“The Visual Presentation of Community: What does community look like?”

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Senses of Place: Urban Narratives as Public Secrets

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Introduction

New York City, as other Global Cities, exhibits an increasingly complex and dazzling array of peoples. Represented in the urban landscape is every variety of race, religion, ethnicity, and life style cultures. With increasing diversity, it appears that a common community is increasingly problematic. Many question whether diversity and a shared community are even possible. This essay addresses this problem in several different ways. What has emerged from my earliest studies of urban neighborhoods is that although that which most people call "communities" are treated as real entities with physical substance and attributes they might be better treated as one or another version of a possible social reality. This reality in turn can be confirmed or disconfirmed through observation and interpretation of symbolic cues. An especially important aspect of the social construction of community is the physical appearances that are imbued with moral or normative qualities. Some of the simplistic working, assumptions can be stated as relationships: physical order-moral order; cleanliness-godliness; and good- taste-good upbringing. Such notions are beyond objective critique as part of a commonsense casual nexus of community accounts and interpretations. They are apparently social givens in many societies that are accepted by common-sense members as valid and therefore real in their subjective experience. One result of this is community activists who are inordinately concerned with being clean and beautiful.

The connection of the ideal version of the American community with middle class virtue and accessories is shown by the display of class through visual and other sensual clues. One can easily argue that community is a moral aesthetic as well as an ethic. Ordinary members of society assume that community is reflected in local appearances. This visually enhanced paper will reflect visual studies of ethnic and other kinds of community performances mostly in the United States but also abroad. I also note at the onset that the actor on the stage, or contrary historical facts, might change the impression of the scenery and thereby increase or decrease the possibility of recognizing community. In American society, race and ethnicity continue to be major factors in the recognition of community in urban settings. Historically it has been in African American neighborhoods that the appreciation of community performances and appearances by outside audiences had been the most difficult. Variants of this problem continue for recent immigrants from nations whose cultures of community clash with those of the Anglo-American model.

I also hope to illustrate the various ways by which community is presented, represented and represented. By “presented” I mean the ways by which ordinary people show themselves to each other in the course of their everyday lives. Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the “habitus” or practices that produce, in this case visible, regularities is helpful in this regard. (1977: 72-95) Sometimes this kind of performance or visible practice is referred to as the “authentic” community. My sense is that I, as an observer, am not empowered to judge the authenticity of someone’s actions. Journalists, social scientists, writers, and artists observe the community and “re-present” it in various forms. When these “re-presentations” become accepted, standardized, perhaps even commodified, a “representation” is created. Another expression of such representation are positive or negative stereotypes.

The American model of community is entwined with ideal notions of Assimilation and the Melting Pot. Assimilationism is an ideology that argues that immigrant groups ought to melt into, and become indistinguishable parts from the whole. On the other end of the spectrum is the ideology of Multiculturalism, which is predicated upon the notion that not only do distinct cultural groups continue to exist in American society, but that their distinctiveness ought to be preserved. I would add that the rise of Multiculturalism as an ideology is also directly linked to “Post-1965” immigration laws which allow the entry into
the country of a spectrum of peoples that better reflects the diversity of the world population. Prior to that time laws favored immigrants who reflected the US population, with few exceptions, before 1920. Additional factors that favor retention of immigrant cultures today are advanced communication and transportation technologies that make it possible to stay connected to places of origin. Diversity is also enhanced in some neighborhoods by a constant flow of undocumented aliens.

Richard Sennett adds a rather depressing evaluation of the results of "managing" difference in the most multicultural of cities, my own New York City: "What is characteristic of our city building is to wall off the differences between people, assuming that these differences are more likely to be mutually threatening than mutually stimulating. What we make in the urban realm are therefore bland, neutralizing spaces which remove the threat of social contact: street walls faced in sheets of plate glass, highways that cut off poor neighborhoods from the rest of the city, dormitory housing developments." (Sennett, 1990, xii) In his work he shows what can be learned from the multitude of historical urban experiences to offer an alternative, positive vision for contemporary, globalized, urban life which would allow for the appreciation of diverse social, and especially visual, urban experience.

