

## *Evaluating Lived Landscapes and Quotidian Architecture of Muslim Devon<sup>1</sup>*

ARIJIT SEN

---

21<sup>st</sup> century ethnic and immigrant landscapes across the world look surprisingly alike. Take the example of the South Asian retail strip. A common sight in major urban centres, these landscapes consist of dress, jewellery, food, baggage and electronics stores catering to an immigrant customer base. Such streets in the United States (Artesia, Los Angeles; Berkeley, Fremont; Jackson Heights, New York and Devon Street, Chicago) look very similar to South Asian shopping strips in London, Singapore, Toronto and Barcelona. The sameness is not merely visual. The store types are the same. Store names are identical. Even the non-visual experiential qualities of these places – smell, layout, interior ambience – produce a very familiar and consistent haptic environment. One may argue that the homogeneity of representation of ethnic spaces across the world is a result of globalisation and the easy movement of people, goods, images, ideas and money across distances. Ethnicity is now a commodity, incessantly reproduced across diasporic locations via simple and easy to replicate systems of objects, signs and symbols. A bank of names, visual images, material culture, space-layout and merchandise circulate in global circuits sustaining what Ulf Hannerz calls a global ecumene.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, despite the banality of these spaces, stores, restaurants, makeshift places of worship and retail streets are indeed places where immigrants spend much time. These are places that appear everywhere and are locations where individuals sustain their social and cultural life. Human behavior in these spaces frames identity and sense of belonging within a collective. Everyday experiences in such locations impact the way groups mark and maintain social boundaries. Yet, such commodified markers of cultural difference are deemed unworthy and somehow inauthentic in architectural discourses. They are not nominated for professional awards. Why not? Current practices and methods of architectural connoisseurship lack a language and epistemological framework necessary to evaluate quotidian spaces. The relevance of ordinary spaces comes out of its social value, not its aesthetic form. It is impossible to identify a single “creator” or designer of these

---

<sup>1</sup> I will like to thank the following individuals: Professor Modjtaba Sadria, participants and organizers of the 2009 AKA knowledge workshop, Marcia Hermansen, Maribeth Brewer, Greg Brewer, Irving Loundy, Dorothea Shah, Amie Zander, Sadruddin Noorani and the students enrolled in the Imagine Devon Studio.

<sup>2</sup> Ulf Hannerz (1989) “Notes on the Global Ecumene,” *Public Culture* 1, Spring, pp. 66-75.

spaces, to whom we can credit the architecture. These spaces don't demonstrate the traditional criteria for artistic or architectural connoisseurship such as stylistic excellence, material and technological innovation, aesthetic form, experiential complexity, economic value, and other forms of artistic creativity. Negative value-judgment due to visual, representational and experiential homogeneity of these spaces often ignores the lived reality of these environments. An argument that these spaces are extraordinary gains traction if we consider the innovative and creative ways by which inhabitants organise the layout and manipulate their worlds in these spaces. The creative genius necessary to sustain these lived-worlds can be acknowledged once we realise that the meanings, layout, use and experience of these spaces are often highly contested and mediated.

Everyday lived landscapes play a salient role in sustaining communities and cultures and are therefore relevant to the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, whose work in identifying, documenting and rewarding outstanding architecture is aimed at setting "new standards of excellence in architecture, urban or regional design, conservation and landscape architecture".<sup>3</sup> In addition, ordinary buildings, their makers, and their users perform extraordinary functions and fulfill the Award's clear criteria: "to trigger debate and reflection on the built environment and plan a positive part in improving it for generations to come". The award recognises "... work that addresses specific societal needs as well as wider contemporary concerns, and understands that successful projects are the outcome of a long and complex process of negotiation and collaboration between many different parties. ...".<sup>4</sup> By valuing common places we go beyond narrow material criteria of evaluation and acknowledge the importance of collaboration and conflict within the built environment. Spotlighting lived environments also allows us to examine the creative agency of users and inhabitants who lack social and political power and whose voices are not represented in official and architectural discourses.

If we agree that ordinary, architecturally insignificant buildings can be of social value then our central question is this: Without using the language of connoisseurship, how do we evaluate these sites? What criteria do we use to identify important buildings and locations that sustain our everyday public domain? Can we, or should we, distinguish individual buildings (as we do with architect-designed structures) from their larger cultural contexts and landscapes – separating, categorising and evaluating them as we do with our art and artefacts?

This paper suggests a methodological strategy that may help us identify, document and evaluate ordinary architecture. It focuses on the cultural landscape of South Asian Muslim communities on Devon Avenue in Chicago. It explores the seemingly homogeneous

---

<sup>3</sup> The Aga Khan Development Network, 2008, <<http://www.akdn.org/akaa.asp>> (accessed on July 21, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Farrokh Derakhshani (2007) "Foreword," in *Intervention Architecture: Building for Change*. New York and London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., p. 5.

and ‘hyper-commodified’ Devon Avenue to examine if there are alternate ways to read this environment. This street has a large concentration of cultural, retail, residential, religious and social spaces catering to South Asian Muslims and is an important node within a large and globally dispersed transnational ethnic network (see Figure 1). Surely this street is an important node within the cultural landscape of South Asians serving as an important lived environment. In order to value this street and its architecture, this paper argues, we need to employ a new analytic lens that looks beyond the apparent homogeneity of this space. The first half of the paper identifies this lens by describing the anatomy of ethnic space in contemporary times. The second section proposes an evaluative criterion to study these spaces. These methods are not only distinct from the methods of architectural connoisseurship described above, they are also different from those used in traditional ethnic studies scholarship to evaluate ethnic enclaves in the United States. Instead, the methods suggested in this paper posit architecture as a part of a larger system of settings and activities and utilise values of social equity in order to evaluate these landscapes.



Figure 1: Views of Devon Avenue showing adjacent stores catering to various ethnic groups. Behind the highly visible signage one can decipher historic building façades. A map of cultural institutions in the area shows the ethnic diversity of the neighborhood. Photo Credits: Arijit Sen.

## Anatomy of Muslim Devon

The number of South Asian Muslim immigrants entering and living in the United States multiplied since the sixties.<sup>5</sup> The actual numbers are difficult to ascertain because the US Census Bureau does not collect information about religious affiliation. Nevertheless, from religious census data released by other organisations and Department of State data, we can estimate that there are between 1.4 and 7 million Muslims living in the United States. A 2001 American Religious Identification Survey estimated 1.1 million adult Muslims in America. In the same year, a study sponsored by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) estimated the United States Muslim population at 6 or 7 million.<sup>6</sup> Studies suggest that South Asians (Pakistani, Indian, Sri Lankan, Nepali, Bangladeshi and Afghani) represent an estimated 18% (Pew study) to 33% (Council on American-Islamic Relations study)

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Pipes and Khalid Durán (2002) “Muslim Immigrants in the United States,” In *Backgrounder*. Washington, DC Center for Immigration Studies; Aminah Mohammed- Arif (2002) *Salaam America: South Asians in New York*. London: Anthem Press; Karen Leonard (2003) *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research*. New York: Russell Sage.

