

SHARON ZUKIN, "WILL NEW YORK CITY BECOME ONE BIG SUBURB?" FROM THE BIG THINK.COM.

TRANSCRIPT

**Question:** *What defines the "soul" of a city?*

**Sharon Zukin:** The soul of the city is its people, its small shops the diversity of the crowds. The hustle and bustle but not just change, rootedness, neighborhoods, streets that maintain their identity over a long period of time. Cities are always changing and it would be silly to say that a city loses its soul when it changes exactly because so many new people come, old people live, businesses die for technological, cultural, and financial reasons but the soul of a city is often felt to be in the long-time residents, the old businesses and particularly the small businesses, the small shops, the small streets. And, the people who are not the richest but they've been here a long time and they give the city character.

**Question:** *What creates this craving for an "authentic" space?*

**Sharon Zukin:** Every movement always spurs a resistance to that movement; a counter-movement, a counter-culture and in our time as in the 1960s, there was a big resistance against the standardization of overwhelmingly large organizations. In cities today, there's been an invasion since the late 1990s of chain stores and these create visible faces of standardization. Some people have spoken of this in terms of the suburbanization of cities. And in some cities I have to say it's a benefit to have a chain store rather than an overpriced store with terrible merchandise that does not give a good deal to consumers in the area but in general its times of homogenization that irritate people, that get under peoples skin and make them desire a more authentic kind of space to live a more authentic kind of life.

**Question:** *How can we help prevent displacement?*

**Sharon Zukin:** You know I can't emphasize enough how important laws are, zoning laws, rent controls, commercial rent controls, maybe providing apprenticeships for young people who are not going to college or people who are graduates of art schools to set up small stores. A continuation of traditional crafts, I think industry is tremendously important in every city, even in New York and there have to be spaces for all of these activities to create an procreate. It's silly to say that a city will survive on the basis of the creative class; a city only survives on the basis of diversity, different classes of people all working and its necessary for local government to make sure there is space for everybody in the city.

I mean there really have to be, you know go to your City Council Representative, write to that person and tell them they voted wrong or they voted right on something. Utter the forbidden words like new laws, new zoning, rent control, maybe all buildings should have not just one percent for art but one percent of the space devoted to mom and pop stores. I understand that these would not necessarily be old mom-and-old-pop stores but they'd be you know new independently owned stores. There really has to be an educational effort to bring tastes together with social need. Like look at the Red Hook Food Vendors in the ball field, they were unknown outside the Latino community, I should say the Latino soccer playing and soccer watching community for almost thirty years when they sold papooses and tacos and delotes and you know whatever they were selling and making at the ball fields. They never lived in Red Hook but they came faithfully every Saturday and Sunday when the soccer leagues played and cooked and sold and eventually through the Internet, through the food blogs after around 2003, 2004 a much wider public became aware of the good food and the cultural value and I would say the social value of these immigrant food vendors.

So it became really crucial for politicians and for food bloggers and for you know ordinary people who just liked tacos to put pressure on the city government to allow those food vendors to stay in place. There was a concerted campaign by the Parks Department and the Health Department to shut them down or make them conform to existing laws which I understand and through the help of outside communities pressing the city government those food vendors were able to protect their right to sell at the park in Red Hook but it's those, it's those cases that show how absolutely important it is for city governments to make good policies to protect people's rights to be in a place.

Take the Community Gardens, they enjoyed a temporary reprieve a few years ago after Mayor Giuliani, lead a campaign to convert most of them to housing sites, and you know people breathed a sigh of relief and said okay great now we have community gardens. But the community gardens are only legal until fall of this year, 2010. There has to be a New York State Law passed by the Legislature that creates a permanent right for community gardens to stay in place. I think everybody agrees that community gardens are truly important. Not just as places of rest and relaxation and nature for a neighborhood but also as places of vegetable production and urban food production is very important now as a sign of the sustainable environmental future. So there has to be some government action to protect that kind of space. It's these examples that show how important it is for all of us to press city government to make new laws.