

From Curry Mahals to Chaat Cafés

SPATIALITIES OF THE SOUTH ASIAN CULINARY LANDSCAPE

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Ethnic restaurants and grocery stores play an important role in the creation of contemporary American urban culture. Difference, both symbolic and real, is expressed through cuisine and culinary practices in these sites. Increasingly such spaces are emerging in neighborhoods impacted by demographic, economic, and political restructuring and urban revitalization in American cities. Hole-in-the-wall eating spots, gourmet ghettos, and foodie places have become part of our urban experience. Various social stakeholders—what Nancy Fraser would call multiple publics (Fraser 1992)—interact and meet in these places making these locations part of a larger public realm where ethnic worlds intersect mainstream landscapes, and global culture is articulated in local forms. Sharon Zukin argues that such spaces serving global cuisine are sites where power, politics, and social and cultural hierarchies are made physical through architecture (Zukin 1995). Valle and Torres (describing Mexican restaurants in Los Angeles) argue that ethnic restaurants provide a critical infrastructure of conspicuous consumption and manufacture “the edible multicultural texts and symbols upon which a global city’s pluralistic self image is constructed” (2000: 69). In these discussions one finds a common refrain that ethnic culinary spaces in urban America cannot be read as part of a landscape that is segregated, circumscribed, and distinct from mainstream. Rather these are sites of hybridity and cultural contact where multiple worlds, networks, processes, and agents interact with each other. These spaces, indeed, are contemporary multicultural public spaces.

In this chapter I will examine a South Asian Indian ethnic grocery store and fast-food restaurant called Vik’s Distributors (henceforth Vik’s) in the city of Berkeley. The following discussion will argue for a method of analysis that puts the material and symbolic processes of producing place as the primary analytic focus. Ethnicity is creatively reproduced during everyday life and social interactions between various individuals and groups (Barth 1969; Conzen, Gerber, Morawska, Pozzetta, & Vecoli 1992; Gans 1996; Sollosi 1989; Stern & Cicala 1991; Waters 1990). The production of ethnic places involves an interactive and performative process during which various individuals and groups actively negotiate social boundaries (C. T. S. 2009; Goffman 1959; Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox, & Grancea 2006). A large part of my argument comes out of the theoretical position of scholars of interactionism (Goffman 1973; Brubaker et al. 2006). Rogers Brubaker explains the performative production of culture and identity among ethnic groups can “best be understood if studied from below as well as from above, in microanalytic as well as macroanalytic perspective” (2006: xiv). He argues that if we only examine rhetorical production of ethnicity and culture at a macro level we encounter an illusion that erases beliefs, desires, hopes, and interests of ordinary people on the ground. Erving Goffman, in his work on behavior in social institutions, demonstrated how sociospatial boundaries sustain human interactions during everyday life. Front and back territories help maintain boundaries between multiple domains such as inside/outside, private/public, informal/formal, and community/civic. Places are like stages, encouraging interactive performances from users.

In addition, this chapter argues that in order to understand contemporary public places we need to understand the multiple forms of spatial behaviors that frame the experience of these sites (Bhabha 1994; Clifford 1997; Gupta & Ferguson 1992). In geographical literature one hears the term “spatialities” to explain the myriad perceptions, character, and lived experiences of the world around us (Bhabha 1994; Clifford 1997; Gupta & Ferguson 1992). This chapter ends with a discussion on the need to study multiple spatialities in order to understand contemporary ethnic food landscapes.

Dolores Hayden’s and Seth Low’s analyses of how identity is produced during concrete everyday activities and human interaction in specific places documents methods of analyzing spatiality (Hayden 1995; Low 2000). During such practices, architectural locations are imbued with meanings and memories, a process Hayden calls the production of place. Many such “places”—like the one described in this chapter—are not built by immigrants. Rather, place making refers to a process by which meaning, identity, and memories are attached to a place, even if these places were originally built by others.
Places can be read as evidence of human culture. Material culture scholars such as Bernard Herman have shown that buildings, objects, and landscapes can serve as valuable evidence to read culture practices and cultural encounters (Herman 1984). Others have analyzed taste (Ames 1992) and symbolic content of interior objects and furnishing (Grier 2010), buildings (Bishir, Brown, Lounsbury, & Wood 1990; Glassie 1975) layout (plan and juxtaposition of interior spaces) (Hubka and Kenny 2000; Groth 1994) and landscapes (Upton 1994) as material registers of cultural contact. In her description of Mississippi blues joints, Jennifer Nardone examines human experiences of material landscapes (Nardone 2003). According to her, the location, interior layout, signage, and lighting on the building facade and the experience of walking through a juke joint reproduce familiar and recognizable spaces for members of the in-group. However, outsiders are oblivious to these places, or they feel unwelcome because of their unfamiliarity with the ambiance of these spaces. Jessica Sewell shows us how at the turn of the twentieth century, department stores staged a highly visible storefront along main streets in order to encourage women customers to come in (Sewell 2011). These storefronts were filled with “objects of desire” meant to incite potential consumers. But the storefronts also became a political space where posters and information about suffrage was prominently displayed.

