Navigating Ethnic Vernacular Landscapes

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Abstract
Ever since Robert Ezra Park and Ernest Burgess published their classic research on Chicago which described “how” residential neighborhoods follow a distinct ecological pattern, generations of urban practitioners and theoreticians have been arguing about “why” they are spatially distributed. This essay is designed to demonstrate the utility of Visual Sociology and the study of Vernacular Landscapes to document and analyze how the built environment reflects the changing cultural identities of neighborhood residents. It is strongly suggested that a visual approach can also help build a bridge between various theoretical and applied disciplines that focus on the form and function of the metropolis. While discussing some of these often-competing models, the text is illustrated by a selection of photographs taken in Brooklyn, New York whose neighborhoods over the past century have been a virtual Roman fountain of ethnic transitions. Although many of the oldest and newest residents of Brooklyn such as Chinese, Italians, Jews, and Poles would be familiar to Park and Burgess, others such as Bangladeshis, Egyptians, and Koreans would not. Ideas about Old and New cities from the “classical” to the “post-modern;” from Park and Burgess to Harvey and Lefebvre are also synthesized via the insights of J.B. Jackson.

Introduction
Urban theoreticians and practitioners of all sorts are anxiously awaiting the results of Census 2000, some to test their hypotheses about the city and others to use the new data in order to better plan for it. If recent past history is any indication, by the time the information is analyzed many of the facts on the ground will contradict those in the book. Since the 1960s there have been major real and imagined changes in the structure and appearances of America’s metropolitan areas. Social scientists debate the role of markets and governments in accounting for these changes. The term “globalization” is often used to describe a combination of factors changing values and norms that are spread across the world. These include new technologies, increased trade, concentration of economic control, reduced welfare state, spatial integration of economic activities, and most important for this essay; movement of both capital, and people. Another term that has entered our Post-modern vocabulary is “de-industrialization,” referring in general to the reduced importance of manufacturing, movement abroad of heavy industry, as well as the decline of historically important urban ports and railroad centers. Concomitant with this has been increased reliance on air, auto, and truck transportation resulting in the spread, perhaps even better -- the “displacement,” of the city toward the fringes and suburbs. The ethnic flavors of the city are accounted for by changes in American immigration laws that have made possible an increasing diversity of permanent and temporary, as residents of our cities. Large numbers of undocumented aliens has further enhanced the diversity of neighborhoods, and workforces, in recent decades. (Portes, 1999)
In a simpler time, Ernest W. Burgess’ Concentric Zone diagram from The Growth of the City (1925) provided students of urban life with “The” semiotic for “The” City. Since then much “urban” research continued to be focused on the domains and denizens of “Inner City” or other euphemisms for what Ernest W. Burgess called the “Zone of Transition”. There one found roomers, hobos, addicts, poor folks, nonwhite minorities, and lower class immigrants who lived in real and symbolic places called the Ghetto, Slum, Black Belt, Chinatown, Underworld, Vice, and Little Sicily. At the turn of the century tens of thousands of immigrants flooded Chicago and mobilization for WWI brought with it a large number of southern blacks. Urban Ecology, the study of the spatial distribution of human activity, developed as a way to make sense of what was for the period an amazingly complex ethnic and racial mosaic. Simply put, the Chicago School of Urban Sociology had borrowed an analogy from biology ecological, in the principles of cooperation and competition for space and resources, to inadvertently create an icon for urban development.