I must note at the outset that I do not hold a naïve icon of community such as critiqued by Deyan Sudjic's: "The most cherished of contemporary myths is the recurring dream of community. Half rose-tinted Frank Capra, half Passport to Pimlico, it's a fantasy that celebrates the corner shop, borrowing a cup of sugar from the neighbours, and all those other unimpeachable suburban virtues that range from motherhood to apple pie." (Sudjic, 1992: 304) Here I would like to discuss one particular version of the ideal American community and the problems which some groups might have in dramaturgically producing it in front of skeptical audiences. It is suggested that this problem of producing community by minority groups in the United States is equally relevant in other ethnic, national, and political state settings. It must be emphasized that when groups are unable to successfully perform community they are effectively stigmatized, and can suffer substantial social, political, and economic penalties for their apparently moral failure. (Krase, 1977, 1978)

**Community Models**

“The Presentation of Community in Urban Society” provides a definition of community as a possible social reality that can be confirmed through observation and interpretation of symbolic cues. The end product of my ethnographic theoretical case study of a predominately African American “inner city” neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York was a collection and analysis of accounts of doing community, and perceiving community. These accounts were analyzed in reference to conceptual categories that developed in accomplishing this particular research project. The concept of community was therefore transformed from an empirical object to a phenomenological possibility. (Krase, 1973: 48-49)

The Emergent Conceptual Categories of Doing Neighborhood Community were:

1. The conditions of togetherness; consensus, solidarity, and agreement.
2. Physical and social boundaries. Locating community.
3. The quality of social relationships; friendliness, warmth, helping, looking out for one another. Vigilance.
5. Oppression and vulnerability. The necessity of community oppression. The advantage of vulnerability. "They" and "We."
7. The desire to be recognized. Community and neighborhood as a moral problem. Stigma.
8. The impact of personal community models, as a guide for present, and future activities, and as a source of judgment.
9. The importance of physical appearances. On being clean, and beautiful. Showing class, thorough visual and sensual clues.
10. The problem of organizational skills. The perceived need for organization. On organizational appearance, and being too organized.

(Krase, 1973:325-26)

For the purposes of this paper, "The Importance of Physical Appearance" is of course, most salient. "Another important aspect of community is the physical appearances that are imbued with moral or normative qualities. Some of the simplistic, although working, assumptions can be stated as relationships such as: physical order-moral order; cleanliness-godliness; and good-taste-good upbringing. It is not my purpose here to criticize such notions, as they are beyond objective critique when they are part of a common-sense casual nexus of community accounts and interpretations. They are apparently social givens that are accepted by common-sense members as valid and therefore real in their subjective experience. It appears that community members and activists are inordinately concerned with being clean and beautiful. The connection of the ideal version of the American community with middle class virtue and accessories is shown in the display of class through visual and other sensual clues. Community is a moral aesthetic as well as an ethic. The value of community is assumed to be reflected in local appearances. A tour of the neighborhood is best performed on a warm sunny day. (Krase, 1973:368)

Perhaps because of the difficulty of manipulating social relations and their effects, to produce a convincing aura of community, local people involve themselves in individual and group efforts at creating an appearance of community through such things as planting trees, putting up gas lamps, planting flowers and other beautification activities. The importance of the physical appearance of an area cannot be underestimated. It is the first clue that a person had to the social and economic make up of the neighborhood. Clean and wholesome vistas of neighborhood streets give the appearance of happy middle-class community. Keeping up appearances becomes, in turn, a moral obligation on the part of individuals and groups to help keep up the front. Even without close and intimate contact with neighbors, the normative aspects of neighborhood appearance are conveyed to those who violate the rules. What does the "good" community look like? What does community look like as a performance? Who should be included in or excluded from the picture?

In Prospect-Lefferts-Gardens my community organizing efforts were directed toward producing local performances which would conform to the expectations of individuals and groups which could mightily impact on the neighborhood such as banks, insurance companies, police, sanitation and other public authorities. Successful performances assisted in the battle against Insurance and Mortgage Red-Lining and poor and indifferent city services. I ask reader consider why it would be so difficult to see “community” in the actions of the people in the photos that follow.