<sup>6</sup> A 2007 survey done by the Pew Research Center projects 1.4 million Muslims 18 years or older living in the United States. In contrast to that report, a 2001 *World Almanac* estimate states the number as 5.8 million. Sociologist Ilyas Ba-Yunu estimates 6.7 million Muslims. Pew Research Center (2007) *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, pp. 9-14; (2001) *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2001*. Marwah, NJ: World Almanac Books, p. 689; Ilyas Ba-Yunus (1997) *Muslims of Illinois, A Demographic Report*. Chicago: East-West University, p. 9.

of the total US Muslim population. Scholarship on the architecture of these immigrants focuses on mosques (there were 1209 mosques counted in the US in a 2000 study).<sup>7</sup> We must note that most of these discussions revolve around buildings legally registered as mosques with local and city government. This figure does not include other prayer spaces, community halls and places of worship that are not registered as mosques. These discussions also leave out other major spaces used by this community – public spaces, residences, cultural centres and workplaces.<sup>8</sup> Except for a limited number of religious buildings, the comprehensive lived landscape of the South Asian Muslim community is rendered invisible and left unaccounted for in official and architectural discourses in the United States.

Ethnic enclaves and mosque typology perpetuate an isomorphism between place and culture, between alterity and geographical seclusion, in the scholarship of urban ethnic spaces. These discussions primarily focus on architecture and immigrant settlement patterns as symbols of difference, as bounded locales where cultural difference is circumscribed and contained. Enclaves and specially-designed religious buildings are easy to identify and document. Architecture (the enclave, the building, stylistic features), culture (visible symbols, bodies, clothes and signage), and human behaviour (cultural practices) in these marked spaces are correlated, perpetuating the discourse of ethnic exclusiveness and “urban villages”. Scholarship on territorially-bounded enclaves includes Herbert Gan’s seminal work on an Italian enclave in Boston’s West End and scholarship on Chinatowns in major American cities.<sup>9</sup> Kahlidi’s work on mosques in North America identifies three types of mosques – the imported, adapted and innovative designs.<sup>10</sup> His discussions are based on the architectural style and formal characters of mosque designs. These discussions of ethnic places fail to acknowledge changing transnational lived realities of our times.

Unlike ethnic ghettos of the past, the Muslim landscape in Chicago cannot be fully captured by reading it as a local ethnic enclave. The landscape is more complex than that, due to geographic dispersal and the extensive social networks that connect this neighborhood to a larger regional and global world. Although a concentration of residential, religious

---

<sup>7</sup> Ihsan Bagby; Paul M. Perl, and Bryan T. Froehle (2001) *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait: A Report from the Mosque Study Project*. Washington, DC: Council on American-Islamic Relations, p. 3; Gulzar Haider, “Muslim Space and the Practice of Architecture” in Barbara Daly Metcalf, (ed.), (1996) *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 31-45.

<sup>8</sup> Few studies exist that examine both secular and sacred spaces. Susan Slyomovic, “The Muslim World Day Parade and ‘Storefront’ Mosques of New York City,” in Barbara Daly Metcalf, (ed.), (1996) *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, pp. 204-216.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert J. Gans (1982) *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans*. New York: Free Press, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> Omar Khalidi (2001) “Mosque Design in the United States” *Saudi Aramco World*, November/December, pp. 24-33.

and cultural spaces within a 10-block radius around Devon exists, one can never understand how this neighborhood works without relating it to the processes within the larger encompassing context. The stretch of Devon Avenue that runs roughly between McCormick and Western Avenues, along the northern borders of Chicago and adjacent to the village of Skokie in Cook County, has a complex and overlapping history and spatial morphology of ethnic space.<sup>11</sup> Germans, Irish, Jewish and Croatians were succeeded by South Asian, Asians and Russian Jews. Since 1991, adjacent portions of this street have been renamed in order to honour members of this diverse community: Gandhi Way (Indian community), Mohammed Ali Jinnah Way (Pakistani community), Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman Way (Bangladeshi community), Golda Meir (different Jewish groups) and Dr. J. Jayalalitha Way (Tamil populations). What makes the area more complex is that while the main shopping stretch is composed of immigrant stores, the adjoining residential neighborhoods are racially mixed. The retail street, too, is a tapestry of interlocking ethnicities, religions and cultures. Orthodox Jewish populations live in close proximity to low-income Muslim immigrants from South Asia. Stores, services, religious institutions, community halls and schools catering to Muslims are interspersed with those catering to Jews, Catholics and Hindus. Stores catering to Muslim immigrants include religious bookstores such as IRQA books; grocery stores selling halal food; restaurants serving culturally specific cuisine and halal cooking; stores with prayer nooks and spaces used by practicing Muslims during prayer times; community spaces; Islamic schools; meeting halls for local youth, the elderly, or women and children; basement prayer halls; mosques; and culturally sensitive services (doctors, consultants, travel agents, hajj-planners, real estate agents who speak vernacular languages and who understand the values and cultural needs of South Asian Muslims). These stores share the street-front with stores selling cultural artefacts, food and services catering to other South Asian, Jewish, Latino and Russian groups (see Figure 2, a-d).



Figure 2 (a-d): There are various kinds of places patronized by Muslim residents and shoppers. These photos show a bookstore, a restaurant, the mosque, and a grocery store selling halal food. In addition there are services, educational institutions, and community meeting halls serving the local community. Photo Credits: Arijit Sen, Jodi Masanz.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Langer (2004) *Crossing California*. New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, Penguin Group; Jacque Day Archer and Jamie Wirsbinski Santoro (2007) *Images of America: Roger's Park*. Arcadia Publishing; Mike Stiehl (2007) *The West Ridge Community Survey*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Extension; Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'A Jones (1981) *Ethnic Chicago*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Places like Devon Avenue highlight the central problem associated with such quotidian lived spaces – the problem of negotiated values. Different constituent groups value different aspects of this neighborhood and cultural values are often contested. Local grassroots organisations like the West Rogers Park Community Organization, West Ridge Chamber of Commerce, the Indo-American Center and the West Ridge Rogers Park Historical Society all have devised plans to redesign the street as a public space. But in the June 2008 community meeting organised by the South Asian American Policy Research Institute at the Indo-American Center, there was no consensus among stakeholders. Non-resident shoppers and storeowners displayed a different sense of place and place attachment



Figure 3: Street corners, sidewalks and building edges serve as meeting locations and playgrounds for local residents of different age groups. The two photos show elderly men socializing on sidewalk seats and children playing on the sidewalks during weekdays.