Heuristically powerful notions such as “Natural Areas,” and “Invasion and Succession” well served those who sought to understand racial segregation, as well as immigrant and ethnic enclaves. Increasingly, however, the accepted wisdom that the stability and change of the metropolis was merely “natural” as opposed to the consequence of the way that powerful people and institutions think and plan became contested. The discipline of Urban Ecology was seen by more radical analysts as too timid (e.g. “conservative”) for honest analyses of White flight, Urban Blight, RedLining, not to mention simultaneous Gentrification and Dis-investment. (Feagin, 1998: 19) In my opinion, however, its basic descriptive principles continue today to have a great deal of value when contempmorized by studious attention to more analytic notions such as “Circuits of Capital” and “Spatial Semiotics.” Under these newer rubrics the same immigrant and ethnic enclaves are treated not as much as merely “natural” but nevertheless “inevitable.” Today’s major urban models and paradigms continue the sociological profession’s tradition of place names such as the Los Angeles and New York City “Schools.” One must ultimately agree that no concrete entity can adequately serve as an abstract concept. That being said, whether it is Ferdinand Toennies Eurocentrically using Gemeinde, or me, Brooklyn, as an “illustration,” we must recognize the value of ideas that are grounded in empirical geographical realities and re-presented as images or semiotics.

A recent look at Chicago by Erick Howenstine is a literal case of déjà vu “Eighty years ago the ethnic mosaic of Chicago was defined primarily on the basis of first and second generation European groups settling in inner-city neighborhoods. Thirty years ago a large population of first and second-generation Black internal migrants from the South changed the character of that mosaic. Today immigrant groups are again changing the mosaic, this time from Latin American and Asia. Today’s ethnic mosaic has extended to suburban territory. Details of the specific settlement and segregation patterns, as shone in these analyses, continue to change. Nonetheless Chicago continues to be an ethnically diverse and also, to an important extent, a racially segregated urban area.” (1996: 47) Note here the use of the visually meaningful term “mosaic,” as opposed to neat concentric rings to enhance the factual description of demographic facts.

Compared to 1900, in 2000 the proportion of the total US population that is foreign-born is not nearly as great. In contrast to the simpler times and spaces of the past, the changing uses of urban spaces today gives the appearance to some that newer immigrant settlements follow no pattern whatsoever. It is more likely, however that the patterns are simply not seen as such. Many
of the most recent poor and working-class migrants to American cities are no longer found near the expected, stereotypical, places where jobs for newcomers were found in decades past because that “traditional” work is no longer done in those places. In addition, many of the historical areas of first settlement immigrant are concurrently being gentrified. Yet in order to find new immigrant and ethnic enclaves we still must take into account the same factors that have always been part of location formulas such as public transportation routes, proximity to work, rental rates, ethnic markets, and ethnic institutions.

Whether or not “globalization” “de-industrialization,” “post-industrialism,” and/or “post-Fordism” have produced Ronald Van Kempen and Peter Marcuse considered a “New Spatial Order” for the "Global City". They cautioned that no uniform pattern can be expected as “The functional, social, and cultural divisions we expect to find is one of consistent and general tendencies expressed in widely varying contexts, along widely varying lines, with widely varying results. “ (ABS. 1997: 293) And to those who are suggesting the decreasing value of the traditional “neighborhood” in the new city, they offer contemporary residential community forms in the ‘citadels of the rich,” gentrified areas, middle-class suburbs, tenement areas, ethnic enclaves, and what is to them a “new type” of ghetto. (4)

In a related way, Robert A. Beauregard and Anne Haila note that Postmodern urbanists tend to “…portray the contemporary city as fragmented, partitioned, and precarious, and as a result, less legible that its modernist precursor.” Discussing Modernist and Post Modernist, Fordist and Post-Fordist Cities they write that “No one would dispute that the city of the late 20th century differs spatially from the city of the early to mid-20th century. The multiple business centers, transformed waterfronts, gentrified neighborhoods, and hollowed-out zones of manufacturing distinguish the contemporary US city from its precursors.”(23) They conclude however that a distinctly “postmodern” city has not displaced the modern one despite a more complex patterning of old and new, and of continuing trends and new forces. Urban areas have always been changing in response to the entrance of “strangers.” The difference today is the rapidity and variety of that change which produce different kinds of segregation and different logics of location. Especially important is the uneven spatial competition that lower class immigrants face with more privileged members of society. Gentrification of areas which once offered good-paying blue collar jobs, industrial loft conversions for artists, and co-op and condo conversions of workingmen’s houses create inner city neighborhoods where visible indications of ethnicity are merely a part of the local “ambiance.”

