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Mapping the Cultural Buzz: How Cool Is That?

By MELENA RYZIK

Apologies to residents of the Lower East Side; Williamsburg, Brooklyn; and other hipster-centric neighborhoods. You are not as cool as you think, at least according to a new study that seeks to measure what it calls “the geography of buzz.”

The research, presented in late March at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, locates hot spots based on the frequency and draw of cultural happenings: film and television screenings, concerts, fashion shows, gallery and theater openings. The buzziest areas in New York, it finds, are around Lincoln and Rockefeller Centers, and down Broadway from Times Square into SoHo. In Los Angeles the cool stuff happens in Beverly Hills and Hollywood, along the Sunset Strip, not in trendy Silver Lake or Echo Park.

The aim of the study, called “The Geography of Buzz,” said Elizabeth Currid, one of its authors, was “to be able to quantify and understand, visually and spatially, how this creative cultural scene really worked.”

To find out, Ms. Currid, an assistant professor in the School of Policy, Planning and Development at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, and her co-author, Sarah Williams, the director of the Spatial Information Design Lab at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, mined thousands of photographs from Getty Images that chronicled flashy parties and smaller affairs on both coasts for a year, beginning in March 2006. It was not a culturally comprehensive data set, the researchers admit, but a wide-ranging one. And because the photos were for sale, they had to be of events that people found inherently interesting, “a good proxy for ‘buzz-worthy’ social contexts,” they write. You had to be there, but where exactly was there? And why was it there?

The answers were both obvious and not, a Möbius strip connecting infrastructure (Broadway shows need Broadway theaters, after all), media (photographers need to cover Broadway openings) and the bandwagon nature of popular culture. Buzz, as marketers eagerly attest, feeds on itself, even, apparently, at the building level. A related exhibition opens on Tuesday at Studio-X in the West Village, just south of Houston Street, an area not quite buzzy enough to rank.

The study follows in the wake of urban theorists like Richard Florida (Ms. Currid calls him a mentor), who have emphasized the importance of the creative class to civic development.

“We had social scientists, economists, geographers all talk about it being so important,” Ms. Currid said. “It matters in the fashion industry, it matters in high tech. The places that produce these cultural innovations matter. We have sort of this idea — ‘Oh, Bungalow 8 matters,’ but what do we even mean by that?”

Ms. Currid became interested in assessing social scenes when doing research for her 2007 book, “The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art & Music Drive New York City.” For the buzz project, snapshots from more than 6,000 events — 300,000 photos in all — were categorized according to event type, controlled for overly celebrity-driven occasions and geo-tagged at the street level, an unusually detailed drilling down, Ms. Williams said. (Socioeconomic data typically follow ZIP codes or broad census tracts.)

The researchers quickly found clusters around celebrated locations: the Kodak Theater, where the Oscars are held, for example, or Times Square. “Certain places do become iconic, and they become the branded spaces to do that stuff,” Ms. Currid said. “It’s hard to start a new opera house or a new theater district if you already have a Carnegie Hall or a Lincoln Center.”

The allure trickled down to the blocks nearby, Ms. Currid said, pointing to the nightclub district in West Chelsea, which started with Bungalow 8. “Why wouldn’t they want to be near the places that already were the places to be?” she asked. “It makes a lot of economic and social sense.”

That the buzzy locales weren’t associated with the artistic underground was a quirk of the data set — there were not enough events in Brooklyn to be statistically significant — and of timing. “If we took a snapshot two years from now, the Lower East Side would become a much larger place in how we understand New York,” Ms. Currid said.

But mostly the data helped show the continued dominance of the mainstream news media as a cultural gatekeeper, and the never-ending cycle of buzz in the creative world.

“There’s an economy of scale,” Ms. Currid said. “The media goes to places where they know they can take pictures that sell. And the people in these fields show up because the media is there.”

Distribution to a far-flung audience helps cement an area’s reputation as a Very Important Place. “We argue that those not conventionally involved in city development (paparazzi, marketers, media) have unintentionally played a significant role in the establishment of buzz and desirability hubs within a city,” Ms. Williams and Ms. Currid write in the study.

Whether their research can be used to manufacture interest — hold your party at a certain space, and boom, buzz! — or help city planners harness social convergence to create artist-friendly neighborhoods remains to be seen. (Ms. Currid and Ms. Williams next hope to map economic indicators like real-estate values against their cultural buzz-o-meter.)

For Ms. Williams the geo-tagging represents a new wave of information that can be culled from sites like Flickr and Twitter. “We’re going to see more research that’s using these types of finer-grained data sets, what I call data shadows, the traces that we leave behind as we go through the city,” she said. “They’re going to be important in uncovering what makes cities so dynamic.”

Ms. Currid added: “People talk about the end of place and how everything is really digital. In fact, buzz is created in places, and this data tells us how this happens.”

But even after their explicit study of where to find buzz, Ms. Currid and Ms. Williams did not come away with a better understanding of how to define it. Rather, like pornography, you know it when you see it.

“As vague a term as ‘buzz’ is, it’s so socially and economically important for cultural goods,” Ms. Currid said. “Artists become hot because so many people show up for their gallery opening, people want to wear designers because X celebrity is wearing them, people want to go to movies because lots of people are going to them and talking about them. Even though it’s like, ‘What the heck does that mean?,’ it means something.”