Photo Credits: Arijit Sen.

compared to the different resident groups. Non-residents saw the street as made up of isolated nodes and wanted more parking to support travel while local residents complained about the lack of interaction between the street-users and the neighbourhood residents, as well as crowding and excessive parking.

Compared to out-of-towners, local resident Muslims experience this neighbourhood as a coherent territory.<sup>12</sup> The storeowners know them as customers, renters and chiefly as a source of cheap labour. Practicing women wearing the hijab, working-class men wearing work clothes or ethnic costumes, unaccompanied children and groups of teenagers collect along the sidewalks of this crowded and heavily trafficked street at odd hours.<sup>13</sup> During late evenings, many of the restaurants and street corners turn into meeting places for young men from this community<sup>14</sup> (see Figure 3). At prayer times, basements of stores and niches in restaurants get converted into prayer spaces.<sup>15</sup> The local residents experience the street, individual buildings and open spaces as part of a continuous fabric that Rapoport calls a “system of settings and activities”.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For example there are many community, dance, and marriage halls located on the upper floors of buildings. Organizations and services catering to local residents, elderly, women, children and families are tucked in between the retail stores along the street.

<sup>13</sup> Ade Astuti and Susy Tekunan (2007) “A Slice of South Asia Lives in Chicago”, *Voice of America*, October 1, <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2007-10/2007-10-01-voa31.cfm>, (accessed May 6, 2009); Neil MacFarquhar, “Pakistanis Find U.S. an Easier Fit than Britain”, *New York Times*, August 21, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Community members of the South Asian community in interviews with the author, Chicago, February-March 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Marcia Hermansen has done groundbreaking research on how Devon is used by the immigrants who live nearby. She has also studied the basement mosques and places of worship that have mushroomed in the area. Personal communications with Dr. Hermansen, Chicago, April 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Amos Rapoport (1993) “Systems of Activities and Systems of Settings”, in Susan Ken (ed.), *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space: An Interdisciplinary Cross-Cultural Study*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 9-20.

At different times during the day and seasons, different parts of the stores are populated and used for different purposes. Stores such as Hyderabad House (2225 W. Devon Ave.) open early to serve breakfast to Muslim residents and cab drivers returning from morning prayers at surrounding mosques. Prayer spaces are located inside stores and restaurants such as Ghareeb Nawaz (2032 W. Devon Ave.) and Tahoorah (2345 W. Devon Ave.). These, often unmarked spaces, are attended by people living in the neighborhood as well as outsiders. For instance, restaurants like Ghareeb Nawaz and Hyderabad House are haunts of practicing cab drivers who traverse the city and need a place to pray during daily prayer hours (without having to drive all the way to their local mosque). This is not an example unique to Chicago. In an article on spaces frequented by cab drivers in New York, Courtney Bender and Elta Smith explore the network of prayer spaces available to Muslim cab drivers in that city.<sup>17</sup>

While we find that this multicultural mosaic appears within the ten-block radius of this street, we also find that suburban immigrants – Muslims among them – travel from the urban periphery to shop, worship, and participate in cultural activities in this core-neighborhood. Since the 1970s, the ethnic institutions along this thoroughfare have also served customers from a multi-state area (Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin and Northern Iowa). This core-periphery geography reminds us of an urban geography popularised by the old Chicago School of urban sociology. In that pattern, the inner urban core is inhabited by working-class recent immigrants while the suburban rings are occupied by the assimilated and rich.

Middle-class immigrants from the suburban hinterland include absentee landlords, storeowners and customers who form a “community without propinquity”<sup>18</sup> mostly in the Greater Chicago suburbs of Evanston, Skokie, Highland Park, Des Plaines, Arlington Heights and Schaumburg”. Many local storeowners live and have set up branch stores in Greater Chicago suburbs (e.g., Patel Brothers, 2610 W. Devon Ave., Chicago; and 873 E. Schaumburg Rd., Schaumburg). According to local residents and the local Chamber of Commerce, some absentee landlords renting out apartments to low-income immigrants show a lack of interest or ability to maintain their properties or to carry out necessary repairs. Their rental strategy impacts the architectural and physical quality of the neighbourhood.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Courtney Bender and Elta Smith (2004) “Religious Innovations Among New York’s Muslim Taxi Drivers”. in Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang (eds.), *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*, New York: New York University Press, pp. 76-97.

<sup>18</sup> Melvin Webber (1963) “Order in Diversity: Community without Propinquity”, in L. Wingo, (ed.), *Cities and Space: The Future Use of Urban Land*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 23-54.

<sup>19</sup> Interviews, The Devon Avenue Needs Assessment: A Smart Growth Strategy, workshop organized by West Rogers Park Community Organization and SAAPRI on Thursday, June 19, 2008, 7:00 pm–9:00 pm at the Indo American Community Center, 6328 N. California Avenue, Chicago. Amie Zander, West Ridge Chamber of Commerce, in interview with the author.

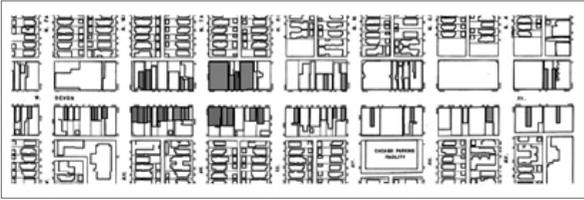


Figure 4. Over the years shops selling similar goods have opened in near proximity creating clusters. The shops marked orange in this map sell clothing and jewelry.

Image Credits: This map was produced by students as part of a research studio, Spring 2009. Instructor: Arijit Sen, Drawings by Nick Gaddy.



Figure 5: Abundant storefront signage is aimed at people who will see it from various vantage points. Signs directed towards automobiles are large and above the door and awnings. Those read by pedestrians are stuck on doors and at eye level. Many of the latter are temporary signs, taken down and changed on a regular basis.

Photo Credits: Jodi Masanz.

The middle-class shoppers coming from far-flung areas (mostly on weekends) take advantage of convenient clusters of related shops. Such clusters have been forming over the last ten years, blocks with jewellery stores and dress stores conveniently appearing next to each other being a common example (see Figure 4). Community spaces, marriage halls and stores selling marriage clothes and jewellery are important nodes for out-of-towners. The services catering to the local community and residents are not easily visible to most out-of-town visitors because the latter are distracted by the overpowering signage and store advertisements carefully designed and placed on building façades to engage the vantage point of those inside automobiles (see Figure 5). The resultant cognitive map of visitors is very different from the map

locals have of this street. For the outsider arriving in a car, visibility from the automobile and then, the experience of walking to a destination after parking, are central spatial experiences. From the point of view of a traditional urban analysis the latter's experience of the street may be mistaken as "fractured." But in reality, this networked and nodal view is merely a different kind of spatial experience, as argued by scholars associated with the so-called Los Angeles school of urbanism.