For those who study the city there are two essential questions. The first is Descriptive: “Who or what is where in the city?” The second is Analytic: “How and why” they got there. The purely descriptive models of Classical Urban Ecology come from a biological analogy. In the city, equilibrium is expressed through the interaction of human nature with geographical and spatial factors producing “natural” areas. This view is seen by as ideologically conservative as others more to the left, see these same ecological zones as the result of “uneven development” or perhaps even planned cycles of decay and renewal. On a theoretical plane Sharon Zukin discusses two schools of thought about the urban environment. “One, identified with political economy, emphasizes investment shifts among different circuits of capital that transfer the ownership and uses of land from social class to another. Its basic terms are land, labor, and capital. The other school of thought, identified with the symbolic economy, focuses on the representations of social groups and
visual means of excluding or including them in public and private spaces. From this view, the endless negotiation of cultural meanings in built forms—in buildings, streets, parks, interiors—contributes to the construction of social identities.” (43) Zukin suggests using both to interpret landscapes of culture and power in the city.

Another tool for deciphering the complex metropolis is spatial semiotics, defined by Mark Gottdiener as "the study of culture which links symbols to objects," (1994: 15-16). A spatial semiotician would recognize that social and cultural meanings are attached to urban landscapes as well as to the people and activities observed on the scene. According to him the most basic concept for urban studies study is the settlement space which is both constructed and organized. Looking at an immigrant ethnic neighborhood in this way, as part of national and global systems, "It is 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."(16) Semiotic and sociospatial analysis makes it possible to see the most powerless of urban dwellers as a social “agent” in the local reproduction of regional, national, and global societal relations. In this regard, it is important to note that perceptions and valuations of residential neighborhood spaces, for example, may be significantly different for insiders as opposed to outsiders. For the casual passersby, foreign language shop signs are easily noticed, but understanding the meanings of the spaces they define requires sensitivity and understanding of the particular culture that creates, maintains, and uses the re-signified space.

Most of this work is framed in the terms of Henri Lefebvre’s “Spatial Practices” as presented by David Harvey. Harvey recognizes that those who have the power to command and produce space are therefore able to reproduce and enhance their own power. It is within the parameters outlined by these practices that the local lives of ordinary urban dwellers take place.

“Material social practices refer to the physical and material flows, transfers, and interactions that occur in and across space in such a way as to assure production and social reproduction.”

“Representations of space encompass all of the signs and significations, codes and knowledge, that allow such material practices to be talked about and understood, no matter whether in terms of everyday common sense or through the sometimes arcane jargon of the academic disciplines that deal with spatial practices.” “Spaces of representations are social inventions that seek to generate new meanings of possibilities for spatial practices.” Accessibility and distanciation speaks to the role of the “friction of distance’ in human affairs. Distance is both a barrier to and a defense against human interaction. It imposes transaction costs upon any system of production and reproduction.

“The appropriation of space examines the way in which space is used and occupied by individuals, classes, or other social groupings. Systematized and institutionalized appropriation may entail the production of territorially bounded forms of social solidarity.” “The domination of space reflects how individuals or powerful groups dominate the organization and production of space so as to exercise a greater degree of control either over the friction of distance or over the manner in which space is appropriated by themselves or others.” (1989: 261-64)

Why Vernacular Landscape?

