



# Communicating the “world-class” city: a visual-material approach

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I demonstrate my visual-material approach to researching the urban built environment as a medium of communication in its own right. Specifically, I discuss my research on second-tier cities with “world-class” aspirations, which highlights the significance of both symbolic and material resources in processes of urban regeneration and redevelopment. A visual-material approach draws not only from social semiotics and multimodality, but also from critical and material rhetoric to engage with the ways in which increasingly widespread “formats” of urban regeneration and redevelopment are mobilized to transform the urban built environment in the service of a globally appealing aesthetic. In doing so, this is also an approach that illuminates the dialectical relationship between cities’ perceived necessity to appear competitive on a heavily mediatized global stage and to intervene on their landscape in ways that mediate the everyday lives of urban communities in lasting ways.

## KEYWORDS

Urban regeneration; world-class cities; second-tier cities; visual-material analysis; urban communication

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between communication and cities is one of increasing importance for an understanding of social relations in contemporary life (Aiello, Tarantino, and Oakley 2017). From an academic standpoint, this relationship has been examined in three main ways, that is (1) by researching how both individuals and communities connect (or do not connect) in cities through a range of technologies and media; (2) by interrogating the ways in which cities themselves are conveyed and constructed through the communicative techniques afforded by traditional and computational media alike (e.g. by means of cinematic representation but increasingly also through data visualizations and locative media), and lastly; (3) by examining how “the urban” itself communicates (Tosoni and Aiello 2019).

It is on this last line of inquiry that I am going to focus here, insofar as considering the urban built environment as a “medium” of communication in its own right contributes to an enhanced understanding of how cities make meaning by way of deploying both symbolic and material resources. Here I am going to demonstrate my own visual-material approach to researching the urban built environment, which is grounded not only in

social semiotics and multimodality, but also in critical and material rhetoric. I return to the methodological foundations of my approach in the next section.

Specifically, my research on the urban built environment focuses on second-tier cities with “world-class” aspirations. This is an important research topic for two main reasons. First, the ways in which contemporary urban spaces undergo major changes towards “world-classness” tend to be consistent and predictable, insofar as they draw from increasingly widespread if not generic “formats” of urban regeneration and redevelopment. Second, these are changes that are largely driven by a perceived need to materially (re)fashion the urban built environment in the service of a visual aesthetic with a global, or better globalist, appeal.

As I will demonstrate later in the article, both in Bologna, where I’m from, and Leeds, where I live, flagship regeneration projects such as Manifattura delle Arti and Holbeck Urban Village, respectively, rely heavily on combinations of photogenic materials like red bricks and wood paneling or cobblestone and stuccos, as well as vistas like outdoor cafés and market spaces, urban parks, and pedestrian areas that are fit for the planning reports, promotional websites, computer-generated architectural images, and the many other “media” that are regularly exchanged among professionals and institutions involved in the regeneration of so-called “brownfield” or “post-industrial” areas. Building on Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) three-pronged theory on the production of space, in my work on Leeds I have argued that these are all “textures” of envisioned lived space, and that these are now systematically mobilized in promotional and planning media to achieve distinction within globalizing formats of urban regeneration such as “urban villages” and “citadels of culture” (Aiello 2013). Needless to say, these media and formats are also carriers of top-down visions of “place” developed for the global stage of urban planning and promotion. Such visions of place foster what David Harvey (1997, 3) has defined as “a utopianism of spatial form” which is premised upon sanitized if not downright discriminatory versions of both identity and community.

In this article, I focus on three “sites” to illustrate the key tenets of my approach to researching the urban built environment in the light of these power relations. These are (1) Seattle’s Aurora Avenue, a highly contested urban space that enables me to elucidate both the importance of considering the urban built environment as communicative in its own right and the centrality of aesthetics in how cities are fashioned, re-fashioned and communicated back to their inhabitants; (2) the European Capital of Culture, which exemplifies the fundamental relationship between material interventions and visual claims in communicating a city’s “world-class” identity; and (3) Bologna’s aforementioned Manifattura delle Arti, which sheds further light on the interdependence of mediation and mediatization in processes of urban regeneration aimed at achieving the image of a globally appealing city.

I therefore begin by telling a “story” about the razing of Aurora Avenue’s Bridge Motel to establish the significance of the urban built environment as a “medium” of communication. I then elaborate on my research on the European Capital of Culture by way of illustrating my own visual-material approach to researching cities’ communicative features. I delve further into this approach in the Bologna example, in order to highlight the relationship between the ways in which regeneration-led visual-material changes in the city are mediatized while, in turn, also mediating the everyday lives of urban communities. Finally, I return to the example of Aurora Avenue to reflect on the importance

of aesthetics as a site of contestation in debates about what a “proper” city ought to be like and how urban change may affect particular definitions of identity and types of communities. As a whole, then, this is an approach that foregrounds the relationship between the visual features of cities and both their material underpinnings and implications. Before I proceed to illustrate my original approach through the three sites that I have just outlined, I want to outline its methodological foundations, as these are not only tied to my empirical research but are also to be found in two scholarly traditions which are not often put in conversation with one another even though they share common foci and concerns.