I am not the first or only person to notice the importance of the visual in ideal community valuations. Sebastian de Grazia, discussing "Adaptations to Acute Anomie" noted the efforts made by the Nazis to re-create the atmosphere of Gemeinschaft, and the nations homier past. In 1938 an English architectural expert had toured Germany and remarked on buildings styles in an interesting way. Quoting John Gloag: “We don't want experiments in structure or materials,’ we were informed. The housing officials know exactly what accommodations a family needs; they prefer to use traditional materials and building methods; they want to create a comfortable setting for traditional family life. (no experiments are wanted in that direction either…) There can be no compromise between the experimental outlook of the modernist and the determinism of National Socialism to establish the family with all of its sacred traditional accompaniments in fecundity and perpetuity….German housing officials put first on the list: the people hate a flat roof. … And everywhere -- around Berlin, near big industrial cities, outside Munich, Nuremberg, Frankfurt and cologne-- you see, as a reflection of these homely ideas, the little warm-roofed dwelling which are stopping the landflucht, spreading contentment and checking the growth of unconventional ideas.” (de Grazia, 1948: 179-80, Gloag, 1939: 95,56, 58-59,61-62.)

Ironically, the pleasant streetscape of Herzberg, Germany shown in the 2001 photograph below belies its wartime history. “On the eastern outskirts of Hersbruck, beside the road to Nuremberg, was Hersbruck Concentration Camp. An outcamp of Flossenbürg, it had at its height nearly 6,000 prisoners crowded into its twenty barracks. They were divided into three shifts for round-the-clock work, digging tunnels for the underground armaments plant in the mountain at the edge of Happurg. Although the shifts were sometimes transported by train, more often they marched under SS guard, sometimes assisted by dogs, to and from work in their 'zebra uniforms' and clogs, through residential streets of Hersbruck, and the full length of Happurg. The Geisterzug (processions of ghosts), was what local people called these prisoner formations travelling their streets, six times in a day and night.” (Luchterhand, 1982: 255 )

Photo 3. Hersbruck, Germany

As in Prospect-Lefferts-Gardens and other nonwhite urban neighborhoods, clearly racialist ideologies make the recognition of community even more problematic. It is therefore impossible to understand the power of the visible and visual in American multicultural community life without reference to the most powerful statement of this relationship by Ralph Ellison:

"I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.” (Ellison: 1952:1)

As is true of minorities in the United States visually clashing with the ideal urban landscape we find in Europe a similar attitude toward the sight of recent immigrants such as the Chinese in Rome, Italy. In looking at this image, I ask the reader to consider whether the space looks more or less Italian by the presence of this Chinese worker on the street.

It is clear from all these treatments of the problem of seeing community that we need to find a way of teaching about community for multicultural society; in essence a way to see, understand, and perhaps even appreciate communities of diversity. Therefore, we turn now to a consideration of the methods that I employ in training my students to recognize community in their own multicultural societies. Beyond the great public spaces and edifices of America’s metropolitan areas lies a vast domain of home environments where ordinary people have created distinct landscapes and places. The visible patterns in these ethnic neighborhoods are richly varied in the ways space is used socially as well as physically constructed. These vernacular urban landscapes are created and maintained by migrants who have carried their designs for living from their places of origin and adapted them to the resources and opportunities presented to them in their new locales. (Krase, 1993)

I hope to show in this section how one might integrate teaching with more traditional modes of observation and explanation, particularly as I train my students in the “practice of space,” or the relations between spatial forms and social practices in terms of how either or both change in response to the constraints of space and place. Here our attention will be directed toward how the landscape of one Brooklyn, New York neighborhoods is being transformed by the influx of new immigrants.

During the 20th Century Brooklyn has averaged well over two million residents. At the turn of the 21st there were 2,465,326 official Brooklynites. Most dramatic and relevant here is the changes in the racial composition of the population during the second half of the century, especially the most recent two decades. For example, since 1940, the non-Hispanic Black population in Brooklyn has grown from slightly over one-hundred-thousand to more than eight-hundred-thousand persons; or from four percent of the borough's total population to not quite thirty-five percent. In broader racial terms, Brooklyn has gone from having a 96% white non-Hispanic majority to having a 34.7% white non-Hispanic minority.

Along with these basic demographic changes have been significant shifts in the national origins of newcomers, especially in the last two recent decades. Often referred to as Post-1965 Immigration because of the major changes made in United States immigration laws, these immigration trends have created an almost bewildering social and cultural milieu. Brooklyn has always been a virtual and actual Roman Fountain of immigration. The foreign-born proportion of the population has averaged 30% for most of the 20th Century.