The study of the vernacular landscape lends itself to both the new and old urban sciences. As a sociologist, I must admit that one can’t go further than John Brinckerhoff Jackson in
appreciating what "… lies underneath below the symbols of permanent power expressed in the "Political Landscape." (1984: 6) His perceptive work neatly complements Sociology’s interest in how and why groups are where they are in the city, and how space effects their social interactions and opportunities. According to Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz: “Jackson always asserted that to interpret landscapes accurately we must turn to the common places of ordinary people rather than to the rarefied designs of architects and planners.” … “The side of him that recognized his own ‘commonness’ insisted the landscape shaped by the needs and tastes of average working people was more important than that created by architects and planners. In this vein, he argued that we should consider the houses and places of work of the poor as well as the rich, of those on the margin as well as those at the center. In essays that others have criticized as being too accepting of contemporary blight, Jackson insisted that we are not rejecting the common landscape but seek to understand and love it.” (xxx-xxxi)

Jackson noted that what people do in a particular physical territory and how they use objects therein are critical for understanding the space. Writing about gentrification, and the displacement of the activities of the poor from the streets and city spaces in 18th and 19th century England, he noted that “in brief, much of the traditional play, popular with working class citizens, located at the center of town where the players lived and worded, was driven out, either by the shortage of space or by police decisions to improve traffic circulation and promote order (11). As to why the study of vernacular, as opposed to “polite,” architecture has become more valuable for insight into social history he argued that since the nineteenth century, “Innumerable new forms have evolved, not only in our public existence –such as the factory, the shopping center, the gas station, and so on—but in our private lives as well.” (118-19) Especially valuable for our purposes here, Jackson commented on the visual competition of commercial streets that he believed represented “a new and valid form of what can be called commercial vernacular.” (246) In the same way Dolores Hayden recognized the potential contribution of immigrant and ethnic vernacular urban landscapes for urban planners in helping to make city life more livable, equitable and at the same time visually interesting. (7)

Harvey is in synch with Jackson, and Hayden, when he writes that: “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.” (1989:265) For those lacking power (especially “low-income populations”) “the main way to dominate space is through continuous appropriation. Exchange values are scarce, and so the pursuit of use values for daily survival is central to social action. This means frequent material and interpersonal transactions and the formation of very small-scale communities. Within the community space, use values get shared through some mix of mutual aid and mutual predation, creating tight but often highly conflictual interpersonal social bonding in both private and public spaces. The result is an often intense attachment to place and “turf” and an exact sense of boundaries because it is only through active appropriation that control over space is assured.” (265-66)

For Puerto Rican residents of New York City, folklorist Joseph Sciorra provides a radical framework for the vernacular. “It is within this imposed economic, political and social marginality that poor people of color struggle to change the existing conditions in with they live by creating
spaces of their own design that serve as locations of resistance to a system of inequity and
domination.” (61) In the South Bronx, East Harlem, and the Lower East Side they “…clear the
detritus of urban decay to cultivate bountiful gardens and construct wood-frame structures typical
of the Caribbean. These transformed sites serve as shelter for the homeless, social clubs, block
associations, cultural centers, summer retreats and entrepreneurial ventures. The cultural production
of vernacular horticulture and architecture create local landscapes of empowerment that serve as
centers of community action where people engage in modes of expressivity that are alternatives to
those imposed from above by the dominant culture. In turn these concerted actions pose a direct
challenge to official notions pertaining to the status of public land and its future use. These
vernacular forms are united temporally and spatially with the historic dispossession of laboring
people by the forces of a global capitalist economy.” (1996: 61-62) My own more radical approach
recognizes the power of ordinary people to change the meaning of spaces and places merely by
being in them.

Visual Sociology

Anthony D. King (1996) speaks of cities as “text” to be read. Ethnic Vernacular
Landscapes are crucial, yet often ignored parts of that text. In basic agreement, Zukin noted the
emphasis and interest by urbanists has been on the geographic battles over access and
representations of the urban center. “Visual artifacts of material culture and political economy thus
reinforce – or comment on – social structure. By making social rules ‘legible’ they represent the
city.” (1966: 44) As a sign of decline for example, “In the long run vacant and undervalued space
is bound to recede into the vernacular landscapes of the powerless and replaced by a new landscape
of power.” (49) “In Henri Lefebvre’s framework, New York is an example of abstract space:
simultaneously homogeneous and fragmented, subordinated to the flows and networks of world
markets, and divided into units of exchange by real estate developers.” (50) “In this enigmatic text
immigrant shopping strips sometimes fare better than Madison Avenue and combative ethnic
groups maintain uneasy coexistence in Brooklyn neighborhoods.” (50)