## 2. Methodological foundations: between semiotics and rhetoric

As mentioned in the introduction, my visual-material approach to researching the city draws not only on social semiotics and multimodality, but also on critical and material rhetoric. These two perspectives are both germane and complementary insofar as they foreground the interplay between the symbolic and the material as key to an understanding of how cities communicate, albeit by placing more or less emphasis on the former or the latter.

Social semioticians and multimodalists see the urban “landscape” as a deployment of semiotic resources, which are typically examined as manifestations of major discursive structures and power relations. These semiotic resources range from writing and visual imagery to sound and texture (Ledin and Machin 2020). This said, an emphasis on language has been historically dominant in critical discourse and sociolinguistic approaches to researching cities, with many scholars conducting empirical research on the “linguistic landscapes” of urban settings and broader regions—or the ways in which “public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings” (Landry and Bourhis 1997, 25) mobilize linguistic resources which are in turn revealing of power relations between different ethno-linguistic groups as well as between local or regional identities, national policies and politics, and/or globalist forces such as tourism and consumer culture (Gorter 2006; Shohamy, Ben-Rafael, and Barni 2010).

While this is a perspective that continues to thrive, the *geosemiotics* approach that was developed by Scollon and Wong Scollon now over 15 years ago has contributed to fostering a move away from language as the only or dominant focus in discursive and semiotic approaches to space and place by emphasizing the importance of researching “the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world” (Scollon and Wong Scollon 2003, 2). In turn, Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) have extended the notion of “linguistic landscapes” to that of “semiotic landscapes” in order to encompass the breadth of research on the “textual mediation or discursive construction of place and the use of space as a semiotic resource in its own right” (1). Thanks to these developments, there is now a growing body of research that actively considers both urban space and place as “semiotic” and therefore also communicative (see Lou 2014; Gendelman and Aiello 2010). This is also an outlook that has become central to current ethnographic strands of linguistic landscape research, which aim to both describe and analyze sociolinguistic practices in space “as indexing social, cultural and political patterns” (Blommaert 2013, 3).

At the same time, critical rhetoric scholars have highlighted the importance of researching “the material spaces of the everyday” (Dickinson 2002, 6) in order to gain insight into how particular subjects and communities may identify and engage with each other and society at large. This emphasis on the materiality, rather than the semiotics, of (urban) space entails that scholars researching cities from this point of view focus much less on “issues of symbolism” than “on the performative dimension of the site” (Blair and Michel 2000, 40). Among other things, this is therefore an approach that requires the scholar’s physical presence in and embodied engagement with the site under study as an integral part of the analytical process: “being there” (Blair 2001) if not “being through there” (Dickinson and Aiello 2016) are key to understanding how and why particular subjectivities, actions or forms of civic engagement may be summoned by specific surroundings.

Here, the body becomes more clearly central to analyses of the built environment as productive of sensorial and affective attachments to place and the identities promoted through particular forms of urban communication (Dickinson and Ott 2017; also see Faber McAlister 2011). And it is precisely this entwinement of what Dickinson and Ott (2017) define as the “semiotic” (or symbolic and signifying) and “somatic” (or affective and asignifying) dimensions of spatiality that illuminates the relationship between the urban built environment and the everyday lives of urban dwellers (see also Dickinson 2015).

In the rest of this article, I outline my own visual-material approach, which actively synthesizes these two perspectives while also advancing distinctive claims about the significance of mediation, mediatization and aesthetics for an understanding of how the city communicates. Through a discussion of my decade-long research on the three main sites that I described in the introduction, I demonstrate some of the ways in which “world-class” aesthetic agendas applied to urban form are grounded in combinations of multimodal and, more specifically, visual-material resources that may ultimately exclude less profitable yet vital versions and visions of urban life. In the next section, I go on to set the scene for my overall approach to researching the city with a “story” from Seattle’s Aurora Avenue.

### **3. The urban built environment as communication: a story about Seattle’s Aurora Avenue**

On September 15, 2007, I was one of the nearly 2,000 people who gathered at the Bridge Motel in Seattle. On the same day the *Seattle Times* defined the motel as “that iconic, seedy little roadhouse off Aurora in Fremont”. Over 20 installation and performance artists had taken over the building before its scheduled demolition to make space for seven new townhomes worth up to \$1 million each. The organizers expected only 300 people to show up for the temporary installations and performances animating the motel’s 12 rooms and parking lot. Instead, on that night, Seattle’s design, art and hipster community converged to the Bridge Motel in large numbers (Figure 1). Most likely, everyone who participated in the event, including myself, would have stayed away from the motel in the original context of its daily business. As a member of the same crowd, what became obvious to me was that, through this event, the Bridge Motel had become a destination for the nostalgic appreciation of the “Americana” aesthetic of dilapidated 1960s architecture and signage.