The importance of food in immigrant culture makes restaurants, grocery stores, and kitchens important sites where ethnicity is practiced and reproduced on a daily basis (Gabaccia 1998; Bonus 2000). Immigrant stores, described in ethnic enterprise literature, serve as sites of social, political, and economic transactions. These places promote in-group solidarity and sustain a robust ethnic economy (Bonacich & Modell 1980; Light 1971; Aldrich & Waldinger 1990). The above works just cited are concerned with social and economic processes and do not consider the role of architectural and material environment in the production of ethnic spaces. More recently works on immigrant stores and markets have shown how the visual staging of signage, exotic goods, and merchandise on storefronts are important strategies used to solicit potential customers (C. T. Sen 2009; Mankekar 2002). Purnima Mankekar argues that Indian grocery stores in the Bay Area “enable the production and consumption of a range of texts, images, and commodities that participate in this ongoing construction of India and Indian culture.” (Mankekar 2002: 76) Mankekar demonstrates that these stores are important nodes within a global network of circulating images, objects, and texts. She also claims that the objects sold and exchanged in these stores produce “regimes of value” even as they travel and circulate. As loci where circulating people and goods converge, they are spaces where gender, class, and race are reconfigured. Although Mankekar doesn’t discuss the spatial and architectural qualities of these spaces, she carefully examines the experience of shopping. “India Shopping,” as she calls it, involves a complex consumption and reproduction of home, homeland, memory, and identity.

Agius and Lee (2006), describing the behavior of cashiers in Latino-owned ethnic markets, demonstrate that in addition to being in-group spaces, ethnic stores are contact zones where multiple social groups interact. The authors demonstrate how cultural roles and norms of behavior and interaction, inflected by class, race, and gender identities, are reinforced and reproduced during interactions in ethnic grocery stores. Turgeon and Pastinelli’s work on Quebec City’s ethnic restaurants (Turgeon & Pastinelli 2002) and Sharon Zukin’s work (Zukin 1995) on similar spaces in New York show that these spaces act as sites where global culture is consumed, commodified, and produced, and are arenas where changes due to globalization and the new economy are made manifest. Turgeon and Pastinelli’s work shows that the layout of the restaurant interior is often implicated in the race and class differences underpinning ethnic enterprises: the interior ambiance and material culture of front spaces in the restaurants cater to a non-ethnic (and white) clientele. The back spaces are occupied by ethnic workers (often people of color). The layout of restaurant controls the nature of contact between various social groups.

NEW CUISINE, OLD PLACES, AND THE NEW ECONOMY

Every weekend afternoon, an odd but now-familiar sight awaits residents of Berkeley’s west side. Single individuals and families of different racial, ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds line up patiently in front of Vik’s. Some engage in conversation, a babel of languages animating a slowly moving line. The line is made of smaller groups. Families, groups of friends, acquaintances, and regulars gather in sociopetal clusters. Occasionally, agile individuals leap out of the line to grab an emptying table for their group while others stand dumbfounded at the confusion and chaos produced by many pulsating worlds—a winding queue, waiting customers on the side, jostling children, and cross traffic—coinciding simultaneously on a narrow crosswalk.
The crowd in front of 724–726 Allston Way is, however, very different from the one we see in the neighboring Fourth Street retail shops, zoned by the city of Berkeley as a region-serving commercial zone. Compared to the more homogenous clients on Fourth Street (mostly young urban professionals, white, and upper- and middle-income couples), the crowd on Allston Way is younger, multicultural, and clustered in groups. Some seem to be part of large Indian families in festive gear. Women in saris and salwar suits and a rather large contingent of loud children sit around tables. Americans of non-South Asian backgrounds, sometimes led by their South Asian friend, try out this new multicultural experience. After they order food, customers hover around unable to find a place to sit in the crowded interior. A few appear to be regulars. They walk straight in and cleverly maneuver themselves in order to reserve open tables before others can get to them. Locating, reserving, and occupying seats is a big part of the experience of this space and one can identify various groups by the ease with which they work their way through this consumer ballet.

The majority of the customers frequenting this business on weekdays work in nearby media, advertising, legal, consultancy practices, real-estate industries, and banking and economic services. They are young, well traveled, and mixed in their racial, ethnic, and national origins. They experience and sustain a new economy that is variously referred to as the post-Fordist, flexible, the informational, or the global economy. The cooks and preparation staff in the kitchen area of Vik’s are mixed—most from India and a few of Mexican and Central American origin.