Merely analysing Devon Avenue as a local strip mall may not give us the entire picture of the global and regional influences within which this space operates. Storeowners on Devon Avenue negotiate multiple juridical and governmental mechanisms – the economic regulations of global trade, national rules set by the FDA, the IRS, and other national governmental and regulatory bodies, local taxation and tax structures such as TIF (Tax Increment Financing) districts<sup>20</sup> and local building, parking and zoning codes<sup>21</sup> – while also

<sup>20</sup> TIF stands for tax increment financing and is used by the City of Chicago for community improvement projects. TIF district redevelopment projects are carried out with the hope that such projects will bring in tax revenue and ultimately pay for the project. For further discussion on the importance of TIF funds for the Devon Avenue community, see Ann Lata Kalayil, Padma Rangaswamy, and K. Sujata (2008) *Developing Devon: Creating a Strategic Plan for Economic Growth through Community Consensus*. Chicago: South Asian American Policy and Research Institute, pp. 16-18.

<sup>21</sup> Parking is a huge and highly contested issue here. A community meeting arranged by the South Asian American Policy Research Institute on June 19, 2008, and December 14, 2008, brought together local residents, storeowners and other stakeholders in 2008. Group discussions during the meeting identified

dealing with neighbourhood groups and their concerns, and advertising their stores to customers who come from far off locations and so on. All of a sudden, the very act of sustaining an economically successful store seems like a complex juggling of multiple laws, regulations, expectations and practices that go beyond the immediate context of the store.

Any study or development of this landscape has to deal with the multiple authorships of these spaces. As mentioned earlier, discussions of South Asian Muslims often generate discussions of mosques and prayer halls (religious congregation spaces) at the expense of other cultural and social spaces. This creates a certain singularity and homogenisation of representation and imagery by which the physical landscape of this group is portrayed and promoted. Contrary to common belief, the South Asian Muslim immigrants visiting this street are part of a very diverse community, fractured along class, language, national and sectarian lines. South Asian Muslims are seen as having dual national and religious identities. Researchers tend to downplay the distinctive interests of these groups.<sup>22</sup> South Asian Muslim immigrants also belong to a transnational ummah (peoplehood) to which Muslims across the world belong. These diverse forms of belonging produce multiple and overlapping identities and cultural landscapes and an internal diversity that can be observed in the nature of Muslim religious spaces.

For instance, in proximity to Chicago's Devon Avenue, there are some 13 permanent centers of Islamic worship. These range from the pan-Islamic Jama Masjid (mosque) that holds thousands for regular Friday services, to a dozen basement gathering places that may each attract as many as several hundred male worshippers on Fridays, while functioning as schools and community centers throughout the rest of the week. Demographic and class diversity contributes to the fact that "basement" mosques (situated in proximity to family life) are common in the Devon neighborhood. Marcia Hermansen's research shows that "basement" mosques signal less visibility than storefront or street-level architecture. Many of these spaces are not readily identifiable as Muslim spaces from outside because of the way they are marked. Their distinctive character is created by complex and intersecting factors such as their spatial placement (in store basements, basements of apartment

---

parking as the most divisive issue for the community. Also cited in Kalayil et al., *Developing Devon*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Bubinas (2005) "Gandhi Marg: the Social Construction and Production of an Ethnic Economy in Chicago", *City & Society* 17, December, pp. 161-179; Padma Rangaswamy (2000) *Namaste America: Indian Immigrants in an American Metropolis*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press; Asad Husain and Harold Vogelaar, "Activities of the Immigrant Muslim Communities in Chicago", in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith, (eds.), (1994) *Muslim Communities in North America*. Albany, NY: State University of New York, pp. 231-257; Ilyas Ba-Yunus (1997) "Muslims of Illinois: A Demographic Report", Updated 11/30/97 (Copyright Asad Ba-Yunus), <http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/6453/illinois.html?200927> (accessed July 27, 2009). Ashutosh briefly touches upon the diversity among Muslim residents and storeowners in his article, but doesn't discuss the local community in details. Ishan Ashutosh (2008) "(Re)-Creating the Community: South Asian Transnationalism on Chicago's Devon Avenue", *Urban Geography* 29, no. 3, April 1-May 15, pp. 224-245.

complexes and inside restaurants), predominant ethnic constituency (Gujerati, Hyderabad, Punjabi, Sri Lankan, Bihari and mixed), and interpretive and sectarian differences (Mahdavi, Tablighi, Deobandi, Bohra, Ismaili and Bareilvi).<sup>23</sup>

The anatomy of Muslim Devon then suggests a networked multi-nodal and fractured geography. Three important issues emerge. First, (borrowing from Nancy Fraser) multiple publics coexist in this landscape.<sup>24</sup> As a result of this dispersal and diversity, one discovers a curious phenomenon. Instead of the waning of the importance of architecture and place, the opposite happens. Sidewalks and party-walls, entrances and edges play a role in the visual and haptic experience of the neighborhood. Signs and subtle boundary markers delineate ethnic businesses and public institutions from those that are not ethnic-owned or patronised (predominantly) by Muslims. Entrances and transition zones are carefully designed and decorated to communicate messages, reproduce ethnic identity and distinguish local-serving businesses from more general ones. A hubbub of exchange and interaction becomes the very basis for a new public sphere that is simultaneously local and global, ethnic and civic, political and parochial.

Second, time is central to the understanding of this lived landscape. Lefebvre's notion of multiple urban rhythms – an embodied temporal understanding of the city – gives us a useful framework of analysis. Seasonal merchandise produce temporal cycles, such as the way mangos in summer may take over the front of the grocery counter while seasonal vegetables are spread out next to the entrance. Stores like Sahil sell upscale marriage gear to a burgeoning second generation of South Asian Americans during “marriage seasons”. During festival weekends the street is crowded as families from the hinterland drive in, often outnumbering the locals who use the street as a public meeting space. During weekend lunch times, the restaurant seating area is full and people flood out into the sidewalks.

Third, it is indeed the homogenising ethnic signage and other spatial orders along building edges on Devon Avenue that renders the diverse interior cultural spaces invisible to those who don't know. As Fredrick Barth wrote in 1969, boundary maintenance is central to the ways in which ethnic groups reproduce ethnic identity.<sup>25</sup> A study of boundary

---

<sup>23</sup> Personal communications with Dr. Marcia Hermansen. See, Marcia Hermansen (2007) “Chicago” in Jocelyne Cesari, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Islam in America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, pp. 132-139.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy Fraser (1992) “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”, in Craig Calhoun, (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 109-142.