Two decades ago, an invisibility different from that suffered by Ralph Ellison concerned the thousands of Chinese immigrants to Brooklyn. My friend John Kuo Wei Tchen, asked me whether I was aware that a large Chinatown was growing in Sunset Park. As an alleged “expert” on Brooklyn’s ethnic communities I was embarrassed to admit that, as to a distinctly Asian enclave in Brooklyn, I was quite in the dark. My ignorance, although inexcusable, was at least understandable. For the casual observer the shopping strip defines the ethnic character of a neighborhood and we therefore read ethnic enclaves by the appearance of their commercial streets. (Krase, 2003) Most immigrants prefer having groceries, bakeries, restaurants, and other shops nearby, as opposed to the American urban planning ideal of functionally segregated residential communities, with commercial centers at some distance away to serve them. Ethnic enclaves are also more or less apparent to the varying degrees to which their visual symbols clash with those of Anglo-American urban culture. The vernacular landscapes of Chinese and American urban neighborhoods are as different as their respective languages but Sunset Park’s Chinese immigrants were working
and shopping elsewhere. They commuted daily by a convenient subway connection to Manhattan’s world-famous Chinatown. Since they spend much of their waking hours elsewhere, Sunset Park’s streets showed little sign of their considerable residential presence. Only at morning and evening rush hours did the neighborhood subway stations contradict the White Ethnic reputation of the area. I have noted elsewhere that most people make their evaluations of the ethnic character of a neighborhood by the appearances of its commercial street. (Kruse, 2002)

For decades I have been teaching a graduate level Sociology of the Urban Community course in a Master’s Degree in Education program for New York City Teachers. My goal is not only to help them learn about Sociology, but also how to see the city in which they live and work. In turn I hope that they will transfer those skills to their own pupils. As my students teach at levels from Pre-Kindergarten to High School seniors I have tried to keep my learning exercises as jargon-free as possible. I require my students to make field trips to observe one “Modern” and one “Traditional” urban community. As a whole, the class (anywhere from 15-30 students) travels to visit the World Financial Center and adjacent residential development, Battery Park City in Manhattan, as an example of a modern community. They are usually given the option to choose a traditional venue on their own.

Before we take the first trip, however there is a great deal of visual preparation. Naturally, the students read and discuss in class how others have described and theorized about urban communities, but being visually prepared requires different skills and sensitivities. In preparation for the field trips I give them a short version of the myth of Orpheus which they read in anticipation of viewing the film Black Orpheus (1959) directed by Marcel Camus. On the next class period following the showing of the film I divide them into groups of four or five to engage in a “Collaborative Project” about how the director has lyrically contemporized the myth of Orpheus. The fact that the actors in the film are speaking Portuguese (English sub-titles) and the setting is the favelas and the downtown of Rio De Janeiro during Carnevale increases the importance of de-coding visual signs in order to understand the filmic analogies and metaphors.

For another in-class visual learning activity I ask my students how they think that “community” is expressed in the films that they have seen. As an assignment, I ask them to share with the other members of the class a one-minute clip from a commercial video of, in effect, what community looks like. As a result of this exercise we have been treated to scenes excerpted from films that range from Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing (1989) to the Disney-animated Beauty and the Beast (1991).

Seminar on Ethnicity and Neighborhood: The Ethnic Mapping of Sunset Park

For the ethnic mapping project in my seminars on “Ethnicity and Neighborhood” I try to select areas such as Community District 7 in which there is some articulation between the “official” boundaries of the local community and those which might be meaningful to the people who live in them. According to the New York City Planning Commission in 1999 District 7 “… located in the western section of Brooklyn, is a mixed residential, industrial and commercial area. The home of an ethnically and economically integrated population, the district is comprised of two communities: Sunset Park and Windsor Terrace… Slightly over 50% of the population of the Community Board Seven is Hispanic. The indigenous Puerto Rican population is now augmented by a large number of Colombians, Mexicans, Dominicans and Ecuadorians. There remains a large European population of Polish, Italian, Irish, Finnish and Scandinavians and we are beginning to see small pockets of Arabic and
immigrants from the former Soviet Union countries. The Chinese is the fastest growing population in the board area.” (NYDCP,1999:115-136.)