The citizens of Berkeley are no strangers to South Asian culture. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Berkeley was the intellectual center of Indian immigration. Students enrolled in the University of California made Berkeley the center of their cultural and political world as they staged nationalist activities against British Colonial rule in India from this city. The counterculture movement in the city during the 1960s popularized Indian culture, religion, music, dress, and food to local residents. N is an old resident of Berkeley who is Jewish-American. She moved from Los Angeles to Berkeley as a student at the University of California during the sixties. She remembers a South Asian store from the sixties, a store that (she thinks) was located on the 2400 block of Telegraph Avenue. She believes that this store disappeared sometime in the seventies: “Going back to the 1960s there was a place called India Imports on Telegraph that was frequented by all the hip people. And I was laughing because it just occurred to me that India Imports and India did not have anything to do with each other [in my mind at that time]. It was just that everyone had to wear those shirts, and everyone had to buy sandalwood incense. Some place around the 2400 block. It was the biggest store in terms of volume and in terms of trade.”

Between 1946 (with the Luce-Celler Act) and 1965 (with the Immigration and Nationality Act) major changes in immigration laws permitted skilled Indian immigrants to enter the United States. Berkeley became one of the major urban destinations for students and new immigrants, and between 1975 and 1980, pioneering Indian grocery stores opened along University Avenue (Bazaar of India, 1801 University Avenue, started in 1975; Milan, 990 University Avenue, started in 1975; Ajanta Enterprise, 1624 University Avenue, started in 1972; and Shrimati’s Sari Store, 2011 University Avenue, started in 1977).

In 1987, when Vinod and Indira Chopra rented the warehouse on Allston Way, south of University Avenue, for their wholesale distributorship, there already existed a thriving concentration of ethnic stores along nearby University Avenue. These years were important for the South Asian community in the Bay Area. The family reunion clause in the immigration act was bringing many South Asians into the Bay Area. Political unrest in Fiji and parts of Africa was pushing out South Asians from these areas. New refugees and immigrants settled in the region. Consequently, during the late eighties and early nineties, the population of South Asians in East Bay and South Bay cities grew at a rapid pace. Residential enclaves developed in cities such as Fremont, Richmond, and El Cerrito along U.S. Interstate 80. Vinod Chopra’s plan was to cater to the wholesale needs of the newly emerging restaurants located in the extended region and suburbs of Northern California where the new population lived.

Just north of Allston Way, University Avenue of Berkeley continued to grow as a regional ethnic retail strip. New South Asian stores emerged on the western end of the street (nearer to the freeway exit) and clustered around rented storefronts below the U.A. Homes building owned by a South Asian. The older stores produced a perfect anchor for the new generation of Indian stores to develop along this busy corridor. Being next to the interstate exit ramp and located in a city already known for its ethnic South Asian stores, University Avenue quickly developed as an attractive venue for Indian stores selling clothes, food, music, baggage, jewelry, and other cultural artifacts (A. Sen 1998). The customers included South Asian immigrants living in the extended hinterland, Middle Eastern and African immigrants from
neighboring cities, and local Indophile Anglo residents of Berkeley and Oakland.

Yet Vik's, compared to the stores along University Avenue, had a different trajectory and reason to be there. The lack of signage on its façade visually distinguished this store from those located along the University Avenue corridor. The reason for this visual austerity was not incidental. As a wholesale distributor for spices and beer, storeowner Vinod Chopra had intended to supply local and regional restaurants and Indian grocery stores. In contrast to most ethnic stores along University Avenue that catered to a growing clientele of South Asian families who drove down to Berkeley on weekends, Chopra's business did not target individuals and families as primary customers. The stores along University Avenue would clamor for attention, trying to attract these potential clients in their cars via large signage. Vik's constituency of restaurateurs and storeowners already knew where the store was located. They were not impulse buyers. In fact, the mere location of Vik's gives us an idea of the nature of its initial clients. In those days before GPS, one needed prior knowledge in order to navigate the complex set of one-way streets in order to get to Vik's. The geographical location of Vik's and the visual character of the storefront distinguished it from other ethnic retail stores in the vicinity.

The west side of Berkeley, where Vik's is located, used to be an abandoned gritty industrial neighborhood until the late twentieth century. We still see corpses of the industrial past in the form of large empty warehouses, unused factory buildings, boarded up worker cottages and empty lots. Things have changed in the last thirty years. Today, the residents of this area are a mixed lot: many older residents remain, but since the late nineties new young, professional, middle-class residents have occupied newly redesigned and renovated warehouses, lofts and live-work units. West Berkeley is like a palimpsest where past and present coexists. One such renovated warehouse on Allston Way houses Vik's South Asian Indian ethnic grocery store (left) and a fast-food restaurant called Vik's café (right).

