When Qualitative Research Trumps Quantitative—Cultural Economy and Smart Growth

Elizabeth Currid, an assistant professor of urban planning at the University of Southern California, writes about “How Art and Culture Happen in Urban Economies: Implications for the Economic Development of Culture” in the Autumn 2007 issue of the Journal of the American Planning Association. In the spirit of Richard Florida’s wildly successful book, The Creative Class, Currid seeks to understand the drivers of the new artistic and cultural economy, an economy more dependent on brains than brawn. Her research question: “How do we create places where talent is often asked for a concise definition of smart growth goals and policies?”

Currid’s sample is a unique mixture of artists, musicians, fashion designers, talent scouts, art critics, editors, curators, and gallery owners. Her sample selection was anything but random, as one contact snowballed into others. She asked my son, an aspiring actor in Los Angeles, is what Currid calls a “starving artist.” His experience confirms many of her observations. He has managed to position himself in a dense, walkable, transit-served part of L.A., an area with good access to gatekeepers (managers, agents, and casting directors); cultural industries (television, film, commercials, modeling); and a network of other starving artists for social support.

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The other article of interest appears in the September 2007 issue of the Journal of Planning Education and Research. Mary Edwards, AICP, of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Anna Haines, of the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, are the coauthors of “Evaluating Smart Growth: Implications for Small Communities.”

Both of the studies described above are qualitative. Both are well done. Both provide useful insights. But one makes no bones about its approach, while the other tries hard to make a qualitative study sound quantitative. I won’t say what my favorite is, but you might guess.

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