**Figure 1.** The Bridge Motel event on September 15, 2007. Photograph by Gregory Perez (<https://flickr.com/photos/gperez/1400104955/in/album-72157602065674809/>; CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

Thanks to its location at a busy intersection, its tribulations over several decades, and the obvious decay of its prominent neon sign, the Bridge Motel had become a city landmark of sorts—a constant reminder of the contested nature of one of Seattle’s main roads, Aurora Avenue North. More commonly known as “Aurora Avenue” or simply “Aurora,” Aurora Avenue North is now part of Highway 99 and covers 200 blocks stretching through desirable residential neighborhoods such as Fremont and Green Lake. Aurora, as we know it today, dates back to the early 1930s, when the thoroughfare was integrated into the then almost completely paved US Route 99. Until the late 1960s, US Route 99 was the main north–south highway connecting the US West Coast states. During the 1930s, Aurora quickly expanded and soon became a highly trafficked though still largely residential thoroughfare. However, it was not until the 1960s that Aurora saw its heyday. With 10 million people expected to visit the Seattle World’s Fair in 1962, Seattle’s own portion of Route 99 became an especially strategic area for hospitality. Boasting futuristic architecture, with the Space Needle and the Monorail as highlights and lasting legacies, the Seattle Center had been expressly planned and designed for the World’s Fair, which went by the name of “Century 21.” This is also when most of the motels that make up the now infamous urban landscape of Aurora Avenue were built and thrived.

To say it with Sharon Zukin (1991, 219), Aurora Avenue’s landscape “visually projects the liminality between *market* and *place*”. In other words, the urban built environment of a locale like Aurora is impermanent by nature—systematically discussed and transformed as markets change. And in addition to being a busy “thoroughfare”, Aurora has been the most debated area of Seattle’s contemporary urban fabric. We will return to this point in a moment. As a whole, the case of Aurora Avenue contributes to illuminating the importance of the urban built environment as a medium of communication in its own right. This is not only because

Aurora Avenue's built environment is symptomatic and indeed "communicative" of its economic and social status, but also because what seems to be at stake in Aurora's changing identity and the debates that surround such changes is its very appearance.

The Bridge Motel event was organized by a group of artists led by D. K. Pan, a Korean-born and Seattle-based installation and performance artist, who was the motel's last manager together with being the founder of the Free Sheep Foundation, which "makes art happen in unused commercial spaces and buildings soon to be torn down" (Farr 2008). The organizers' description of the event can still be found on the website dedicated to this and other "motel projects" that followed the Bridge Motel initiative:

In the popular imagination, the place embodies and realizes that underbelly, shady side of life's toiling. There has been murders here, and numerous drug busts, its decaying artifice contains the stories of a full lifetime of drama, and the day by day passing through of souls [...] For one night, its last night of existence, the Bridge Motel will be dressed up and called to shine and dance [...] Numerous installation/performance artists have been given full rein the week prior, to transform each dilapidated pocket into whatever they could imagine. The opening evening will reveal the Bridge's final blossom before its inevitable razing. (motel #1 n.d.)

So, what can we draw from this description? Ultimately, in the liminal version of its existence as a site of spectatorship and play, the Bridge Motel was aestheticized through artistic creations that drew inspiration from its impermanence, decay and grittiness. After "its inevitable razing," the motel was replaced by a complex of seven high-end "green" townhomes named "Footprint at the Bridge." On their website, the architectural firm who designed the townhomes dedicate ample space to a description of this residential project, including details regarding its location and "views." They state:

With sweeping views of the Cascades, Lake Union and just blocks from the exciting and eclectic Fremont district, this project consists of seven private town homes with shared underground parking in a cornerstone location. (Footprint at the Bridge n.d.)

While this official description situates the townhomes as geographically or visually close to coveted areas in and outside the city, there is no mention of the former motel lot's "cornerstone location" being just a block away from Aurora Avenue. The only implicit hint at the townhomes' proximity to the strip is to be found in this statement:

A screen wall blanketed in vegetation wraps the community yielding both visual and acoustic privacy, rarities in an urban environment. (Footprint at the Bridge n.d.)

In other words, the emphasis here is on design features that actually "hide" Aurora Avenue both from one's sight and from one's hearing.

The Bridge Motel's transformation into exclusive residential units—and the mediation of such passage via an event such as the one that took place on September 15, 2007—is emblematic of the increasing role of Aurora Avenue's urban built environment as symbolic currency in a globalist marketplace that rewards aesthetics and distinction over sheer substance and function. And, naturally, this process is tied to the increasing expansion and economic value of urban land. In an article on the Bridge Motel "farewell" event, *SeattlePI* reporter Regina Hackett wrote:

The motel didn't close because it failed in its changing function. Most nights, it filled up. It closed because the land on which it sits is too valuable to waste on a low-rent enterprise. (Hackett 2007, np)

The closing of the Bridge Motel is also emblematic of some of the key debates that seem to dominate Seattle's public discourse on Aurora Avenue, which consistently revolve around the relationship between its appearance and its social issues. In researching Aurora, I have noted some of the major ways in which changes in the conceptualization of its urban landscape have corresponded to shifts in public discourse and overall debate around the area's "aesthetics," both in the media and in planning documents. In particular, there has been a shift from an emphasis on Aurora as an unattractive "thoroughfare" to a focus on Aurora as a "streetscape," in light of efforts to improve its image. I will return to the "streetscaping" of Aurora Avenue towards the end of this article. Now I would like to focus more broadly on this relationship between the image of a city and its materiality.