<sup>25</sup> Barth's emphasis on people and performance has influenced a variety of fields and scholarship in multiple forms – as transactionalism, interactionalism, and in scholarship on performance studies. Fredrik Barth (1969) *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.; Kathleen Conzen, David Gerber, Ewa Morawska, and George Pozzetta (1992) “The Invention of Ethnicity: Perspectives from the U.S.A.”. *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, Fall, pp. 3-41; Werner Sollors (1989) *The Invention of Ethnicity*. New York: Oxford University Press; Mary C. Waters (1990) *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

maintenance encounters posits the built environment as a theatrical stage – a setting that is more than a mere neutral context where culture and everyday life play out. A stage is successful because of its flexibility and malleability. It can be used for different purposes and for different plays. But at the same time a stage is successful because of the inventiveness with which the spatial parts are manipulated and transformed during performance. A stage is also successful because it lends itself to multiple forms of readings. Some of these interactional events are transforming and ephemeral, some invisible to the viewing audience, while others are permanent and highly visible. The notion of temporality, transactions and exchange in situations of cultural contact form a difficult yet useful armature to understand place-making in Muslim landscapes along Devon Avenue. Such an understanding also complicates the notion of singular culture with a capital C and shows us that multiple forms of South Asian Muslim cultural practices occur along Devon Avenue at different times.

### **Approaches toward the Study of Lived Spaces**

Historians and scholars of cultural landscapes argue that quotidian places cannot be studied in isolation from the larger landscapes to which they belong. Amos Rapoport suggests that understanding the system of settings and system of activities that sustain these networks is essential in understanding cultural landscapes.<sup>26</sup> Dell Upton argues for the importance of inserting the built artefact within a larger cultural landscape in order to look beyond architecture as the singular creation of the architect-designer.<sup>27</sup> He argues that using cultural landscapes (and not individual buildings and types) as a unit of analysis allows us to not only capture the physical and material aspects of the world around us, but also the imaginative and cognitive factors that give meaning and symbolic relevance to this world.

Studying a building within its larger context requires us to frame our investigation with transformation and change in mind. Renee Chow and Thomas Hubka propose two such concrete ways to evaluate ordinary spaces. Chow suggests that we need to look for “capacity” in a design. Capacity is the architectural character of a built form that allows it to “suggest a variety of uses. Capacity extends the functional requirements of a program by holding multiple configurations of inhabitation and receiving multiple associations”.<sup>28</sup> Capacity can be evaluated by an analysis of spatial form, its syntax, configurations, dimensions, layout and morphology. Forms with high capacity are flexible enough to

---

<sup>26</sup> Amos Rapoport (1993) “Systems of Activities and Systems of Settings”, in Susan Kent (ed.), *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space: An Interdisciplinary Cross-Cultural Study*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>27</sup> Dell Upton (1991) “Architectural History or Landscape History?” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 44, August 1991, pp. 195-199.

<sup>28</sup> Renee Chow (2002) *Suburban Space: The Fabric of Dwelling* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 88.

accommodate functions and uses beyond those planned by the designer. Chow uses four categories to evaluate capacity: 1) flexible forms of circulation and access; 2) dimensional variety allowing for multiple uses and architectural forms; 3) graded privacies and control of spaces that allows for territorial complexity and structure; and 4) building materials that produce tectonic flexibility in the built form (allowing it to be changed and adapted). A building that allows multiple forms of movement and access (both physical access and visual access) accommodates a variety of functions and users. Chow shows that the nature of circulation within a building can accommodate change over time. Dimensional variety is a formal and “proxemic” concept that suggests that buildings can support a wide variety of uses and adaptations because of their spatial layout and size. Proxemics is a word coined by anthropologist E. T. Hall in 1966 to explain how distance between two individuals interacting with each other is determined by their relationship and by the nature of their interaction.

Chow’s notion of capacity not only challenges us to “value” flexibility in the form and program of the building but also entertains multiple forms of expressive uses and interpretations by users of buildings. In other words, Chow argues for an architecture that can be, in Michel de Certeau’s phrase, “poached” by its inhabitants.<sup>29</sup> A building thus designed ensures that the design supports patterns of use, behaviour, and practices without sacrificing formal and tectonic beauty and functionality. Like Rapoport, Upton, and Groth, Chow too argues that, rather than seeing buildings as independent objects, we should see the built form as part of a larger built fabric. A design that integrates the building-artefact into a larger urban (morphological) system can potentially promote a “great deal of individual variation in which the collective structure is still highly discernable”.<sup>30</sup>

Thomas Hubka, an architect and scholar of the built environment, compares the folk design process to that of a bricoleur whose “design method is characterised by a primary (dependent) and a secondary (independent) design component in which the primary or gross architectural arrangement is rigorously structured while allowing the designer a range of individual design interpretations in the secondary system”.<sup>31</sup> Hubka’s allusions to language and grammar come from his structuralist references and suggest another framework that allows us to accommodate individual user’s creative ideas within a more structured (cultural) grammar. This is where Hubka’s work meets Chow’s suggestions and leads into the following suggested criteria to evaluate lived spaces.

---

<sup>29</sup> Michel de Certeau (1988), translated by Steven Rendall, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. xii.

<sup>30</sup> Renee Chow (2002) *Suburban Space: The Fabric of Dwelling* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Hubka (1979) “Just Folks Designing: Vernacular Designers and the Generation of Form,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 32, February, p. 29.

## **Evaluating Lived Spaces: Three Connected Criteria**

It is clear that, given the demographic heterogeneity and historical transformations of this neighbourhood, culture-specific evaluation criteria will not give us a balanced picture. Not only do people and their culture change over time, the built environment along Devon Avenue displays cycles of death and renewal. New buildings come up in place of old dilapidated ones; preservation battles pit historians and residents against developers over certain historical buildings.<sup>32</sup> Economic values and business practices change over time. New immigrants come in as immigration trends change and these groups have different cultural practices. Older values and expectations change as newer residents arrive. But the new practices are often seen as different and contrary to accepted norms of the place. Zoning codes, behavioural etiquettes, and community expectations built on mores of the past don't fit the needs, expectations and practices of the new residents. Differing values and histories produce conditions of inequality – both in terms of access to resources and levels of assimilation. This sets up conditions of social inequity and unequal access to resources in a multicultural and diverse neighbourhood as such as Devon Avenue. Such scenarios necessitate a reconsideration of our values. Discussed below are three such values that can be used in order to assess lived environments.

### ***The Value of Dependencies: Hierarchies of Decision-making***

The first issue necessary for evaluating the lived environment along Devon Avenue involves the relative role of multiple stakeholders in the maintenance of this landscape. Because there are many users and stakeholders involved in the production and reproduction of the cultural landscape along this street, it is important to analyse the nature of interventions and the individual's role within a complex hierarchy of ownership and decision-making in this lived landscape. By outlining this hierarchy we can see how social power is reproduced within this neighbourhood.