The South Asian cultural landscape in the Bay Area exemplifies a geographical settlement pattern that Melville Webber calls "a community without propinquity" (Webber 1963). In a more recent work on "heterolocalism," Wilbur Zelinsky (2001) identifies contemporary immigrant landscapes as networked and argues that the experience of such a landscape is very different from that of territorially bounded ethnic enclaves. Today's ethnic residential settlements are dispersed in suburbs (Wei Li calls them ethnoburbs) while cultural, business, and work spaces are spread across the region (Li 1998; Fong 1994; Dunn 1998; Anderson & Gale 1992; Poulsen & Johnston 2000; Newbold & Spindler 2001). Nodes within this network are accessed via the automobile. As a result of this dispersed nodal geography, the spatial experience of traversing this landscape is considerably different from the way, say, Boston's West Enders experienced the cultural geography of Italian immigrants (Gans 1962). This novel geography also impacts the way we read, study, and talk about ethnic landscapes of immigrants in contemporary cities. For instance, it is impossible to talk about Vik's in geographical isolation from its many constituent networks. This store sells merchandise from across the world and is thus tied into transnational networks of goods, capital, culture, images, and people. But, being located in Berkeley, Vik's is influenced by local laws, economics, and politics. Being attached to a regional ethnic political geography ties Vik's to the culture and politics of the region. Ethnic groups that patronize this space come from a vast hinterland and their lifestyles influence how the store is inhabited at different times. Since the store is accessed by out-of-town customers traveling in their automobiles, customer experience is related to the way they emerge from their automobiles, cross the street, and enter the store through a series of sequential, transitional, and experiential boundaries. Each of these frameworks provides us with a different sense of location, geography, and spatial experience. I argue that production, reproduction, and consumption of "cultural difference" in ethnic restaurants should be confused neither with cultural and ethnic authenticity nor with a singular causal reference (ethnicity). Rather as Arjun Appadurai shows in his discussion of scapes and flows, chaat restaurants like Vik's are local sites where global flows of images, cultural forms, culinary practices, and taste meet crisscrossing flows of capital, resources, and labor. The following discussion therefore suggests a method to read ethnic sites as a product of simultaneous macro- and microcontexts/processes.

CHAAT CAFÉ, A CONSTANTLY TRANSFORMING PLACE

The side-by-side juxtaposition of the restaurant and the ethnic grocery store in Vik's is important because it brings together two very important spatial types within the South Asian immigrant foodscape. On the one hand, the Indian grocery store has a long history and is one of the most distinct place-types within South Asian cultural landscapes across the world. These stores
sell groceries, beverages, spices, grains, toiletries (often made in the subcontinent), and seasonal fruits and vegetables used in South Asian cuisine. Generally, merchandise sold in these stores is not available in mainstream American stores. Elsewhere I have shown how the unique sensorial qualities of the Indian grocery store give meaning, sense of place, and value to these locations among immigrant customers (A. Sen 2006, 2009). Indian grocery stores appear regularly in literature, popular culture, and media as symbols of the exotic ethnic landscapes of expatriate Indians.

On the other hand, the chaat café is a new type of place to appear in the United States. Until recently most Indian restaurants in the United States were famous for their curries that required skilled kitchen staff. For example, between 1980 and 2002 there were eight to ten Indian restaurants in the city of Berkeley serving the traditional fare of North or South Indian curries. By 2003 a fast-food restaurant type called chaat cafés overtook them and a total of eleven such cafés appeared in the city, some of them often only a counter inside a preexisting restaurant or grocery store.

Made of a crunchy mix of stuffed fillings and topped with a tangy sauce, chaat is a kind of food that is prepared and mixed fresh on the spot. A New York Times article mentions that “Chaat is made of fried bits of chickpeas, puffed rice, browned mashed-potato patties, fresh ginger, mung bean sprouts, spice-dusted toasted lentils and topped with a tangy powder made from green mangoes, mint, cumin, pomegranate, black salt, cilantro, tamarind sauce, and yogurt.” Chaat is part of an emerging menu of global cuisine that has appeared in American cities. It belongs to a growing list of popular food—wraps, organic snacks, fusion food, finger-food, and small plates that attract cosmopolitan urban professionals. Most chaat cafés are places that accommodate everyday practices of immigrants while also catering to the needs and activities of nonimmigrant customers and other stakeholders in a multicultural city. Increasingly, in cities across the world we encounter chaat cafés sporting similar décor, store names, and menus.