Manuel Castells provides us with another view of how real and imagined urban spaces are
used, contested, and transformed by different social groups. For him power is information, and
networks of information or "Spaces of Flows" supercede "Spaces of Places". Along with this
comes the tribalization of local communities. As local identities lose meaning, place based societies
and cultures (cities, neighborhoods) also lose power. Castells proposes that this momentum toward
the total disempowerment of urban dwellers can be reversed by the reconstruction of place-based
meaning via social and spatial projects at cultural, economic, and political levels. Territorially
defined ethnic groups, for example, can preserve their identities and build on their historical roots
by the “symbolic marking of places”, preservation of “symbols of recognition”, and the

Visual attention to Vernacular Landscapes allows us to read conflict, competition, and
dominance at a level not usually analyzed. Just think of how more useful Lefebvre’s notions of
“accessibility” and “distanciation” become when we visualize discrimination in local housing
markets. How better to explain ethnic or class-based neighborhoods than when Harvey writes:
“Successful control presumes a power to exclude unwanted elements. Fine-tuned ethnic, religious,
racial, and status discriminations are frequently called into play within such a process of
community construction.” (266) Seeing other productions of Symbolic Capital, defined by Bourdieu as “The collection of luxury goods attesting to the taste and distinction of the owner.”, (1977: 188) might help us to understand the gentrification of immigrant ethnic enclaves during a later phase in the second circuit of capital when they become shabbily chic “in” places to live.

**What is Visual Sociology?**

Jon Prosser (1998) informs us that: “Over the last three decades qualitative researchers have given serious thought to using images with words to enhance understanding of the human condition. They encompass a wide range of forms including films, photographs, drawings, cartoons, graffiti, maps, diagrams, signs and symbols. Taken cumulatively images are signifiers of a culture; taken individually they are artefacts that provide us with very particular information about our existence. Images provide researchers with a different order of data, and, more importantly, an alternative to the way we have perceived data in the past.” (1) John Grady adds that Visual Sociology is an organized attempt to investigate “how sight and vision helps construct social organization and meaning and how images and imagery can both inform and be used to manage social relations.” Most valuable for us in studying vernacular urban landscapes is “how the techniques of producing and decoding images can be used to empirically investigate social organization, cultural meaning and psychological processes.” (14). In addition, Jon Rieger noted that among its many other advantages “Photography is well-suited to the study of social change because of its capacity to record a scene with far greater speed and completeness than could ever be accomplished by a human observer taking notes.” (1996: 6).

Given that rapidly changing metropolitan landscapes are often the venues for sociological reconnaissance of globalization and de-industrialization, Visual Sociology can be a valuable adjunct to “normal” urban research and reportage. For example, we can use photographic surveys in comparison with historic photographic archives to see and record how differing constructions of space and spatial practices the landscape of new immigrants transform the city. We can photograph, film, or video ethnic enclaves to both document and illustrate how particular spaces are changed by their new occupants. Of special interest might be the ways by which public areas are used. Visual methods make it easier to examine new construction, as well as the alterations of existing spaces.
Orthodox Balcony

