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Chapter 9: Awe and order

Ethno-architecture in everyday life

Arijit Sen

Devon Avenue is a bustling retail street on the northern edge of the city of Chicago in the United States of America. A section of this street is known for its Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic stores (Figure 9.1). Chicago locals call it ‘Little India’. Among the few original immigrant-owned businesses is Patel Brothers. The business patriarch, Mafatbhai Patel, recounts the difficult yet determined early days when the store opened at 2034 Devon Avenue in 1974, ‘my brother was handling daytime [business], because we ... [worked in] shifts. ... My brother ... and his wife, Aruna ... were working from 10 [am]. ... I was coming 4 o’clock after work and Tulasibhai [his brother] was going after 4 pm to job [his second job in addition to managing the store]’ (Mafat Patel 2013).

Into the second decade of the new millennium, in addition to their many grocery store outlets, the Patels own a food packaging and distribution business, travel agencies, clothing and handicrafts stores, and cafes. The conglomeration of stores moved from the simple, two-roomed space to multiple storefronts in an entire block on Devon Avenue. Posters in the grocery store suggest that they ‘recreate India’ on Devon Avenue and ‘bring the best ingredients from around the world, right to your doorstep’ (Patel Brothers 2014).
Using the example of the Patel Brothers grocery store, this chapter examines how cultural, sensory, and symbolic cues, coded Indian, mark and claim territory on this street, and how the resultant ethno-architecture, in its turn, influences the way immigrants understand, perceive, and reproduce ethnicity. Ethno-architecture stages human behavior and interactions, promotes a sense of in-group belonging, cultivates distinction, and perpetuates cultural memory. In this, the smells of exotic food and sounds of foreign languages reproduce a unique sensorium. A complex visual culture made up of displays, signage, colors, advertisements, and imagery on the storefronts, contributes to a growing ethnic identity. All these together mark this street as ethnic and the store as an example of ethno-architecture.

Stereotypical descriptions of ethno-architecture are carefully reproduced in texts, images, and media forms. For example, in the *The Mistress of Spices*, Bay Area novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni recreates an Indian spice store as exotic landscape and taste culture that is feminine and enticing (Banerjee 1998). Is this a form of ‘self-commodification’ or is it part of the narrative of poor-immigrant success stories, the heartwarming renditions of the possibilities of the American economic dream, the warm, fuzzy nostalgia of a world left behind, only to be dazzlingly recreated in a new metropolis (Mannur 2008: 56–71)'? Such representations of the Indian grocery store are vivid in the American imagination, as is seen in the popular Indian spice tours along Devon Avenue (Singla 2014). One of the owners of the Patel Brothers stores, Swetal Patel, explains that the Indian grocery store has a unique image due to its visual and sensory ambience and the habitual daily activities inside the store. He invests in its sensorium: ‘Your identity is still on bringing back the little touch of India with a modern effect. So, when you go into a Patel Brothers store, you know, as the owners are Hindu at 10 am you will have some sort of a Ram Bhajan [devotional songs] going until 10, 10:30, 11 o’clock, as there would be with an Indian shopkeeper in India’ (Swetal Patel 2013). The social construction of an Indian store is sustained by persistent representations and practices.

Examining the store, media representations, interior ambience, and human activities in this grocery store gives a partial picture of the ethnic marketplace and how it is socially reproduced. The success of such places is built upon a carefully ordered world of enterprise and planning, and the sensuous and mysterious nature of the grocery store is not due to an unexplainable reproduction of cultural difference, or authentic Indianness seamlessly reproduced in America. The storeowners carefully curate these sensate landscapes and ambient atmospheres. Shoppers play a part too. Regular customers learn the internal layout and recognize where different kinds of merchandise are located, and thereby participate and perform in expected ways inside the stores. Therefore, while the ethnic store is a social construction, the store in turn reproduces and reiterates the cultural expectations, behavior, and identities of users.

Ethnic stores are also part of larger global flow of trade, migration, and representations. Hidden behind the hustle and bustle are carefully arranged processes where ethnic products are collected, distributed, organized, and reproduced using modern methods and economic considerations. A global marketplace sustained by the hard logic of economic enterprise coexists within these exotic spaces of
cultural difference. Entrepreneurial success stories represent how immigrants skillfully manipulate the marketplace by carefully calibrated, rearranged, and packaged items, producing the ethnic grocery store as a managed interior.

