Journal, Summer/Fall 2008. Retrieved March 12, 2012 ([http://www.ncjw.org/media/sum\\_fall08\\_losing\\_ground%20.pdf](http://www.ncjw.org/media/sum_fall08_losing_ground%20.pdf)); Women of Color Policy Network. 2011. “Foreclosure Crisis in U.S. Disproportionately Affects Women of

Color, Leads to Discriminatory Lending Policies against Women.” New York University Wagner, June 9, 2011. Retrieved March 12, 2012

(<http://wagner.nyu.edu/wocpn/blog/2011/06/09/foreclosure-crisis-in-us-disproportionately-affects-women-of-color-leads-to-discriminatory-lending-p.html>); and the recent campaign by MomsRising.org to uncover and prevent housing and mortgage discrimination of mothers.

3. LISQ determines total units receiving foreclosure filings by combining first lien mortgaged owner-occupied units with 44 percent of the one-to-four unit rental units (those with residential mortgages). Filings can be affected by bank procedures and other local factors, but these rates are commonly used in research analysis and are reasonably representative of recent local conditions.
4. Fisher (2005) notes that, despite their limited predictive power, local decision-makers do pay attention and often adjust regional policies in response to competitiveness rankings. Tremblay, Rogerson, and Chicoine (2008) note that ratings indexes like PRA focus heavily on “. . . new forms of urban leadership . . . which are more entrepreneurial, growth-oriented and . . . [featuring] characteristics of the private sector - risk taking, inventiveness, promotional and profit motivated” and argue that these are used by growth coalitions and city development authorities/agencies to ‘sell the city’ and attract new investment. In this way, they serve the growth of both neoliberal governance and spatial commodification, but the rankings themselves tell very little about the actual mechanism by which these operate.

5. Bee, Adam. 2012. *Household Income Inequality Within U.S. Counties: 2006-2010: American Community Survey Briefs*. U.S. Bureau of the Census. (Available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acsbr10-18.pdf>).
6. Office of the Governor, Economic Development & Tourism. 2011. *Texas Biotechnology Industry Report May 2011*. Retrieved March 28, 2011 ([http://www.governor.state.tx.us/files/ecodev/Biotech\\_Report.pdf](http://www.governor.state.tx.us/files/ecodev/Biotech_Report.pdf)).
7. The 'creative' economy Florida associates with this class is a corollary to Zukin's symbolic economy.
8. Johnston specifically refers to more pessimistic characterizations of the potential for middle-class activism and alliances with working-class issues which emerged during the Reagan Era, like those from Mike Davis (1986) and Barbara Ehrenreich (1990).
9. Rosdil (2010:110) determined that nontraditional cultural behavior, which by his definition "... question[s] not only the legitimacy of entrenched business interests but also a number of closely linked, traditional activities. . . , " is strongly correlated with progressive urban governance.
10. For instance see Bagguley, Paul. 1994. Prisoners of the Beveridge Dream? "The Political Mobilization of the Poor against Contemporary Welfare Regimes." In R. Burrows and B. Loader (eds.), *Towards a Post-Fordist State?* London: Macmillan; Castells, Manuel. 1977. *La Question Urbaine*. Paris: Maspero; Castells, Manuel. 1983. *The City and the Grassroots*. London. E. Arnold; Castells, Manuel. 1997. *The Information Age. Vol. II. The Power of Identity*. Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell; Feagin, Joe R. and Stella M. Capek. 1991. "Grassroots Movements in a Class Perspective." In P.C. Washburn (ed.), *Research in Political Sociology*, vol. 5. Greenwich,

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## CHAPTER 3

### ARTICLE 3: STORMING TOURISM'S 'CITY ON THE HILL:' FAMILY VALUES, NATURAL BEAUTY, AND LIMITS TO GROWTH IN BRANSON, MISSOURI

In a prepared statement issued Wednesday, Herschend said a casino is still not the answer for Rockaway Beach. "Very definite and prominent support continues for maintaining Branson's uniquely one-of-a-kind image -- highly respected and famous for its family values. Protecting that 'brand' is essential to the entire region's economy and growth" (Buckstaff 2006).

Casinos - and destination entertainment generally - have expanded dramatically in recent decades as city leaders seek new economic growth industries, in part as a strategy to recover from declines wrought by the transformation of urban economies in recent decades. Their history in Missouri dates to the approval of riverboat gambling in 1994 and there are now casino operations in St. Louis and Kansas City and other communities on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. But officials in the state's one nationally recognized tourist city, Branson, located near the Arkansas border in Southwest Missouri, have repeatedly rejected efforts to develop a casino in the region, with state-wide initiatives in 2004 and 2008. The conflict pitted two prominent regional business owners against each other in a competitive battle that featured appeals to conservative moral values and claimed community detriments on one side and promises of much needed jobs and potential for economic growth on the other. Coalitions were led by Peter Herschend and Herschend Family Entertainment (HFE), touted as the largest family-owned theme park corporation in the U.S. and owner of Branson's iconic Silver Dollar City (SDC), and Robert Low, owner of the Springfield-based trucking company Prime, Inc. Each spent millions of dollars of their own money for an extended campaign. The Herschend funded

coalition included business owners, local churches, and residents. The Low coalition included the casino industry, local business owners, entertainers, unions, and unemployed or low-wage service workers mobilized by the prospect for economic growth and higher wages in year-round employment. The high profile campaign ultimately ended in rejection of the casino development.

In contrast, a more recent high-profile battle featured a loose coalition of neighbors, environmentalists, political officials, and some local business owners who challenged a proposed \$250 million 65,000 seat race-track development encompassing 800 acres in the adjacent city of Hollister, largely on the grounds that it would produce environmental degradation associated with soil erosion and sound and water pollution. An initial Planning Commission public hearing in July 2011 drew hundreds of local residents and officials in a packed local high school where more than 75 people signed up to speak (Francke 2011). While the developer brought a team of advocates and experts to address concerns and some residents spoke in support due to the prospect of jobs, most spoke in opposition. Opponents, including Johnny Morris, the owner of a nearby lake resort and the national outdoor gear store Bass Pro Shops, challenged the developer's projection of 3,000 jobs, plans to restrict race decibel levels, and environmental impact, which had already included massive tree cutting and earth removal for site preparation. Yet, less than two weeks after the public hearing the Commission approved the plans.

These examples represent relatively rare conflicts over growth and development in Branson. They each unraveled in the context of a tourist city in which business elites, developers, public officials, and citizen boosters promote growth and actively package, market, and sell the city as a branded entertainment consumer destination. In 1980



Branson was a relatively remote community in the Ozark Mountains with scattered tourist attractions and a population of less than 3,000 residents. But the region has experienced rapid growth and transformed into a national tourist destination in the decades since, boasting 8.4 million annual tourists generating nearly \$2 billion in revenue in 2007 prior to the national economic recession (Springfield Business Journal Staff 2008). Competitive pressures have compelled urban officials in dozens of cash-strapped municipalities, particularly in the Midwest, to develop tourist attractions, including casinos, for new economic growth. In recent decades these pressures have been intensified by political and economic transformations associated with neoliberalism, which since the 1980s in the U.S. has featured a roll-back of social welfare provisions and redistributive outlays to cities, expanded privatization, discipline of labor, and liberalization of economic policy (Harvey 2005). The project has been spatially implemented unevenly, but tourist cities like Branson represent an ideal-type of the neoliberal city, featuring a particularly high degree of spatial commodification, frequently stark uneven development, and commitment by local political and business elites to a “good business climate” designed to limit regulation and use public money to leverage private development and growth. Casino growth is linked to these trends and though development slowed in the early 2000s the late decade economic crisis has prompted many states and cities to revisit the jobs and revenue potential of casinos (Trejos 2012).

Yet, prominent members of the Branson region’s growth-coalition mounted an expensive campaign to reject a casino, which promised economic benefits for the community, while tacitly approving the race-track, for which claims about job creation were considered by many especially dubious and which contributed to environmental

degradation and held the prospect for a decline of quality of life for nearby neighbors. Religious organizations and traditional casino opposition groups like Casino Watch were active in the Branson campaign, and casinos have been rejected by other communities across the U.S., but local culture and place-based brand competition provided a unique character to both of these battles in Branson. A spatial brand is specifically the commodified form of local identity, which may prefigure the brand, but can also be shaped by it after the fact. The carefully constructed branding of a ‘sanctified town,’ featuring the active marketing of Branson’s *Jerusalem* in contrast to Vegas’ *Sodom and Gomorrah*, has been used as a competitive distinction for the tourist city to lure entertainment consumers (Ketchell 2007; Moreton 2009). Religious fundamentalism has deep roots in the Ozark Mountains, but its commodification in Branson as Christian entertainment generates unique contradictions. In an interview by the author, SDC senior vice president and current Branson Board of Aldermen member Rick Todd (2012) recently noted

. . . a lot of people said, well the reason they’re so opposed to gambling is from a religious stand point and I don’t think that could be farther from the truth. I don’t think it has a thing to do with that. We have a very unique situation. We enjoy families through three months out of the year and we enjoy empty nesters or second honeymooners the other times of the year . . . we can’t afford, literally from a financial standpoint, economic standpoint to chase one of those markets off. And if we do we’re in trouble because we don’t compete well.

Todd compared this to Las Vegas’ efforts in the 1990s to attract families through investment in marketing and non-gambling attractions; the effort failed because it conflicted with Vegas’ established and profitable adult entertainment brand. Thus, the resistance to a casino development in Branson was linked to aggressive brand protection. The race track, on the other hand, was implicitly deemed less threatening to the Branson

brand, if emblematic of the degradation of the region's initial attraction - nature - and it appears to have more in common with anti-growth battles in other cities. Nature remains an extant component of Branson's brand, but is in practice a relatively minor thematic auxiliary of the conservative leitmotif of "flag, faith, and family" and calls to ". . . foster an entrepreneurial culture . . ." (Ozark Mountain Legacy 2012). Further, as the following analysis will demonstrate, protection of nature as a brand theme has been more difficult to reconcile with a pro-growth agenda than social conservatism.

Conflicts like these, sometimes narrowly, even dismissively, characterized as not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY), are wrought with complex overlapping moral assessments and occur within specific political-economic and socio-cultural contexts. Contests over the meaning of space are constituted in all cities and have been intensified, for instance, by the process of neoliberalization. While the process has been unevenly implemented, in tourist cities the exchange value (capital accumulation) meaning of space becomes arguably more hegemonic. Growth politics in Branson include some of the features and agents traditionally characterized in growth machine literature, including residents periodically responding to the social and environmental costs of growth with small-scale challenges. But in some respects battles over spatial commodification in tourist cities like Branson take on the appearance of a foregone conclusion, where local residents are among the boosters of growth. Because of this, the dynamics of growth politics in Branson is largely shifted to negotiations over brand themes between various factions of the political and economic elite. And in Branson the brand constructed on socially conservative themes produces its own internal contradictions highlighted by the overlapping loyalties of local factions of the New Right conservative movement (which

has been largely responsible for making neoliberalism a national agenda) in which social conservatives and economic liberals have a historically tenuous relationship.

To address the question of why a local growth coalition would reject one major tourist attraction while tacitly approving another, in the following evaluation I unravel the linkages between broader political economic transformations, spatial commodification and culturally constituted place-branding and local growth politics. Combined these factors produce a neoliberal tourist city featuring overlapping urban contests among local agents with shifting and sometimes contradictory interests. I begin to offer an explanation for the particular character of development conflict in Branson, and to assess the extent to which these examples reveal limits to growth and commodification in a tourist city.

## THEORETICAL CONTEXT

According to Logan and Molotch (1987), urban politics under capitalism is dominated by local and regional growth machines comprised of developers, real-estate speculators, financiers, and allied politicians who promote the commodification of space by prioritizing the exchange-value of property and place for their mutual political and economic benefit. Drawing from the work of Lefebvre (1991), Logan and Molotch note that commodified urban space is imbued with use-value but is produced with the express purpose of realizing its exchange-value. Others, particularly non-elite urban residents, focus on the use-value of space which satisfies the needs of life. Because of the concentrated power of business interests in growth machines, the outcomes of resultant conflicts tend to favor business, expanding spatial commodification even in cities where

quality-of-life concerns are taken into account. Increasingly adopting an entrepreneurial approach that focuses on selling the city (Harvey 1989), pro-growth governance is based on the assumption that the needs of urban populations will be met through the economic growth generated by such a strategy (Feagin and Parker 1990; Logan and Molotch 1987; Swanstrom [1985] 1988).

Recent interest-group analysis by Lubell et al. (2009) brings the role of allied politicians into sharper focus with an analysis of the influence of local political institutions on the politics of growth and land use. Among other findings they note that the growth machine hypothesis is supported in cities featuring manager-council style government, the dominant form in the U.S., where “city managers are driven by economic development incentives and thus more open to influence from concentrated development interests” (Lubell et al. 2009:662). Emerging from Progressive Era efforts to address corruption and fiscal crisis in rapidly growing cities, manager-council or commission style plans gained wide acceptance primarily because

. . . they offered stability; they were less expensive; they were devoid of commitment to radical social theories; and they assured businessmen of more of a direct and central role in municipal affairs (Weinstein 1968:96).

The presumed basis of the role of city managers is politically neutral economic rationality, but as Lubell et al. (2009) infer, business interests dominate both because business owners and developers appear prominently in elected leadership and because growth becomes the priority of city government. In Branson a ‘manager’ equivalent city administrator serves as the chief executive officer in charge of the operation of the city, while political decisions are made by a weak-mayor and board of alderman currently

consisting disproportionately of local business owners and developers, including SDC senior vice president Rick Todd.

The growth priority combined with the decline in federal redistribution to cities in recent decades has led to increasing use of public/private partnerships to fund local development projects. The redirection of public resources to leverage investment or subsidize the private sector often results in a double blow for policies aimed at social well-being, including revenue lost from the initial subsidy and later losses from the use of capture tax methods like tax increment financing (T.I.F.), used repeatedly for projects in Branson, for which revenues from future property tax increases in the designated district are used for the redevelopment and property improvements. Further, city planning under this style of governance in most cities in the U.S. is relegated to an advisory role for which public officials make the final decisions and tends to be applied to developments on a site-by-site basis and limited to zoning for land-use designed especially to meet the needs of business (Gottdiener and Hutchison 2011:329). This is particularly the case in Branson, where the historically small population led to zoning laws which have been haphazardly applied and poorly equipped to handle the rapid growth since the 1990s. The combination of rapid growth, reduced city revenues, and piecemeal planning driven primarily by market directives generates social problems resulting from uneven development and can lead to citizen objections to new growth.

