



Creative Dissonance: Performance of Ethnicity in Banal Spaces

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Abstract

This article analyzes material culture and spatial behavior of storeowners and customers in two South Asian grocery stores in Berkeley, CA in order to argue that the social construction of ethnicity is often inflected by the social and spatial circumstances of individuals and groups who interact inside these places. Order and clutter within these stores are put forth as embodied forms of spatial knowledge that influence the way individuals experience and reproduce peoplehood. Certain communicative and representational ways-of-being in this world—like theatrical performances—frame such experiences. The knowledge of South Asian-ness produced as a result of operating within the immigrant cultural landscape can be varied. In order to decipher such spatial orders, this article draws on data from participant observation and interviews with storeowners and customers, as well as spatial and material culture analyses of the two South Asian grocery stores.

Immigrant world-making among South Asian Indian immigrants is an infinitely reproducible and malleable process. Its flexibility lies in the way individuals and groups originating from distant geographies, set in different locations, belonging to diverse religions, races, classes, and social groups can participate. The immigrant world-making process is spatial—it is associated with ways individuals recreate “place” by engaging with the

everyday built environment both cognitively and corporeally. My reference to South Asian immigrant place-making doesn't refer to purpose-built edifices designed for singular community use. A miniscule number of examples of new temples and community buildings may fall under that category, but a majority of South Asian immigrant places are reused and adapted environments where multiple social constituencies and stakeholders within and outside the immigrant community come in contact with each other. The majority of these spaces are not built or designed by architects; many of them are shells of older buildings. Immigrant place-making in this context involves small acts such as the manipulation of material culture, employment of spatial metaphors to create a certain sense of place and reproduce commonly shared meanings, and the deployment of objects and images to create distinction and attract attention. Repeated interactions, recurring practices, and implied behavior in these locations reproduce narratives of belonging and engender a sense of peoplehood. These spaces are embodied, literally inscribed into our bodies and minds, through daily practice.

[2] This article argues that order and clutter are embodied spatial knowledge reproduced in immigrant spaces. This spatial knowledge influences the way individuals learn, experience, and reproduce community and peoplehood. Certain communicative and representational ways-of-being

in this world—like theatrical performances—frame immigrant world-making, thereby allowing different kinds of people to make sense of their experiential environments. Since different individuals move differently through any given space, the knowledge of Indianness produced as a result of operating within the immigrant cultural landscape can be varied. Experiencing and deciphering spatial order are haptic acts. The social production of Indianness is therefore mediated by an individual's haptic engagement with the built environment in a given context.ⁱ

The Two Grocery Stores

The case studies discussed in this paper are two ethnic grocery stores located in the city of Berkeley near San Francisco. These stores were among the first four Indian stores that opened along University Avenue during the 1970s. University Avenue is a major east-west artery running through the city and connecting downtown and the University of California to Interstate 80.