The goal of this chapter is to reexamine how the two ends of this complex world work in tandem. Understanding that the spaces of magical awe are sustained by invisible rules of economic order is central to understanding immigrant ethnic architecture in the United States. This reflexive relationship between place, representations, spatial practice, and structural forces is important to understanding how the very definitions of culture and tradition have changed over time.

READING ETHNO-ARCHITECTURE, METHODS AND THEORY

Contemporary immigrants in the United States do not build new buildings representative of their craft traditions as did the European immigrants who came to America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Palmqvist 1986, Hubka and Kenny 2000, Fitchen 2001). Nevertheless, this chapter argues that new immigrants make subtle changes—physical, symbolic, and sensory transformations—to their surrounding settings and buildings.

My primary approach towards the study of ethno-architecture uses a method called spatial ethnography. Spatial ethnography emerges from theoretical frameworks on embodied placemaking 'as a category of analysis—that is, foregrounding not only place but also the body's role within it as mutually constituent elements of the built environment' (Sen and Silverman 2014: 2). This method sees ethno-architecture as a form of verbal and non-verbal communication—engaging its users through grammar and syntax, experience, and emotions. Experiences and expressions of culture are held and learned by our body and expressed and repeated via habitual embodied practices in sites such as an ethnic grocery store.

The act of shopping and engaging with a sensate environment in a store can be integral to the experience of what Pierre Bourdieu calls habitus, gathered via socially determined embodied practices and behavior (Bourdieu 2004). Bourdieu argues that social action and human agency emerge within a complex, overarching context—a system of discourse, practices, transactions, that are both overt and covert. For instance an analysis of the use, layout and material culture of the store indicates how different stakeholders and social groups maintain social and spatial boundaries. Store signs are visual symbols and texts that communicate cultural and economic messages to the customers. However, different social groups interpret the same sign in nuanced ways, depending on their interests as consumers. Display of merchandise produces consumer desire, but customer desire is inflected by individual tastes and contexts. On the one hand, cultural rules regulate human behavior and social action, while on the other hand, expressions of culture and cultural practices are inflected by individual backgrounds and idiosyncratic situations.

The experience of shopping in the grocery store produces embodied knowledge that may not be as overt and visible as the material culture but is nevertheless pertinent. The store interior generates a micro rhythm that engages individual
bodies by the way merchandise sections are sequentially arranged and experienced. The sounds and smells of the store create a unique sensorium that reminds people of similar places elsewhere. Over time this experience of the ethnic grocery store becomes habitual, expected, and internalized as ‘incorporating practices’—affective responses to the environment generated from embedded values, accepted maxims, and customs that are deeply cultural in nature (Connerton 1989: 88). Such practices may not be overt but nevertheless are powerful in a didactic sense, since they inform our kinesthetic and haptic engagement with our world. The way we situate ourselves is not merely a cognitive act described by speech and language but an embodied experience that depends on the nature of our engagement with the material world. Therefore the everyday and repeated act of shopping in a grocery store like Patel Brothers produces a personal as well as collective knowledge of ethno-architecture.

The second approach borrows from cultural landscape scholars and cultural anthropologists and seeks to situate ethno-architecture within larger systems of relationships, processes, and places (Jackson 1994, Upton 1997, Marcus and Clifford 1989, Falzon 2009). The second strategy emerges from the way a grocery store becomes a product of larger social, political, and economic forces. Such framings shift the perspective and scale of analysis from individual to collective bodies. In the past, ethnic stores, residential enclaves, and cultural spaces were seen as physically, culturally, and experientially different from the so-called mainstream (Gans 1962). Scholars have identified that ethnic spaces such as those along Devon Avenue are merely nodes within a territorially dispersed network of ethnic strip malls, residences, cultural institutions, and retail streets. Geographer Wilbur Zelinsky calls these networked spaces heterolocal geographies where propinquity is not the sole form of territoriality (Zelinsky and Lee 1998). Framing ethnicity solely within a single geographic context (urban, regional, or national) renders invisible connections and allegiances that transcend that geography (Li 1998, Wood 1997). In addition, transnationalism or transnational practices refer to networks and practices that extend beyond national boundaries (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, Sanjek 1978, Ashutosh 2008, Mankekar 2002, Blunt 2007, Glick Schiller et al 1992, Basch et al 1994). The logic of economic efficiency, market trends, and transnational movement of merchandise and capital regulate ethno-architecture when seen from this point of view. An invisible world of economic strategies and distribution flows props up the visible and experienced world of the grocery store.

