



# Cafés as a Place of Cultural Innovation

Arts, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation Lab

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## CAFÉ AS A PLACE OF CULTURAL INNOVATION

### Abstract

Cafés have a long history of contribution to social practice and artistic production in both Europe and America. Cafes and coffee shops in the US have doubled in number over the past 20 years.

Amenities like cafés are important for cities because the formation of arts and cultural identity impacts economic and political characteristics of cities and neighborhoods and they build community and vital street life. Characteristics of neighborhoods and their intersection with cultural production can be classified into several types of prevailing café and arts scenes. There are three types of café scene that differ based on the context of their relationship with local artists: bohemian, corporate & business, and traditional & communal. This paper utilized GIS mapping, photos, and statistical analysis to explore the relationship between cafés and artist communities in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Across all three

cities cafés were correlated with a larger artist presence, but bohemian café scenes had the strongest positive relationship with the number and growth of artists.

### Café as a Cultural Institution

Cafés have their historical roots as open-air gathering spaces in Paris not subject to the gatekeeping typical of other artistic venues and sources at the time. Additionally, as “public sphere,” cafés allowed for the development of social movements through open political discussion in Great Britain and can function as a “third place” for community development (beyond home and work) in a variety of contexts. Cafés can promote livable and connected communities and, based on Census data, are growing in popularity compared to bars and other cultural amenities (see Figure 1). Though concentrations of cafés varies by city, they are most common in areas with high artist

employment, designated arts districts, or proximity to institutions such as college, arts institutions, parks, or public transit stops in wealthier areas.

### Typology and Measurement of Café and Arts Scenes

Differences in clusters of amenities result in differences in aesthetic or cultural activity. Using data from *Scenescape* (Silver & Clark, 2016) on the legitimacy, theatricality, and

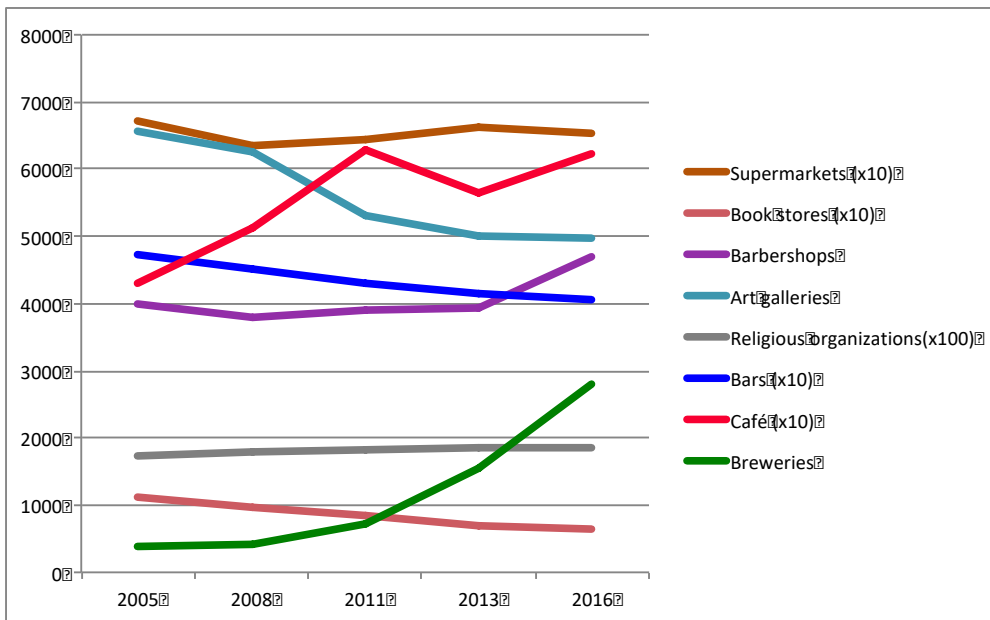


Figure 1. Change of Third Places in the US, 2005-2016  
(Source: US Census, County Business Patterns)

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authenticity of neighborhoods, three types of café and arts scenes were theorized:

- (1) Bohemia: less corporate influence, residents are transgressive, self-expressive, and tolerant, high levels of alternative transit and creative-class workers.
- (2) Corporate & business: often near CBDs at heart of cities, patrons are businesspeople and tourists, active primarily during the day
- (3) Neighborly & communal: locations nearer to churches or schools, family-oriented, close ties with community, diverse.

Cafés are most correlated with bohemian places, such as Brooklyn's Williamsburg, Chicago's Wicker Park, and L.A.'s Melrose District (See Figure 2), though they are somewhat common in corporate places like downtown as well. Of the three cities analyzed, Chicago had the highest rate of corporate cafés. Socioeconomic variables that correlated with café presence included education, alternative transit, arts businesses, and negative relationships with population density.

### Statistical Regression

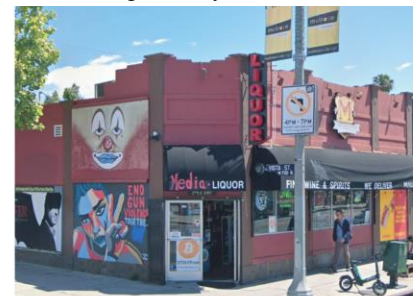
Hypothesis 1: When density, mix, and transit variables are controlled, (a) cafés will have a significant positive relationship with number of artists and (b) change in percentage of artists.

Hypothesis 2: When density, mix and transit variables are controlled, (a) the three cultural scenes will have significantly different impacts on number of artists and (b) change in percentage of artists. Independent variables included demographics, density, transportation options, number of cafés, cultural scene designation, and interaction variable of scene and café. For each of

the three metro areas examined, cafés had significant positive relationships with both presence and change of artists. Cafés were most present in bohemian scenes and least in traditional & communal ones, but those two both had positive correlations with artist change: artists in those areas were more likely to settle and increase in number than those living in corporate scenes. Higher education levels, lower income, and higher density also attracted artists, and evidence indicated low rents and a lack of artistic competition were also attractive.



Williamsburg, Brooklyn (ZIP 11211)



Melrose District, L.A. (ZIP 90016)



Wicker Park, Chicago (ZIP 60622)

Figure 2. Bohemian Café Streets in NYC, L.A, and Chicago  
(Photos taken by the author)



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