Experiential Design – Rethinking relations between people, objects and environments

• Paper / Proposal Title:

Aesthetics of Gentrification: An exploration of branded spaces, language, and design processes in ‘revitalized’ neighborhoods

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• Abstract (300 words):

Letterpressed coasters, artisanal pie, the word artisanal, antique chandeliers over a bar of reclaimed barnwood, signature cocktails, vintage knick-knacks, wax seals, expensive signage to emulate cheap printing, no signage at all.

To visit the gentrified neighborhood of Logan Square in Chicago, we can understand a space with a familiar and now normalized rhythm. A reclaimed barbershop letter board promoting low prices for weaves and relaxers is displayed at Gaslight Coffee Roasters, advertising services for a demographic that is neither reflected in their customers nor
workers. A walking tour of the neighborhood replicates a virtual tour of a Pinterest board created for “hip typography.” This is no coincidence. In client-designer relationships, the brief is where all decisions are based. It articulates the client’s goals, how they perceive themselves, and how they hope others perceive them. It is the designer’s job to pull out what the ‘essence’ of the organization is, clearly and succinctly designing a visual form to embody identity. Keywords like premium, artisan, radical, progressive, alternative, craftsmanship, revolutionary, etc. are perfect identifiers for what we’re looking at in Logan Square.¹

The various online digital collections—Pinterest, Instagram, Google image search, etc.—reflect the same homogeneous smoothing over of urban and aesthetic histories. New graphic identities morph into a singular cluster of codes with an existing contingency of followers who understand them, of how they designate a specific milieu, to replace (and displace) the existing community.

In these redesigned environments—bars, restaurants, cafés—(white) economic affluence is conflated with community progress, bringing with it visual and affective signifiers of who belongs and who doesn’t. This presentation will explore the aesthetics of gentrification through an analysis of the objects, spaces, and images within ‘revitalized’ neighborhoods, as well as highlighting the role of language and digital collections in the design process.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Becky Nasadowski is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (beginning August 2019). She received an MFA in the multidisciplinary Design program at The University of Texas at Austin where her research explored social design—or “design for good”—as violence. Her work insists that insights regarding power, state control, and privileges afforded by race, class, and gender should form a critical foundation for designers seeking to work in this growing field. She is invested in an educational practice that reaches beyond the traditional design canon, and looks outside of the discipline to explore how antiracism and feminist praxis can and should inform the way we teach visual culture and design. In addition to utilizing design strategies as tools for critical inquiry, Nasadowski has maintained an active professional design practice since 2007, collaborating with artists, activists, educational and cultural institutions, among others. Her work can be seen on her website: www.whitewirestudio.com.