Chaat originated as a roadside snack food in North India. Chaat means to “lick” or “taste” in Hindi. The word chatpata—from where the term originates—refers to tingling hot and sour flavors. In India most chaat restaurants were roadside vendors. They were not sit-in, formal places. Going for a chaat “is a social act with the same casual sociability as going for a beer. (Most Indians are Hindus and Muslims and drink little or no alcohol.) After work a group of men will buy each other rounds of chaat on the way to the train and sometimes even have competitions over who can eat more. Piyush Sukhadia, an owner of chaat-and-sweet stores, said ‘In India a guy might have a Mercedes and live in a house on a hill, but he still puts on his slippers and goes to eat chaat’” (quoted in Moskin 2003).

As a circulating cultural phenomenon, the chaat café has returned to India as a fashionable gourmet restaurant type. Unlike traditional Indian “curry-restaurants,” new chaat cafés sport self-serve delis and informal decor. The small serving portions, distinct recipes, absence of specialized culinary skills, location, and interior space requirements differentiate the latter from former (Moskin 2005; Holbrook 2007; Mochon 2007). Upscale restaurants in five-star hotels in Indian cities now sport chaat counters and chaat cafés. However, in the unstable economy of ethnic restaurant businesses of Berkeley, changing clientele and fluctuating urban rent create constant renewal and change in the chaat café business. Chaat cafés appear and disappear with alacrity.

After a few years of its inauguration the news of Vik’s spread within the community. Initially, on weekends few Indian families driving down to Berkeley from the surrounding cities began to include Vik’s in their itinerary. Although intended only as a wholesale business, Chopra’s retail business had taken off and by 1992 Chopra added a small weekend fast-food counter near the entrance in order to serve a quick lunch to the growing clientele.

Chopra reasoned that if he could serve a quick snack for the immigrant families who drove down on Sundays to shop, he could produce loyal and
returning customers. What started as a trickle grew and the popularity of Vik’s transformed it into a well-known retail grocery store. Vinod Chopra’s initial decision to start a small food counter came out of his prior experience of a kind of fast food that was popular in North India, where he grew up. The chaat counter in Vik’s recreated the informal layout of North Indian chaat stores with the food being prepared, sold, and consumed in the same front part of the store. Relatively simple to make, Chopra’s wife, Indira could supervise the service from the front counter. Chaat was a novelty in America during the eighties. It was not something one got in local Indian restaurants.

Soon, the front counter could no longer accommodate the increasing number of customers. By the late 1990s redevelopment and gentrification efforts by the city of Berkeley started to transform West Berkeley. The West Berkeley Plan, a long-term development plan for the area between San Pablo Avenue and the Eastshore Freeway, was a policy document drawn up by the city in 1997 in response to the economic boom in Silicon Valley. This boom had resulted in high property rents in the South Bay. Easy access to San Francisco and South Bay made the West Berkeley neighborhood very desirable for information technology (IT) businesses, advertisement agencies, graphic design offices, architectural and landscape architectural firms, artist units, and professional services. The West Berkeley Plan encouraged in-fill developments with light industrial, small-scale office, and live-work uses. In 2001 the Berkeley city manager reported to the city council that in 2000 there was “a greater level of construction of new offices and conversion of warehouse and light industrial space to office uses in the MU/LI [Mixed-Use, Light Industrial Zoning Code] district as well as in other West Berkeley manufacturing districts than in the previous three years” (Rucker 2001). The plan also specified that new retail establishments should not spread south of University Avenue. Therefore while restaurants developed north of University Avenue—along Fourth Street earmarked for such growth—no new restaurants appeared in the vicinity of the office developments.

Because of its location, by 1999 Vik’s was one of the few lunch destinations for the local professional customers. Realizing the potential of serving lunch to the burgeoning customers, the Chopras decided to keep the food counter open during lunch on weekdays as well as weekends. The interior layout of Vik’s changed to cater to this new lunch crowd. By 1999, the weekday lunch crowd consisted of mainly non—South Asian customers. The owners decided to move the chaat counter to the back of the store in order to avoid the crowding and confusion in the front that resulted out of the Indian grocery store customers jostling with the café customers. By 2000, Vik’s owners separated the restaurant section from the grocery store and moved the former to the adjacent warehouse space.

Vik’s popularity led to many copycat chaat cafés in Berkeley in special locations such as near downtown—to cater to lunch crowds. Chaat was fast gaining acceptance among non—South Asians and chaat cafés were making their appearance across the country in cities such as Phoenix, Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, and New York. By 2008 franchise opportunities for chaat cafés appeared in the United States as well as in India under Chaat Café Inc.

A common back space was shared by the café and the grocery store. This space was closed to the public and was generally used for storage and food preparation. These changes transformed the nature of the chaat café while keeping the grocery store the same.

By 2003 the New York Times reported with wonderment that this Indian café has become a popular local hangout even for the staff of Alice Water’s upscale French restaurant Chez Panisse (Apple 2003). Vik’s had entered the urban gourmet world—it was now ready to be explored and discovered by young urban Bay Area foodies. In 2004, the continuing popularity of Vik’s
made further demands on its interior space. By 2005, Sam Whiting wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "On weekends, it is mobbed... You can stand in line for half an hour, [and] you'll see everybody in the neighborhood" (Whiting 2005).