While there is evidence to support some of the growth machine dynamics theorized by Logan and Molotch, Gottdiener ([1985]1994) suggests that the production of space as initially theorized by Lefebvre is a more complex social phenomenon than the growth machine approach indicates. In contrast to a container analogy, space both

constitutes and is constituted by interlinking structure and agency in a dual relationship that problematizes dichotomized categorization. First, as Lefebvre (1972) observed in *The Right to the City*, the working class tends to be fragmented and itinerant as a particular condition of modern urbanization, especially with the decline of the factory and rise of contingent work. Capek and Gilderbloom (1992:49) note that from a sociospatial perspective

. . . the growth ideology is viewed as a crucial point of intersection between various shifting interests participating in the negotiation of power over the definition of social space. The ‘capitalist class’ is not viewed as monolithic and all-powerful, nor is the working class necessarily uniformly opposed to it on issues of growth.

In tourist cities, especially, local economies are constructed by a logic that makes them highly dependent on constant growth and the continual reconfiguration of space. While occupation structures in cities like Branson feature concentrations of low-wage service-sector jobs and growth and commodification which produce externalities, local citizens rely on these jobs, nonetheless, and may be compelled to fight to keep them or to promote their expansion by supporting a growth agenda if options appear limited. Finally, the growth machine approach fails to account for local manifestations of the “decline, deindustrialization, and the boom-and-bust cycles of capitalism” (Gottdiener and Hutchinson 2011:87). Recent political and economic transformations have expanded the scope of these phenomena and rapidity at which they occur and have been largely responsible for the acceleration of spatial commodification processes, particularly in tourist cities.

## METHODS

In the following analysis I provide global, national, and regional historical context for two case studies of growth politics in Branson in order to unravel the linkages between the national and local constitution of neoliberalization and the ways that these processes are shaped by local culture. Using secondary data I develop an analysis of the historical process of neoliberalization and of its contingent political, economic, and cultural links to the Ozark's region. The case studies themselves, one evaluating the effort to develop a casino near Branson and one to develop a large race track, rely primarily on qualitative data and consist of media and content analysis from archival and secondary data sources which address the history of growth, development, and culture in the region, local government documents, and regional newspaper articles.

I also conducted face to face open-ended interviews with a selection of key local informants. These interviews were conducted with prominent figures in local growth politics, generally, and in these two development battles in particular, including Robert Low and Rick Todd - both referenced earlier, Branson Mayor Raeanne Presley, Branson Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau President Ross Summers, and Dave Coonrod, former Commissioner in nearby Greene County (Springfield) and consultant with the regional water quality assessment company Ozark Underground Laboratory (OUL) which produced data for the race track project. While these informants do not represent all positions on development issues locally, they have historically wielded disproportionate influence over regional growth politics. Pete Herschend was unavailable for an interview, but his positions on the casino development and local growth are represented here by Silver Dollar City senior vice president Rick Todd. These interviews allow not only assessment of the details of the events leading to



and specific engagement in these battles, but also permit evaluation of different spatial meanings attached to the local landscape and processes of urban growth, and the role of culture in shaping and in turn being shaped by these social phenomena.

#### THE NEOLIBERAL TURN

Urbanization and urban contestation since the 1980s have proceeded in an environment dominated by neoliberal policy. With provisions including the systematic dismantling of the welfare state, privatization, labor discipline and reorganization, and federal devolution that places the burden of service provision at the local level, neoliberalization has accelerated both the transformation of the U.S. economy through deindustrialization and the growth of constituent industries of spatial commodification like real-estate and tourism (Brenner and Theodore 2003; Brenner 2004; Hackworth 2007; Peck and Tickell 2002). David Harvey (2010:175) has noted that spatial commodification now increasingly defines urban political economy characterized by “. . . consumerism, tourism, niche marketing, cultural and knowledge-based industries, as well as perpetual resort to the economy of the spectacle . . . “. These processes are shaped by local culture, which in turn also becomes the object of consumption, and engender increased urban competition which makes it critical that cities emphasize and refine place distinctions (Bourdieu 1998; Rifkin 2001; Zukin 1995). These processes are impacting all urban space, but under certain historical conditions they culminate in urban regions which specialize and become economically dependent almost entirely on real-estate development and tourism and engage in competitive place-branding (Fainstein 2007; Judd and Fainstein 1999; Mullins 1991). Marketing symbols, particularly those signifying lifestyle alternatives, come to play a preeminent role in conflict between

producers of consumer goods when the product is very similar, whether in the carbonated beverage industry or the tourism industry, for which signs are used as ‘weapons’ in the war for consumer dollars (Gottdiener 2001:41).

Neoliberalism has led to an intensification of competitive battles between producers of space and spatial meaning, but it also speeded the generation of barriers to challengers of non-commodified space, in part through the physical elimination of public spaces where dissident collective action may be exercised (Giroux 2004). Crowds remain visible in modern urban space, but they have been ‘tamed’ through a history of depletion and militarization of public space and redirection into consumer activities in private commodified space (Davis 1992; Sandine 2009). Cities which have grown up primarily during the neoliberal period, like Branson, had relatively little public urban space to begin with so that this process is related primarily to conversion of forested private space restrictive of crowds into urbanized commodified space for tourist consumption.

Relatedly, Peck and Tickell (2002:385) note that neoliberalization erodes “. . . the political and institutional collectivities upon which more progressive settlements had been constructed in the past (and may be in the future).” Blyth (cited in Harvey 2005:114) suggests that a hegemonic, if unevenly applied, political and economic project like neoliberalism can delimit policy options via the co-processes of ‘cognitive locking,’ which references the restriction of the imagination of alternatives, and ‘path dependency,’ whereby decision-making is constrained in part through the elimination of existing alternative policies. Governance based on faith in free-markets, individualism, and rejection of government intervention (at least in its regulatory or downward redistributive

variation) constrains policy options and also influences the nature of urban resistance. Policies that might include public planning for growth or more stringent growth management to reduce externalities and to focus on infrastructure and quality of life issues are eliminated or rejected when proposed. When Branson experienced its first growth boom in the early 1990s, then mayor Wade Meadows proposed a moratorium on sewer hookups following an accident that dumped sludge into nearby Lake Taneycomo. The proposal was designed to slow growth in part to allow the city to increase its sewer capacity to meet expanding demand, but Branson's City Council summarily defeated it with members like Pete Herschend expressing concern that the measure would *hurt growth* (Associated Press 1992). With alternatives delegitimized or systematically eliminated, local residents are left with few options but to support a free-market growth agenda which promises economic development and jobs.

While the cultural constituent ideology variably constitutes local resistance to or accommodation of growth politics and spatial commodification, neoliberal ideology tends to undermine collective action. Giroux (2004:106) begins to outline the mechanisms of these processes, arguing that a prominent feature of neoliberalism is its use of “. . . the educational force of culture to negate the conditions for critical agency.” This occurs through the funding of private think tanks and the defunding and/or sequestering of existing public institutions of education and media to promulgate an ideology that negates the cognition of problems and solutions as social in origin. Freedom comes to be defined by consumption practices and “. . . private satisfactions replace social responsibilities. . .” (Giroux 2004:128). One consequence of this tendency to refocus democratic energies on consumption and to atomize resistance is the limiting of experiential resources for those

democratic citizen movements which may emerge. Capek and Gilderbloom (1992) note that free-market cities like Houston, for example, are essentially ‘cities without grass roots movements,’ where current residents have limited broad-based leadership and organizing experience from which to draw for new challenges. They observe that while there are “. . . hundreds of civic clubs in Houston, their primary goal is to promote and enforce deed restrictions in neighborhoods” and, thus, they do not tend to foster broader democratic movements (Capek and Gilderbloom 1992:211). The efforts of these clubs and, indeed, a preponderance of modern citizen objections to urban development represent what Harvey (1997) has called “militant particularism.” With a focus on incompatible development, these challenges sometimes lead to modifications or even occasionally rejection of developments, but Harvey suggests that while these can lead to broad-based movements they are generally politically reactionary - designed to protect privileged neighborhoods or the diminishing community resources of the poor.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in the neoliberal city spatial commodification engenders place-brand competition while the very possibility of collective action is undermined through the absence of public forums for critical analysis and public space for collective agency, the ideological reorientation of social problems as individual problems and freedom through consumption, and the lack of historical social movements which provide experiential resources. Some theorists might argue that the assessment of the hegemonic power of neoliberalism is overstated in the theses outlined above. Brenner and Theodore (2003), Brenner (2004), Harvey (2005), and Peck and Tickell (2002) have all emphasized its uneven, and sometimes circumscribed implementation. And researchers including Leitner, Peck, and Sheppard (2007) and Naples and Desai (2002) illustrate resistance to

neoliberalization through case-studies of recent more or less broad-based urban movements which target its various provisions. This is in part due to contradictions inherent in the logic of the neoliberal project itself. Larner and Butler (2007:73), for instance, observe that “. . . contestation is always and everywhere within neoliberalism, rather than simply being a reaction to hegemonic forces.” But these observations do not preclude the existence of various forms of coercion and force by elites to advance the neoliberal project, via well-funded think-tanks and through a national conservative activist movement with local constituents. This movement must be briefly analyzed to more fully understand the dynamics of the conflicts in Branson.

#### *Ozark's Frontierism and the New Right*

The New Right conservative movement in the U.S. emerged from the continually negotiated confluence of three separate and frequently contentious conservative branches represented by the individual liberty and free-market driven economic liberals; strong national defense “hawks;” and a new wing of politically engaged evangelical fundamentalists who reframe social problems and solutions in strictly religio-moral terms (Himmelstein 1990). Emboldened by the anti-tax movement of the late 1970s (Lo 1990), the resultant loosely integrated movement rallied behind Ronald Reagan for the presidency in 1980 and ushered in the neoliberal dismantling or “roll back” of the Keynesian labor/business compromise and the social welfare state, an enormous military-industrial build-up, and the retrenchment of evangelical fundamentalist values. All three of these branches have overlapping constituents constituted by features of regional culture in Branson which have been critical in the development of the Ozark's burgeoning variation of “Christian free-enterprise” (Moreton 2009). But it is the

relationship between agents of social conservatism and neoliberalism which is most directly relevant to conflict and growth politics.

The Ozarks region has long been characterized by a cultural mentality defined by individualism, resisting government intervention, and favoring free-markets. The relatively few conflicts in the region that have drawn loose coalitions tend to share these features. Benac (2010), for example, documents how “frontier-minded” pre-industrial residents in the eastern Ozarks developed some dependence on the timber and mining industries which appeared in the late 1800s. But marked conflicts developed over the economic and cultural changes wrought by the new industries and the government intervention in land-use which their growth invited. A century later an effort to establish an internationally designated Ozark Highlands Man and Biosphere Reserve (for sustainability research) encompassing a vast forested region to the east and south of Branson encountered public resistance from local residents and property-rights organizations who rallied behind opposition to local intervention from the government and environmental groups (Goedeke and Rikoon 1998). This example, in particular, highlights the contradictions that arise in a region where residents ostensibly support protection of the natural environment, but not when this appears to usurp fundamental individual property rights or invite broader government intervention, or, it may be inferred, when it is unclear how the region will profit from the proposal.

The sentiments manifest in these instances have historically coalesced with the evangelism of the Ozarks. While long characterized by an individualistic theology, Ozark’s evangelism mirrored a long transformation occurring nationally from being relatively more socially and works oriented to more individualistic and antinomian

(Himmelstein 1990). The former is exemplified in Harold Wright's early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ozarks' novel *The Shepard of the Hills*, identified by no less than Ronald Reagan as an influential favorite, with evangelism in the region at this period featuring ministries "... prefaced on both spiritual uplift and this-worldly betterment" (Ketchell 2007:16). This approach included anti-materialist sentiments, calls to care for the poor through voluntary redistribution, and intensive stewardship of sacrilized nature. But by the 1980s, evangelism in the Ozarks, particularly in Branson where it was being rapidly commodified, focused more exclusively on personal salvation and incorporated the more social-Darwinistic outlook favored by economic liberals. The social aspects of environmental stewardship, for example, remained a popular tenet but were politically deprioritized in the face of growth and development needs. Ketchell (2007:179) notes that "... this religious perspective helped to create and fortify a sense of radical independence and self-sufficiency made manifest in other sociocultural arenas."

With few resources beyond those wrought by limited timber and mining and relative isolation in the Ozark hills, tourism was initiated in the Branson area in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the commodification of nature as spectacle and rest cure by local entrepreneurs. Later, a permanent outdoor theater version of Wright's *The Shepard of the Hills* and HFE's frontier nostalgia themed entertainment park Silver Dollar City, which opened in 1960, were the region's first big built attractions (Ketchell 2007). The city received another boost from the 1960s television show "The Beverly Hillbillies," which featured fictional characters derived from the region and shot several episodes in Branson.

But Branson would not be the nationally recognized destination it is without government investment. Despite the laissez-faire convictions of regional leaders, growth and the tourism industry in the Branson area have long been dependent on state and federal subsidies (Moreton 2009:10).<sup>2</sup> These resulted, for instance, in the construction of major dams to create hydroelectric power and control flooding, producing two large lakes, Taneycomo and Tablerock, promoted by local booster organizations and immediately exploited for tourism, though these projects did garner opposition from many locals who decried the relocation of communities and influx of “. . . land speculators, government agents, and similar outsiders. . .” (Ketchell 2007:142). Later, large mixed-use developments like the Branson Landing, the Branson Meadows, and the Branson Hills all relied heavily on state tax subsidy mechanisms and local public funds (City of Branson 2012). Branson also relies heavily on state funding for tourism marketing. The Springfield and Branson areas received \$1.1 million from the Missouri Department of Tourism in 2011; nearly 10 percent of the department’s spending for the entire state (Nelson 2012).

The region has also economically benefitted from hundreds of millions of public dollars in highway construction, including Branson’s famed highway 76 ‘strip’ which was boosted by the expansion and rerouting of U.S. 65 (the area’s primary national access route) in the 1960s. This also provided a site for early public, if atomized, challenges to growth. Construction on a loop route from an intersection with U.S. 65 north of Branson to the west and eventually back to U.S. 65 called the Ozark Mountain Highroad was controversial from the beginning. Residents surveyed about the highway construction in 1992 “. . . ranked environmental concerns above commercial development



in terms of importance,” which undoubtedly reflected the inevitable environmental and aesthetic degradation this and any highway in the highlands entails (Becker and Bradbury 1994:273).