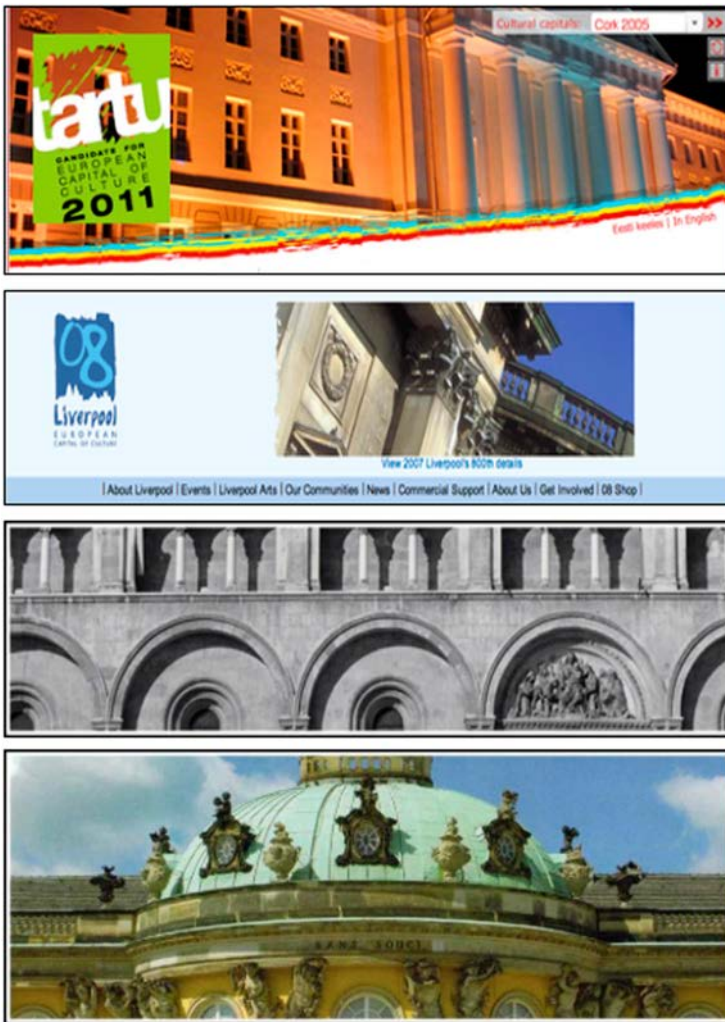
#### **4. A visual-material approach to researching the city: insights from the European Capital of Culture**

As a growing number of cities compete for global attention, the visual-material spectacle of the city is more than ever a significant medium of communication in its own right. In some of my work, I have looked, for example, at how "second-tier" European cities materially enact visually compelling renovation and regeneration plans to achieve a "world-class" aesthetic. I have also looked at how imagery found in cities' planning and promotional media both reflects and shapes what I call globalist aesthetic agendas that may de facto exclude other, less becoming or profitable, versions and visions of urban form and urban life.

In researching the European Capital of Culture, I examined the bid books, websites and other promotional materials of 50 candidate cities to understand how both aspiring and current titleholders communicated their symbolic status as "European" rather than "just" specifically local or national: as "capitals" or destinations able to attract international visitors; and as centers of creativity and cultural production. One of the more obvious ways in which these candidate cities compete through their websites and bid books is by highlighting their Europeanness through visual metonymy. What this means, for example, is that often we see images of "snippets" of buildings from any given candidate city that are distinctly and classically European but no longer recognizable as being specific to any particular local or national context (Aiello and Parry 2020).

In our article on visual discourse in the European Capital of Culture, Crispin Thurlow and I used the website banners in [Figure 2](#) as an example to explain that this kind of visual metonymy can be used strategically to stylize locally available representational resources like Greco-Roman capitals and reliefs, arches and domes as generically European, and therefore also self-style as quintessentially European. Importantly, these images also work to reinscribe the notion that culture may be reduced to "high culture" and to these material artefacts, spaces and practices. At the same time, these are all actual "buildings" and "places" that can be visited while in the city (Aiello and Thurlow 2006).

