

the cultural heritage of alternative subculture and the politics of preservation in Berlin, Amsterdam and Melbourne

Kate Shaw, University of Melbourne
kates@unimelb.edu.au

Introduction

If the socio-cultural changes of the last few decades are democratising understandings of cultural heritage, they are countered by political-economic changes that increase the pressure for 'highest and best' use of urban land. The contradiction is thrown into stark relief in places used by alternative subcultures. The breeding grounds for new urban scenes - public space, low cost housing, warehouses, docksheds, bars and music venues - are targets for urban redevelopment, regeneration and gentrification in advanced market economies throughout the world.

Alternative scenes in some places have found unlikely allies: the city governments of Berlin, Amsterdam and Melbourne are so reliant on the role of alternative culture in their local economies - for national and international tourism and opportunities for local employment and artistic expression - that they are introducing strategies to protect the places where it flourishes on the basis that subculture is part of their cultural heritage. Having made much of cultural diversity in their local imagery, they are now exploring planning and policy responses to stem its decline.

There is a powerful argument of course that culture cannot be contained or 'preserved'. What are the consequences of these policy initiatives on the subcultures themselves? Does the oft-postulated link between presence of artists and gentrification mean that preservation of the places of alternative cultural production becomes, even if not deliberately, yet another incentive for further gentrification? Or can careful planning practices give nuance to urban form and use to enhance the meaning of place for marginal cultures?