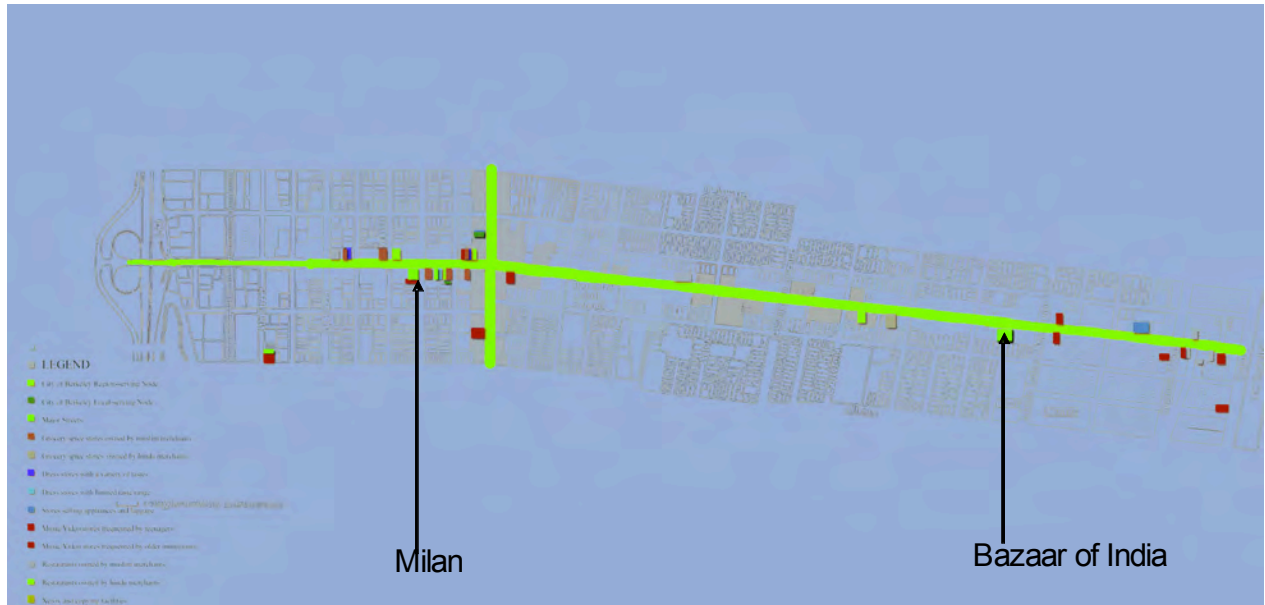


Figure 1: Map of South Asian stores on University Avenue, Berkeley

Retail stores owned by South Asians are not concentrated in one location but spread across the length of University Avenue, Berkeley.

Map by Arijit Sen

Click for larger image:

<http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/images/arijitsen1lrg.jpg>

[4] Traffic originating from San Francisco, South Bay's Silicon Valley, and Northern California's coastal and agricultural communities enters the city via this thoroughfare. The eastern end of the street culminates at the border of the campus of the University of California. A few blocks before it ends, the street cuts through the small downtown and middle-class residential neighborhoods of Berkeley.

[5] The two stores we will examine are located on the two ends of this street. The store located on the western end, on the corner of University and Tenth, is called Milan International while the one located on the eastern end,

at 1810 University Avenue, is called Bazaar of India. Today, interspersed along this street one finds more South Asian Indian-owned stores. Certain sections of the western end of University Avenue have so many ethnic Indian stores that media reports have named it the Sari Street (Cooper; Sen "Ethnicity in the City").



Figure 2: University Avenue seen as Sari Street by local media

J. E. Cooper, "Sari-Street: University Avenue Offers Arcade of Indian Shops," *The Daily Californian*, 27 (August 1986), pp. 1,3.

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<http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/images/arijitsen2lrg.jpg>