Soon Vik's expanded again. The 2006 layout of the café no longer resembled a chaat house in India or the original chaat counter of 1992. Rather it reflected the changing business, clientele, and neighborhood economy. While the grocery and spice store interiors remained exactly as it was ten years ago, the café saw renovations. A blogger described in 2008, "Now, Vik's is an institution. Despite several expansions into the warehouses next door, there are still impossibly long lines on the weekends. On Sundays, it feels as if the entire South Asian community and all the hippie wannabes of Telegraph Avenue have descended upon the place" (Emerson 2005).

The entrance to the grocery store used to be a large warehouse door with overhead rolling shutters. That entrance was redesigned in 2006 and the overhead shutter in front of the café was substituted with a door and an entry vestibule. The community bulletin board added to this vestibule made this an extended transitional space between the café and the street and allowed

**Figure 3.** Vik's interior layout, 1999. Drawing by Andy Blaser.

**Figure 4.** Vik's interior layout, 2000. Drawing by Andy Blaser.

**Figure 5.** Vik's interior layout, 2004–2006. Drawing by Andy Blaser.
the interior of the café to be air-conditioned and meet code requirements for a restaurant. The entry to the grocery store remained as it was.

By 2008 two separate and distinct kinds of spaces existed side by side. The grocery store interiors resembled the quintessential niche market ethnic grocery store. It was part of an immigrant community domain. An elderly lady at the counter spoke to customers in her native tongue (Gujarati). On weekend and evenings Indira, Vinod Chopra’s wife, would manage the counter. She engaged customers in friendly banter, asking them personal questions about their family and trips to India. She would remind some women customers when herbs like methi and curry leaves would come in fresh and chide others for buying the wrong brand of spices. She whispered in a conspiratorial tone advising regular clients to choose alternate brands of oil (even though she carried the brand she was advising against). An Indian helper, who did not speak fluent English, clearly knew the names of the goods held at the back and scurried back and forth to retrieve these items for customers. The grocery store employees spoke a language of the insider and employed a tone that gave an impression of familiarity.

In contrast, the material culture of the café was cosmopolitan. The café customers displayed racial, occupational, ethnic, and age diversity. Festive wall colors, posters of exotic locales in India, and the Air India Maharaja doll sustained a symbolic economy of cultural difference oriented towards westerners—similar to what Kay Anderson terms “a Western construction” in her work on Vancouver’s Chinatown (K. J. Anderson 1987: 591). The bulletin board space near the entrance to the café was very different from the similar space near the entrance to the grocery store. In the former there were displays and announcements of neighborhood new age yoga and meditation classes, self-realization workshops, local meetings, and organic food. In the latter one found untidy piles of ethnic newspapers printed in Northern California, the regional Indian American Business directories, old newspapers, advertisements for Bollywood movies, advertisements for South Asian cultural events in the Northern California Bay Area region.

The café sales counter was neatly separated from the preparation area and seating space producing order in this chaotic environment. A self-serve silverware and plate counter ran against the back wall. At the café counter the server spoke fluent English and took orders with speed not matched by their counterparts in the grocery store. Ready orders were announced by the loudspeaker system and customers lined up along the east wall to collect.

the goods with the efficiency of a production line. View lines and surveillance was carefully manipulated via the layout. Customers got a controlled glimpse of the back kitchen where Mexican and Central American immigrants worked alongside the elderly Indian Amma Chennale. Mixing chaat required fewer skills than preparing food in traditional restaurants and hence non-Indian workers did just fine. There was no communication between the customers and the back kitchen workers. No one knew what went on in the storage and food preparation back zone (the space at the back of the grocery store adjoining the café).

Yet the café was no more local than the grocery store and the experience in the two spaces were not segregated. People in the café mistakenly slipped into the grocery store (the common refrain being that the two adjacent entrances, lacking signage, was very confusing). For many non-South Asians this unintentional entry into this new world became an instructive experience. As they threaded their way past Indian groceries and peered through the exotic merchandise, they experienced the Indian grocery store for the first time. Repeated over time, the once newcomers became familiar with the musty world of spices and over the years the number of non-South Asian customers in the grocery store increased.