I would argue that there are “visual dimensions” of almost every social process, and most easily imagined are those of immigrant enclaves. The process of immigrant adjustment, and eventually assimilation, is also reflected ecologically through the invasion and succession of residential neighborhoods. This is evidenced by changes in the vernacular landscapes of urban neighborhoods. Ordinary people do not “know” they are in an ethnic neighborhood because they read the most recent census data. To them it simply “looks like” one. By conducting an “Ethnic Mapping” of the extremely diverse and rapidly changing Sunset Park area students are able to see how culture/ethnicity reflects and shapes the urban form and the local community. They can witness, and perhaps even document, how the built environment changes, or is preserved, to reflect ethnic cultural identities. At the theoretical level, by mapping signs of ethnic culture they learn how ethnic landscapes carry on the social activities of space reproduction and representation by noting the interaction between local landscapes in other neighborhoods or the city at large.

My seminar students surveyed a segment of the neighborhood that was bisected by the main commercial strip- Eight Avenue. They discovered that at the southern end (60th Street) it was a virtual Chinatown. As they walked northward toward 50th, the avenue looked less Chinese and more Latino. The easiest ethnic keys to read were of course the commercial signage, but the dress, language, and physical features of the people on the streets also seemed to correlate with the appearance of the storefront displays and the products and services offered. In the south, nearest to the subway station, the good luck colors of China, and Chinese language characters were ubiquitous. Of special note was the red and gold lettered sign of the Buddhist Zenjin Association USA. But along the avenue there was also a smattering of other Asian languages, such as Indonesian-Malaysian, Arabic, Pakistani-Bengali, and Korean.

At the corner of 60th Street they also found the Birkal “Turkish” market, next door to a Moslem clothing shop, the American Muslim Association, and above which was a mosque. Much of the food and produce offered, including the “Halal” meats, in the Birkal market were clearly designed to appeal to non-Chinese Asians, Europeans, and Middle-Easterners. Around the corner and down the block from the market, my students observed a small group of women in Islamic dress (long robes and shadoors) watching over young children playing an enclosed space. It should be noted that here in Sunset Park similarly dressed Moslem women are very “noticeable” while not far away in a large Bangladeshi-Pakistan enclave they visually blend into the landscape. Most of the other residents of this particular block appeared to be Chinese. In front on one house was displayed a sidewalk shrine of Saint Anthony and students assumedly it was lived in by Italians. At a few other places on the same street my students noted similar religious shrines, as well as other indicators of prior occupation by Mediterranean ethnic groups such as fig trees, and grapevines.

Although the main ethnic continuum which runs north south through the neighborhood is Asian-Latino there are some other interesting visual stops along the way. A few decades ago this part of Sunset Park was an old Scandinavian (Norwegian) neighborhood...
and was referred to by locals as Lapskaus Boulevard. Lapskaus is a Norwegian beef stew. Today one has to search very hard to find signs of their eighty-year-long dominance. One ethnic fossil is a small variety store on Eight Avenue that has a \textit{Lute Fisk} sign in the window. I had to explain to my students that \textit{lute fisk} is a dish, served especially during the Christmas holidays, that is made from salted dried cod. Other signs of this senior ethnic group are the Protestant (Lutheran) churches in the neighborhood that, now in Chinese characters or \textit{en Espanol}, announce religious and other services. In a few instances, students also found Scandinavian names such as “Larsen” displayed in the front of neatly landscaped single-family houses on the side streets.


Mid-way between the Chinese and Latino concentrations along Eight Avenue my students were surprised to discover another mosque, this one decorated in green and white (colors of Islam), and several stores, with hand written signs in Arabic and advertising Halal meat. They were even more puzzled however by the sudden appearance at this point of a \textit{Polski Delikatessi} decorated in red and white, and two stores; \textit{Odziez na Waga} which sells used clothing, and a \textit{Frysjer}, or hairdresser. I explained that these Polish stores provided services to the numerous household workers employed by the Orthodox Jewish families who live a few blocks away in Borough Park. Although, compared to Latinos and Asians, there is not a large number of Poles residing in the area, one of the local Roman Catholic churches in the area offers masses in Polish. As to the explanation for the Moslem, assumedly Middle Eastern, presence I can only surmise that they, like the Poles, have simply found a niche in a residential area contested by much larger, and continuously growing, Chinese, Latino and Orthodox Jewish enclaves.