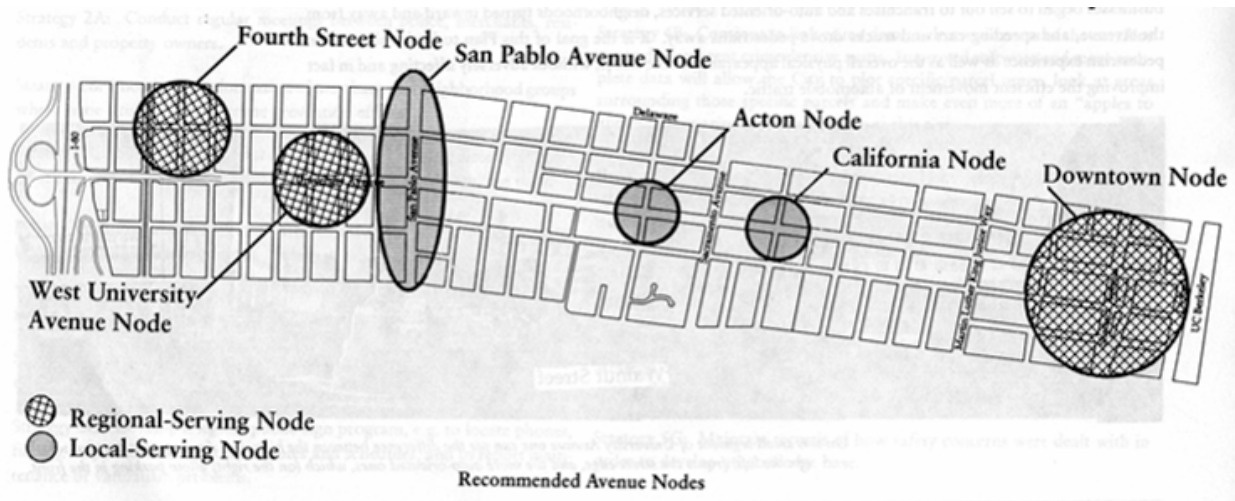


Figure 3: West University Avenue node defined as regional serving node due to the existence of ethnic stores in the West Berkeley Development Plan

Berkeley. City of Berkeley Planning Commission. *University Avenue Strategic Development Draft Plan*. By Calthorpe Associates with Bay Area Economics. June 1996.

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[6] The two stores examined here appear very similar, both in the look of the interiors and the sensorial ambience. Both are categorized as ethnic grocery stores in immigrant enterprise literature as well as by the City of Berkeley's Permits Office ("Berkeley International Food Festival") (see Figure 3). However, on closer inspection we will find that the two stores display subtle differences often invisible to an outsider but nevertheless clear enough to encourage targeted clientele and discourage others. This paper will show that the two stores are quite distinct in the way they are experienced by users. These distinctions are reproduced through layout,

merchandise, and behavior of customers. The experiences lend to the way the two grocery stores produce very different knowledge about an Indian grocery store and, by extension, about immigrant culture. These differences are not happenstance, rather they indicate real divisions in the way South Asian Indians reproduce Indian ethnicity and identity in the United States and in how intentional business strategies are employed by the two storeowners. This article will explore how the owner of Bazaar of India, located on the eastern end of the street, draws middle-class and skilled immigrants, Anglo Americans, and local Berkeley customers, whereas the owner of Milan International uses similar spatial strategies to invite customers from a more diverse background from an extended geography.

[7] Neither building is representative of any stylistic, formal, or technological innovation. Their banal architecture may seem uninteresting to the connoisseur. Yet these are the very places where immigrants spend a large percentage of their time. These are contact zones where immigrants encounter each other and people from other ethnic groups. What makes the two stores extraordinary—and worthy of analysis—are the innovative and creative ways by which the storeowners organize their stores, the clever manipulation of merchandise and material culture, the processional experience of the interiors, and the carefully designed visual iconography on the storefronts. The stores are of great value if we consider their relevance

and importance to the daily lives of different social stakeholders and groups within the immigrant community. Finally, the stores are of great significance if, instead of seeing these spaces as inert physical “containers,” we conceive of them as perfect stages where multiple performances of ethnicity and belonging are enacted.ⁱⁱ

[8] For South Asian immigrants, grocery stores are important places. Families typically visit these stores at least once a month in order to pick up the necessary produce and spices not available in mainstream food outlets. As a result, South Asian grocery stores appear everywhere one finds a concentration of immigrants—in ethnic enclaves, in suburban strip malls, along mixed-use streets, and even in shopping centers where neighboring businesses are not ethnic. Immigrants from nearby as well as those living in far-off suburban and ex-urban neighborhoods drive to these grocery stores, especially on weekends. To attract customers from far-off locations and to be easily identifiable from the street, South Asian Indian grocery store owners display large and multiple signs with their names and merchandise listed on it.ⁱⁱⁱ They use stereotypical names taken from a familiar lexicon (Bazaar of India, Gandhi Market, and Bombay Bazaar). In a competitive market characterized by high turnover, where businesses come and go, survival is an art and the ethnic grocery store owners described in this article excel at it.

