

Cultural Pluralism and Constructed Space: Two Corner Stores in the Lykins Neighborhood of Kansas City, Missouri, USA

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Abstract

This article examines business space in a culturally plural neighborhood of Kansas City, Missouri. Business space is constructed in socially and symbolically meaningful ways to embody both the personal identities of owners and their relationships to the community. Material culture illuminates socially constructed space that bespeaks differences in inclusive and exclusive relations toward customers and the community. Space is also symbolically constructed, material representation of owners' cultural heritage, and that of the historical neighborhood culture, provides insight about the bicultural identity of store owners. Constructed space offers meaningful insight about the structure of everyday interethnic interaction. Analysis of material culture is an important means by which to understand the cultural, economic, and social fiber of diverse urban contexts. Examination of constructed space in culturally diverse neighborhoods is a means to understand differential cultural invocation and the relationship between business owners, their clientele, and the broader community.

Introduction

The neighborhood known as Lykins in the northeastern part of Kansas City, Missouri, was my home from 1998 to 2005. During those seven years, I observed the development of two local corner stores, Las Tres Palmas and Nelson's Island Mart. Differences in the social construction of space were apparent. The inclusive / exclusive continuum, the extent to which cultural heritage is invoked, and economic specialization are used to analyze spatial arrangements. Symbol systems, embodied in material culture at Las Tres Palmas and Nelson's Island Market are important in understanding the social, economic, geographic, and global meanings of each business's relationship to the community. My theoretical basis hails from symbolic archaeology and sociology. Ian Hodder (1992:11-23) says that "material culture is meaningfully constituted...[with] ideas and concepts embedded in social life which influence the way material culture is used, embellished and discarded." Artifacts with meaning are deemed symbolic when their meanings are of particular interest (Halle 1998). Thus, interesting meanings found in the material artifacts and constructed space of Las Tres Palmas and Nelson's Island Mart, places analysis firmly in the theoretical realm of systems of symbols.

Socialization of Space

Socialization of space is a concept that sheds light on human interaction facilitated in these examples by the constructed space of businesses. Spatial archaeology theorizes that space is not passive; rather, it shapes and is shaped by social actions (Ashmore and Sharer 2006). Space thus facilitates different modes of interaction. My analysis links the spatial arrangements of each store – and the broader streetscape – to patterns of social interaction.

As this study focuses on material culture, I shall not discuss the owners or clientele. In many ways this approach encourages you, the reader, to make and examine your own assumptions about the owners and patrons. I deem this approach helpful as assessment of deductive processes can illuminate inherent biases in one's personal logic. Thus, examination based upon the material record in current contexts can highlight new and useful data for understanding social interaction and meaning.

In both stores, the building was constructed well before the opening of the business. Nelson's was built over 80 years ago in the late 1920s, while the Palmas building was constructed half as long ago in the 1970s. Adaptation to existing space differs in each store. Cultural inferences are implied by use and construction of space (Rapoport 1989) facilitating the relationship of each business to its customers. Commercial and

personal use of space will be considered vis-à-vis their impact on social relations. The material record bespeaks an exclusive relationship between Nelson's Island Mart and its customers in contrast to an inclusive relationship between Palmas and its customers. The conclusion links findings to the neighborhood's economics, geography, and finally to global meanings.

The so-called corner stores are two blocks from each other, within walking distance of the same clientele and subject to the same municipal policies. Their proximity, similar merchandise, and corner locations provide a similar context and thus the basis for comparison. Comparison of the material record in both stores highlights the social implications of their respective material culture.

Both stores are on the south side of Ninth Street. Las Tres Palmas is at the bottom of a hill and Nelson's Island Mart is further west. Nelson's Island Mart was built, as many other buildings on Ninth Street were, between 1920 and 1930 when a street car ran outside its door. The building sat vacant and reopened as Nelson's about 10 years ago. Las Tres Palmas was originally a 7-11 convenience store built in the 1970s, which failed. After housing a bread outlet and then several years of vacancy, Las Tres Palmas opened; it has been operational about five years. Architectural age couples with that of the business in articulating symbolic and social space.

These two corner stores provide groceries to customers within walking distance. In each case, exterior signs communicate the store owner's intended image to potential customers. The name, design, and placement of exterior signs at each store invoke culture in different ways. Interior decoration also differs. Social and symbolic meaning affecting the context of the stores is also formulated by the municipally constructed streetscape, shared by both stores. These spatial realities are analyzed herein.

Spatial Realities

The exterior presentation of Nelson's Island Mart is congruent with norms of the historic host culture (Heldstab 2000). *Nelson's* sounds Anglo and representative of the majority of the inhabitants of the neighborhood. *Island* refers to the nature of the building, surrounded on all

sides by streets. The sign with the name of the business is placed above the entrance. Flanking it, above the windows on both sides and in the windows, are mass produced beer signs. Sign placement, name choice, and style of advertisements convey the owner's perceptions of neighborhood ethnic, commercial, and spatial norms.