The dependence of the region on public investment for growth has historically rendered political connections critical and, combined with Branson’s transformation into an icon of new evangelism in recent decades, this has fostered direct relationships between members of the New Right. President George H. W. Bush’s choice of SDC, for example, as the place to emphasize his “family values” message in 1992 was no coincidence. Pete Herschend has had a long-time relationship with former Missouri governor and U.S. Attorney General under George W. Bush, John Ashcroft, both of whom are members of the Assemblies of God, which is headquartered in nearby Springfield. The relationship has led to periodic political appointments and to state funding for projects which benefitted Herschend and other contributing developers (Ketchell 2007:80). Ashcroft, for instance, declared the Ozark Mountain Highroad an “economic emergency” for the region following conversations with friend and campaign donor Herschend (Corn and Moldea 2001). The chosen route crossed tracks of Herschend owned property and provided rapid access to SDC. And early in the casino battle, a St. Louis Post Dispatch reporter documented some of the many and complex relationships between the opponents of gambling in Branson and particular state Republican politicians, including indirect links to Governor Matt Blunt and John Ashcroft (Associated Press 2004).

Residents in Branson and surrounding Ozark’s communities practice the habitus of frontierism and evangelism, but variously aligned local elite members of the New

Right continue to wield inordinate influence over governance, growth, and development and are the primary agents locally implementing the broader neoliberal project. In the context of rooted, if transformed, regional evangelism and local constituents of the broader conservative movement the branded signification of 'sin-city' battling the sanctified 'city on the hill' for consumer dollars takes on elevated significance. This is the context for growth contestation in Branson and provides a foundation for more fully understanding the dynamics and implications of the casino and race track battles. The remainder of this paper consists of a more comprehensive analysis of the details of each of these cases.

#### ROCKAWAY BEACH AND CASINO POLITICS

Jan McCabe thinks the \$100 million casino proposed for this faded resort town could wipe out much of her business. Nothing would please her more. She runs My Neighbor's Pantry, which distributes groceries to about 400 needy families a month in northeastern Taney County. It is one of the busiest establishments on the main drag. "If the casino could put us out of business, we'd be tickled to death," McCabe said . . . Developers say the casino would generate 1,000 full-time jobs with benefits in an area where many jobs are seasonal and offer few extras. But the plan faces heavy opposition from powerful forces, including the Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau, Branson theater owners and the operators of Silver Dollar City (Carey 2004).

Riverboat gambling was approved in Missouri in 1994, but restricted to the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Kansas City and St. Louis followed Atlantic City and New Orleans as the first major U.S. cities to establish a casino outside of Las Vegas. Since that year, the gambling industry in the United States has exploded and Missouri is prominently featured in that expansion. In the summer of 2006 Mississippi based Isle of Capri Casinos Inc. moved its headquarters from Biloxi to the St. Louis area, citing concerns about being in hurricane territory, but tax incentives were clearly a significant allurements (Feldstein 2006). Subsequent efforts outside of the Kansas City and St. Louis

metro areas include successful casino developments along the rivers in central, northeast, and southeast Missouri. There are now twelve total casinos in the state, but not in the Branson region as neither river traverses Southwest Missouri. Because the existing casino restrictions were constitutionally codified in Missouri, any initiative to approve a casino beyond the Mississippi or Missouri river regions requires a statewide ballot, which broadened the scope of the battle in Branson.

Prior to the initiation of the casino battle in Branson, the city's brand had undergone a transformation in conjunction with regional growth. Through the 1980s 'Christian family-values' was an implicit thematic component to regional entertainment destinations in Branson, but it was not until the 1990s that local political and business leaders led efforts to solidify the region's marketing focus explicitly on Christian entertainment, for example by targeting church association conference groups. This was largely in response to competitive pressures. Responding to a decline in business in 1997 and 1998, the Branson/Lakes Area Convention and Visitors Bureau held its first event at the annual convention of the Religious Conference Management Association in Dallas in 1999, noting that "700 travel planners for church groups represent \$50 billion of business..." (Buckstaff 1999). Shari Thomas, meeting and convention sales manager for the Convention and Visitors Bureau, noted "This is our first big step to jump in with both feet...we're being proactive in trying to protect our future and make sure Branson continues to rise as a destination in the United States and the world" (Buckstaff 1999).

It was within this environment that the battle for a casino began in October 2001. The Board of Aldermen in Rockaway Beach, located 12 miles from Branson, voted to place a nonbinding referendum on a November 6th ballot to seek voter approval for the

launching of a campaign to develop a casino (Buckstaff 2004a). Located on the White River, Rockaway Beach had at one time been a thriving tourist destination itself, but the construction of the dam nearer Branson drew investment from Rockaway Beach. As Branson thrived, Rockaway Beaches' economy declined dramatically. Believing other development efforts to change the town's fate had been exhausted, voters approved the November 6th initiative. Shortly thereafter in 2002 Southwest Casino and Hotel Corp. agreed to develop a casino in Rockaway Beach and became active in the campaign, promising 1,900 construction jobs and 1,000 casino jobs with higher than average wages (Buckstaff 2002). Local resident Virginia Ferguson evoked both community and family values themes in calls for support calling this "a plan to revive our community and bring tourists back," and asking voters to "do the neighborly thing" (Young 2004b). Many elites in Branson expressed less than neighborly sentiments, including the Branson Board of Alderman who immediately voiced disapproval, rejecting any support for the Rockaway Beach community which they deemed competitively threatening.

Collective opponents of the casino amendment included HFE and Peter Herschend; Branson Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and CVB; the Branson Board of Aldermen; Branson's sitting Mayor Lou Schaefer; Casino Watch (Mark Andrews); Branson area churches; Senator Doyle Childers from Missouri district 29; Springfield News-Leader editorial staff; the Missouri Baptist Convention; the Missouri Board of Education; and a collection of Branson business elites. Proponents included many Rockaway Beach residents; the Rockaway Beach Board of Aldermen; the Gambling Industry and Southwest Casino and Hotel Corp.; Rockaway Beach business owners; Building and Construction Trade Council; the Missouri AFL-CIO; the local Masons'

union; and Robert Low who became an investor. Low's primary business is the trucking company Prime, Inc., but he was an early investor in a tribal casino in the 1980s and has been a primary and successful investor in the Palace Casino Resort in Biloxi since the 1990s.

On June 30, 2003, Missourians for Economic Opportunity filed the initiative petition to amend "Article III of the Missouri Constitution by adding one new section, 39(g), to permit floating gambling facilities on the White River in Rockaway Beach, Missouri" with the Missouri State Auditor's Office. The committee was formed by Rockaway Beach Business owners and political leaders who began the collection of nearly 200,000 signatures, more than needed to get the initiative on the August 2004 ballot (Murphy 2003). Proponents were initially bankrolled by Southwest Casino and Hotel Corp., but once Springfield businessman Robert Low was announced as the developments' partner, he became the principal backer for Missourians for Economic Opportunity. By July of 2004, Low had contributed \$10.9 million of the \$11.7 million total for the campaign (Young 2004c). Low (2012) became convinced that a casino was a good investment and framed the benefits for local workers:

. . . Branson is quite a phenomenon as far as tourism is concerned. [It] attracts a good demographic for gaming, attracts a lot of them. . . gaming is typically a pretty good employer. Competing for folks that maybe before were [making] \$8 or \$10 an hour, minimum wage and layoffs from seasonal stuff. These kinds of workers had the potential to move up to \$15 to \$20 an hour . . . you know I wasn't there just for altruistic purposes, but you know I could think of things I do [that] make economic sense . . .

In June 2004 the anti-casino committee 'Show Me You Care,' formed by Pete Herschend, filed a statement of organization with the Missouri Ethics Commission (Young 2004b). Up to that point, Herschend had led a group of Branson business and

political elites almost single-handedly in opposition to gambling, funding anti-gambling efforts in Missouri as early as 1994 when a casino was proposed for the area by a New Jersey-based company and the Eastern Shawnee tribe. For the 2004 campaign, a number of Herschend family members contributed large sums, with Peter Herschend becoming the single largest donor, contributing a combined \$1.28 million in cash and services by the August vote (Alm 2004). Herschend's tactics included compromise talks in February 2004 with Ameristar Casinos Inc., the states' largest casino operator, to raise the loss limit in exchange for a limit on the number of new casino licenses to the areas where gambling was already established (Young 2004a). This effort eventually resulted in a ballot initiative that voters later approved in November 2008, effectively putting an end to any subsequent efforts to revive the casino development issue in Branson. Opponents also unsuccessfully attempted to use the courts with a last minute lawsuit to stop the statewide vote that claimed the amendment violated "...a constitutional ban against using the initiative process to set aside money 'other than that of new revenues' created by the initiative," suggesting that casino revenue was an existing stream, and that the amendment violated state and federal guarantees of equal protection (Goodwin 2004).

The economic benefits argument was forcefully made by proponents and was appealing to those suffering in Rockaway Beach, but also to some business interests in Branson who believed that a casino would not deter typical Branson tourists, but would simply add to the overall visitors. The results of a study regarding the impact of a casino in Tunica, Mississippi, indicated that this is precisely what happened in their market and, coincidentally, shuttles were operating at the time to take tourists from Springfield to Tunica (Buckstaff 2003c). In 2003 the casino developer was accepted for membership to

local chambers of commerce in Springfield, Rockaway Beach, Nixa, Kimberling City, Forsyth, and Hollister, but was denied by the Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce (Buckstaff 2003b). With focus on the non-family segment of the Branson tourist demographic, particularly young couples and seniors, which local elites have repeatedly expressed an interest in growing, some Branson business owners believed “a casino in nearby Rockaway Beach [is] a perfect fit for Southwest Missouri. They're eager to see their business brochures on display in the new casino's lobby.” (Buckstaff 2003c). As Low (2012) opined

. . . the small business guy in Branson isn't thrilled with the status quo as perhaps the Herschends, and . . . in my opinion and my perception small business people supported our initiative . . . Branson had an overbuilt condition really in the hotel business especially, and even in the convenience stores and the restaurants and those kinds of things, so our concept was to not even build a hotel to begin with.

Small business owners were not the only local supporters. Early in the campaign Branson entertainer Cindi Barr made efforts to rally the entertainer community to support the casino proposal. She noted that “A lot of people were afraid to do anything because they thought they might be blackballed if they were supporting the gambling” (Buckstaff 2003a). Later reports inferred the emergence of a ‘silent majority’ of businesses and workers in Taney county who were supportive of the amendment but remained silent for fear of losing their jobs or facing hostility from local business elites like Herschend, with one report offering local speculation that the prospect of higher paying, potentially unionized, casino jobs was really motivating local opponents (Buckstaff 2004b). If a “silent majority” did not emerge in the final vote in the region, a very significant minority did. The amendment ballot received 45 percent approval in Taney County (containing both Branson and Rockaway Beach), where it might be assumed that the Herschends, and

evangelicalism, have the most pronounced influence (Springfield News-Leader Staff 2004).

Herschend's public framing of the issue either dismissed or downplayed wage and revenue claims, especially when directed to constituents in the Ozarks. This appears particularly strategic as it may have served to diffuse attention on the low wages and contingent nature of predominant service-sector work in the region. Overall the campaign did not exclusively reference regional culture or values, generally focusing on Branson's competitive marketing brand. This assessment is supported by a recent content analysis of Missouri newspapers reporting on the campaign which demonstrates that overall reference to the "Branson brand" by opponents to the casino were relatively more frequent than reference to the social and moral costs of gambling or arguments countering the economic benefit claims of proponents (Derossett 2012). However, a revealing regional pattern appeared in the Kansas City and St. Louis areas, where casinos are currently operating, as opponent comments in newspapers mostly avoided the "counter-economic" argument, focusing primarily on the "Branson brand," likely reflecting the reluctance to offer an argument that might contradict the experience of local casino workers. In the Springfield newspaper, with circulation throughout the Ozark's, the "counter-economic" and "Branson brand" argument both appeared more frequently than did reference to social and moral costs.

According to Rick Todd, holding a particular market demographic was the key to the battle. Again referencing the efforts by Las Vegas to draw families, he suggested that

. . . while lots of people in Missouri I'm sure get on the plane and go to Las Vegas, the numbers of them that take their children with them, you could put it in a thimble, it doesn't happen. We need that family



business intact for that three months, four months out of the season financially. The fear is that gambling would have a devastating impact on that market (Todd 2012).

In Todd's summation gambling is not inherently anti-Christian and, contrary to the Herschend's public pronouncements, he even recently acknowledged the possibility that a casino could bring jobs and better wages for families in the region. But for the campaign, HFE and "Show Me You Care" drew on a variation of the "family-values" theme which downplayed the material needs and economic reality of families while focusing on the potential damage to the Branson brand and, to a lesser extent, the social problems said to come with gambling. This reflects the local balance of religiosity and capital accumulation manifest by most Branson businesses, particularly those owned by the Herschend family. Sociologist Aaron Ketchell (2007:81) observed that "because Silver Dollar City relies on Billy Graham's innocuous mode of evangelism rather than John Ashcroft's more brazen attempts to integrate Christianity into the public sphere, no contemporary visitor would find evidence of the Herschend's opposition to gambling or to any other hot-button political initiative that is part of the larger evangelical 'family values' agenda." He certainly made his position on the casino publicly clear, but the politics and biblical orientation of evangelicalism are deemphasized at Herschend businesses. But what is more, Herschend (and the "Show Me You Care" coalition) was able to take advantage of culturally constituted brand themes which produce particularistic contradictions to politically divide the local community on the casino issue and protect their business interests. Raeanne Presley, prior to becoming mayor of Branson, was less ambiguous in her assessment of the battle proclaiming that "we *sell* values, family-friendly, and we believe a casino image would mar that" (Young 2004b).

The rejection of the amendment in 2004 did not end the Herschend coalition's mission to ensure a casino would never be approved for the Branson region and subsequent efforts, including the 2008 initiative, illustrate contradictions for business leaders and public officials otherwise committed to laissez-faire governance. The passing in 2007 of a "village-law" in Missouri was designed to allow developers to bypass municipal and regional zoning restrictions by making it easier to petition for incorporation of private developments as a 'village.' Before its repeal in 2008, at least a dozen state-wide land-owners and developers sought to use the petition, including Robert Plaster, a Missouri businessman and developer, who ". . . frustrated by county government, immediately sought to turn his land near Table Rock Lake into a village" (Lieb 2008). Plaster petitioned the first day the law was passed to incorporate a 400 acre development on county land into a village. Branson citizens fought Plaster's development attempts in the past citing concerns about potential threats to quality of life and water. Considering the evidence for relatively lax zoning in Stone and Taney County, Plaster's 'village' petition may seem unnecessary, but he had engaged local officials in a previous dispute when he proposed rezoning for the property for a casino in 1999 (O'Dell 2007).