For instance a city planner and city government's decision impacts policy and transformation at regional, urban and subsidiary scales. City regulations about vending, taxation, parking, zoning and business frame the way the storeowners, residents, and customers interact and behave. A lack of transparency and clarity about the hierarchies of political decision-making and jurisdiction in Chicago creates dissonant responses from various neighbourhood and local business groups. Such a situation fractures the local community and produces apathy among South Asian merchants. During our research, local merchants complained that they felt that city services are not commensurate with the huge revenue that this street

---

<sup>32</sup> Interviews with community members of the South Asian community, February-March 2009. The Devon Avenue Needs Assessment: A Smart Growth Strategy, a community workshop organized by West Rogers Park Community Organization and SAAPRI on Thursday, June 19, 2008 7:00 pm–9:00 pm at the Indo American Community Center, 6328 N. California Avenue, Chicago.

generates – a complaint that confirms some residents’ impression that they are ignored by the city government. Garbage removal policies, police citations and activities, and parking enforcement policies give rise to such conceptions.

For instance, SAAPRI (South Asian American Policy and Research Institute) reported that the Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district created by the city in 1999 and scheduled to expire in 2022 often produces a lot of confusion. TIF funds come out of increasing property taxes that are funnelled back into the community as business investments, subsidies for private development and infrastructure improvement. The intention is to generate local revenue to improve a neighbourhood. However, TIF development can work to the detriment of the local community (leaving much of the power to the city agencies) if they do not participate in this process. A recent parking lot being constructed at Devon and Talman is one such infrastructure project. This project gets the support of some merchants, developers, and the alderman’s office while a majority of residents complain that their views were never taken into account during the planning and execution phases. SAAPRI reported that “it became clear in the interview process that Devon Avenue business owners and residents had little or no idea about TIF. Some did not even know that they were part of a designated TIF district. Others felt that TIF information was withheld deliberately by interested parties, and there was no transparency.... There is tremendous scope for proper utilisation of TIF funds for genuine economic development of the community. This has remained unrealised due to the lack of awareness about the TIF, lack of cooperation from the alderman and developers, and a general failure to pursue the matter aggressively and access existing resources”.<sup>33</sup>

The decisions of the architect and the building owners impact the building, interiors, and surroundings. Local residents complain about the unkempt conditions of the neighbourhood while absentee landlords overlook building repairs and maintenance. New owners convert and change their buildings, bringing howls of protest from preservationists and old neighbourhood residents about the owners’ lack of sensitivity and appreciation for the neighbourhood’s history. Political realignment between property owners, developers and the politicians can produce powerful political alliances that transform the shape of the neighbourhood.

The storeowners’ manipulation of signage, storefront images, material culture and in-store policies point towards tactics by which those in the lower end of the decision-making hierarchy (storeowners and tenants) manipulate the lived environment in their favour. The use of the sidewalks and street corners by local residents, especially the elderly, young adults and women, show how socially subaltern groups can claim public resources. Guerrilla tactics utilised by illegal vendors include use of temporary awnings and street

---

<sup>33</sup> SAAPRI, *Developing Devon*, p. 18.

furniture. Other architectural tactics include manipulation of façade transparency, visibility and access.

The nature of intervention and control at each of these telescoping levels is different and produces distinct results. Hierarchies of decision-making also point towards differential access to spatial resources. On the one hand, these hierarchical levels and dependencies of decision-making produce a stable social pattern that Habraken calls an “unambiguous communication structure”.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, it also shows us that certain individuals and groups, by virtue of their social standing and roles, have less power over the built environment and limited access to resources. The ability of a physical environment to cater to the needs and uses of various social groups, respond to hierarchies of decision-making and the politics of stakeholders is the primary criterion that can be used to evaluate lived spaces.

### **Value of Thematic Patterns: Parts and Whole**

Levels of decision-making are related to patterns within the built environment. According to Habraken, thematic patterns are *shared* syntax of the physical landscape. Just like the grammatical construction of language, the social and spatial aspects of the built environment also display a certain structural syntax. An analysis of the formal and experiential orders of a lived environment should explore such thematic patterns. Thematic patterns not only explain the logic of the total lived environment but they also help us understand how smaller constituent parts are assembled within the larger whole. Thematic patterns sustain a physical armature on which future adaptations, generative and creative interventions and other changes can occur.

Analysis of thematic patterns in the Devon case study can occur at different geographical scales – international, regional, urban, neighbourhood, street-level, architectural, and the near environment. For example, at the regional scale Devon Avenue belongs to a network of major and minor streets crisscrossing Greater

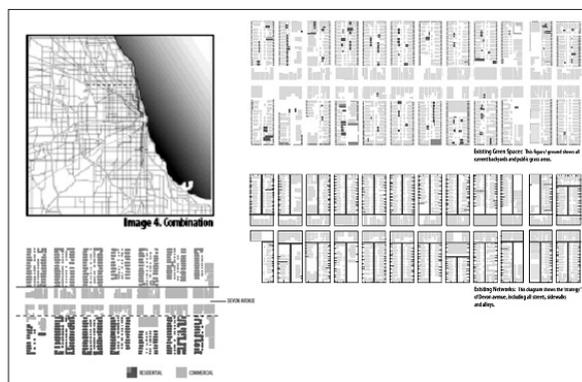


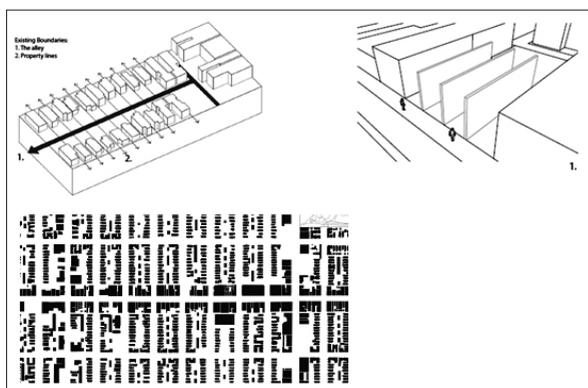
Figure 6: Whether at an urban scale or at the neighborhood scales we find multiple networks and patterns that give order to this neighborhood within its larger context. A few such syntactic structures are noted below. The transportation networks include freeways that connect this area to the tri-state area. At a neighborhood scale major and minor streets sustain different kinds of traffic; automobile, public transit, bicycle and pedestrian. The alleys and sidewalks create also serve as connectors. Open, not-built, green spaces when mapped show a distinct pattern. Image Credits: This map was produced by students as part of a research studio, Spring 2009. Instructor: Arijit Sen, Drawings by Nick Gaddy, Kelly Adrian, Tom Joy.

<sup>34</sup> N John Habraken (1972) “Involving People in the Housing Process”, RIBA Journal, November, p. 3.