Functioning within a pre-existing built environment, Nelson's Island Mart adapts to space in dramatic ways. Historic architectural features include high ceilings, a full basement, brick construction, picture windows on three sides, street parking and modest size. Nelson's Island invokes norms of the historic host culture via the historical architecture of its constructed space. The current owners reference the historic host culture (Nelson's) and architecture (Island) in the business name.

In contrast, Las Tres Palmas invokes a culture different from the historic host culture of the neighborhood. The name Las Tres Palmas, "the three palms," evokes a Mexican landscape, not that of Kansas City. Signs are raised next to the street, above the door, and on each side of the façade. Utilizing every available space on the building, not just above the door, is a norm for Mexican businesses in America (Arreola 1988). Most signs are produced specifically for this business; there are, however, mass produced cigarette ads placed in the window. The store's signage indicates dual affiliation with Mexican and American culture but is primarily Mexican due to the Spanish language employed in the name and images of palm trees. Secondly, however, the historic American host culture is represented by mass produced advertisements in English. Therefore, a bicultural nature of the establishment emerges, Mexican by name and icon, American by advertising.

Architecturally, the interior of Las Tres Palmas is intended to draw in automotive passersby. Construction favoring motorists is evident by the large windows across the façade facing the busiest street and by the parking lot in front of the building. Despite the architectural intentions of the original 7-11, Las Tres Palmas communicates, via sign placement, imagery, and language, norms that differ from those of the historic architecture. Emphasis on novel signage is contrasted with a parking lot full of potholes. Evidenced by large

new signage, neglect of presentation in the windows, and neglect of the parking lot, owners chose to invest resources to create a new business identity rather than reinforce the originally intended function of accommodating motorists.

Examining the exteriors of Nelson's and Palmas, differential cultural invocation is discernable. Las Tres Palmas invokes both Anglo and Mexican culture through sign placement, imagery, and bilingual usage. Signs at Nelson's Island Mart adhere to historic host Anglo and Italian American cultural norms through sign placement and name. Differences in the intended clientele, owners' personal invocation of culture, and the implications for social interaction begin to emerge.

The examination of material culture inside the stores reveals that the use and construction of space point to differing manners of relating to customers. Exclusivity is materially communicated at Nelson's Island Mart while Las Tres Palmas communicates inclusivity. Interior arrangement in each business is constructed to facilitate differing social relations with customers, and hence the community. I follow with descriptions and analysis of each store's interior.

The Interiors of Each Store

Counter space is of central importance in a business, the spot where monetary transactions occur and the primary place of customer/employee interaction. The countertop in Nelson's Island Mart is raised; the sales person stands about two feet higher than the customer. The counter's entrance is at the rear of the store, limiting accessibility. Such construction forms a marked distinction between the customer and the sales person, creating an exclusive space for the latter. Social interaction between them is spatially constructed as hierarchical with the sales person being literally above and protected from the customer by way of the long counter with entry at the rear of the store. The constructed space communicates exclusivity via the separation of the sales person from the customer at Nelson's Island Mart.

The countertop at Las Tres Palmas is level with the customer, and the entrance is easily

accessible. Spatial distinction between the customer and sales person is deemphasized, creating an inclusive environment. The relationship between the sales person and the customer is constructed to convey equality. The relationship with the customer is inclusive. Separation between sales personnel and customers is spatially deemphasized at Las Tres Palmas, in contrast to Nelson's Island Mart.

The placement of television with associated seating at Las Tres Palmas further illustrates inclusivity. Providing customer seating for television encourages people to linger and stay. A playpen sits alongside certain tables. Business space is familial and even used for child care. This space provides a means by which customers and sales people can interact beyond the purchase point of the register where no divide exists between family and business matters.

Space utilization beyond transactions at the counter also exists at Nelson's Island Mart. There are three chairs placed in a circle around the edges of the store's entry. Individual placement of the chairs means that their use is not intended for customers to sit together. The chairs occupy the entry way, an open space which might be utilized by customers to gather and chat. The chairs go around the area, and anyone using them must speak loudly to communicate with another sitter. Also they face all the foot traffic coming in and going out of the store, which is hardly conducive to a friendly chat. Their placement instead communicates a role of gate keepers. Even unoccupied, the chairs' placement (1) facing the store's foot traffic and (2) surrounding the entrance further emphasizes the exclusivity of space separating customers from those who tend to sales at Nelson's Island Mart.