Low, whose coalition spent more than ten times as much money, partially attributes the initiative's failure to the opposition's strategic construction of what he calls a "sin city ballot," which included both the casino proposal and Amendment 2 which banned gay marriage. He also suggested that unions, a key ally for proponents in the battle, ". . . really don't turn-out the vote the way they maybe once did," though support was clearly strongest in the more urbanized and unionized St. Louis and Kansas City

areas where casinos already existed (Low 2012). But this analysis makes clear that local elites capitalized on particular moral assessments of spatial meaning which are used to produce the Branson brand.

Interestingly, a casino has since been developed less than two hours from Branson near Joplin, Missouri, just across the border in Oklahoma. And the website BransonCasinos.com (2012) provides travel packages that link Branson with seven Missouri and Oklahoma casinos. This arrangement is, undoubtedly, less concerning for local business elites, who may, in the end, benefit from regional casino visitors after all. The casino battle begins to illustrate the role of the complex intersection of spatial commodification and regional culture in the production of local development conflict. It also highlights a central contradiction, as elites otherwise committed to laissez-faire governance and espousing the primacy of consumer choice became involved in the political process to protect their business interests. A second recent battle to approve a large race-track development near Branson brings the linkage between commodification and culture and the contradictions which arise when these intersect with neoliberalism into clearer focus and allows for further assessment of how these factors shape local particularities of growth politics and conflict.

#### THE BRANSON SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX (BSEC)

Environmental degradation in the Branson area from rapid unplanned growth and severe overbuilding emerged in the early 1990s and has continued relatively unabated since (Becker and Bradbury 1994; Ketchell 2007). This has been particularly true of water quality concerns, which dominate regional environmental discussions because of

the importance of local lakes as an attraction for tourist dollars. Regional elites cannot afford to entirely disregard environmental concerns but the potential for environmental degradation is weighed against both the perceived accumulation benefits of development and the specific semiotic meaning of that development, while land-use decisions proceed in the historically contingent context of loosely structured land-use policy guided by a laissez-faire development approach.

When Russell Cook announced his plan to build an 800 acre “NASCAR-style” speedway complex near Branson in early 2011, he had already amassed a substantial portfolio of both successful and failed development projects in the region and some considered his previous activity a prime example of the consequences of unfettered individual land rights and lax environmental protection. Cook was a partner in two recent large scale failed development projects in Branson, TanStone Plaza and Tuscany on the Lake. Numerous factors contributed to their failure, but at issue for many residents and officials in the region is the massive blasted and cleared vacant properties left in their wake. TanStone Plaza land clearance issues eventually garnered the developer a \$36,000 tree removal fine from the city (Groman 2007). Dave Coonrod, who was with OUL when studies of the race track development area were conducted, is particularly critical of the ‘scorched earth’-style clearance approach typical of local developers like Cook. OUL was initially consulted on the racetrack project by Todd Asherman, a resident of a subdivision just north of the proposed development, to determine the impact on water quality, as environmental impact analyses are not required by the county. Cook began land clearance for the race track project before zoning changes had been fully approved and later, in fact, was in a dispute with the Missouri

Department of Natural Resources for violating the initial land disturbance permit by clearing significantly more than the permitted 75 acres (Clanton 2011). According to Coonrod (2012),

They were already engaged in pushing down trees. This was a forest. And they, if you go out and look at it now, it is totally denuded. It's a lunar landscape. And, there are aerial photos that were flown by, at the behest of Johnny Morris, that show in painful detail what they've done to that property. It's ruined forever and our involvement was because sanitation was going to load the creek that is downstream from there . . .

The Taney County zoning process is reactive by design. Planning and Zoning Commission administrator Bob Atchley refers to the system as “performance-based,” for which “. . . individual property owners submit an application to use their land for specific purposes to the planning body instead of having predetermined zones for certain uses. Planning & Zoning officials can place specific conditions on uses based on concerns or objections of other residents or the group itself” (Brown 2011). Development permits are addressed individually with use changes determined by non-elected planning and zoning board members (Styron 2009). This approach prioritizes the rights of individual property owners and eschews broader public planning, but also tends to undermine collective opposition. At issue, according to Branson Mayor Raeanne Presley, is the fact that large parts of Taney County remain rural and strict zoning seems less necessary, but the areas adjacent to Branson present a challenge. Contrasting Branson's only recently and marginally stricter zoning process, she observes that

Taney County is very much an entrepreneurial place and is very much ‘hey, it's my land, I'll do what I want with it.’ It's [the racetrack] in the county. and the county is very loose, almost nonexistent regulation... So you have that push and that pull against the environment and ‘what about my quality of life?’ and when do we say no. And, at least on a county level, they seldom say no (Presley 2012).

The Taney County Planning Commission had already been hearing concerns before a planned July 11<sup>th</sup> public hearing on the racetrack proposal. Water quality, noise, and the potential for decreased property values were the greatest concerns expressed about the racetrack, now called the Branson Sports Entertainment Complex (BSEC), by the OUL and local residents. The commission had other items on its agenda, but roughly 400 people appeared with interest primarily in the proposed racetrack and neighbors overwhelmingly opposed the project (Moring 2011). In some contexts this may have proceeded as a case typifying Harvey's 'militant particularism,' but regional entertainment competition and branding dynamics impacted both the process and the outcome.

John L. (Johnny) Morris, who owns Bass Pro Shops, one of the largest outdoor retailers in North America with nearly 60 stores in the U.S. and Canada and \$3.83 billion in sales in 2011, joined local residents in opposition to the racetrack. He started his company in Springfield, still site of the national headquarters, in the early 1970s and the original store attracts nearly four million visitors annually. Morris became involved in the dispute primarily because the proposed site is near Big Cedar Lodge, a resort he operates on Table Rock Lake. Morris expressed ambivalence about the racetrack in part because he is an enthusiastic race fan and Bass Pro Shops is an active NASCAR sponsor, but in an open letter to Taney County he expressed concerns that "This project threatens hundreds of homeowners, our property values, thousands of jobs, our quality of life and the natural environment of our Ozark hills and waterways" and that the project was financially risky (Daues 2011).

Morris was drawn into this battle due to his concerns with protection of the natural environment and the local quality of life and, especially, his personal business interests, but he did not express opposition with the race industry or the kinds of market segment competition which emerged in the casino campaign. Many in the region held to the notion that a racetrack, in fact, would draw new tourists and economically benefit the region. Cook already had endorsements from the Hollister Chamber of Commerce and other local businesses and many Branson officials and business leaders were at least tacitly supportive. Ross Summers (2012) observed that

Crowds that go to NASCAR races are very similar to the Branson audience. The profile is very similar. They are not big city people. Mostly rural and probably in the, I don't want to say lower rung of the socioeconomic scale, but kinda in the middle. So, it's . . . the demographics of the race fan and the Branson fan are very similar. *That's why we were in favor of it.* It would . . . probably would have brought in a lot of folks that would look just like our customer.

These officials and others did not explicitly express concerns that a project of this scope would inevitably entail environmental degradation of the region's natural beauty, focusing, instead, on whether or not the developer would abide by already established environmental standards to ensure water quality and minimize noise. Resistance by other prominent local elites was minimized because a racetrack was not deemed conflictive with the "family values" brand. Moreover, Cook, a long-time resident of the region, worked to add Branson brand flavor to the project, quickly proposing that when the track was not hosting races it be used for other "...faith-based and community events" (Taney County Planning Commission 2011).

Two weeks after the public hearing in July, the Planning Commission approved Cook's project, with conditions, including the completion of any necessary transportation

upgrades and development of sound monitoring stations near the track, both at developer expense. In November 2011 the Taney County Board of Adjustment rejected a collection of appeals, primarily from residents intent on stopping the project, including claims that there were procedural errors in the initial approval and “. . . that the track would be detrimental to surrounding property, that the developer has not provided sufficient proof that the project will create economic growth and that the project’s developer violated procedures by doing grading work without a permit” (Sain 2011). It was also reported that the Missouri Department of Natural Resources had notified Cook that his project was in violation of portions of the Clean Water Act.

Despite Morris’ conservation roots and appeal to the environment as regional attraction, concerns by him and neighbors about water and land degradation, and local lip-service about protecting the Ozark’s natural beauty, for Morris and many of the other opponents it was the location of the development which was considered objectionable. The racetrack was approved despite opposition by Morris, who nominally represents a larger business entity than the Herschends and is also well respected in the region, and despite the fact that the ultimate decision was in the hands of a relatively small county zoning commission which might be expected to be more amenable to influence. This case clearly illustrates the relative preeminence of the family values brand theme compared to the natural beauty theme. Interestingly, Morris found himself the subject of neighbor complaints regarding concerns about potential light pollution and noise from a proposed gun range and ATV course at a 946-acre project called “Bass Pro Shops Outdoor Academy at Big Cedar,” which the Planning Commission approved in April



2012 (Sain 2012). He had alluded to this project in his complaints against the racetrack the previous summer, suggesting at the time that the two were incompatible.

Morris' involvement, vociferous opposition from neighbors, and professional assessments from agencies like OUL demonstrating a significant environmental impact were insufficient to halt the racetrack development. While for some, like Branson mayor Presley, both Cook and the racetrack were potentially problematic, most regional officials and business leaders were either openly supportive or ambivalent about the project so that the opposition remained restricted primarily to immediate neighbors. Interestingly, representatives from HFE, which includes environmental stewardship as a component of its mission statement, were mostly silent on this issue. In his argument against the casino, Pete Herschend, who worked extensively to ensure that local highway expansion intersected his own businesses, once made the practical observation that "Rockaway Beach lacks enough flat land for a casino complex and adequate parking . . . and the two-lane roads leading to the town could not bear the volume of traffic projected for the casino" (Carey 2004). Whatever their connections to regional natural beauty, these concerns were apparently not deemed similarly dissuasive for an 800 acre 65,000 seat racetrack project. In this instance, the regional theme of natural beauty and the relative importance of the environment to the tourism industry appear insufficient to halt a development project that is otherwise compatible with Branson's target market and social conservative family-values brand.

## DISCUSSION

These two studies illustrate the complex role of culturally constituted spatial meaning regarding both political-economic exigencies and contradictions and moral

assessments of the role of government, business leaders, and local residents in structuring local land-use conflicts. While the Branson brand has long been represented by the collective themes of individualism, faith in free markets, and religio-moral conservatism and by protection of the environment and natural beauty, the former collection has come to dominate local development decisions. This is due in part to the regional constitution of the New Right and neoliberalism, which has operated to reconcile the ideological contradictions it embodies and emphasized its significance in the structuring of local space, and because protection of the local environment creates more direct conflicts for a pro-growth agenda. In Ketchell's (2007:139) assessment elites have chosen to address the environmental ruin which has continually threatened the region through a “. . . gentle merger of conservation and ‘dollar signs . . .’” Such a tepid strategy has proven only marginally effective over the years.

Both Ketchell (2007) and Rick Todd (2012) in a more recent interview imply that the keeper of the “religious environmentalism” theme was likely the Herschend matriarch, Mary, who died in 1983. Reflecting on a moment he was fired from the company for cutting down trees, Todd (2012) remembers that “. . . back then you'd get hired back but there was a real emotional attachment to trees. If you were doing something to trees you might as well be doing something to one of her children.” The 1980s were a period of heavy commercialization in Branson and it is probably no coincidence that the gradual prioritizing of other themes and attractions follows on the heels of Mary Herschend's passing.

The Ozark Mountain Legacy (2012) ‘visioning’ document, essentially a marketing project developed by regional officials through town hall meetings and resident surveys, includes a call to “actively and relentlessly protect and enhance our natural beauty, resources, and environment.” This could signal a resurgence of political will for a pursuit of sustainable development practices which may necessitate more proactive growth management. Indeed, there is some evidence for a move beyond lip-service to address environmental concerns. In 2009 the Branson Board of Aldermen initiated a “sustainable education series” called “Greening Up Branson” with session topics addressing such issues as energy, transportation, building and planning. Many researchers from nearby Missouri State University have been among the series’ lecturers, including Linnea Lantria who kicked off the series for 2010 with a presentation entitled “Developing Sustainable Destinations: Geotourism Explained” (City of Branson 2010). Most of the sessions appear to frame topics in practical language with market-based themes highlighting, for example, how sustainable development might help save money for the city and recalling the potential market for environmental tourism, but this could nonetheless signal a reevaluation of the consequences of a pro-growth course.

Pressures on infrastructure have compelled the addition of zoning policies and limited planning, at least within the Branson city limits, and have begun to illuminate problems with the public/private development project approach frequently used to attract growth. Mayor Presley, who was elected in 2007, has become increasingly concerned about how growth and a relative lack of zoning regulation or experience with large scale development have combined to lead the city into unlucrative agreements with developers. In her assessment developers came to Branson in the 1990s and early 2000s seeking

taxpayer incentives, especially through TIF's, and promising economic growth, leaving the city strapped with reduced revenues and vacant properties due to overbuilding. The \$420 million Branson Landing, for example, took advantage of a TIF that allows the developer to capture most of the tax revenue it generates for redevelopment and has ultimately led to a retail glut in the region, causing other sizable centers which once produced tax revenue to shut down. Further, the city is still obligated to cover the cost of a long-term bond used for infrastructure. According to Presley (2012) those few critics caught up in the process were undermined by developer promises and the city's pro-growth agenda, suggesting that

. . . when they [Branson officials] had the opportunity to listen to people -- because when you do a project of these types of course there are lots of consultants and the consultants make their presentations and they say "we'll bring this many people and they'll spend this much a day and oh my gosh isn't it great?" And there were people who I respect who got up and said "really? Where did you get those numbers? That doesn't seem possible to us." And people were simply told, "*well you don't have the vision. You're against growth. You're anti-something new. You just want to protect what you have.*" And I think if there had been more, I think if there had been a willingness to say "lets talk about that" that we could have seen a bit more of the real pressure that this put on the taxpayers.