Chicago. Devon Avenue is reached via major streets and minor neighbourhood streets. But the kind of people who use the different roads, the time when they use them, and the nature of transportation differ (see Figure 6).

Access to the freeway (I-94) from Devon Avenue makes Peterson Avenue in the south and Touhy Avenue in the north major traffic carrier streets in the area. A large volume of automobile traffic on weekends clogs up this network and makes it difficult for local residents to use these streets. Most of those accessing Devon from the major streets are out-of-towners driving into this area.

Low-income residents use public transit connections between Devon and the rest of the city. Route 155 (Morse Red Line) and Route 49B take bus riders from the locality. Route 155 connects to the Red Line and Loyola, but requires multiple transfers in order to reach other parts of the city. Route 49B travels along Western Avenue, a street perpendicular to Devon, and connects to more transit lines. But reaching Devon via a bus is a different experience. The riders are often elderly, children and poor residents of the region. The street's proximity to Loyola University has a potential of attracting younger crowds on weekday evenings, but interviews with non-South Asian residents showed that the predominant image of the neighbourhood, real or imagined, keeps white Americans away. Negative images included lack of safety, cleanliness, unsanitary conditions, and the presence of panhandlers.



Neighbourhood streets and alleyways are used by local residents and encroachment of outsiders (as they park their cars in these neighbourhood residential zones) creates a lot of conflict between storeowners, out-of-town shoppers, local residents, and the police and other law enforcement authorities.<sup>35</sup> The modes of transportation and network of streets influence the nature of connections between residents and non-residents and the experience of this neighbourhood for the socially powerful (and mobile) users and subaltern users.

Let's consider another scale. The neighbourhood fabric along Devon Avenue is very different from that seen

Figure 7: The relationship between property lines, the shape of individual lots and their relationship to the street create a complex urban fabric. The residential lots produce a patterns reflecting on the ordering of privacies and fronts and back regions. The processional way the property is accessed and entered from the street produces clear sequential territories enclosed within party walls. A figure-ground shows grain at the neighborhood scale.

Image Credits: This map was produced by students as part of a research studio, Spring 2009. Instructor: Arijit Sen, Drawings by Nick Gaddy, Brad Wilk, Jodi Masanz, Kelly Adrian.

<sup>35</sup> SAAPRI, *Developing Devon*, p. 2.

in the surrounding neighbourhoods. A figure-ground map shows densely built spaces and relatively scarce “unbuilt” or open spaces (see Figure 7). The predominant pattern emerges from the generative grid of property lines along the street. The property lines, setbacks, allowances, and built/unbuilt patterns produce a rectangular grain with the narrow end facing the street. Devon’s street grain promotes small stores to thrive. Due to the depth of the property, the square footage of stores are adequate. However due to the narrow façades the density of the stores (number of stores per block) is high. Such a pattern makes economic sense and, over the years, building owners rented out the lower floors of their buildings to tenants, subdividing and further subdividing the prime real estate along the ground level into increasingly thin slices (see Figure 8).

If we correlate this finer-grained development with property values, capital available to start new immigrant businesses, economic affordability, and business turnover, a clear pattern emerges. It is a pattern that Roger Waldinger explains as the inverse of “economies of scale”. Historically, new immigrants with limited capital have gravitated toward small business: in turn of the century New York, it was not only in the petty trades of peddling and huckstering that the foreign-born were over-represented, but also among ‘manufacturers and officials’, ‘merchants and dealers’, and other proprietary occupations. Small enterprise played an important role in the economic progress of a variety of immigrant groups that implanted themselves in business then – Jews, Italians, Greeks, and others – and their proportionally higher involvement in entrepreneurial activities continues to differentiate these groups from much of the native population”.<sup>36</sup> For instance, as the new South Asian immigrants concentrate along Devon Avenue, the store sizes get narrower and there is quick turnover in businesses. In addition similar businesses gravitate and produce agglomerations of similar stores. Thus one sees a cluster of jewellery stores selling a variety of jewellery ranging from high-end expensive goods to cheap handmade trinkets. Waldinger argues that smaller shops create conditions for upward mobility. A new immigrant initially affords

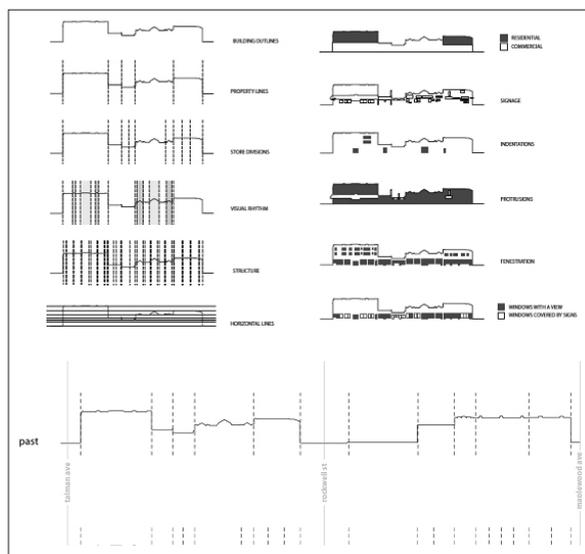


Figure 8. Economies of scale and physical fabric. Many ethnic stores start small. Frequent turnover and subdivided properties characterize the fabric and produce a very fine grain along the street, producing elaborate hems of buildings, protuberances and niches along edges and dense lived spaces along sidewalks. Image Credits: This map was produced by students as part of a research studio, Spring 2009. Instructor: Arijit Sen, Drawings by Tom Joy.

<sup>36</sup> Roger Waldinger (1986) “Immigrant enterprise: A critique and reformulation,” *Theory and Society*, 15, January, pp. 249-285.

a smaller premise and over the years gathers enough capital to grow into larger stores, and then finally diversifies and adds stores and branches in suburbia. Such is the story of Patel Brothers, a grocery store that started small at 2034 W. Devon Avenue in 1974. It is now a national chain with 40 stores in 20 states. The existence of a finer grain accommodates businesses of different sizes, spurs growth, and allows access to resources to a wider group of immigrant entrepreneurs. The second evaluative criterion suggests that architecture that allows for thematic variety produces successful lived spaces.

### ***Value of Infrastructure: Strategies and Tactics of the In-between***

There is a third aspect of place-making that helps us account for tactics used by less powerful residents to gain access to environmental resources. This is important for Muslim Devon where South Asian Muslim residents have relatively less social power to make major transformations to their built environment. De Certeau refers to “poaching”, an everyday, on-the-ground tactic used by residents and users where spaces are used, adapted and given new meanings and uses without completely transforming them. De Certeau explains, “everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others”.<sup>37</sup> By that he refers to a process by which subaltern groups subvert the built environment “not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to the ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept”.<sup>38</sup> Based on the work of de Certeau, we can claim that in order to understand and investigate everyday life and ordinary landscapes “we must first analyse its manipulation by users who are not its makers”.<sup>39</sup> Poaching as a tactic is often surreptitious and ephemeral. Poaching behaviour is difficult and so subtle that it is often impossible to capture. Yet poaching is central to the evaluation and appreciation of lived spaces.