These dual worlds—the local and the global, the tangible and the intangible, the material and the experiential—influence how identity, belonging, and ethnicity is enacted in everyday life. Practice and engagement within these spaces produce ethnicity—in the sense of embodied being interacting with and within the grocery store. Ethnic architecture is a somatic product of time and place as well as a node within a global system of flows of people, goods, money, media image, and ideas.

DEVON AVENUE ETHNIC RETAIL STRIP AND ITS URBAN CONTEXT

The historic built fabric, layout, and material culture of Devon Avenue is the first local actor in our story, shaping behavior and business practices. Immigrants
operate within a preexisting cultural setting and larger history that frames the social construction of ethno-architecture. The physical setting of Devon Avenue is typical of ethnic retail strips found in immigrant-receiving urban centers across the United States. The street runs east to west, stretching from the edge of Lake Michigan into the suburban hinterland of Greater Chicago. This study includes a 15-block stretch between Ridge Avenue and California Avenue close to the eastern end of the street (see Figure 9.1). This gridded urban stretch grew as a retail street comprising rows of one- or two-storey commercial buildings in the 1920s when the City of Chicago grew northwards and new residential neighborhoods flourished. The commercial section is one urban block deep. Residential neighborhoods comprised of bungalows and apartments are neatly laid out north and south of this commercial strip.

A rich history of incremental growth and the resultant physical morphology of this street produce a feeling of visual density that urban planners call ‘fine urban grain’ (McNeill 2011). That term refers to the high ratio of built area in comparison to open unbuilt space. Visual density also refers to the overabundance of visual information and details such as signage, architectural ornaments, horizontal and vertical datum lines produced by cornices, walls, windows, sills, and parapets. In Devon Avenue, visual density promotes a sense of intimacy and contact. Rows of multistoried, mixed-use buildings are so designed that upper stories may be rented out to immigrants as residences, offices, and community services, while the ground-level spaces are used for retail businesses. Compact in scale, due to the long and thin lot sizes, the narrow side of the stores faces the sidewalk and party walls touch neighboring buildings. The deep interior allows for rear spaces for storage and service areas. Therefore the retail buildings provide formulaic front and back sections that the immigrant tenant reconfigures and adapts.

Immigrants with limited capital find it useful to rent these narrow stores. When a business grows and prospers, the storeowner tends to take over the next-door space, spreading out horizontally in the process. The turnover of businesses along this street is high—unsustainable projects going out of business only to be replaced by brash newcomers. It is also common for storeowners to move from one location to another as their business grows. Successful business owners such as Patel Brothers have made good use of the street infrastructure and morphology in order to consolidate their economic enterprise.

The historic buildings lining this street stand testimony to a diverse history of ethno-architecture predating the Indian immigrants. German and Irish immigrants built many of the buildings that host the stores, restaurants, and residences on this street (Archer and Santoro 2007, Jones 1995, Bennet et al 2006). Jewish families moved into the area after World War II, especially in the neighborhoods between Damen Avenue and Kedzie Avenue. By 1963 there were approximately 48,000 Jewish immigrants in the West Rogers Park area (Cutler 1996, Langer 2005). Since the late 1980s, the now-aging Jewish residents and their children began moving to suburban locations such as Skokie, Buffalo Grove, Highland Park, and Deerfield, and newer immigrants moved in (Loundy 2013, Turner 2010). Following preceding decades of Irish and German occupation (Archer and Santoro 2007, Jones 1995, Bennet et al 2006), Jewish refugees (Cutler 1996, Langer...
Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis, in addition to Russian Jewish émigrés (1990s) and Mexicans and Central Americans—evident by the many taqueria, laundromats, and the roving carts selling paletas from Paleteria La Monarca (Woodard 2013)—occupy this street. Stores selling halal food, businesses with prayer rooms, and mosques reflect the changing demographics of the street and arrival of Muslim immigrants. Deep internal fissures that remain hidden to an outsider mark the ethnic community on Devon Avenue. Ethnic, religious, and language-based constituencies include Gujarati, Sri Lankan, Jain, Bengali, Indian, Pakistani, Baluchi, and Sindhi, and sectarian traditions such as Mahdavi, Tablighi, Deobandi, and Barelvi. Postcolonial national rivalry renders itself during national independence day parades or cricket matches between South Asian countries. Devon Avenue has a very complex and layered ecosystem in which diversity is contained within this dense streetscape. Ethnic stores cater to a variety of ethnic groups and operate as an intertwined transcultural context.