To better understand the relationship between these cities' globalist aspirations and their local social and material contexts, I also conducted fieldwork in several capitals of culture—something that enabled me to see whether and how their physical landscape had been transformed in the wake of such promotion. In 2007, both Sibiu in Romania and Luxembourg were European capitals of culture. This was also the year that Romania entered the EU, as one of its then poorest countries. In Sibiu, the relatively



**Figure 2.** Metonymic architectural details in banners for the official websites of Tartu 2011, Liverpool 2008, Pécs 2010, and Potsdam 2010.

small pre-Communist historic center had just been restored and made perfectly presentable (Figure 3). Meanwhile, the rest of the city was a construction site with skeletal structures of new buildings and decaying façades of old ones. The renovation and brand-new construction of key infrastructure such as the train station square and the airport had been subordinated to the restyling of Sibiu's "face" for the acquisition of photogenic symbolic capital in sight of titles like European Capital of Culture and UNESCO World Heritage Site. This said, Sibiu's approach to branding the city with European Capital of Culture publicity was remarkably subdued. As Oana Ionita, who was the communication officer for Sibiu 2007, explained to me, the historic buildings and the main squares had recently been renovated and the municipality did not want publicity related to the European Capital of Culture to take over the city center's visual landscape. For this reason, Sibiu 2007 opted for banners in somber colors and flags with the capital of culture logo that were alternated





**Figure 3.** Renovated façades in Sibiu's historic center.

with EU and Romanian flags. Walking around Sibiu, I also noticed the occasional branded T-shirt, cloth bag and postcard being sold, but by no means in any systematic manner.

At the same time, in an interview I conducted with the communications manager for Luxembourg 2007, she said: "Rebuilding the image of Luxembourg is at the very core of Luxembourg 2007: from outside, Luxembourg is mostly seen as 'banks,' so we want to make something new and reactivate creativity." As a country with one of the largest GDPs per capita in the world, Luxembourg had a budget of €7,000,000 for communication related to the European Capital of Culture alone, and focused on spreading its brand image across the city. For this reason, a plethora of steel cutouts of the whimsical Luxembourg 2007 logo, a blue deer, were strategically placed by major city buildings, in addition to the European Capital of Culture headquarters (Figure 4). The blue deer were sponsored by ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steel company with headquarters in Luxembourg, which was one of the major partners of Luxembourg 2007. In Luxembourg, the hyper-branding extended to street lighting and the 54 types of different branded products that were developed for Luxembourg 2007, with two new products being introduced every month based on the time of the year like, for example, gloves for the winter, and flip-flops for the summer.

Not unlike Sibiu and Luxembourg, in 2011 the cities of Tallinn (Estonia) and Turku (Finland) *materially* intervened on their urban built environment in order to *visually* promote their identities as designated European Capitals of Culture for that year. My fieldwork in these two urban locales revealed what I define as a "light touch" approach to transforming each city's material landscape. This is something you can see, for example, in Figure 5, a collage of fieldwork photographs that show moveable banners and other easily removable branding spread across Tallinn. Along the same lines, Turku 2011 had commissioned local artists to paint on electrical boxes located along the city's main river.

In Tallinn, Margit Aule and Margit Argus were the two young architects in charge of creating temporary public spaces for the European Capital of Culture year. They illuminated me on how these light touch interventions were in fact tied to plans for the private redevelopment of the city, and especially of the waterfront. In the interview I conducted with them, one of them said: "All these places are in process, they are waiting for



**Figure 4.** Steel cutout of the Luxembourg 2007 logo by the city's European Capital of Culture headquarters.

the final money and investment, so thanks to this Tallinn capital of culture it happened that there are all these amazing buildings and installations in the city." Likewise, Turku's bright orange European Capital of Culture branding was deployed strategically to lead visitors to LOGOMO, a former industrial hall that was redeveloped into a creative industries hub by a local businessman. This aestheticized signposting of private development in both cities tells us something about the importance of each European capital of culture as a temporary performative stage for lasting corporate business. While the European Capital of Culture title comes with European Commission funding for the required year-long cultural exchanges and activities, this is also a scheme that aims to "boost" local economies through urban regeneration plans to be fueled both by public and private investment. It is therefore also and foremost by paying attention to both cities' aesthetics that we can understand this problematic entrenchment of "light" cultural policy and "heavy" globalist capital.

And it is precisely this dialectical relationship between cities' perceived necessity to "appear" proper or competitive in a particular marketplace, like that of a United Europe for example, and intervene on their material landscape to fulfill this image that makes it particularly productive for me to adopt what I define as a visual-material approach rather than a more broadly discursive or, on the other hand, infrastructural approach to researching the city. These are just a few examples that highlight the importance of image in relation to these cities' socio-economic backgrounds and changing materialities. As a whole, a visual-material understanding of cities enables us to examine some of the concrete and lasting implications of symbolic acts of communication such as branding



**Figure 5.** Moveable banners and structures with Tallinn 2011 branding.

and, more broadly, the promotion of a particular urban image for cities aspiring to “world-class” status.