Both conservative and progressive politicians have criticized the use of TIF's and the mayor has called for them to be removed as a local development tool and for limited growth management through bolstered zoning and limited planning. This has led to some changes in how the city approaches development and many local officials and business interests have been tacitly, if cautiously, supportive. Presley and others have characterized the transition, and the contrast between the city's emerging approach and that of the county where the racetrack is being developed, as a matter of development 'maturation.' Coonrod (2012), who as Commissioner helped developed a loosely

regulated urban growth boundary around the larger city of Springfield, referred to the rural counties in the Ozarks as “. . . more juvenile in the way they approach their government . . .” and he decried “. . . a lack of vision . . .” and reluctance to create comprehensive planning. But framing growth management issues in evolutionary terms obfuscates the conscious efforts by many officials and business leaders in the region to prevent more restrictive zoning regulations or more comprehensive planning. Both Ross Summers (2012) and Rick Todd (2012), for example, recently expressed concern that the “pendulum had swung too far,” with regard to eliminating developer incentives and increasing zoning and suggested that cautious retrenchment was necessary for continued growth in the region. While exaggerating the extent of new zoning (and the anti-growth convictions of the mayor) one local blogger decried the potential political impact of the “Greening Up Branson” series with the exclamation that

. . . new business is coming to a halt. An anti-business and anti-growth policy is successfully being posted with new green initiatives aimed at permanently stopping new development and the accompanying new income. Prior to taking office Presley complained that the new growth in jobs, while the rest of the nation experienced a recession, were forcing her personal business to pay higher wages - poverty benefits some” (Codon).

While it’s beyond the scope of this study to empirically determine the degree to which this represents popular sentiment in the region, this blogger’s comments are indicative of the growth ideology, equating growth with widespread benefit to local workers and families.

What this analysis makes clear is that the intention of agents in the relatively few local conflicts over development that emerge in the region is not to limit growth generally, but neither can it be dismissed simplistically as NIMBY opposition. In the context of the rise of the New Right and the processes of spatial commodification and

neoliberalization culturally constituted with local constituents these conflicts represent efforts to direct growth within the confines of a particular symbolic construct that ultimately provides the region, particularly developers and business owners, a competitive advantage. As the city and region continue to grow and development further encroaches on the natural environment, it is possible that conflicts involving neighbors and developers over issues of noise and light pollution and environmental degradation will become more common, so that the preeminence of social conservatism and laissez-faire free-market individualism as the dominant themes in development and land use decisions may be more significantly challenged out of political and economic necessity, if not a transformation of values.

#### Notes

1. For an earlier analysis of collective consumption-based urban movements see Castells, Manuel. 1977. *The Urban Question*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Castells, Manuel. 1983. *The City and the Grassroots*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
2. This has long been recognized as an important contradictory feature of cities characterized by laissez-faire free-market urban governance, particularly in tourist cities. In addition to Logan and Molotch (1987) and Judd and Fainstein (1999) see, for instance, Feagin, Joe R. 1988. *Free Enterprise City*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Feagin, Joe R. and Robert E. Parker. 1990. *Building American Cities: The Urban Real Estate Game*. Washington, D.C.: Beard Books. Gottdiener, M., Claudia C. Collins, and David R. Dickens. 1999. *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City*.

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## CHAPTER 4

### ARTICLE 3: CONSECRATED COMMODIFICATION: CONSUMPTION, PIETY, AND PROFIT IN BRANSON, MISSOURI

Branson's rise to national prominence in the 1990s coincided with the emergence of American evangelicalism as a potent social, cultural, and political force. As evangelicals fully surfaced from the subcultural insularity that had characterized the movement since the 1930s, the Ozarks became a potent site for facilitating this transition...Moreover, as political awareness and activity among evangelicals abetted the "Republican Revolution" of the mid-1990s, the city also did its part by offering a platform to prominent Christian Right leaders who found Branson's longtime promotion of family values and civil religiosity a snug fit for their sensibilities. By linking such vantages to other elements that have always had traction in the region – antimodernism, nostalgia, affability, and affordability – the city solidified what Peter Herschend has labeled the Branson brand" (Ketchell, 2007:224).

In 1992 when George Bush Sr. determined to emphasize the Republican Party's "family values" platform and celebrate his second presidential nomination in the Herschend family's nostalgia themed entertainment park Silver Dollar City, Branson was on the cusp of a growth explosion which would endure for the next two decades. The community of only 3,700 at the time, located in the Ozark hills of Southwest Missouri, benefitted from a "60 Minutes" profile the prior year during which it was proclaimed the "live music capital of the entire universe." Currently there are more than 40 live theaters in Branson featuring primarily country, bluegrass, and gospel music. But as Francaviglia (1995:66) observed, ". . . the themes and messages in the music itself are the determining factors that have made it the perfect medium for entertainment in Branson." What truly distinguishes Branson, a city structured almost entirely to enhance tourist consumption, is its unified marketing emphasis on the themes of an evangelical variation of family values, patriotism, faith in free-markets, and the nostalgic romanticism of rural life and natural

beauty. Through a combination of pressure from local elites and self-selection based on a habitus infused with these values, theaters, restaurants, hotels, theme parks, and retail centers, all find more or less explicit ways to embody the local leitmotif. The operators of Silver Dollar City, as one of Branson's oldest attractions, self-consciously incorporate these into the park's marketing and on-site messaging, where shows with elements of old-time tent revivals are blended with the typical attractions of modern theme parks and whose parent company, Herschend Family Entertainment (HFE), punctuates its mission statement with the proclamation "All in a manner consistent with Christian values and ethics."

By the late 1990s Branson had been iconized more than once on the popular "Simpsons" television show, where in one episode a visit to the city elicited the remark by the character Bart, "My dad says it's like Vegas – if it were run by Ned Flanders," the Simpson's straight laced God-fearing neighbor (Kennell 2001). This exposure and the nationwide expansion of evangelicalism and the Christian entertainment industry have contributed greatly to the region's rapid growth, which has for two decades outpaced most communities in Missouri and the United States. The consumption industries of tourism and retail dominate in Branson. With a population of only 10,500 in 2010, Branson operates over 100,000 hotel rooms, restaurant seats, and theater seats combined (more theater seats than the New York Broadway District), the nation's only privately funded commercial airport, and new corporate developments like the \$1 million mixed-use Branson Landing and a proposed 65,000 seat speedway, together drawing roughly 8 million visitors annually (Branson.com 2011). In 2007 total revenues for the retail trade and accommodation industries alone were roughly \$1.5 billion (U.S. Census Bureau



2007). HFE is by far the single largest employer with nearly 2,000 workers in predominantly seasonal service sector occupations, the majority of whom are concentrated at Silver Dollar City, the company's first theme park. HFE is now the largest privately owned family theme park corporation in the U.S. with 26 parks nationwide (Herschend Family Entertainment 2012). The question this analysis addresses regards how social space in Branson is culturally and physically structured to stimulate consumption and enhance profit.

### CONSUMPTION EUTOPIA

Branson elites have historically eschewed comprehensive public planning and actively leveraged public revenue for private development, generally allowing developers to determine the most profitable arrangement of urban services. The result is a city built for tourists and to stimulate tourist consumption which appears in most areas a haphazard gaudy assemblage of Las Vegas style theaters, trinket and memorabilia shops, hotels, big box retailers, endless billboards, parking lots, and massive highways carelessly cut through or plunked atop Ozark mountain ridges and valleys inducing an experience that is at once over-stimulating, disorienting, and claustrophobic. While the difficult Ozark terrain has dictated the paths of development to some extent, rejection of urban planning and an aggressive growth agenda which prioritizes the needs of business and developers are largely responsible for Branson's urban form. When Peter Herschend convinced then Missouri governor John Ashcroft, evangelical conservative and close friend to whose campaigns he routinely donated, to fund a new major highway in the region in the early 1990s, the route, which inevitably plowed through mountains and forests, was chosen largely because it traversed several of Herschend's properties near Silver Dollar City

(Corn and Moldea 2001). Through a seemingly chaotic system of roadways, tourists and local residents are funneled into and through spaces of consumption in ways which particularly benefit the largest attractions. It is quite possible to spend an entire weekend in Branson, following twisting color coded roadways from one attraction to another, without once encountering what most would easily identify as a neighborhood, school, or public park.

It may seem that such a garish jumble would constrain both the quality of life and the circulation of capital. Branson does, in fact, struggle with increasing social and environmental problems directly attributable to rapid growth and dependence on service sector industry, including low wages and high seasonal unemployment, lack of affordable housing, deforestation, soil erosion, water pollution, and severe traffic congestion. And indeed in recent years historically hesitant public officials have begun to implement more stringent zoning restrictions in an attempt to address some of the worst consequences of unfettered urban development. Nonetheless, efforts to control growth for the benefit of the environment and local residents continue to be reticent and reactive. Community well-being has been actively tied to a growth ideology which purports that policies designed to create growth will lead to economic and social benefit for all residents. The “needs of life” for residents and workers are assumed to be satisfied naturally through individual entrepreneurship and free-market economic expansion. The Branson and Tri-Lakes area serves up to 70,000 visitors daily, generating nearly \$2 billion for the local economy (City of Branson 2009). Yet, with a population of 83,877, the Branson micropolitan area has a total poverty rate of 12.9 percent compared to the rate of 11.3 percent for the U.S. and 10.6 percent for Missouri (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Fully 63

percent of all employment in Taney County (containing Branson) is in “retail trade,” “arts, entertainment, and recreation,” and “accommodation and food service,” all predominantly low-wage occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). Revealing tension related to trying to live the “family values” brand, Branson mayor Presley (2012) candidly acknowledged in a recent interview by the author that a push by the city for non-tourist industry employers is compelled largely by the fact that “Branson lacks . . . a defined middle class” because of the preponderance of seasonal service-work.

Mirroring predominant national urbanization trends in recent decades, particularly with the rise of the New Right in the late 1970s, governance and development in Branson tend to defer to market priorities accelerating the process of spatial commodification so that regional infrastructure, architecture, signage, and indeed social life are structured for consumption based economic growth. Tourists consume products but they also consume the symbolic meaning of the city itself. While it may be said that tourists in Las Vegas are seeking reprieve from personal trouble and the ills of modern life through illicit consumption and the prospect of ‘striking it rich,’ in Branson they may be said to be seeking redemption through, what Ketchell (2007:227) entitles, “sanctified consumption.” But this is, nonetheless, *commodity* consumption, so that theming, or branding, is simply one emergent component in the production of space primarily for its exchange-value. Branson elites may earnestly extol the restorative capacity of “God’s country” and morally infused tourist entertainment, yet they do so to enhance capital accumulation. This creates contradictions which often require local agents to deploy strategic messaging which deemphasize or obfuscate the exploitation of a predominantly low wage and seasonal workforce, growing environmental degradation,

and other social costs of growth. The emphasis on an idealized past in Silver Dollar City, for example, where pre-factory craft, housing, and food production are exhibited and workers donning period clothing spend entire shifts attending consumers and performing service scripts offers a sublimated vision of the organization of work and manipulation of consumers.

How are contradictions between, for example, traditional Christian ideals which broadly eschew a focus on personal profit and extol support for the poor and stewardship of the environment reconciled locally with capitalist exigencies of growth and capital accumulation? Further, what are the methods used by local agents to enhance capital accumulation in urban space produced and reproduced for tourist consumption? The intention of the following analysis is to unravel some of the ways market externalities are obfuscated by theme messaging in Branson and how business owners, political officials, and residents use the construction of ‘authenticity’ through the leisure and entertainment industries and the structure of the physical environment to exalt free market principles and stimulate consumption. The former becomes clearer from the details of a content analysis of the messaging frames in a recent battle over a proposed casino development in Branson waged by local business elites, for which both sides used critically different variations of a “family values” theme. Ostensibly at issue, according to Peter Herschend and others who fought to halt the development, were the social and moral problems associated with casinos, but constant talk of regional brand protection and dismissal of higher casino wage projections suggests more base business competition. The latter is revealed through a set of semiotic analyses of billboard and advert messaging and the physical structure of space in Branson, the Branson Landing, and its most famous

attraction, Silver Dollar City. Together these studies make clearer how theming and physical development are combined for the production of social space for profit in a tourist city.

## HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

What is new and different about the use of culture by cities for global positioning, such as the development of cultural tourism, is that local distinctiveness of urban places, which have developed often over the course of centuries, has now become commodified and transformed into an adjunct of profit making through consumption of space. No longer does urban culture refer to a particular way of life. In the context of capitalist economic development and global competition, the new way in which culture is exploited often clashes with the old, such as in local neighborhood resistance to grand projects of branding in attempting to acquire world attention. (Gottdiener & Hutchison 2011:173)

As Ketchell (2007) notes, Ozark's culture has not been subject to the same kind of scrutiny, particularly involving scholarly investigation, as, for instance, its eastern corollary, the Appalachian region. For his own part, Ketchell traces the roots of evangelism and its linkage to the growth of tourism in the Branson area, unraveling its complex historically contingent transformation to the present. The first attractions to the region, including game parks in the late 19th century, emphasized "rest cure" from urban ills and focused primarily on regional natural attributes, like the prominent White river, the Ozark Mountains, an abundance of natural caves, and on an Ozarks' traditional cottage craft industry kept alive in part by the region's physical isolation. Southwest Missouri has a tradition of Christian fundamentalist influence. It is home, for example, to the world headquarters for the evangelical "Assemblies of God" Pentecostal church in nearby Springfield, and the Branson region historically offered a variety of religious retreats that drew travelers. The widely influential spiritually infused Harold Wright

novel set in the Ozarks, the *Shepherd of the hills*, provided a national audience its first glimpse of the culture and natural beauty of the region and eventually spawned a memorial lodge, farm, and theater featuring a production based on the book beginning in 1955.

While these early attractions are of significance and continue to inform extant elements of the Branson brand, they did not ensure that the city would grow as a nationally recognized tourist destination. In addition to active boosterism, as Ketchell (2007:29) suggests, “. . . the historical and current Branson industries have relied heavily on a constructed and idealized past;” a process entailing, as always, an emphasis on selective historical themes chosen to reconcile the moral ambivalence of profit-seeking from tourism. He notes, for example, that most early visitors sought “. . . a brief reprieve within an environment deemed immune from the tribulations of capitalism,” while the morality-based theme and rural setting of the *Shepherd of the Hills* eschewed urbanization and its concomitant “coercions of temptation and materialism” and the distractions of “cheap culture” (Ketchell 2007:19). Wright himself, for instance, rejected what he genderized as “feminized modern culture,” characterized by “. . . spurious mental work and the quest for monetary gain,” while extolling instead the “. . . meritorious and productive physical labor. . .” he attributed to masculinity and rural living (Ketchell 2007:10). Branson residents, particularly business and political elites, would gradually come to embrace these apparent contradictions, making the city a premiere Christian entertainment destination offering its own baptized version of Americana and “cheap culture” to tourist families. Joel Manby, current Herschend Family Entertainment CEO, remarks in his forthcoming book entitled *Love Works: Seven Timeless Principles for*

*Effective Leaders* that “. . . love is not an excuse to put up with bad work or a lack of profit” (Said 2012).