It must be noted here that a major change in the appearance of the northeastern section of Sunset Park has been due to the expansion of the Orthodox Jewish population that has radiated outward from its demographic and commercial center on 13\textsuperscript{th} Avenue in Borough Park. As with the Chinese population, subway lines have played a major role in Borough Park’s development. Just as Sunset Park was an extension of Manhattan’s Chinatown, Borough Park was connected to the legendary Jewish community of The Lower East Side. Long before the publication of the 2000 Census, my students already recognized ethnic change by the spread of Hebrew characters on store signs, Stars of David, Yeshivas, synagogues, \textit{schuls}, and \textit{mikvahs}. They easily recognized the strictly segregated groups of males and females, the wigs or covered heads and long dresses of women, and the bearded, men wearing black hats, suits, white shirts and no ties. Much more difficult for them to understand are \textit{mezuzahs} affixed to doorways, and the \textit{succahs} built on the balconies of apartments, or in the yards. \textit{Mezuzahs} are encased bits of scripture, and \textit{succahs} are outdoor eating areas used during certain religious festivals.


People often speak of Latino neighborhoods as though they were ethnically homogeneous, but the diversity of Latinos in Sunset Park is attested to by obvious and subtler signs. One thing they all have in common is highly stylized graffiti and colorful murals, some of which commemorate the tragic deaths of local youths. Throughout Sunset Park, but especially in the Latino quarter, an observer might spy Puerto Rican flags painted on murals, hanging in apartment windows or front yards. It is possible that such visual expressions of ethnic pride are also symbolic protests against the recent invasion of the neighborhood by Mexicans, and the encroachment of Asians, and even Orthodox Jews.
Just as one might caution that “not all” Europeans or Asians look alike, Latinos in Sunset Park who trace their origins to Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Central America display a physiognomic variety. In addition, at least until they assimilate American styles, they also dress differently. One example is the “western” dress of many of the Mexican men: what my students generally refer to as “cowboy” hats and boots. The most recent female immigrants from places like Guatemala and Honduras are also noticed because they continue to wear pieces from their colorful native costumes. This transition from “foreign” to American dress codes seems to be true among all of Sunset Park’s immigrants. It is the young males in all groups who are most likely, and most quickly, to dress, as do their American-born teenage cohorts.

As to local stores catering to Latinos, or bodegas, outside one of them is a sign handwritten Spanish claiming that “real” Nicaraguan food is sold here. If the “Spanish spoken here” postings (en español) are insufficient clues, others hawking Productos Tropicales, Dominicanos, or Mexicanos, are prominently posted, as well as national symbols such as flags, or patriotic color schemes. But here caution must be exercised. For example, and for good reason, several of my students misread the Mexican red, green, and white tricolor as an Italian ethnic marker. More certain icons of Mexican presence are various stylized illustrations of Our Lady of Guadeloupe (Vergine de Guadalupe) in the windows of homes and businesses, or sometimes painted on exterior walls. It was also not difficult for my students to decipher the origin of the “Acapulco Car Service” on Seventh Avenue, but they were less likely to place the names of towns and cities, like Xalapa, displayed in the windows of shops which provided long-distance telephone services.


**Brief Theoretical Overview**

It is difficult to argue with David Harvey when he says such things as: “Different classes construct their sense of territory and community in radically different ways. This elemental fact is often overlooked by those theorists who presume a priori that there is some ideal-typical and universal tendency for all human beings to construct a human community of roughly similar sort, no matter what the political or economic circumstances.” (Harvey, 1989: 265) Furthermore, a variant of Anthony Giddens’ “structuration theory” cautions that new shop signs in a neighborhood “taken over” by new immigrants are easily noticed, but “seeing” the uses and/or meanings of space require sensitivity and understanding of the particular culture that creates, maintains, and uses the re-signified space. In other words even the most powerless of urban dwellers is a social “agent” and therefore participates in the local reproduction of regional, national, and global societal relations (Giddens, 1984).