[9] Both stores have used names and interior arrangements that refer to the exotic and sensorial complexity of an Indian marketplace. The name Bazaar of India evokes an image of the Indian marketplace prevalent in the American collective memory and appeals to local non-South Asian (mostly Anglo) Americans. In contrast, the name Milan resonates with a more diverse cross-section of Americans. The word "milan" means "gathering" in Sanskrit-based languages. This name is very common in India, but to those Americans who are not familiar with India and Indian languages, this name can be easily confused with the Italian city of that name. This clever play on words generates different kinds of customers by appealing to their unique tastes and expectations. Therefore, unlike owner Kirpal Khanna's use of the word "bazaar" to entice out-group customers, Milan International's owner Hari Parmar uses the word "milan" to bring in both out-group and in-group shoppers.



Bazaar of India



Milan Groceries



Figure 4: Bazaar of India and Milan, two South Asian grocery stores located at opposite ends of University Avenue

Photo: Arijit Sen

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[10] **Bazaar of India**, located near downtown Berkeley, was the second Indian store to open on this street.^{iv} Khanna had entered the United States as a student of business administration at the University of California, Berkeley. As a student, he lodged with other students and commuted from the neighboring city of Alameda. It was then that he realized the existence

of a market niche for ethnic stores where Indian immigrants could buy vegetables, spices, and cooking ingredients for their unique culinary practices. After graduation, Khanna worked at Paine Webber for a short time, and like other immigrants of the time, he discovered that the easiest way to improve his economic condition and assimilate into American society was by investing in a small business venture.^v

[11] In 1975 Khanna rented a store at 1331 University Avenue and started his grocery and spice store. This store was located on the western end of the street, three blocks east of San Pablo Avenue. Rent on the West Berkeley side of University Avenue was low. Other minority immigrant businesses, laundries, and low-income residences dotted this neighborhood.^{vi} By 1980 this nascent grocery business had prospered and Khanna bought land at 1810 University Avenue, near downtown Berkeley. In 1981, when Khanna moved his business from the old location, he acquired loans from local banks to start businesses in the new location. Moving into this prime location—five blocks east of the earlier location, three blocks away from the University of California campus, and two blocks east of downtown Berkeley—was a social step-up for Khanna.

[12] Bazaar of India, despite being known as a grocery store, is in reality more like a department store. Today one finds books, groceries, music CDs,

clothing, and furniture sold here. A distribution business and a convenience store are located under one roof. The building ultimately came to consist of three adjacent structures, each with their own entrances. The new building was made of two independent adjacent stores. Khanna occupied the eastern section of 1810 University Avenue with the cusped arch entrance while the western part of the store was rented out to an Indian jewelry store called Bombay Jewelry Company. In 1990, Bombay Jewelry owner Maulin Choksi moved out of the western building. The extra space returned to Khanna and he used it for storage until 1995 when he restructured his business and located the bookstore in this space (City of Berkeley). The adjoining building to the east housed an automobile repair business. In 1997 Khanna bought this building and expanded his herbal remedies and Ayurvedic care products business on the premises. As a result of this acquisition, Khanna had three entrances to three different sections of his store.

[13] Khanna decided that he would create a singular entrance. He blocked off the entrance of the old jewelry store—now a bookstore—with an engraved shrine set against the door. He retained the rolling shutter and small doorway of the old repair shop as a delivery and office entrance but kept it closed during business hours. He added a series of blue awnings in order to unify the façade and continued to use the main entrance (with the arched entry) as the sole door into Bazaar of India.