The power of the visual is clearly demonstrated by Steven A Camarota. Noting stories of immigrant businesses revitalizing neighborhoods are a staple of local news coverage used by immigration advocates to show “…that immigrants infuse the country with an entrepreneurial spirit unmatched by natives” However data show that immigrants are not more likely to be self-employed than natives. People are more likely to encounter immigrant entrepreneurs than immigrant workers. “The immigrant restaurant owner who greets customers is much more likely to be remembered than are the immigrant cooks and dishwashers, whom the patron never sees.” And, “Most Americans have much more personal contact in their daily lives with self-employed immigrant street vendors or kiosk operators than with immigrant farm labors or construction workers. Since most people make generalizations based on their own experience, it is not surprising that they see immigrants as particularly entrepreneurial.” (2000)
As an aside to ethnic impressions created by commercial streets in immigrant neighborhoods, I note that many “Indian” restaurants in New York City are operated by Bangladeshis, as “Japanese” restaurants are run by Koreans, and “Mexican” eateries by other-than-Mexicans. In addition to the obvious décor and menu, the ethnic authenticity of the establishment rests on the visual competency of the patron vis a vis the staff. There is of course a special relevance of race (and racism) for the visualized spatial structure of cities—For most Americans, Blackness, Latinoness, Asianess, are generalized visual values that are partial explanations for why some areas look more “dangerous,” “inviting,” and/or at least “exotic.”
3. Chinese New Year

Brooklyn and the World

With a population of almost two and a half million people, Brooklyn is a huge social laboratory. It has always been a city of immigrants. During the 20th Century Brooklyn almost a third of its residents have been foreign-born. Most dramatic, and visible, and are the changes in racial composition of the population over the most recent decades. Since 1940, the non-Hispanic Black population in Brooklyn has grown from slightly over one-hundred-thousand to almost eight-hundred-thousand persons; or from four percent (4%) of the borough’s total population to thirty-five percent (35%). In broader racial terms, Brooklyn has gone from having a 96% white non-Hispanic majority to having a 40.1% white non-Hispanic minority. Along with these basic demographic changes have been significant shifts in immigration trends, especially in the last two recent decades, which have created an almost bewildering socio-cultural panorama.

As might be expected, immigrant and racial residential transitions are not uniform across the borough. In some sections of Brooklyn more than half of the population is foreign-born. Residential and commercial segregation by ethnic, racial, and/or religious groupings is common. Some neighborhoods are virtually all-white; others all-black. Brooklyn’s black population is large enough for it to be further segregated by nativity. In the borough one can find a variety of Afro-Caribbean as well as Afro-American neighborhoods. The greatest proportional increase, and most “visible,” has been the more than doubling of the “Asian” population. If we were able to include the estimates of the numbers of “undocumented” it might have trebled or even quadrupled. Although the Chinese, and Bangladeshis have produced the most striking changes, there is also a multiplication of Latinos on top of their already impressive base populations. Within the span of a decade large areas have taken on distinct new ethnic characters. The ethnic dimension was visible
long before the publication of Census 2000 announces the spectacular transformation to those who have not already witnessed it. As a paean to the New Urbanists, I note that the demographic shifts do not follow the “usual” historical patterns; slowly moving from the downtown center city outward and in their wake creating zones of transition. New immigrants appear to settle and move to specific parts of the borough, defying the Classical Ecology of place. In some cases immigrant communities leap frog each other as if directed by unseen, but understandable, forces. An important case in point was the “sudden” emergence of a Russian enclave in Brighton Beach. Since 1940 minority groups moved southward in Brooklyn, filling in the housing vacuum left by exiting (sometimes fleeing) white European middle-class families. A half-century old densely over-built residential area, Brighton Beach had been projected by housing experts to become a low-income black and Hispanic community.

4. Brighton Beach

It would be erroneous to assume that the ethnic transformation of Brooklyn’s urban landscape is essentially the consequence of more or less radical changes in immigration law, international labor migrations, or simply international transportation and communication technologies. The Pre- and Post-Duvalier chaos in Haiti, Civil Wars in Central America and West Africa, the Rescue of Soviet Jews and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Polish Solidarity Movement, and the change-over of Hong Kong from British to People’ Republic sovereignty are just some of the global events which have helped fill once residentially marginal spaces.
Visualizing the “Not So New” Spatial Order in Brooklyn