Yet, as thorough as Ketchell’s analysis is, it under-theorizes the political-economic context in which the tourism industry has been constituted in the Ozarks, barely treating, for instance, the commodity form which consumption takes in a capitalistic structure. Profit-making is, for instance, precisely what motivates elites to construct *authenticity*, as presumably embodied in “sanctified consumption,” which emphasizes the moral certainty of sanctification while obfuscating the ambivalence of commodity consumption. The exigencies of capital accumulation shape urban development and constitute the process of spatial commodification in Branson, so that the stimulation of consumption is prioritized over other purposes and elites attempt to reconcile the contradictions this generates for Christian theology through regional messaging.

### *Spatial Commodification*

Max Weber demonstrated the complex culturally constituted linkage between the protestant ethic and capitalism more than 100 years ago, but he was unable to fully anticipate the historically contingent process of expanded spatial commodification. To better understand the process of spatial structuring which shapes tourist cities like Branson, we must first unpack the commodity form. According to Marx, commodities are unique to capitalism and embody the social relations typical of its political-economic structure. These are, thus, produced both for exchange-value, which creates profit, and use-value, which entails the satisfaction of a need. Drawing from the Marxian-based

work of Lefebvre (1991), Logan and Molotch (1987) envision urban space in commodified form as a container of social relations imbued with use-value but produced with the express purpose of realizing its exchange-value. Urban residents tend to focus on the use-value of space which satisfies the needs of life. Developers, real-estate speculators, financiers, and allied politicians tend to promote the commodification of space by prioritizing the exchange-value of property and place for their mutual political and economic benefit.

But space is not precisely like other commodities. Gottdiener ([1985] 1994) suggests that the production of space as initially theorized by Lefebvre is a more complex social phenomenon than the analysis from Logan and Molotch indicates. In contrast to a container analogy, space both constitutes and is constituted by interlinking structure and agency in a dual relationship that problematizes dichotomized categorization. In his interpretation of Lefebvre's analysis he notes that

...space is produced like no other commodity. It has both a material reality and a formal property which enables it to constrain the material reality of other commodities and their social relations. Just as other commodities, it represents both a material object and a process involving social relations. Unlike other commodities, it continually recreates social relations or helps reproduce them; furthermore, these might be the very same relations which helped produce it in the first place Gottdiener ([1985] 1994:129).

In this sense, space may be the most decisive commodity of all and the socio-spatial perspective suggests that space is constituted not simply by political and economic structure, but also by the confluence of these with national and local culture. Fainstein and Gladstone (1999:28) suggest, for instance, that “. . . the concept of commodification therefore provides a link between cultural analysis, based on an inquiry into patterns of



consumption and the diffusion of symbols, and political economy, rooted in an examination of the relation of structures of production and social domination.”

The commodification of space has been accelerated in recent decades by the global political-economic restructuring project generally referred to as neoliberalism. Politically leveraged by economic stagnation in core countries in the 1970s, the free-market oriented process of neoliberalization has been loosely and unevenly coordinated by elites throughout the globe with particular effects on urban space. An oft contentious coalition of social conservatives, military interventionists, and economic liberals referred to as the New Right ushered in the neoliberal agenda (Himmelstein 1990). And, as the quote by Ketchell which opens this article suggests, Branson’s historically contingent cultural and political affinity made it poised to exploit changes wrought by neoliberalization with the aggressive support of local agents. With provisions including the systematic dismantling of the welfare state, privatization, labor discipline and reorganization, and federal devolution that places the burden of service provision at the local level, neoliberalization has accelerated both the transformation of the U.S. economy through deindustrialization and the growth of constituent industries of spatial commodification like real-estate and tourism (Brenner 2004; Brenner and Theodore 2003; Hackworth 2007; Peck and Tickell 2002). David Harvey (2010:175) has noted that spatial commodification now increasingly defines urban political economy characterized by “. . . consumerism, tourism, niche marketing, cultural and knowledge-based industries, as well as perpetual resort to the economy of the spectacle . . . “. These processes are shaped by local culture, which in turn also becomes the object of consumption, and

engender increased urban competition which makes it critical that cities emphasize and refine place distinctions (Bourdieu 1998; Rifkin 2001; Zukin 1995).

Neoliberalization and spatial commodification are impacting all urban space, but under certain historical conditions they culminate in urban regions which specialize and become economically dependent almost entirely on real-estate development and tourism and engage in competitive place-branding (Fainstein 2007; Judd and Fainstein 1999; Mullins 1991). Unlike other products that are circulated among people, "...tourism involves the circulation of people to specific locations that are consumed as spaces – spaces of leisure, sport, recreation, 'nature,' amusement, 'history,' or simply 'otherness'" (Gottdiener 2000:269). The production of tourist spaces, which entails the restructuring of the built environment, the creation and recreation of meanings and histories, branding, and advertising, articulate with the vast tourism industry. This has led to themed casinos, themed malls, themed restaurants, even themed public space, as well as the creative use of denotative and connotative architecture, so that Silver Dollar City's icon emblazoned with an ax embedded in a log may represent craft production, gospel music, a meeting place, and a life-style, but never the extraction of profit or exploitation of labor. Difference becomes a competitive advantage and contributes to the construction of identity and in themed space, "Difference is produced not through products but contrasts in the themed environment alone" (Gottdiener 2000:273). Lodging and retail service and the food, trinkets, apparel, and even entertainment in individual establishments in Branson are nearly indistinguishable from the products offered in other tourist cities. Marketing symbols, particularly those signifying lifestyle alternatives, come to play a preeminent role in conflict between producers of consumer goods when the product is

very similar, whether in the carbonated beverage industry or the tourism industry, for which signs are used as ‘weapons’ in the war for consumer dollars (Gottdiener 2001:41); Holcomb 1999). In this sense cultural production does not occur in traditional ways, but is directly related to the production and consumption of space.

Examining the growth of the ‘symbolic economy’ and the modern search for authenticity through spatial consumption, Sharon Zukin (1995; 2010) observes that culture itself has become both the object and subject of consumption. Histories are re-imagined to entice consumption and to mark boundaries of spaces. Zukin (1995:19) notes that

Linking public culture to commercial cultures has important implications for social identity and social control. Preserving an ecology of images often takes a connoisseur’s view of the past, re-reading the legible practices of social class discrimination and financial speculation by reshaping the city’s collective memory. Boston’s Fanneuil Hall, South Street Seaport in New York, Harborplace in Baltimore, and London’s Tobacco Wharf make the waterfront of older cities into a consumer’s playground, far safer for tourists and cultural consumers than the closed worlds of wholesale fish and vegetable dealers and longshoremen.

Zukin (2010) implicates gentrification, uneven development, and the anonymity of life in the suburbs to explain the drive to consume authenticity. In Branson, as Ketchell documents, there is a long history of demonizing modern urban life as morally bankrupt, out of step with the natural order, and ultimately dissatisfying, constructing the Ozarks as an *authentic* alternative.

Ritzer (1999) drew from Weber in the development of his theory of the commodification of ‘enchantment,’ immediately recognizable in the fantasy creation applied to theme parks but increasingly used more generally in the production of meaning in social space. His evaluation of the ‘new means of consumption’ produced the concept

of McDonaldization to explain the process whereby more and more institutions take on the rationalized structure of the popular fast food restaurant. This structuring process, which effects both physical design and practice, is organized to induce maximum consumption. Gottdiener notes that individual modern “themed environments structure the consuming experience in ways that borrow from state fairs, the department stores, the arcades, and the movie palaces (from the past) . . .” and “. . . involve the engineering of structures through franchising to sell products in the most efficient way possible.” In documenting the “construction of the consumer,” Richard H. Robbins (2008:18) observes that it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that large department stores, as the first spaces to be structured specifically for consumption, began to consciously arrange products and manipulate store atmosphere with the goal “. . .to aggressively shape consumer desires and create value in commodities by imbuing them with the power to transform the consumer into a more desirable person.” Service became a critical component as well, by not only producing good feeling among consumers, but also by masking the social and environmental costs of growth and commercialism and the exploitation inherent in the capitalistic organization of production. In the 1920s the Commerce Department began to “. . . advise[d] retail establishments on the best ways to deliver goods to consumers, redevelop streets, build parking lots and underground transportation systems to attract consumers, use colored lights, and display merchandise in ‘tempting ways’” (Robbins 2008:20). Today such efforts have been applied to the production of entire cities. Urban planners in most cities are typically mandated by business and political powers to restrict their attention to maintaining compatible land-use zoning and managing auto traffic to improve capital circulation, using, for instance, a roadway hierarchy which intentionally

feeds drivers through commercial centers, whether or not this enhances community (Feagin and Parker 1990; Langdon 1994). Today analysts speak of auto or “car culture” in reference to the identification with and worship of cars themselves, but also the advent of drive-ins, drive-up windows, drive-in weddings, road-side parks, truck stops, and the iconic family vacation. Cities are consumed at a higher speed, changing perceptions of space and time and, consequently, the way that spatial messaging and consumption is organized.

## METHODS

This analysis provides the framework for unraveling the production of meaning and particular shape and impact of regional signification, practices, and physical structure of social space in Branson. What follows are three brief studies highlighting various features elaborated above. The first relies on a content analysis of the campaign framing of a recent fight to prevent a casino development in Branson, which allows me to demonstrate the effects of Branson brand messaging in local practice when “wielded as a tool” in business competition. It also provides an opportunity to unravel the ideological contradictions embedded in the conservative variation of “family values” when contrasted with actual social life in Branson. I conducted a limited frame analysis, focusing on content related to the campaign from three major Missouri newspapers. A content-analysis of newspapers is appropriate for this project because this particular battle was not fought in the legislature or in the courts, as it required a statewide ballot initiative to amend the state constitution. As such, the targets were state voters and the campaign required wide exposure. The campaign also entailed extensive use of radio and television ads, billboards, and wide distribution of flyers, with television ads comprising

the largest portion of the campaign budget for proponents. One observer noted that proponent's “. . . four commercials barely mention the word casino. It shows up on the screen in all the ads, but is only spoken aloud in one of them . . . ,” inferring that economic growth was the focus of these messages (Mannies 2004). But a full review of these media is not feasible at this point. I chose to review articles from Missouri's three largest newspapers, the Kansas City Star and St. Louis Post Dispatch, from regions where casinos are already developed, and the Springfield News-Leader, which closely covers Branson development, using the News Bank search engine.

In my preliminary study a search of ‘all text’ for the key words ‘gambling’ and ‘Branson’ generated over 400 total hits for all three papers. Subsequent analysis narrowed the total to 51 articles, after eliminating Associated Press duplicates, articles written before an initial October of 2001 Board of Aldermen decision in Rockaway Beach and after the August of 2004 initiative vote, and articles that did not include discussion of the casino development in Branson. Additional detailed information is drawn from newspaper articles to bolster the argument presented.

The two remaining case studies rely on technical and semiotic analysis of the built environment in Branson to demonstrate how space is structured to stimulate consumption and concentrate profits in ways that are often not obvious to passive visitors. I personally visited both the Branson Landing and Silver Dollar City and took detailed field notes of observations, which are organized and summarized below. These studies also are informed by analysis of advertising literature for each site, including proprietor websites, flyers, maps, and newsletters.

Finally, these studies, particularly the casino campaign analysis, draw from face to face open-ended interviews completed by the author with key local informants. These include current Branson Mayor Raeanne Presley, Rick Todd, senior vice president for Silver Dollar City and current member of the Branson Board of Aldermen, and Rob Low, Branson casino campaign investor and owner of Prime, Inc. trucking company headquartered in nearby Springfield. These informants provide key insights into local growth politics and the construction of spatial meaning in Branson.

#### SODOM VERSUS JERUSALEM

At the fore of a major national expansion, casino gambling was approved in Missouri in 1994, but restricted to riverboats on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Cities in the U.S. began efforts to draw casinos and other entertainment destinations for new economic growth, particularly where deindustrialization had caused divestment and decline. Kansas City and St. Louis followed Atlantic City and New Orleans as the first major U.S. cities to establish a casino outside of Las Vegas. Subsequent push outside of the Kansas City and St. Louis metro areas include successful casino developments along the rivers in central, northeast, and southeast Missouri. There are now twelve total casinos in the state, but not in the Branson region as neither river traverses Southwest Missouri. Because the existing casino restrictions were constitutionally codified in Missouri, any initiative to approve a casino beyond the Mississippi or Missouri river regions requires a statewide ballot, which broadened the scope and heightened investment in the battle in Branson.

In October 2001, the Board of Aldermen in Rockaway Beach, located 12 miles from Branson, voted to place a nonbinding referendum on a November 6th ballot to seek

voter approval for the launching of a campaign to develop a casino (Buckstaff 2004a). Located on the White River which feeds Table Rock Lake, Rockaway Beach had at one time been a thriving tourist destination itself, but the construction of the dam nearer Branson drew investment from the city. As Branson thrived and expanded, aided also by strategic highway planning, Rockaway Beaches' economy declined dramatically. Having exhausted other development efforts to change the town's fate, voters approved a November initiative. Shortly after in 2002 Southwest Casino and Hotel Corp. agreed to develop a casino in Rockaway Beach and became active in the campaign, promising 1,900 construction jobs and 1,000 casino jobs with higher than average wages (Buckstaff 2002). Almost immediately after approval of the initiative the Branson Board of Alderman voiced disapproval.