John Brinkerhoff Jackson informs us that the commonplace aspects of the streets, houses and fields and places of work can teach us about ourselves and how we relate to the world around us. For him the "Vernacular Landscape" lies underneath the symbols of permanent power expressed in the "Political Landscape". It is flexible without overall plan and contains spaces organized and used in their traditional way. Vernacular landscapes are part of the life of communities that are governed by custom and held together by personal relationships. For him and his students "vernacular landscape cannot be comprehended unless we perceive it as an organization of space; unless we ask ourselves who owns the spaces, how they were created and how they change." (Jackson, 1984: 6)
John Grady defined Visual Sociology pragmatically: “how sight and vision helps construct social organization and meaning”; “how images and imagery can both inform and be used to manage social relations”. And “how the techniques of producing and decoding images can be used to empirically investigate social organization, cultural meaning and psychological processes.” The techniques, methodologies and concerns of Visual Sociology are the best known and where the camera and other techniques of representation play crucial roles in the analytic process (1996:14). Visual Sociology demonstrates human agency by capturing the efforts of people to create or modify the spaces they occupy, or as Bourdieu might say; the practices which produce their habitus.

Visual Sociology and Vernacular Landscapes are connected via Spatial Semiotics, or “the study of culture which links symbols to objects.” (Gottdiener, 1994:15-16) According to Gottdiener the most basic concept for urban studies study is the settlement space “…built by people who have followed some meaningful plan for the purposes of containing economic, political, and cultural activities. Within it people organize their daily actions according to meaningful aspects of the constructed space.”(1994:16) Despite this agency, of course, neighborhoods are not autonomous. They are tied into national and global economic systems and are therefore affected by a wide range of supply-side forces. As Symbolic Capital, ethnic enclaves are products and sources of both social and cultural capital. Vernacular landscapes of all varieties of urban neighborhoods reflect both the social and cultural capital of its residents. Visual Sociology of vernacular landscapes allows us to “see” how we all are both products and producers of space.

Learning to See Through The Eye of the Beholder

While lecturing on “Multiculturalism in American Urban Life” in the American Studies Center at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, since my Polish was much worse than my students’ English, they seemed to appreciate my slide presentations of the many different (including Polish) ethnic neighborhoods in Brooklyn. I was in Poland to conduct photographic research on the visual similarities between Polish and Polish-American neighborhoods. Therefore, I asked the students if they would take me on a tour of different neighborhoods in Krakow to show me what they thought symbolized “Polishness.” My students there taught me a lesson about seeing. One trip was to Nowa Huta, a planned industrial suburb of 200,000 built in the 1950s, which has long been a hated symbol to Poles of Russian Communist repression. Described as a “communist dream” that “didn’t materialize,” a “grey concrete desert,” and a monotonous monument to Stalinist architectural (Dydynski, 1993: 196)

In Nowa Huta my students led me to many “landmarks” which reflected what they felt was valiant Polish opposition to oppression such as a tank which had been commandeered by protesters during an anti-government demonstration. Oddly, the most memorable “sight” during this visit was an empty square in the middle of the planned apartment block community where a statue of Lenin used to be. They took me to see something that, at least physically, was no longer there!


A few years later I escorted several visiting scholars from Poland, and from Italy on tours of two of Brooklyn’s most well known ethnic neighborhoods - “Polish” Greenpoint, and “Italian” Bensonhurst. To the naked American eye the two different communities were both stereotypically “ethnic.” They both were bustling immigrant enclaves where the store signs and the languages spoken on the street were foreign. It is important to emphasize that
Brooklyn's Italian and Polish neighborhoods are actually more "foreign" today than they were twenty years ago. Immigrants are a much larger proportion of the local populations now as most Italian Americans have moved, and an even greater segment of assimilated Polish Americans left for the more distant suburbs.

By the 1960s, commercial signs in the Polish language had almost disappeared in Greenpoint. Only a few local enterprises were still adorned with semiotics of the Poland such as red and white signs, and crowned Polish eagles. Even fewer Polish place names on local stores, such as “Zakopane,” had survived the residential transitions. At the beginning of the new Millenium young immigrant Poles have filled the spaces vacated by their assimilated co-nationalists and share the neighborhoods with only small remnants of the older Polonia. Interestingly, many of the newer Polish businesses are not marked by the stereotypical national motifs of previous generations. But, Greenpoint is now saturated with signs in Polish announcing everything from food to professional services, multi-purpose Agencja, and other, work-related signs. The otherwise ordinary looking street corner near St. Stanislaus Kosta Roman Catholic Church is now the intersection of Lech Welesa, Solidarity Square and Pope John Paul II Street which commemorates their visits, perhaps even their pilgrimages, to Polish Greenpoint.