Global political and economic restructuring has resulted in increasing and diversifying forms of labor and capital mobility. In response, Curtis C. Roseman, Hans Dieter Laux, and Guenter Thieme have identified five general types of major migration systems help to understand the emergence of “EthniCities”: internal migration; regional international migration; global migration; illegal migration; and refugee migration all of which can be “seen” or are “legible” in Brooklyn. (1996: xviii) Although Marcuse and van Kamp saw no single new spatial order for what they term the “Globalized City” they noted some varied patterns and common trends which also might inform our discussion here: strengthened structural spatial division among quarters of the city; quarters of those excluded from the globalizing economy; increasing walling among the quarters; increased totalization of life within each quarter; and continuing formation of immigrant enclaves of lower-paid workers both within and outside the global economy. (271)
In addition, John Logan argued that the impact of the de-industrialization, global financial, transnational linkages, and service industries of the 70s and 80s on New York’s occupational structure has been “minor” and that what is seen today is substantially an outgrowth of old patterns. His central thesis is that “… key features of inequality in New York are traceable not so much to the city’s new function in the world economy as to the continuing and expanding function as a receptor of peoples..” (2000: 159-60). As to Residential Segregation, Logan compared the present to 1920 and finds much higher levels of segregation between Europeans and non-Europeans, and Blacks from whites. Separation between Puerto Ricans and whites is still about the same. In addition, Afro-Caribbean’s and Dominicans even more highly segregated from whites than either Blacks or Puerto Ricans. Interestingly, Asian segregation from whites is the least. Minorities are also highly segregated form each other. “These unique identities of these national origin ethnic groups are clearly preserved and reflected in urban space. These results taken together undercut the viability of interpreting New York along a simple white-non-white dimension. “ (178)

There are many parts of Brooklyn which belie any “simple dimension.” One of the best is Kensington a neighborhood shared most remarkably by Moslems, and Orthodox Jews, Middle Easterners, Bangladeshis, Russians, and residual European “white ethnics.” There within walking distance of each other can be see mosques, synagogues, shuls, mikvahs, male-only Sweet Shops, as well as Halal and Kosher butcher shops. The competition for dominance of the area is demonstrated in the constantly changing panorama of national colors, flags, foreign language signs, and religious symbols along the main commercial strip of the neighborhood. Another contested marketplace is the busy intersection of Flatbush and Church Avenues, which was centuries ago was the center of the Dutch town of Flatbush. Today is a busily diverse Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean “downtown” shopping center replete with car and van services competing for passengers, and a myriad of colorful street vendors surrounded by jostling, bargaining patrons.
Some semiotics are obvious, while other signs are much more cryptic. In the center of Brooklyn’s new Chinatown is a “Lute Fisk” sign in a run-down storefront window. It is one of the last traces of “Scandinavian” Bay Ridge. Nearby, on the border of Borough Park, an international center for Orthodox Jewry, one comes across a Agencja sign in a corner office window which recruits the Polish women who are “preferred” for Orthodox Jewish household work. At busy intersections on the edges of declining industrial areas in Brooklyn one can easily spot the ethnically segregated informal male labor markets—Bengaladesis here, Poles there, and Mexicans in yet another place. Well-developed ethnic neighborhoods also have their “own” car services—Acapulco, Carmel, and Tel Aviv are a few more or less obvious examples. Finally, in most enclaves one finds at least one local shipping, phone, and wire-services business, for sending goods, messages, and of course remittances to families “back home.” The language of the storefront sign is a general clue, and the specially advertised destinations a more specific indicator of places of origin for community residents.
Ethnic enclaves are products as well as sources of both social and cultural capital. When immigrants alter the territory allowed to them, they simultaneously become part of the transformed urban landscape. The images they create eventually come to represent them and in the process and they lose their autonomy. In some cases the enclave comes to symbolize its imagined inhabitants and is also commodified. For example for the delight of tourists, the expropriated cultural capital of Caribbeans, and Italians are turned into “Ethnic Theme Parks” (Krase, 1997) like the West Indian Day Carnival Parade in Crown Heights, and a festa in Bensonhurst’s Little Italy (Photo 8: Festa). Visual study can show how what I have termed “Traces of Home” (1993) and Lefebvre’s “material spatial practices”, are transformed via “representations of space” into “spaces of representation”.