Places that lend themselves to poaching without losing their central character are valuable places. The value of infrastructure suggests a conceptual framework to explore such spaces and territories amenable to poaching. Infrastructure here refers to “in-between” spaces occurring between multiple domains. It refers to connective tissues simultaneously relating and delineating disparate elements in the built environment. Being part of two separate spaces yet apart from them both, transitional zones are ambiguous boundaries where norms of either domain are suspended. It is a space of difference as well as of negotiation. It is the “thirdspace” that is often ignored when we get blinded by simplistic binary oppositions such as inside/outside, home/world, private/public, street/store, male/female. These spaces are also spaces of flows and exchange – of crisscrossing people,

---

<sup>37</sup> Michel de Certeau (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. xvii.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

goods, energy, resources, communication and media images.<sup>40</sup> Because it connects more than one thing, the space of infrastructure can be part of more than one domain; its in-betweenness can spawn new knowledge and hybrid uses.

Iain Borden provides certain examples of such boundaries.<sup>41</sup> He calls them ‘thick edges’, a boundary that “that emerges as not a plane but a zone, not physical but socio-spatial, not a division of things but a negotiation of flows”. According to Borden thick edges are important because they become settings where social and political mediations take place. As boundaries between two distinct domains, thick edges are liminal zones. Rules and themes of either domain are recombined and circumscribed to produce new knowledge and mores. Use and behaviour along thick edges challenge normative cultural practices. In Borden’s example, thick edges are like stage sets where human behaviour, bodily activities and daily experiences are activated in order to recreate a novel sense of place.

Thick edges appear in sectional drawing of Devon Avenue as building edges, alleyways, basements, intermediate floors, and the spaces between buildings and along sidewalks. They are inhabitable thresholds that include hems of buildings comprising an array of usable spaces such as façades, entrances, stairs, awnings, display cases and hallways. Thick edges often are transition zones between different levels of decision-making, described in the previous section. Local residents, store owners, street vendors and shoppers occupy these in-between spaces and produce lived and performative territories. Ephemeral behaviour in these spaces produces embodied forms of knowledge that are related to how human bodies move in space. A good example of manipulation of thick edges can be studied by examining strategies of street signage – persistent naming strategies, repeated imagery, and reworked stereotypes along storefronts. Signage produces polyvalent readings among the customers, city agencies, local residents, and visitors.<sup>42</sup> A good example can be seen in restaurants with the word “darbar” in their names (such as Data Darbar and Delhi Darbar). These locations revert to young male gathering spaces (“darbar hall” in a South Asian context meaning “meeting hall”) during late evenings.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the cognitive landscape of prayer spaces, basement mosques underneath restaurants, and cab driver

---

<sup>40</sup> In recent urban geography scholarship the emergence of the ‘in-between’ can be traced to the work of scholars such as Edward Soja and Saskia Sassen. But anthropologists working on social behaviour and communities have described the importance of liminal space in the past. Edward W. Soja (1996), *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell; Homi Bhabha (2004) *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge; Saskia Sassen (2008) *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>41</sup> Iain Borden (2000) “Thick Edge: Architectural Boundaries in the Postmodern Metropolis”, In Iain Borden and Jane Rendell (eds.), *InterSections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*. New York: Routledge, pp. 221-246.

<sup>42</sup> Arijit Sen (2009) “Creative Dissonance: Performance of Ethnicity in Banal Spaces”, *Uncommon Ground: Everyday Aesthetics and the Intensionality of the Public Realm*, *InTensions 2*, Spring, <http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/>, (accessed July 27, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Personal communications with Dr. Marcia Hermansen.

prayer niches (discussed above) is invisible and incoherent to those who are not part of this community, yet they coexist with secular and civic spaces and perform a central role in the life of Islamic immigrants.

Since different individuals move differently through any given space, knowledge that is produced as a result of operating within the immigrant cultural landscape can be varied. Focusing on translation of such “transforming edges” by various social stakeholders allows us to explore the interplay between individual and community values in the social production and politics of meaning in the built environment. It shows how multiple social and spatial boundaries are reproduced, accessed and permeated by individuals and groups. It allows us to place more value on architecture’s potential of accommodating multiple bodily experiences and performances as primary criteria for evaluating ordinary buildings not solely on their formal and stylistic characters. It allows us to see the complex workings of power/resistance in this neighbourhood, and in the lives and experiences of a variety of people.

### **Lived Landscapes and Social Equity**

Interpreting Devon Avenue using the three criteria mentioned above provides an alternative way to read lived environments. It serves as a counterpoint to a view that bemoans the loss of authentic places and sees “homogenisation” as a loss of resistance, death of “locality”, and an erasure of a “sense of place”. Despite the seeming spatial, visual and experiential similitude, streets like Devon Avenue display a tremendous amount of flexibility and diversity in the way these spaces are experienced, inhabited and used by individuals. The three evaluation criteria take our focus away from the production of places (by designers, architects, builders) to the way places are consumed, translated and occupied. The values suggested above provide an appropriate lens to evaluate lived environments. By studying the relationship between dependencies, themes and infrastructure we are able to better capture transformations and contestations within the lived landscape. The above values do not negate or ignore traditional principles of architectural connoisseurship. It includes participation, social action and individual performance in space as values in addition to structure, form, technologies and types. While traditional evaluation of architecture focuses on production of the built environment, the proposed strategy adds consumption and translation as ontological perspectives to frame our appreciation of architecture.

By studying lived landscapes we are able to focus on the political and negotiated nature of meanings and values in the built environment. We are also able to frame the built environment as a spatial resource available to its users. Research has shown that the built environment is the setting, origin and cause of a large amount of unequal resource allocations. Uneven spread of and access to resources in the built environment causes social inequity. The physical/material impact of social inequity on the neighbourhood

fabric is evident if we drive through any dilapidated inner-city neighbourhood, many of them inhabited by minorities and poorer immigrants. Devon is no exception. Behind the more visibly cluttered and unkempt spaces, boarded-up stores and frequently turned-over businesses, lies an even more pernicious story of social, ecological and economic inequity. As de Certeau shows us, space and its manipulation can allow the dispossessed, subaltern, and socially marginalised groups' access to resources otherwise not available to them. The above argument reiterates the principles of holistic sustainability: environment, economy and equity. Evaluative criteria used in building practices like LEED lack a thorough consideration of social equity issues. Showcasing the importance of the lived environment will provide design professionals an opportunity for environmental activism in the area of social equity.