### **5. The urban built environment as mediation and mediatization: thinking through Bologna’s Manifattura delle Arti**

Overall, it is this kind of text- and field-based empirical observation from a visual-material standpoint, then, that has also led me to argue that the urban built environment is a key form and force of both mediation and mediatization. From this point of view, the physical qualities of cities mediate the everyday lives of both individuals and communities, as the urban built environment is a major observable manifestation of the “power-filled social relations” (Massey 1999, 21) that both constrain and enable a range of actions and practices among urban dwellers. On the one hand, then, the urban built environment mediates the performances of our everyday life. This is a statement that resonates greatly with rhetorical approaches to the study of space, but here I use the term “mediation” purposefully to highlight that bricks and mortar can be seen, to quote William Mazzarella (2004), as a “set of media” through which “a given social dispensation produces and reproduces itself.” Based on a broader and, so to speak, “media-less” definition that extends Roger Silverstone’s foundational approach to this key concept (Silverstone 1999, 2005), we can

state that the urban built environment is a key form and force of mediation, because it contributes to transforming and reproducing major discursive and structural conditions that shape and constrain or, quite literally, mediate the everyday lives of individuals and communities.

On the other hand, the urban built environment can be seen as a form of mediatization, as it is often used as symbolic currency for marketplaces like tourism, public communication, real estate, and commerce—and which, for example, is exchanged through media like urban planning materials and promotional websites. It is in this sense that the urban built environment is made to perform for mediatized communication, as it is imagined *and* imaged for key lifestyle publics through multimodal narratives spread across media. Often, this is done from the top down, in that global and second-tier cities alike are increasingly fashioned to project a desirable, “world-class” image through photogenic cityscapes and lifestyle-oriented planning initiatives such as creative and cultural districts or waterfront developments. And it is not only the social but also the physical dimensions of our cities that are increasingly mediatized.

I originally developed this conceptualization of the urban built environment as mediation and mediatization through my work on Bologna’s “Manifattura delle Arti” (Aiello 2011). This regenerated district is a generically distinctive urban enclave, aimed at communicating Bologna as a highly specific and historically rich, yet translocally “recognizable” and appealing locale. Manifattura delle Arti covers the area that used to be Bologna’s harbor between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century and the city’s main mercantile and manufacturing hub until the 1800s. Between the 1800s and 1900s, this area was gutted and made to fall into disrepair both due to major urban land-use planning interventions and World War II bombings. In the late 1990s the area was included in official city plans for preservation and renovation, which until then had focused on more “noble” sections of the historic center. In 2003, Manifattura delle Arti was therefore inaugurated as Bologna’s first “citadel of culture,” and “one of the largest in Europe” (Parisini 2003). Buildings like the former slaughterhouse, paper mill and salt warehouse were all restored to house several prominent cultural institutions, including the University of Bologna, Bologna’s world-renowned Film Archive (Cineteca), Modern Art Museum (MAMbo), and the national headquarters of Italy’s main LGBT organization (Arcigay). In addition, Manifattura delle Arti was designed to include social housing, a nursery, a senior citizens center, student housing, and a park.

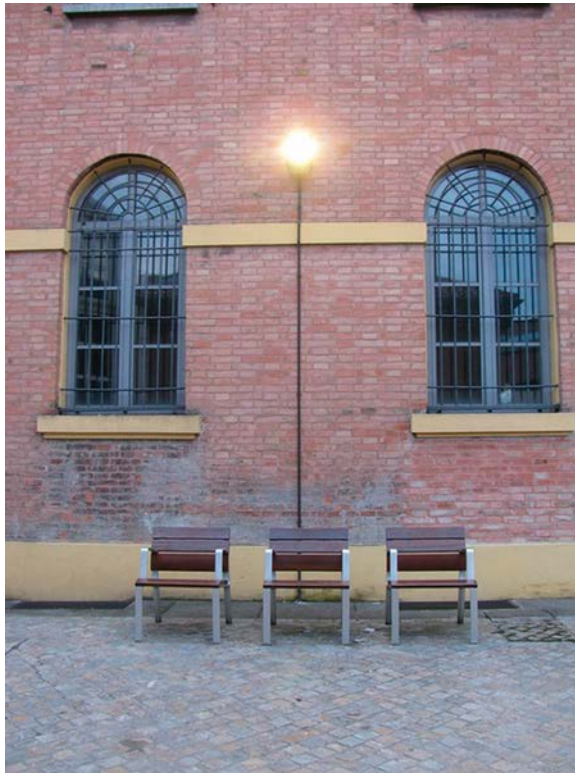
As a regenerated district, Manifattura delle Arti bears little visual-material similarity to any other part of the neighborhood in which it is nestled. This is not only because it covers Bologna’s historic harbor and proto-industrial center, but also because it was completely redesigned to resemble other regenerated districts from across Europe and North America, rather than the Italian postwar architecture that dominates the surrounding neighborhood. Manifattura delle Arti is also distinctive in relation to Bologna’s historic center, where we don’t have the deliberate juxtaposition of contemporary architectural details with historic ones. A striking example of this act of layering is to be found in the student housing building shown in [Figure 6](#). The façade’s design combines contemporary details such as steel columns, white space and a stylized composition of variably sized, elongated windows with signifiers of history and tradition such as red brick, red cloth curtains, and even a layout that mimics medieval architecture.