Amanda Berne of the *San Francisco Chronicle* describes the atmosphere in the café/grocery store on a weekend:

The Viks' dining room, if you can call it that, is filled with a mix of students, couples and Bay Area natives either from the area or making the trek for chaat. It's a weekend morning ritual, so the tables fill up quickly and spill out on sunny days to the parking lot... The kitchen has more energy than an airport during the holidays, and as soon as the doors open, the automated machines go into action, flashing orders on flat-screen panels. Staff members man various stations, while a few work in the back on preparing for the next day. Amod [Chopra's son] expedites, calling out names on a microphone for people to come back to the counter to pick up orders. Vinod and Indira arrive on the weekends around 11 a.m., and Vinod immediately starts greeting the customers. He's all over the place, tasting sauces, sitting in the sun chatting with groups of men, while Indira sneaks off to help work the store, her own meeting point to catch up. When he's not at the counter, Amod dips into every curry pot, sambar or biriyani pan in the kitchen, tasting for balance of flavors, spice and salt. Pakoras fry in the giant karahi, a cast-iron wok used in Indian cooking, and as they turn gold, the vegetable dumplings come out. Amod barely waits for them to cool before cracking one open. He adds more
Clearly Berne read the café as the public dining room and the grocery as Indira’s place. This apparent front and back experience was reiterated in the layout of the two spaces. During weekdays, out-of-town visitors parking their cars in the adjacent private parking lot created some conflict among neighbors by inconveniencing people working in nearby offices on a daily basis. Local residents often had to call the police and tow unauthorized vehicles away. As a result Chópra erected signs warning potential customers that if their parked in nonspecified locations their cars could be towed. On weekends the lot was free, and Vik’s customers drove into the lot through the lot’s exit (near store entrance). In doing so the visiting cars moved in the opposite direction than the normal weekday traffic flow. The drivers ended up parking at an angle that was different from the direction indicated by the lot signs. There was a different spatial order to this occupation, a temporary spatial change that marked the parking lot during the weekends as part of this ethnic landscape. By 2006 Vik’s had rented out a large section of the parking lot to avoid this continuous bother. Yet conflict over parking continued to fester. In 2008, the owners of Vik’s (now Vinod, Indira, and their son Amod) wrested the chaat restaurant premises from the grocery store. Now located a few blocks south of the original location, with its own parking lot, Vik’s chaat house is a separate entity no longer attached to the ethnic grocery store.

MULTIPLE SPATIALITIES AND MULTICULTURAL CONTACT ZONES

An emphasis on “place-making” is a good point of entry into the analysis of immigrant landscapes, as well as of the urban culture of contemporary American cities. The editors of this volume posit that due to globalization, neat separations between the global and local are complicated, the “categories of the local and the global, which previously appeared to be distinct, now become increasingly interwoven and reproduce each other” (see chapter 1). The preceding discussion partially unravels this interwoven nature of urban ethnic landscapes by tracking and correlating the physical transformation of the built environment within larger political-economic processes. Place and place-making allows us to examine how global practices are being rearticulated at a local setting. The interior environment of Vik’s is akin to an ever-changing stage that accommodates everyday events, shifting practices, and changing identities and political negotiations between various social constituencies. Vik’s is a node where multiple worlds overlap and the public realm of the immigrant community confronts the urban public domain. Ethnic networks of friends and family intersect with networks based on nonethnic relationships and professional liaisons. Understanding place-making allows us to see how culture and ethnicity are negotiated and learned. Changes instituted in the store (interior layout, merchandise, and business practices) were more than an attempt to solve a crowding or a space problem. By constantly redefining the boundaries between the grocery store and the café, between the street (outside) and store (inside), between front and back, the ethnic entrepreneurs mediated the many conflicting domains within which their business operated. The reconfiguration of the interior space became a way by which the Chopras and their cosmopolitan clientele negotiated contingencies of daily life, needs of the market, and policies of the state and urban governance. Ethnicity and indeed the immigrant cultural landscape became a site of capitalism’s creative destruction where the market incessantly redefined itself (Schumpeter 1942).

In addition to the expansion and locational displacement of the café, the edges between the grocery store and the café underwent repeated mutations. The transitional space between the street and the café became what Borden calls thick edges (Borden 2000). In the first instance, when the café was a weekend snack counter, the edge served as the transition between the store and the street, a point where customers paused before leaving (or after entering). The move to the back during its initial transformation as a lunch counter was an attempt to wrest the interconnectedness between the store and the café. By placing the café in the “back-zone,” this functional space was separated from the social space of the store. Yet, since the credit card machine was located in the front store counter, cross-traffic between café customers and store customers became intertwined. At this point the café had the quality of a private back room, from which one could hear sounds and laughter, but which was disconnected from the street by the intervening interior space of the grocery store. The imagery of the private back room gives us a glimpse of how the owners thought of the café at a time when it was becoming popular among Anglo and non-South Asian clients. They saw it as a bracketed space ensconced at the back within the larger ethnic retail and
wholesale context. Access to it was controlled and under surveillance. Later the move to the neighboring premises coincided with an acknowledgement of the unique interdependent yet independent nature of the chaat café. The shared back space, storage, and food preparation area provided an umbilical cord between the store and the café—the position of the café counter along the back wall was a result of the existence of a common back zone.