PATEL BROTHERS GROCERY STORE AS ETHNO-ARCHITECTURE

The managers at Patel Brothers Indian grocery store, located at 2612 West Devon Avenue, have carefully curated the architecture in order to successfully cater to the store’s multiple constituencies. The store website declares that the business is more than a grocery store: ‘At Patel Brothers, we’re committed to sharing what we know best about our Indian heritage and culture: our food.’ Food acts as a symbolic as well as a material marker of cultural heritage, and connects everyday family life (your dinner table) to community history (tradition and culture), nation-state (India), and global economic practices (store). On the one hand, this grocery store describes a unique sense of place, while on the other hand it is a mere node within a global economic landscape and a regional network of Patel Brothers stores (Figure 9.2) (Sen 2012, Zukin 1996).

The building grew in a modular, incremental fashion from a one-storey warehouse structure with high ceilings to an elaborate tiled entrance façade comprising...
three four-centered arched pediments. These pediments mark three separate front bays (Figure 9.3): two narrower bays flank the wide middle section, where the main entrance is located. The middle section has an oddly eclectic trefoil-cusped arch pattern (with the central arch shaped as an ogee arch) on the pediment, demarcated by black and white tiles. None of the arches is a perfect replica of eastern or Indian architecture. Rather, they are hybrid and symbolic, and their alien and hyper-visible forms set off the storefront of Patel Brothers against its context. The side bays demarcate adjoining stores and properties that the storeowners bought and incorporated into the grocery store as their business grew, including the Annapurna vegetarian restaurant, now united by the arched façade.

Mafat Patel emigrated from the small village of Bhandu in the district of Mehsana in the Indian state of Gujarat in early 1968. By 1971 his brother Tulasi and his wife joined him, and in 1974 the first Patel Brothers grocery store opened. Susan Patel, Tulasi's daughter, fondly remembers the old store: 'I remember that store, I remember that it was definitely dark and dingy and gray. Gray shelves! And it was so small—you know, we had one register, couple of rows and I remember, my dad being in the back packing spices and ... and mom was a cashier.' This store was located at 2032 West Devon Avenue, on the eastern end of this retail strip, near the crossing of Devon and Ridge Avenues. The grocery store business flourished and soon the Patels moved to a bigger location at 2534 West Devon Avenue, on the crossing of Campbell Avenue, a minor residential cross street located centrally on this retail strip, and nine blocks west of their first store location. Susan remembers that this store was 'So much bigger. I remember playing tag in there and just running around in circles ... It was a corner property so it was easy to run in and out and play on the sidewalk.' She remembers helping her father weigh groceries and grains, while her older cousins, Swetal and Rakesh (Mafat's sons), would help after school. It was indeed a typical immigrant-family business as described by scholars of ethnic enterprise in the United States (Gabaccia 1994: 56, Kaslow 1993, Light 1984).

Figure 9.3 Façade of a current Patel Brothers grocery store, showing signage. The awning and fixed signage are more permanent than the sales posters displayed on the storefront windows. Drawn by Jared Schmitz, copyright Arijit Sen.
In 1987 the Patels had bought the current location on 2610 West Devon Avenue, three blocks further west in a more upscale section of this strip, and in 1989 they purchased the corner building on the same block (2600 West Devon Avenue), and then the building opposite (2605–2609 West Devon Avenue). Much of their real-estate ownership may be invisible to a casual visitor but the Patel complex reflects the success of their enterprise and the incremental growth that is historically typical of this 'fine grained' street. Each of the stores located in the Patel complex belongs to a member of the extended Patel family. Mafat Patel handles Air Tours and Travels. Nirmala and Babu Patel and their son Bhavesh own Sahil, an upscale dress and clothing boutique catering to the high-end festival and marriage needs of the Indian-American community. Susan Patel owns Patel Brothers Handicrafts & Utensils on 2600 West Devon Avenue. Patel Café is the newest addition at the corner of this block.

Tulasi’s daughter, Susan, compares the modern and slick new store to the older store: ‘good fun memories are when Patel Brothers fliers went out … ten of us would sit on the floor and [it] would be like a chain … packing them with the rubber-band’ (Susan Patel 2013). This description of communal family labor is like the ethnic enterprise described by immigrant scholars (Bonacich and Modell 1981), but her fond description of the family contribution and gathering is a reminder that a business strategy of family ownership has continued, even if efficiently run by employees and made efficient to respond to the current needs of globalized transnational trade.