Bensonhurst has benefited by ebbs and flows of Italian, especially Sicilian, immigrants since World War Two, many of whom have homes in both Italy and the United States. In contrast to Greenpoint, the Italian shopping street, 18th Avenue that was renamed in 1992 as “Cristoforo Colombo Boulevard,” attracts many non-Italians. Polish shopping areas point more inward than do Italian ones. This has as much to do with immigrant and ethnic attitudes as to perceptions by outsiders. In American cities, Italian neighborhoods, festooned with red, white, and green signs and flags, are places where people go to shop and especially to eat. Italian restaurants are a virtual ethnic industry; what I have called in other places “Ethnic Theme Parks” or “Disneylands.” (Krase, 1997) In contrast, in Brooklyn's Polonia one finds few "fancy" restaurants and even fewer eateries, which seek to attract outsiders. Of course Bensonhurst is not totally open to outsiders, its ethnic insularity is reflected in the large number of local Caffes, town and regional social clubs, and Italian record stores which are generally off limits for non-Italian-speaking visitors.


As obviously “authentic” expressions of national cultures as these areas might appear to most native-born Americans as Little Polands or Little Italies, all of my Polish and Italian guests announced that they saw nothing which reminded them of either Poland or Italy in Greenpoint or Bensonhurst. The ethnic, or national, qualities of these spaces were virtually invisible to them. Why? This question can be addressed in several different ways. The most relevant is that America’s hyphenated-ethnic appearances are a matter of “class.” Most European professors think of themselves as members of the Intelligentsia who historically have expressed considerable disdain for their lower class compatriots who have come to represent their nations in the minds of Americans. Members of elite social classes maintain considerable virtual and actual social distances between themselves and those below them in their own countries. In Italy, for example, there also continues to be a bias against southern Italians who make up the greatest proportion of Italian Americans. In a related vein America’s Polonia has historically come primarily from the less educated, rural and working-class Polish citizenry. Despite decades of failed Communist party rule, Poland is still a very class-conscious society. The combination of what these visiting intellectuals consider the
rather crass American commercialism, and the mostly working-class residents on these shopping strips who it is claimed “represent” their esteemed cultural and national heritage was enough to make them cringe. It is also another expression of the role that seeing plays in creating social distance between those who share multicultural urban spaces. If Europeans when the visit the United States cannot recognize the community they share with conationalists living there, it makes it easier to understand why they have difficulty recognizing the community which they share with new immigrants to Europe. It also helps us to understand our own myopia when it comes to seeing community in the diverse practices which are performed before our eyes on the streets and in the neighborhoods of America’s multicultural society.

References


**Biographical Note**

Jerome Krase currently holds the titles of Murray Koppelman Professor, and Professor Emeritus, at Brooklyn College of The City University of New York. After an interruption for military service (1963-66) he received a Baccalaureate of Arts in Sociology at Indiana University (1967). His New York University doctoral dissertation "The Presentation of Community in Urban Society" (1973) dealt with the problems and prospects of maintaining the viability of minority and racially integrated urban neighborhoods. Subsequently he worked as an activist-scholar in the field of community organizations, publishing articles and presenting papers while deeply involved in the neighborhood organization movements. He has served as a consultant to public and private agencies regarding inter-group relations and other urban community issues. During the last two decades his interests have expanded into visual, mainly photographic, studies of ethnic and other varieties of urban neighborhood communities. He has written and photographed widely on urban life and culture and has lectured and conducted research on "Spatial Semiotics" in the US and abroad, most recently at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Perth, Australia. Representative published works include *Self and Community in the City* (1982), *Ethnicity and Machine Politics* (1992) with Charles LaCerra, and with Judith N. DeSena, *Italian Americans in a Multicultural Society* (1994), and the forthcoming *Ethnic Communities in New York City* with Ray Hutchinson. He has exhibited his photographic studies at many electronic and geographic sites and, with Timothy Shortell, has developed an on-line archive for visual and textual research, and teaching resources. He is an active member in the American Sociological Association, American Italian Historical Association, the International Visual Sociology Association, and the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America.