The many interior rearrangements of Vik’s also produced changing temporal experiences in the store and the café. In Vik’s, the weekday rhythms of customers created crowded hours during lunchtime at the chaat counter. That crowd dwindled down by the afternoon and spiked again in the evening with customers coming in for groceries on their way back from work. In each instant different parts of the store become operational and people performed and consumed ethnicity in different ways. With the shifting of the chaat counter (relative to the store counter) the locus of activities shifted too. Groceries produced a “seasonal” cycle that impacted the experience of space—mangos in summer took over the front of the grocery counter while seasonal vegetables were spread out next to the entrance. Frequent customers knew when a certain green leafy vegetable called methi became available and when curry leaves came in fresh. What looked to outsiders as clutter as they negotiated the strewn merchandise was a heartwarming reminder of home to others.

The acts of the government imposed a different, albeit longer beat to the system. For instance, the urban development schemes and plans of the city influenced the popularity of Vik’s as a lunchtime destination. Yet the impact of these factors operating within long-term planning cycles, determined at the urban government level, also coincided with an even larger international migration pattern. The immigration patterns of Indians in the Bay Area, national economic cycles, the digital revolution, and the real estate boom in the region were intertwined factors.

Like the forums and plazas of yesteryear and the privatized public spaces, malls, and amusement parks of a consumer society, Vik’s café is indeed the new public space of a global city. Unlike the adjoining grocery store that (despite many non-South Asian customers) caters mainly to a more-focused community of clients (mostly immigrants from out of town), the café is a meeting point for immigrants, natives, men, women, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, the powerful, and the powerless. Communities without propinquity negotiate territorial control with neighborhood groups and urban publics. The sequential entry and the watchful surveillance of the grocery store clerk discipline the customers and educate the uninitiated about a highly constructed world of Indianness. The bustling market place with an ambiguously transforming edge between the grocery store and café simultaneously sustains the divided worlds of the cab driver, the computer scientist, and the Anglo neophyte.

Vik’s displays what Lefebvre calls polyrhythmia, an overlay of multiple rhythms producing a complex spatial and temporal rhythmic field (Lefebvre 2004: 16–17). Understanding Vik’s therefore requires us to examine the conditions of polyrhythmia. The experience of spatial change and temporalities inside Vik’s are embodied in diverse ways as people move through the store, experience the changing smells, sounds, and ambient qualities of the interior, and approach different destinations. As users use these spaces they internalize the rhythms and orders within them. Experiencing these rhythms also creates a certain kind of memory. A memory of time and place that repeated, adapted, or transformed in cycles, produce a log of what has occurred before, different experiences of social circles and networks within the store. Paul Connerton shows how persistent bodily enactments—incorporating and inscribing practices—produce and sustain memories (Connerton 1989: 72–73). Such memories sustain imagined communities and shared and collective knowledge. These memories and embodied forms of knowing are not produced in conscious and predetermined ways. Rather, they are haptic.

It is here that the concept of multiple spatialities becomes relevant to our discussion. The internalization and experience of these rhythms and temporalities as embodied spatial knowledge is not fixed. Many customers come from suburban and urban areas across the Bay Area. They visit Vik’s primarily on weekends. They come in automobiles, often in groups, and use the chaat café as a place to meet friends. They drive down from distant locations to stock up on groceries and goods on weekends. To these customers Vik’s is a node within a regionally reticulated landscape of ethnic spaces. The network includes places of worship, work places, residential spaces, retail and business sites, and cultural institutions. The experience of Vik’s as part of a network is not the same as the experience of being a part of a neighborhood fabric. Such a spatiality contrasts with that generated by territorially bounded experiences of place that one finds in an ethnic enclave or a neighborhood café. Local residents’ experience of Vik’s as part of an everyday neighborhood fabric falls under the latter.

By simultaneously mapping Vik’s at multiple scales—within a global public culture, an automobile-based networked geography of Indian immigrants
in the Bay Area, a local pedestrian-based area from which majority non-ethnic customers come, and the personal scale of the store interiors where Anglo, Indian, and Mexican individuals consume and reproduce immigrant culture in different ways, we generate systemic cartographies that challenge the way we understand the relationship between place and culture, between ethnic and mainstream domains, between locality and globality (Rapoport 1993; Lynch 1960). Such mappings also bring forth complex local factors that ground global processes. The spatial development of a chaat café can then be read as the document of an unfolding history in which business needs, local government requirements, and cultural identities are all in a state of flux and dynamically related to each other. The clientele and the business incessantly redefine themselves, architectural and ethnic identities are constantly reinvented. What on first glance seems like bland global simulacra turns out to be a protean and creative rearticulation of place.