The battle led to the formation of two coalitions. Pro-casino "Missourians for Economic Opportunity," was funded almost entirely by Robert Low, casino investor and owner of the Prime, Inc. trucking company in Springfield. The anti-casino committee "Show Me You Care," formed in June of 2004, just ahead of the August 3<sup>rd</sup> "Amendment 1" vote, by HFE's Peter Herschend and funded primarily by Herschend family members. Herschend had been an active opponent of the expansion of casino gambling in the region since an initial proposal in the early 1990s (Alm 2004). While Robert Low and local supporters of the proposal touted economic growth and job expansion, including casino jobs with anticipated wages higher than average for the region, Herschend and "Show Me You Care," with outside support from anti-casino groups like Missouri's "Casino Watch," highlighted social problems like alcoholism and crime which they associated with casinos. But Herschend frequently belied his competitive interests, suggesting in a



statement after the campaign that ““Very definite and prominent support continues for maintaining Branson's uniquely one-of-a-kind image - highly respected and famous for its family values. Protecting that '*brand*' is essential to the entire region's economy and growth”” (emphasis added) (Buckstaff 2006). Just days ahead of the August vote Betty Burche, member of the Rockaway Beach Gambling Committee, offered the observation that ““We think it all boils down to money’ . . . ‘There are those who genuinely don’t believe in gambling — I don’t fault those people at all.’ Yet others are not being forthright about their objections to a casino in Rockaway Beach” (Moser 2004).

Terkildsen et al. (2000) have noted that interest groups put forth specific frames, symbols, and metasympols when engaging the media for messaging. Issue framing regards the particular approach, argument, or tone that an interest group uses. Symbols are particular strategic uses of language and metasympols “are the overarching group labels that advocates create to describe their organization and its cause” (Terkildsen et al. 2000:48). To determine how symbols and metasympols were used in the casino campaign a research assistant and I independently completed an initial review of the 51 collected articles and developed coding categories, using key words to identify emergent themes, and then narrowed these by eliminating overlap. The categories which appeared most frequently included “**Economy**” (keywords: jobs, growth, tourism, tax base, development, economic, salvation); “**Branson Brand**” (keywords: family brand, image, family image, *family values*); “**Moral/social costs**” (keywords: *impact* on families, *family values*, community, or individuals, gambling addiction, immoral, evil); “**Educational Revenue**” (keywords: unfairly distributed, unconstitutional, school funding); and “**Slippery slope**,” which refers to arguments that this initiative would lead

to casino expansion in communities throughout the state. Reference to “family values” appeared both in the “Branson brand” and the “social/moral costs” categories, so that it was necessary to distinguish how the phrase was being used. The first three categories appear most frequently. The “educational revenue” argument, which referred to concerns about how the initiative proposed dispersing new casino tax revenues (purportedly illegally placing a revenue issue into the constitution), did appear in articles, but so infrequently that it was deemed of limited use for this study (though it would become more important for a separate ballot initiative in 2008, also led by Peter Herschend). The “slippery slope” argument, which some reports suggest was more prominent in mailings and television ads from opponents, was rarely mentioned in newspaper articles and was thus eliminated in the final analysis.

### *Findings*

Table 8 lists the frequency of appearance of each category in the 51 articles. Multiple appearances of a single frame category in a given article only garnered one tallied instance for that category. This analysis also allowed me to attribute frame categories to either opponents or proponents and distinguish the ways they wielded these. Proponents, for instance, use the “economy” frame in reference to economic benefits to workers, business owners, and tax revenues while opponents use a “counter-economic” argument, downplaying or dismissing the local economic impact or even suggesting that a casino would actually hurt the local economy by deterring family values tourists. Casino proponents, on the other hand, countered the “moral/social” costs argument, though infrequently, generally with suggestions that the problems were either overstated or not directly attributable to casinos.

**Table 8: Frequency of 2004 Missouri Amendment 1 campaign frame categories**

Frame category	Initiative opponents	Initiative proponents
Economy	21	41
Branson Brand	30	2
Social/moral costs	20	4
Educational Revenue	6	4

In newspaper interviews, prepared statements, or commentator references, the “economy” message frame was used almost exclusively by casino proponents, whose coalition included Rockaway Beach business owners, the Building and Construction Trade Council, the Missouri AFL-CIO, and the local Masons’ union. In a recent interview, Robert Low (2012) reiterated his belief that a casino was a good investment for the region and again framed the benefits for local workers, suggesting that:

. . . Branson is quite a phenomenon as far as tourism is concerned. [It] attracts a good demographic for gaming, attracts a lot of them. . . gaming is typically a pretty good employer. Competing for folks that maybe before were [making] \$8 or \$10 an hour, minimum wage and layoffs from seasonal stuff. These kinds of workers had the potential to move up to \$15 to \$20 an hour . . . you know I wasn’t there just for altruistic purposes, but you know I could think of things I do [that] make economic sense . . .

Opponents, for which Peter Herschend was the most vocal and visible spokesperson, focused primarily on the “Branson Brand” message frame, but they divided their messaging more evenly. The counter-economic and the social/moral costs frames registered the second and third highest frequency. And while “family values” was referred to in both the “Branson brand” and the “social/moral costs” categories, it appeared more frequently in the former, which suggests a prioritizing of the competitive interests of business elites. Single issue groups like “Casino Watch” would naturally be less inclined to emphasize the branding frame (though support from John Aschroft, demonstrated in a letter displayed on the organization’s website, suggests linkages to the

interests of local elites) and, thus, their contributions to the campaign in the media focused predominantly on other issues. Their current website lists “economic and social costs,” “crime,” and effects on the elderly as primary concerns related to casino expansion (Casino Watch 2007). But for the most part the articles reviewed for this study reported the positions of local and regional opponents, providing a more accurate account of their framing.

When the findings are recalculated separately for each newspaper a distinct regional pattern emerges. In articles from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the Kansas-City Star the ‘Branson brand’ category was used almost exclusively by casino opponents. In the Springfield News-Leader the “counter-economic” category emerged as the most frequently used frame appearing in 15 articles, while “Branson Brand” references appeared in 14 and “social/moral costs” in 12. In the St. Louis and Kansas City regions, where casinos already operate, it seems likely that the “counter-economic” argument from opponents of the amendment would meet more extensive resistance and this interpretation was emphasized in a recent interview with Robert Low (2012) who acknowledged that support was much greater in the larger cities. Casinos in those regions have been operating for more than a decade and, regardless of the reality of their economic benefit they do provide jobs and are at least perceived as having contributed to economic gains by some members of the community.

Many public schools in the state have come to rely on the designated tax revenue from state gambling firms, making the “educational revenue” argument less convincing. While the social/moral arguments may have, in the end, swayed many voters, those in the St. Louis and Kansas City areas are generally less socially conservative than the

Springfield/Branson area in Southwest Missouri. This suggests that opponents were strategic in their messaging depending on the region. Finally, media message structure is determined not only by the interest groups, but also by “journalistic norms, values, and routines,” which, among other characteristics, is notable because of the “issue dualism” standard. In an effort to represent all sides in a debate, media can make it appear that opponents and proponents are presenting equally weighted positions, or further, may leave debate subtleties out in efforts to concisely summarize in simplistic terms. In other cases, journalists may “reject frames that do not fit within a story’s parameters or those that conflict with their personal ideology...” (Terkildsen et al. 2000:49).

Amendment 1 was ultimately defeated in Missouri, while Herschend had already begun negotiations for a deal to raise the loss limit in exchange for a limit on the number of new casino licenses to the areas where gambling was already established (Young 2004a). His effort led to a ballot initiative that voters approved in November 2008, apparently blocking any future attempts to develop a casino in Branson. For the 2004 initiative, the economic development argument was forcefully made and proved persuasive to many in Rockaway Beach and surrounding communities. Ahead of the vote in 2003 the casino developer was accepted for membership to chambers of commerce in the adjacent cities of Springfield, Rockaway Beach, Nixa, Kimberling City, Forsyth, and Hollister, though was denied by the Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce (Buckstaff 2003b). The argument also swayed some in Branson and the surrounding region who believed that a casino would not deter typical Branson tourists, but would simply add to the overall number of visitors, benefitting all regional firms. Branson entertainer Cindi Barr initiated a campaign to rally the entertainment community

to support the casino proposal. She noted that ““A lot of people were afraid to do anything because they thought they might be blackballed if they were supporting the gambling”” (Buckstaff 2003a). With focus on the non-family segment of the Branson tourist demographic, particularly young couples and seniors, which local elites have repeatedly expressed an interest in expanding, some Branson business owners believed “a casino in nearby Rockaway Beach is a perfect fit for Southwest Missouri” (Buckstaff 2003c). Later articles inferred the emergence of a ‘silent majority’ of businesses and workers in Taney county who were supportive of the amendment, but remained silent for fear of losing their jobs or facing hostility from local business elites like Herschend. Others openly speculated that the prospect of higher paying, potentially unionized, casino jobs was really motivating local business opponents (Buckstaff 2004). In fact the amendment ballot received 45 percent approval in Taney County (Branson and Rockaway Beach) where it failed by the relatively slim margin of only 1246 votes out of 14,398 cast (Springfield News-Leader 2004).

There is ample evidence that casinos do not, in fact, provide the economic salvation for cities which investors promise. But what is relevant to my argument are the ways that powerful local business and political elites control messaging to obfuscate existing economic reality in Branson. The tourism industry, regardless of the brand of entertainment a particular community constructs, is dependent on low wage non-unionized, and as is the case in Branson, often seasonal labor. This is as true of the structure of the economy in Las Vegas as it is in Branson (Gottdiener et al. 1999; Rothman and Davis 2002). In tourist cities which feature large prominent entertainment attractions, including Las Vegas with its concentration of casinos, ancillary businesses

including hotels, restaurants, and theaters, which depend on non-unionized labor, typically comprise a larger share of the local economy (Judd and Fainstein 1999). Low (2012), in fact, has suggested that based on his encounters at the time small business owners were supportive of the initiative in Branson and an important part of the proponent coalition. For opponents, the primacy of market concerns is revealed in recent comments by Rick Todd. According to Todd (2012)

. . . a lot of people said, well the reason they're so opposed to gambling is from a religious stand point and I don't think that could be farther from the truth. I don't think it has a thing to do with that. We have a very unique situation. We enjoy families through three months out of the year and we enjoy empty nesters or second honeymooners the other times of the year . . . we can't afford, literally from a financial standpoint, economic standpoint to chase one of those markets off. And if we do we're in trouble because we don't compete well . . . while lots of people in Missouri I'm sure get on the plane and go to Las Vegas, the numbers of them that take their children with them, you could put it in a thimble, it doesn't happen. . . The fear is that gambling would have a devastating impact on that [family] market.

Local elites in Branson continually reproduce the argument that growth, generated by political adherence to free-market principles and the construction of a “family values” brand rooted in regional culture, benefits all residents. In this battle prominent elite opponents jockeyed to maintain a regional competitive edge by framing the proposed casino development as a threat to local economic growth. That a casino might also produce a threat to the moral order of the region was an important consideration and undoubtedly impacted some voters, but this was secondary in campaign messaging. Existing Branson tourist firms shared with casino developers a primary interest in the exchange-value of Branson as a tourist commodity, but differed in their vision for how best to promote or protect capital accumulation. The efforts by opponents in this battle reproduced the “family values” structure of consumption both through messaging, which

reinforced the brand themes, and by preventing the physical development of the casino, competitively protecting the regional tourism market.

## THE BUILT-ENVIRONMENT, SERVICE, AND CONSUMPTION

The built-environment in Branson is also structured in ways designed to stimulate themed consumption. Unfettered growth and limited government intervention in the form of land-use zoning have remade a once pristine landscape through market priorities. With limited open space in the Ozarks, forests are either obscured by ubiquitous billboards advertising attractions, particularly along the 30 mile highway 65 corridor from Springfield to Branson, or removed entirely for development. Roadways follow along ridges or plow through the middle of mountains in a chaotic spaghetti-like system which requires color-coded stripes in some areas to direct tourists. And big box stores, gas stations, hotels, theaters, restaurants, and expansive open parking lots pack prominent ridges or sit on massive lots created by mountaintop removal that offers an eerie urbanized corollary to Appalachian strip-mining, particularly where failed development projects are left incomplete. Housing, which is largely invisible to tourists in the urban areas, can be seen crowding the once pristine shores of the man-made lakes Taneycomo and Table Rock, where it is, despite their expanse, increasingly difficult to find a boating location out-of-sight of deforested hill-sides cluttered with new condominiums, apartments, and single family homes.

But if it appears haphazard, urban design in Branson belies the ways that development has been structured to stimulate tourist consumption. While essentially taking advantage of local topography, roughly following an east/west mountain ridge, the



packed 76 Strip theater corridor features Silver Dollar City several miles to one end and the downtown retail area where the Branson Landing, a Hilton Hotel, and a convention center were recently completed at the other. The effect, while clearly not a product of conscious planning, is the routing of traffic through a dumbbell-like design reminiscent of typical suburban malls so that traffic is funneled from attraction to attraction through centers of consumption activity. In a region for which urbanization would be problematic regardless, lack of planning has restricted both the number of lanes possible on and egress from the strip, only recently slightly improved by new road construction tailing off the mountain ridge here and there. The 76 Strip is almost as well known for its chronic traffic crawl as it is for the shows themselves, but until the more recent growth explosion created the prospect of diminished returns this arrangement ensured visibility and sales for adjacent businesses. With limited space on the ridges, theaters and waterparks crowd yard ornament stores and trinket shops, which until recent new zoning restrictions often featured products displayed outdoors nearly to the edge of the roadway.

### *The Branson Landing*

“Add a splash of entertainment with a visit to the Branson Landing Town Square where you will be dazzled by our \$7.5 million water spectacular that synchronizes light, sound, music and fire” (HCW Development, LLC. 2009).

Adding a bit of Las Vegas glitz to Branson’s downtown waterfront, the Branson Landing’s enormous “watertainment” feature, physically straddling the riverbank, provides a centerpiece to a 100 acre planned-shopping and condominium complex, which ironically obscures views of the river itself from most of the rest of downtown. Branson’s downtown waterfront was once the site of logging operations, the region’s first

large industry, but by the 1990s it featured a collection of traditional services and small shops and restaurants struggling to compete with the glittering concentration of attractions on the 76 Strip. Some of these would be cleared in preparation for the development, including a public neighborhood waterfront park and blocks of older moderate housing, which constituted a small portion of the city's limited housing stock for low-income families. Leveraging public money for infrastructure and using a method to capture sales tax for redevelopment called Tax Increment Financing (TIF), the developers of the \$420 million Branson Landing promised jobs and a boost to local retail sales. In fact, sales have not consistently met projections and according to Mayor Presley (2012) because of the provisions of the TIF the Branson Landing has actually cut the city's overall sales tax revenues as it has drawn consumers from other retailers in the city which do not have TIF agreements.