By the 1990s Patel Brothers had become the established Indian grocery store in Chicago, Mafat Patel recalls: 'people were coming to shop from Wisconsin, Minneapolis [Minnesota], Indiana, Michigan, Iowa, Kansas. Every weekend, they...
used to come to shop here' (2013). He remembered how a large parking lot on the cross street of Rockwell Avenue and Devon Avenue would fill up with cars with license plates from these states. This popularity led to the opening of grocery stores in major cities across the United States—New York, Houston, Atlanta, Detroit, extending across 52 locations. These are managed by members of five generations of the extended family and supplied by four distribution hubs located in Chicago, New York, Atlanta, and Houston. As an enterprise of an efficient and modern supply network and a distribution chain of multiple ethnic grocery stores has spread across the United States, Patel family members have kept the mega-business afloat.

In the 1990s Mafat Patel's sons gained degrees in Finance and Marketing and assisted in developing a nodal distribution network business model called Raja Foods Inc. One son, Swetal, remembers that 'it was time to shift away from bringing in 55 pound bags of chili powder and selling 55 bags of chili powder. It's time to sell branded chili powder, branded whole chili, everything was in a brand at that time.' The packaging of food took place under the Swad label. With the organization of Raja Foods, spices, vegetables, and grains were packaged and sealed in the port city of Kandla in India, and then shipped off to New York and other ports and transported directly to the Patel Brothers warehouses. From two containers that shipped to each warehouse every month to two containers arriving every day! While someone has to service the front counter of Patel Brothers grocery store, according to Swetal Patel, the twenty-first-century ethnic grocery business is a virtual system of information management: ‘all about forecasting. It’s just forecast, after forecast, after forecast and … information into your computer and giving your numbers and saying that this is what your requirements are going to be.’ An ethnic grocery store is no longer a brick-and-mortar family enterprise in a back alley, but a global network of securing good deals with your vendors so that the store and its architecture can be a stage for their display.

The process of stocking and staging merchandise has evolved since the 1980s, leading to a major change in the interior layout of the grocery store. With the introduction of forklifts and electric jacks the process of unloading merchandise into the back-room has been mechanized. The Patel Brothers distribution center has nine forklifts and eleven electric jacks. While the back-store section on Devon Avenue has shrunk, an enormous Raja Foods warehouse, located at 8110 N St. Louis Avenue in the city of Skokie, 3.3 miles from the grocery store, is the primary storage. Unlike the grocery store with its Indian-looking façade, the warehouse is modern and unassuming: a brick-faced building with a modest vinyl banner nailed onto the façade, announcing ‘Raja Food: Wholesalers of International Food’. The interior space is efficiently laid out into rows of merchandise, office spaces, refrigerated sections and loading ramps. The warehouse feeds regional Patel Brothers stores and supplies smaller local grocery stores (not owned by Patel Brothers) within the extended regional hinterland including cities across Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Minnesota.

The familiar grocery store—rows of plantains and mangos, unruly bins of rice, pulses, and spices—is the front end of this transnational economic enterprise.
Swetal Patel compares the new Patel Brothers to the old store, ‘Back then, there was no pattern in the store ..., it was a square box ... and the perimeter had shelving. Then in the center of the store, you had rows of merchandise ... There was no system of setting things up. It just, sort of, worked themselves out ... canned goods here, packet of spices here, barrels of beans here, flour here. And that’s how the categories were made.’ The old store order was practical and tied to its immediate context as his father and other family members lugged those heavy sacks in and stacked them up in the store. The physical layout was not a predetermined, replicable template, but emerged incrementally, based on criteria and logic that existed at that time. Contemporary store layouts are predetermined, pre-planned, and dependent on complex considerations of schedule and trade practices beyond the parochial needs and organic production of the local store. Incremental changes that encourage efficient movement of people and to optimize shopping change the experience of ‘India shopping’ (Mankekar 2002). Aisles are wider and better organized. The grocery section is well lit and spacious. Specialty goods catering to subgroups are located in separate subsections and the frozen section is carefully rearranged to cater to new kinds of customers. Immigrants from East Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Nepal, and Sri Lanka patronize the store, as do Americans from a variety of persuasions who buy spices, fresh vegetables, new-age medicine, and frozen dinners.