**Figure 6.** Layering of contemporary and historic architectural details in Bologna's Manifattura delle Arti student housing.

Another example of this kind of layering can be observed in the former slaughterhouse's outdoor space (Figure 7). Here, public seating made of dark teak on a brushed metal structure is set against the background of an historic building, featuring a red brick wall with yellow plaster trims and arched windows. This arrangement is made even more deliberate by the symmetrical framing of the three pieces of public furniture against the two original windows. The resulting effect of juxtaposition is striking and distinctive, but also familiar and generic. It is through such juxtaposition of stylistic references that Manifattura delle Arti is made to "look like" historic Bologna, while also performing a cosmopolitan identity. Reconverted districts like this mobilize semiotic resources that balance local and global identity traits. In doing so, they maximize on the symbolic profitability of distinction—from the surrounding neighborhood, from the rest of the city, and from other cities—within prized formats of urban design.

Together with more overt boundary-making resources such as gateways and signage, this work of distinction extends to differences in texture between the outer edges of Manifattura delle Arti and the streets outside its limits. The streets that are now included in Bologna's "citadel of culture" used to be paved, and often suffered from disrepair and the presence of potholes. During the area's reconversion, its streets were repaired and repaved with old-fashioned, but also brand-new and leveled, cobblestone. This is a choice that led to a strong contrast between the polished though "old-time" feel of the new cobblestone's aestheticized texture and the imperfections of the street and sidewalk spaces surrounding the area. However mundane, this textural divide contributed to



**Figure 7.** Juxtaposition of “historic” and “cosmopolitan” details in outdoor space by Manifattura delle Arti’s former slaughterhouse.

making Manifattura delle Arti into a separate enclave. Although no concrete gatekeeping structures such as fences or walls were introduced, one’s experience of Manifattura delle Arti is shaped by visual-material resources that make access not only distinctive, but also exclusive and exclusionary.

## **6. An aesthetic trope: learning from the “streetscaping” of Aurora Avenue**

As a whole, it is not always so easy and in fact it is increasingly difficult to tease apart the top-down placemaking and the, shall we say, bottom-up textures of heritage and everyday life that set each city apart. And that’s precisely why this kind of fine-grained analysis matters. The aesthetic form of cities may increasingly be transformed and fashioned in ways that fulfill spectacular logics that are rooted in the perceived needs and anticipated rewards of global capitalism. Meanwhile, the changing substance of cities will continue to shape and constrain the everyday lives and identities of urban communities for many years to come. So, let’s go back to Aurora Avenue in Seattle in this regard. In public discourse, Aurora is consistently framed as an eyesore, and its circumstances are directly linked to the social issues that set apart this contested area of Seattle. For example, across news articles I collected and regardless of newsbeats or the journalist’s evaluation of the strip, Aurora was consistently associated with less than flattering words relating to its appearance: “grayscale,” “dicey,” “ugly,” “infamous,” “dumpy, primitive, aged,” “declined,” and “beyond repair.”

Not unlike the “organic trope” described by Timothy Gibson (2003) in relation to the redevelopment of downtown Seattle in the early 1990s, an “aesthetic trope” dominates debates on Aurora Avenue as a “problematic” area in need of redevelopment. The organic trope is used to frame the city as a living organism which can be “wounded” or otherwise “healed” by specific spatial and environmental choices, and it is typically adopted both by those in favor or against redevelopment. For example, Gibson explains that organic metaphors were deployed both in support of and in opposition to plans to redevelop the Pine Street pedestrian mall in downtown Seattle to accommodate the demands of major corporate retailers. It is in this sense that the organic metaphors are “multiaccental, that is, they are capable of taking on a variety of accents and meanings” (Gibson 2003, 440).

Instead of being multiaccental and open to struggle, the aesthetic trope foregrounds physical appearance – intended as the presence or absence of “beauty”—as an “objective” issue that determines social disorder. Unlike the organic trope, the aesthetic trope is usually only mobilized by those who support redevelopment. Most importantly, however, this trope doesn’t seem to allow for competing or alternative definitions. As I showed earlier, the Seattle press is rife with references to Aurora’s “ugliness” as if this were a given and a non-partisan observation. There doesn’t seem to be much of a debate over Aurora’s ugliness, but rather a general agreement that the strip is an eyesore and that its physical circumstances engender social disorder. This is a form of visual-material determinism, insofar as Aurora’s definition as problematic seems to originate directly from its appearance. In addition, this ongoing emphasis on aesthetics discursively displaces and sanitizes social exclusion. Arguably, the aesthetic trope is a reversal of sorts of Wilson and Kelling’s broken windows theory, which maintains that urban neglect and disrepair lead to anti-social behavior and crime (Kelling and Wilson 1982). At the same time, those who may find a locale such as Aurora Avenue fascinating—just like the hundreds of people that flocked to the Bridge Motel event before its demolition—usually do so nostalgically, that is, by appreciating the aesthetic of a bygone era through the lens of its current decay, or by acknowledging its deterioration and celebrating its deviance rather than upholding its present image.