Summary

Theoreticians and practitioners in the field of urban sociology are faced with a wide range of apparently competing theories and methods for describing and analyzing the post-modern metropolitan urban scene. Because the main focus in urban studies is “space”, explaining how these actual and virtual spaces are used, contested, and transformed by different social groups is a crucial task. All the “urban” disciplines use visual approaches more or less explicitly whether through mapping, architectural rendering, photographic surveys, or land use and building condition surveys. In architecture and planning the visual has always been important in documentation, presentation, research and teaching. Historical photographic archives are used in the processes of Historical Landmark research, restoration, and preservation. “Windshield” surveys, conducted with eyes, cameras, and camcorders have a long tradition in urban studies.

In most cases visual techniques are used in qualitative, or descriptive studies. It can be
argued that generalizations can also be made from visual surveys and employed in hypothesis testing. The simplest types of analytic studies would be longitudinal studies of physical changes as a consequence of specified variables. In any case the method used and the link between the evidence presented in “before and after” photographs for example would have to be quite explicit. At the least, as a purely qualitative method, such research ought to produce delightful insights even if of limited generalizability. My own procedure has been to treat observations and photographs as I do other information, such as interviews, or demographic data which are specific to areas, neighborhoods, streets, organizational boundaries, and census tracts. I should note here that my snap shots attempt to be as close as I can get to what an ordinary person might see as they traverse a space. They are not attempts at artist representation, but are intended to document visual surveys.

In addition to the general utility of this visual approach as, there are I believe distinct advantages of documented visual surveys for social research, urban planning, as well as informing policy makers. Findings from visual surveys can differ significantly from census or other published data. In addition to the general enumeration taking place only every ten years, Census and other data may not be as up to date as needed when dealing with ethnically, racially, or culturally sensitive issues. Much published data tend also not to be specific to the smaller pieces of territory that one might study such as a single intersection or cluster of buildings. As one moves to the block level in Census data, for example, the categories become less meaningful. Not only doesn’t official immigration data accurately show, or locate, the undocumented, most data is reported by Zip Code for registration of resident aliens. In my experience the visible presence of the undocumented is considerable in certain areas, as are the homeless, and other “statistically invisible” populations. We can add to this the simple observations of illegal business and other activities that can be made in these same places, and which contradict official portraits.

Finally, in some cases seeing is the only way of knowing. Ethnic groups can be quite concentrated in small “pockets” but because of the geography of census, or other maps, the numbers can be shared between two or more units. In a related vein, on the basis of published data and casual observation, substantial residential concentrations of ethnic groups can be missed. It is common for people to falsely assume the ethnic character of a neighborhood by reading the symbolic environment of its commercial streets. Such was the case of Brooklyn’s Eight Avenue in Sunset Park. Even though Chinese dominated the residential scene for at least a decade it became a virtual “Chinatown” only after the stores on the commercial strip announced their hegemony. Ironically, whereas at first the Chinese were invisible in Sunset Park, other Asians (Burmese, Cambodian, Korean, Laotian Pakistani, Turkish, and Vietnamese) who share some of the territory with them now merely blend into the background. Similarly, in the year 2000 there are well over a half a million Latinos in Brooklyn. Seeing “differences” among Spanish-speaking people from let us say Mexico and The Dominican Republic in the barrios they share can be as easy as deciphering Productos Mexicanos from Productos Dominicanos. Recognizing the national flags, cultural emblems, and religious effigies such as those of La Vergine de Guadalupe are more challenging. Most difficult is noting the variations of native dress worn by the newest arrivals to the neighborhood.
References


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