A customer explained that the redesigned aisles and shelves adjacent to the grocery bins influence her behavior. For instance, when confronted with the grocery aisle in Patel Brothers, she does not see discrete items—a gourd, a bundle of curry leaves, an eggplant, a pile of potatoes or a packet of nigella seeds—but a potential meal. A desire to recreate an ethnic meal is induced by the sight of individual ingredients: eggplants and greens become an image of panch meshali, an East Indian dish (Nirmal 2009), and a dining scene that is not yet realized. Reminded of a recipe, she proceeds to look for more ingredients in nearby shelves, illustrating how the layout of this section produces an affective reaction. The grocery interior space arouses her memory of a home-cooked meal and induces a certain shopping behavior such that the grocery store turns into praesentia, a presencing of something that is not really there (Hetherington 2003), and how food ‘tends to generate a sense of home as a distant absent which becomes present in their present context’ (Coakley 2003). As individuals step into the store, a sequence of encounters and sensory experiences unfold. These moments, despite their ephemerality and transience, define the grocery store as a place, a time, and an event/situation. Ethno-architecture becomes a stage—its atmosphere, sense of place, props, surrounding objects, other participating human bodies, boundaries delineating front and back zones, and other spatial ambiances. Reconceiving the interior of the store as a series of interrelated performance spaces brings out the social and architectural complexity of the grocery store and urges us to rethink the role of the architecture in maintaining cultural identity.
ETHNO-ARCHITECTURE AND IMMIGRANT WORLD MAKING IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Ethnic place making is a dynamic production of culture and a process rather than a product. The ethnic store evoked via elaborate signage, interior ambience, and spatial qualities seems unique, local, and emplaced. Its careful management and business strategy is driven by global considerations. Occasionally a contradiction between the economic and organizational logic of ethnic enterprise and the evocation of collective memory erupts.

Recently, Patel Brothers took a major decision to sell frozen fish in their store on Devon Avenue. Since the owners are Gujarati Hindus, and refer to the Indian state of Gujarat where the term ‘non-veg’ is applied to those who eat meat, eggs or fish, this was a major decision. Non-veg is a linguistic act defining a social characteristic that locates persons as outsiders in caste Hindu Gujarati society. Given these social, cultural, and linguistic strictures against ‘non-veg’, the storeowners’ decision to carry such products seems to be an act of apostasy. This decision reflects a certain pragmatism and business acumen, and acknowledgement of the growing diversity within the immigrant community, and the fish section was tucked away in the last aisle, behind the popular ‘home-made’ pickle jars, and many customers were not aware of it.

Immigrants shopping in stores along Devon Avenue have diversified. The Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi community patronizing Devon Avenue is diverse by national origins, languages spoken, class and religious backgrounds, age and generational differences, and gender. Increasing numbers of first-generation Indian and mainstream Americans who shop at Patel Brothers have omnivorous food habits. The merchandise and layout of grocery stores reflect this diversity and the need to accommodate multiple group and individual needs even while recreating an overall ethnic identity. This is an intensely lived, everyday, and dynamic form of ethnic identity, transforming yet influenced by the exigencies of larger economic and social forces.

Within this context a complex and slippery diasporic identity emerges that is not defined by a single pre-existing category. The Indian ethnic identity in the context of Devon Avenue is a dynamic recombination of these categories. It undoubtedly results from trends in globalization but this identity is very local. It is articulated within the specific context of Devon Avenue and Chicago and reflects regional immigration trends, the demographic constitution of shoppers, and precise market conditions within this store. This identity is neither fixed nor autochthonous. Instead it incessantly redefines what it means to be Indian in the United States.

An analysis of ethno-architecture provides a unique glimpse into the social construction of ethnic identity in the United States. The very act of shopping in Patel Brothers reiterates communal cultural practices and solidifies collective memories. Entering such ethno-architecture reiterates a performance of ‘being Indian’ and also allows shoppers and storeowners to negotiate their place and presence within a global landscape of commerce and transactions. Indeed, these everyday, mundane, taken-for-granted embodied acts—opening a door, entering an aisle, smelling
a mango, shifting one's gaze to scan a shelf full of spices, shunning stigmatized spaces—frame bodily and performative engagements and are central to a reading of contemporary ethno-architecture and Indian identity along Devon Avenue.

NOTES
1 In 1965, the passage of a new Immigration Act made it possible for highly skilled South Asians to enter the United States. Although the 1965 law lifted all geographical and racial quotas and let in only skilled immigrants it was only in the 1980s that the family reunification clauses brought in less-skilled South Asian immigrants’ families to join their more educated and skilled compatriots. According to the 2000 Census, this area has 49.7% white residents, 6.78% black, 15.5% Hispanic, 22.3% Asians and 5.65% counted as ‘others’.
2 This trend was reflected in the Greater Chicago region (Numrich 1997).

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