A television set behind the counter at Nelson's is for the private use of those in sales. It is not for the customers. Social interaction of customers with other customers or with sales people based on shared television consumption is hence precluded. Congruent counter arrangement, private not shared seating, and the location of the television set communicate the exclusive nature of the interior setting of Nelson's Island Mart versus the inclusive ambience of Las Tres Palmas. The organization of interior space

in each business facilitates differing types, depths, and modes of social interaction.

Religious Items

Both stores display religious objects differing, as with the construction and use of space, in their private or public nature. Hanging above the counter of Las Tres Palmas in a cluster, Mexican-made rosaries are for sale. This symbol of Mexican Catholicism invokes the owner's cultural heritage. Availability for purchase of religious items further indicates the inclusive nature of Las Tres Palmas. Public display of religious material culture is also another demonstration of cultural invocation.

Nelson's Island Mart has a shrine facing the entrance, a symbol of the hope for good fortune for the shop owner. Shrines function to bring good luck and prosperity to their keepers, the owner in this case. The shrine concretely invokes Vietnamese culture in its placement and use (Raulin 1993). This display evidences cultural heritage that is not materially communicated in any other way in the store. The shrine expresses beliefs and practices of the owners to customers inside the store. As the intended benefit is for the owner, the shrine is a further demonstration of the exclusive construction of space in Nelson's Island Mart.

Economic Specialization and Spatial Arrangements

So far, I have discussed only the secondary uses of each of the two stores; they are, of course, primarily retail businesses; each with its own specialized emphasis. Nelson's Island Mart and Las Tres Palmas sell many of the same items such as groceries, toiletries, and cigarettes. But Las Tres Palmas also carries specialty items for a Mexican clientele including snacks labeled in Spanish such as nuts with chili salt and spices. The store is a *taqueria*, the entire menu of which is also displayed in Spanish only. Congruent with the exterior signage, merchandise and interior signage socially construct the space primarily for a Latino clientele.

Nelson's Island Mart offers items congruent with perceived community norms. Frozen pizza, ice cream, cereal, and chips are the same assort-

ment found in larger grocery stores in the neighborhood. All signs are in English, and in keeping with the exterior signage, merchandising reflects the historic English-speaking community. From the types of merchandise, it is clear that Las Tres Palmas targets a culturally specific clientele while Nelson's marketing emphasis is on the owner's presumed norms of the historic community.

The prepared food available at Las Tres Palmas and the alcoholic beverages available at Nelson's are differences in what each store has to offer, analyzed respectively above as inclusive and exclusive. Choices to sell these items contribute to the differential spatial arrangements, of convenient public seating at Las Tres Palmas and the long, raised counter at Nelson's Island Mart symbolizing exclusivity because of the greater spatial separation between those who run the store and their customers. Economic specialization thus contributes to the construction of space and reflects the cultural norms of each shop owner.

Different Cultural Spaces

Each store invokes culture differently. At Nelson's Island Mart, the name, sign placement, merchandise offered, and décor are devoid of reference to the owner's Vietnamese heritage. On the other hand, at Las Tres Palmas the owner's Mexican heritage is invoked in each of these ways. The organization of interior space in each store is, as indicated, reflective of inclusive and exclusive approaches to customer relations. The spatial arrangements in turn influence different types of social interactions in each store.

Each business interacts not only with customers, but also with the community as a whole. The exterior presentation of each business indicates the relationship of each business to the larger community. Nelson's Island Mart appeals to the larger historically Anglo and Italian community. The relationship to the community indicates an inclusive, rather than exclusive, type of relationship. In comparison, Las Tres Palmas' relationship to the larger community is more exclusive. Although the construction of space communicates an open atmosphere between customers and the owner's sales force, the tar-

geted customers of Las Tres Palmas are definitely those whose cultural identity and values of Mexican heritage are shared by the owners. Spatial exclusivity occurs not between the customer and sales person, but between the Mexican clientele and the greater community.

Cultural Pluralism

The fact that each store chooses to emphasize distinctively one of two cultures (Vietnamese or Mexican) in the larger setting of a third (American of the United States of America) bespeaks a culturally plural neighborhood. Both stores indicate acceptance of cultural diversity in the Lykins neighborhood, albeit with different spatial construction. This situation is so even when expression is for private benefit, as with the Vietnamese shrine. A neighborhood norm of meshing historically based community norms with those of different incoming cultural heritages is thus materially communicated. Thus the neighborhood accepts representation of both the Vietnamese and Mexican cultural heritages.

The Streetscape

Many storefronts along Ninth Street have no signs, are not open for business, and are seemingly abandoned. The architecture is of a bygone era. The lack of new buildings communicates neighborhood poverty. Both Nelson's Island Mart and Las Tres Palmas have bars on their windows, an indication of crime in the neighborhood. Such characteristics of the streetscape clearly indicate that this neighborhood is not receiving funds for municipal improvement.