Since the early 2000s Aurora Avenue has not only been heavily criticized for its unattractiveness, but it has also been subjected to increasing interventions with the aim to redesign its appearance and redefine some of its uses. Redevelopment projects similar to the Footprint at the Bridge complex have become increasingly common along the strip. In 2012, Seattle’s Design Review Board approved a 285-unit building project with “a ‘hill town’ concept” (801 Dexter 2012). It features materials such as wood, steel and concrete, and a color palette with hues inspired by the Cinque Terre villages in Italy which are called “Salute” (or dark red), “Snowbound” (or off white), “Overjoy” (or custard yellow) and “Peacock Plume” (or water green). The residential complex was named “True North” and occupies a former industrial site located on a slope along Aurora Avenue.

And whilst “True North” resolutely sits next to Aurora Avenue, on its dedicated website it is described as being part of “South Lake Union,” an area of the city that was completely redeveloped to host the new Amazon headquarters. Amazon has completely changed the face of the city with their brand-new high rises and lifestyle establishments where there used to be mostly parking lots, low-rise industrial buildings, and warehouses. Not surprisingly, then, a major makeover of most of Aurora is in the works. In October 2017 the City

Council passed a moratorium on new permits for auto-oriented and other heavy-duty commercial uses of the strip. This means that, for example, drive-in businesses, car dealerships and storage yards will be banned, as they don't fit plans to transform Aurora Avenue into what, in their official Facebook page, the Aurora Licton Urban Village association define as a "visually vibrant urban village."

The "streetscaping" of Aurora Avenue, which I mentioned earlier in the article, shows that social change through urban renewal may have become synonymous with beautification through globalist redevelopment. Over decades, Aurora Avenue went from being Seattle's main highway to becoming a simple and despised thoroughfare. Both as a highway and a thoroughfare, however, Aurora was little more than a heavily trafficked commercial street.

In its most basic definition, a street is not a place with a distinctive identity in its own right, but rather a physical linkage between communities and destinations. On the other hand, the definition of streetscape pertains to "the character of a locality" (Tucker et al. 2005, 519), which is defined by the spatial and visual characteristics of the built and landscaped environment when this is viewed from the street. In other words, a streetscape is shaped by the visual-material resources that define its identity as an interface. According to Tucker et al. (2005, 520), these include "the boundaries between the elements that constitute the street wall or façade" and "patterns that are consistent within a specific urban or suburban built environment." Applying the term "streetscape" to a "space" like Aurora Avenue entails a will to define the strip as a specific kind of "place," by means of designing and regulating its identity and overall visual-material performances through a set of aesthetic judgments and choices.

## 7. Conclusion: communicating the city as a human endeavor

In this article, I have discussed some of the ways in which communication "works" in cities, specifically through the visual-material characteristics of the urban built environment as a "medium" in its own right. By merging methodological perspectives drawn from social semiotics and multimodality on one hand and critical material rhetoric on the other, I have outlined an original approach that foregrounds the significance of form and aesthetics for an understanding of how cities "mean" in ways that are often political and always power-laden.

Overall, central to an understanding of the urban from a communication perspective is what Simone Tosoni and I have defined as a keen interest in how *people* in urban settings connect, or do not connect, with others and with their environment "via symbolic, technological, and/or material means" (Aiello and Tosoni 2016, 1254). In other words, in spite of its ostensible focus on the urban built environment as such, across this work there is an evident emphasis on the importance of human agency and human outcomes in both *mediated* and *mediatized* processes of spatial production. This is an important point to make because, in recent years, digital geographers and Science and Technology Studies scholars, for example, have convincingly demonstrated the significance of theoretical and empirical approaches that foreground the agency of both code and software in shaping the social and physical layers cities and, in turn, also the everyday lives of their inhabitants. Perspectives that privilege an understanding of the "automatic" production of space through pervasive computing have become central to urban communication



studies as well. This is because digital platforms and technological infrastructures are absolutely essential to contemporary communication processes. They are also often worryingly opaque, making it all the more significant for scholars to engage with perspectives and methodologies that shed light on these spatial black boxes.

Power relations in cities shape and are shaped by meanings, practices and interactions that are rooted in communication, and in my own work particularly in visual-material communication, rather than technology or information alone (Aiello, Tarantino, and Oakley 2017). It is mainly questions about identity, voice, creativity, and inequality that animate this work. These questions matter precisely because they address issues pertaining to people's lives in cities, rather than cities per se. Ultimately, what communication theory as a whole and the approach I have described here more specifically can offer is a unique understanding of the nature and potential of the urban as a human endeavor.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributor

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