The landing development is fully commodified space and, unlike much of the city, intentionally and comprehensively planned to maximize consumption and profits. In a region dominated by single-use developments and typical strip architecture, the Branson Landing promised to bring urban style and opportunities to the city. For the most part the landing architecture follows the pattern of suburban malls and upscale outdoor shopping complexes like Kansas City's well-known Country Club Plaza, where developers ". . . have attempted to replicate [these] downtowns in design motifs, re-creating a simulated 'urban' environment" (Gottdiener 2001:85). Stylistic flourishes notwithstanding, this produces a space with a generic sensibility, featuring recognizable franchised retailers and restaurants. The developer invites consumers to "Stroll the promenade of magnificent shopping with first-to-Branson national retailers including

Bass Pro Shops, Belk Department Store, Coldwater Creek, Chicos, Build-A-Bear Workshop, Charlotte Russe, Hollister, White House/Black Market and many more” (HCW Development, LLC. 2009). The attraction at the Branson Landing is not explicitly “family values,” but the urban experience and the hope was actually to draw consumers who might otherwise not find the city’s live shows and typical motif attractive, in recognition that the brand presents limitations for Branson’s continued growth.

The development is surrounded on three sides by the retail buildings, a large parking garage, and occasional condominium towers. The west-facing “front” is bordered by Branson Landing Boulevard and consists of tall mostly uninterrupted solid brick walls and restricted employee and delivery entrances. Despite featuring the main central entrance to the center, this side actually functions as the backside and resembles a fortress. The rest of downtown, which includes a nearby Hilton Hotel and convention center and older development, is distinctly physically separated. On the waterfront, the complex sits directly atop tall shear flood control retaining walls separated from the “natural” riverbank for most of its length by only a pedestrian pathway with narrow landscaped medians. A few restaurants and retail shops are even built offshore, resembling large boat docks with ramps for entrance from the bank, effectively obscuring the view of the river. This side is ostensibly designed as the front façade, with an arrangement of buildings vaguely evoking a small European waterfront village, but is only visible from the water (visitors are encouraged to take a tour boat ride), from within a few businesses which sit atop cliffs across the river, or in the developer’s advertising literature.

Inside the walls the Branson Landing is typical of open-air shopping “villages” in cities around the country, with mall-like corridors lined with mostly franchised retail and restaurants and short residential towers tossed in to complete the effect. As Zukin (2010) observes, today we use streets and buildings to create a “physical fiction” that seduces us with symbolic appeals to Jane Jacobs’ idealized urban village. With the sporadic booming noise from the central water feature and from the scrambling shoppers and eaters, the best areas to quietly enjoy “God’s country” at the landing is near the unadorned parking lots which bookend the development. One can conceivably walk to the waterfront without making a purchase, but the entire complex is clearly designed to contain consumers and maximize consumption. The private “Landing Town Square,” where the water feature resides, provides a court for outdoor concerts and other events, but attractions like these draw consumers in and encourage them to linger so that they are more likely to make purchases. The center unabashedly commodifies the landing’s social space and crowds out what might be considered non-commercial public space. The city does operate public parks and has recently developed two in the downtown area near the landing. But unlike neighborhood parks, including the one that was cleared for the development, with little housing nearby these are clearly part of the tourist complex and designed to contribute to the consumption experience.

### *Silver Dollar City*

The Herschend family opened Silver Dollar City in 1960. Its development begins near the entrance of the first local tourist attraction they operated, Marvel Cave, which visitors can still tour once they purchase a ticket for the theme park. The park is designed to resemble a small pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Ozarks community, with walking paths and building

development following the natural hilly contours of the local landscape. In a region where an individualistic frontier-mentality blended well with the laissez-faire free-market ideology of the New Right, Silver Dollar City stands as an icon to presumably superior values associated with rural living and predating urbanization and the intervention of government and rational planning. As such, it appears to have none of the obsessively-planned character of the modern theme park archetype Walt *Disney World* Resort. Yet, all of the Disney elements are visible, with a main entrance followed by a relatively small pathway from which the main park is obscured. Anticipation is heightened before funneling visitors along a path that empties into a “town square.” Period costumed service employees mingle with crowds and work in “ye olde kitsch”-style buildings where typical theme park goods are on offer. The square itself is surrounded by shops, but from this starting point tendriled paths wind their way to music, shows, craft production exhibits, retail shops, rides, and restaurants which either cook outdoors or pipe kitchen smells into the open air, one of the more obvious devices designed to stimulate consumption. Instead of the pod-like layout at Disney World, where visitors are ushered to variously themed parks, Silver Dollar City was designed to depict a “. . . living, working village” (Ketchell 2007:65).

I conducted field research at Silver Dollar City at the start of the 2011 ‘Christmas season.’ The “Silver Dollar City Times” (Silver Dollar City 2011), an advertising mailer, announces Christmas themed attractions in Branson and features a quote from CNN.com calling the theme park “One of the World’s Top Holiday Destinations.” The park offers a variety of seasonal shows and events and punctuates the festivities with a display of over 4 million lights. This season is especially interesting because the ambivalence about the

intersection of capitalism and Christianity is heightened for many, particular among visitors to Branson. Beginning November 5<sup>th</sup> the park revels in the holiday ‘spirit,’ modifying the typically featured significations of nostalgia and nationalism to include a mix of sacred and profane symbols of Christmas. ‘Old time’ Christian hymns sung by a local bluegrass band and proclamations that “Jesus is the reason for the season” mix more or less easily with life-size plastic depictions of Santa Claus with reindeer and piles of gifts, a giant “starburst”-topped Christmas tree in the middle of the square, and ubiquitous sale signs. The commercialization of Santa Claus hit its peak in the 1920s (along with its role in the creation of child consumers), but the figure, and the imagery of a pre-industrial workshop where happy elves produce toys for kids, continues to be an important retailer device (Robbins 2011:22). It happens that this overlaps well with the depictions of craft workers throughout the park, reinforcing the image of independence and self-determinism, some of whom actually resemble depictions of Santa Claus with long grey beards, round spectacles, and workshop suspenders. Presumably, those who possess the knowledge and skills to engage in craft work enjoy it, but their exhibition here belies the true organization of labor behind many products in the park and most sold in Branson. Moreover, craft work here is predictably genderized, with male operatives in traditionally male oriented craftworks like glass blowing, woodworking, and blacksmithing and females in cooking, the making of candles, candy, or jelly, and quilting. Some of the crafts are seasonal, like a street vendor offering “Oscar’s Wassail.”

At Silver Dollar City, as Ketchell (2007:75) notes, “. . . employees are compelled to offer Christian witness . . .” in a variety of ways, but in my observation these were limited to expressions of the same kind of friendly small-town persona typical of service

workers in such settings. Service has been used as a marketing strategy since the late 19th century and it is difficult to discern how employees at the park operate differently than those in other similar consumption environments. And what is for certain is that workers are never to betray their own misgivings about pay or work conditions. A popular tactic among employers in all industrial sectors, workers are encouraged to envision their role as that of a family member or ostensibly equal “associate” and they are often directed to portray this image for customers. If anything, the encompassing ‘family values’ brand in Branson and at the park make this device especially effective. In his forthcoming book, Herschend Family Entertainment CEO Joel Manby “. . . makes a case that if leaders will use this type of love [agape], the company’s employees will be more enthusiastic and the company will be more profitable. . . ;” a sentiment, which for all its sincerity, harkens to the decades old W. Edwards Deming inspired “Total Quality Management” (TQM) movement (Said 2012). One limitation of my field research is that it lacked interviews addressing these analytic themes with workers at the park, which may provide verification and more detail for this interpretation.

Pathways in the park are lined with retail and restaurants and occasionally dead-end at a large attraction. A store just behind a set of shops located on the square called “Inspirational Fine Art and Crafts,” includes the “Bittersweet Gallery” featuring paintings, cards, and pictures by Jack E Dawson replete with signification of patriotism and ‘moral values.’ These include pictures with variously arranged eagles, U.S. flags, and families, with one large picture depicting the ‘World Trade Tower’ disaster. Down a different path I encounter the “Jingle Bell Junction” store, which features Christmas

themed gift items year-round. During my visit the tellingly crowded store was notable for its relative lack of Christian iconography among the items for sale.

One particularly popular feature at the park is the ‘Silver Dollar Saloon.’ During my visit the building was surrounded by a large crowd more or less intently watching several tastefully and colorfully dressed ‘old-time’ saloon girls who are standing on podiums and operating as barkers for an eminent performance of the “Frontier Fa-La-La Follies.” Their shouts promise the crowd a show invoking a wholesome “Rowdy” Christmas. The saloon is a relatively old attraction at the park and features what might be described as a sterilized vaudeville-style show with music and dancing girls, but no alcohol or profanity. There is a large painted sign on one side of the saloon with a cartoonish depiction of Abe Lincoln with the words “Honest Ale,” “The Best Ginger Drink in the West,” and “It’s Extra Dry.”

A sign announcing performances of “A Dickens Christmas Carol” is featured in front of the “Opera House.” I am not able to make a performance, but it is reasonable to speculate that the Silver Dollar City version would emphasize the individualistic moral values themes in Dicken’s story, including admonishment of selfishness and greed. Other readers draw on an interpretation of the story offering a more explicit critique of the system of capitalism, which, as Marx suggested, institutionalizes selfishness and greed. Whatever Dicken’s true intent, both interpretations are wielded in an ideological battle and, in this instance, the former more easily meshes with the Hershend’s values-driven profit-making ventures. For this season the park has added a stage production of Frank Capra’s “It’s a Wonderful Life,” which mirrors these themes.



There is Christian symbolism on display in Silver Dollar City but its appearance is attenuated and often subtle, an impression confirmed by Ketchell's (2007:81) observation that ". . . Silver Dollar City relies on Billy Graham's innocuous mode of evangelism rather than John Ashcroft's more brazen attempts to integrate Christianity into the public sphere." During my visit, signs, flags, and wreaths throughout the park feature messages telling visitors to "believe" or "Believe in the Wonder of Christmas," but this messaging is ambiguous. Additional seasonal signs present quotes by Taylor Caldwell, Alexander Smith, Charles Dickens, Irving Berlin, Charlotte Carpenter, Ralph Blane, Dr. Seuss, Francis Church, and others. Flags lining the main walking paths offer visitors a "Welcome to an old-time Christmas" and invite them to "Believe in the wonder of Christmas," prominently featuring the moniker for one of Silver Dollar City's corporate partners and frequent event sponsor, "Humana." Representing the tightrope business owners like the Herschend's walk, these signs do not generally expressly implore visitors to consume, but neither do they offer an explicit critique of consumption. In this way, any remaining vestiges of ambivalence which visitors manage to carry into the park, and any memory of Harold Wright's critique of materialism, capitalism, and "cheap culture," are melted away so that other symbols and devices designed to more directly stimulate consumption become more effective. Whatever experiences they walk away with, they leave a great deal of capital in the park.

## CONCLUSION

It would be hyperbolic to suggest that Branson elites operate as a well-oiled fully intentioned consumption stimulation machine, and such an interpretation overlooks the role of conflict and agency among regional residents. For that matter, the traditional

laissez-faire free-market approach to development in the region eschews comprehensive rational planning for whatever purpose. But the preceding analysis does highlight some of the ways that the physical environment and signs and symbols in Branson are conscientiously structured to stimulate consumption and enhance profit. The fact is that development in Branson is guided by market principles and, whether or not it is consistently coordinated, this primarily serves business interests. While clearly constituted in a historical milieu which produced particular cultural practices and ways to interpret the world, the themes which emerged from this process have been intentionally refined and are now implemented in Branson as a competitive tool to distinguish its tourist product.

This is a city designed predominantly for tourists and, similar to comments I heard as a resident in Las Vegas in the 1990s, new visitors to Branson occasionally express surprise, not only at the apparent level of urbanization, but that there is a community behind the glitz. Suburban zoning, to which Branson's regulations are most similar, emphasizes physical design which distinctly separates land-use, protecting housing values, for instance, by prohibiting adjacent industry and concentrating commercial development outside of neighborhoods. The effect is amplified in Branson because a significant percentage of the city's service-workers live outside of the city boundaries and because the hilly terrain provides natural physical barriers between developments. Traditional neighborhoods are relatively rare, but they are also hidden from the tourist gaze.

But another reason the non-commercial community in Branson can be difficult to distinguish is the fact that members of the community have been an integral component

of Branson marketing for decades. Ketchell (2007) documented evidence of intentional discernable augmentation of local habitus in the Ozarks following the growth in popularity of the *Shepard of the Hills*. Local residents felt obliged to attempt to bring their personal behavior in line with the expectations of visitors to the region in an effort to improve their own economic lot. The practice has not entirely dissipated with Branson's growth, despite the reality of unequal benefits. Mayor Presley (2012) reflects on resident's continued role in selling the product of Branson, surmising that

. . . generally we understand that if you live here it's your responsibility to be kind, to be smiley, to be hospitable, to help someone who appears lost, to welcome them to our community. Because I think if you move here you generally have signed on to the belief that you are kind of a host and hostess to folks who visit.... So if you're in the grocery store or you're on the road, *it's your job to be a community supporter for tourism*.... Branson sometimes is compared to kind of a Disney World, but obviously we're a city, a town if you want to go by population. We don't hire all these people, they're not actors in a play. They are real people with real lives and real struggles. I think the community believes enough in the product that we have, they're proud of what Branson is, that we generally put a pretty happy face on the product that we portray to tourists. And I don't think that we are insincere about that.

The level of sincerity or variety of individual motivations of residents who engage in off-the-job "service-work" does not negate or undermine its contribution to the process of theme enhancement and stimulation of consumption. These practices highlight ways in which the process of commodification and stimulation of consumption is diffuse and sometimes indirect. But in Branson, as a tourist commodity, some of the functions of the local economy, like marketing, are highly coordinated so that the brand message is staunchly protected. Combined, the diffuse activity of local residents and more concentrated efforts by local elites further muddles the meaning of authenticity for local residents and tourists alike.

Moreover, an evangelical variation of family values, individualism, and faith in free-markets offers elites an ideology that rationalizes inequality, poverty, and other social problems, while obfuscating the exploitation inherent in capital accumulation (Giroux 2004). This is especially the case in Branson, where low wage service sector work predominates and collections of poor workers are housed in older overpriced motels and hotels rendered obsolete by overbuilding in the 1990s. The construction of a rural “authenticity” in the Ozarks has always appealed to consumers weary not only of the mundane character of their lives, but also the moral turpitude and social dislocation of modern life in cities. But whether it is as a stylish urban downtown designed to appeal to the expanding commodity desires of a growing rural population or pre-industrial rural village, this leads to the creation of a “physical fiction” for social space that is in fact produced for commerciality.

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