Further, the sidewalk has grass growing through it. The street has been re-paved so many times that it is no longer at a lower level than the sidewalk, a sign of municipal emphasis on people just passing through in vehicles, not on residents or other pedestrians. Power and telephone poles are placed in the sidewalk, not behind buildings, ignoring any ideas of aesthetics. Street lights are on wooden poles, telling of installation years ago when wood was used instead of the more current metal poles. The lights are purely utilitarian, lacking any semblance of aesthetic design.

The streetscape shows a combination of economic depression and lack of municipal

upkeep. The stores are in a socio-economically depressed neighborhood. Consequentially, the marginalization of community members is seemingly reflected by the neglect of the streetscape associated with municipal maintenance practices. This is the setting in which the two stores do business. Hence examination of the constructed space of Ninth Street, the street that Las Tres Palmas and Nelson's Island Mart share, illuminates social relations between the Lykins neighborhood and the greater urban area of Kansas City, Missouri.

Global Applications

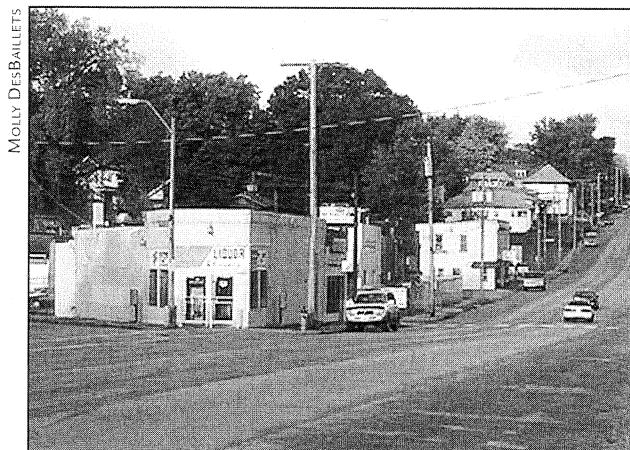
Business owners around the world construct space within their establishments conveying cultural beliefs that impact social interaction. Lack of capital forces adaptation to existing space, the age of which necessitates high levels of maintenance in poor inner city neighborhoods like Lykins. Added to the problem is municipal neglect (Harvey 1972), which marginalizes businesses and their clientele (Lewis 2002). But constructed space in a culturally plural neighborhood like Lykins shows cultural invocation indicating community acceptance of cultural norms differing from the greater urban area.

Culturally plural neighborhoods are found in urban areas around the world; the concentration of economically marginalized ethnic diversity in neighborhoods is common in North America (Valdes 2000). Settlement patterns of new immigrants in municipally, economically, and geographically marginalized neighborhoods is also common. While marginalization in poor diverse communities is imposed by an urban host culture (Menchaca 1989), a higher degree of cultural acceptance in such marginalized communities allows for the material expression of varied cultures. Cultural maintenance and economic niches are facilitated in such diverse neighborhoods that are perhaps hindered in other, more affluent, neighborhoods. The question follows: What institutional changes are necessary to facilitate equal municipal support of culturally rich communities like Lykins and more affluent neighborhoods?

Conclusion

In conclusion, detailed analysis of constructed space, as with the two stores in Lykins, is an important means by which to understand cultural, economic, and social variables in current urban contexts. Utilizing well formulated

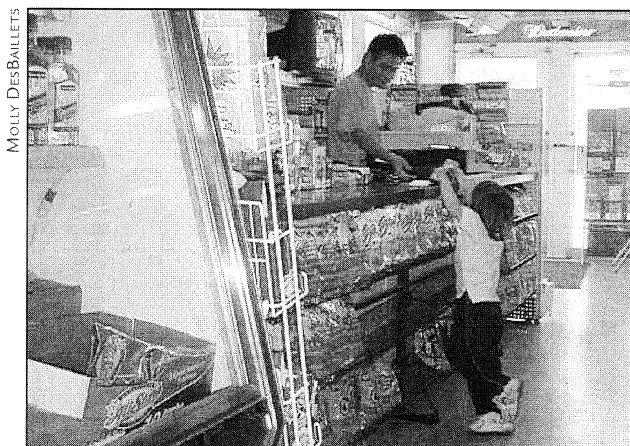
archaeological theory, urban scholars including cultural anthropologists can access important and useful information, significantly contributing to the understanding of the human experience within such environs. ○



Nelson's Island Mart. Note how exterior signs are placed only above the entrance and windows.



Las Tres Palmas. Note how exterior signs cover the facade. Bilingual English and Spanish signs contribute to bicultural invocation of both Anglo and Mexican cultural traditions.



Nelson's Island Mart. Raised countertop creates an exclusive space for sales persons separate from customers.



Las Tres Palmas. Spatially there is little or no boundary between sales persons and customers. Note the children to the left.

Notes

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