Figure 5: Entrance view of Bazaar of India

Photo: Arijit Sen

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<http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/images/arijitsen5lrg.jpg>

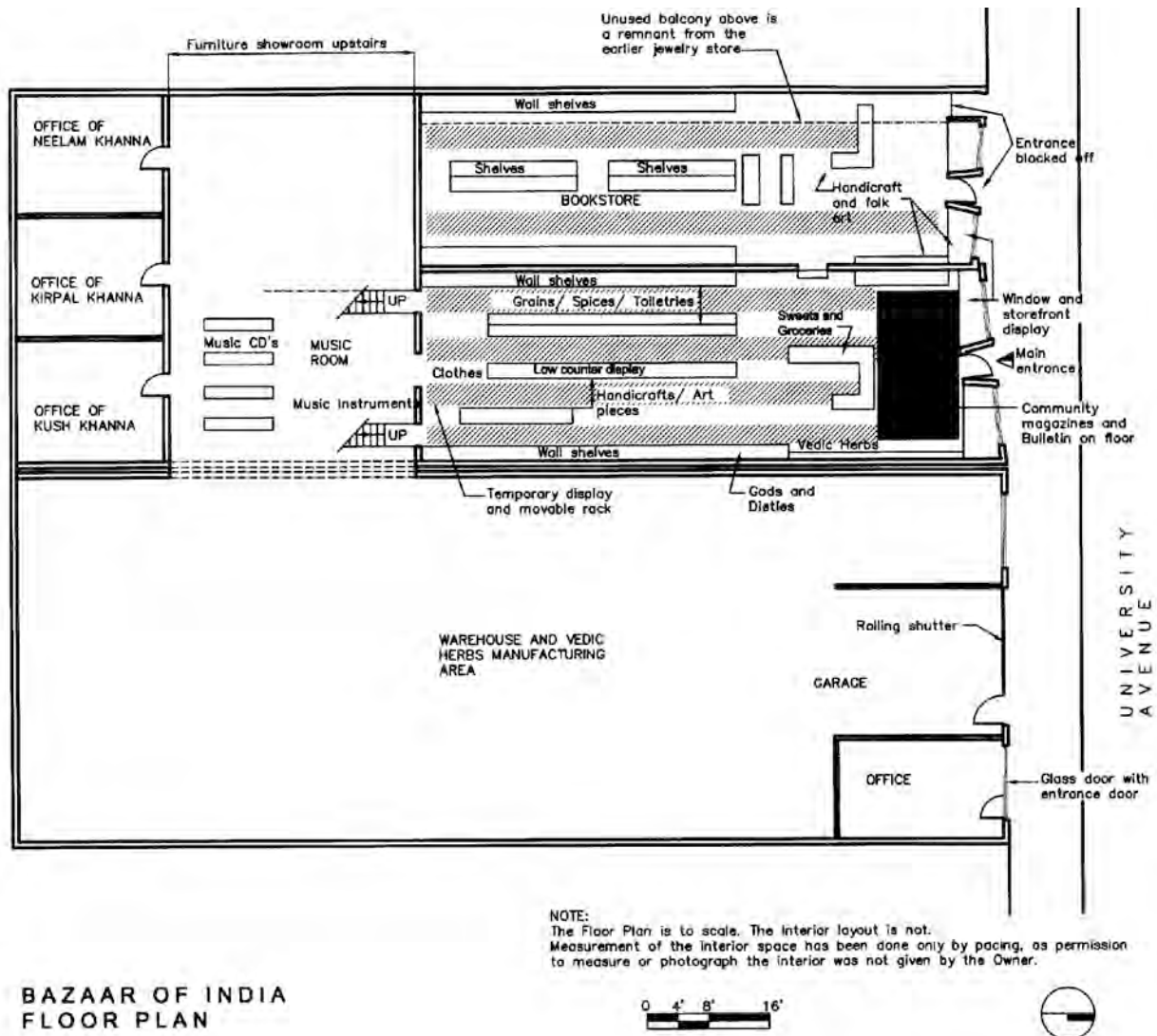


Figure 6: Interior store layout of Bazaar of India, Berkeley

In Bazaar of India, the transaction/checkout counter is located at the entrance in line with the central doorway. The shaded band depicts a transitional space between the entrance and the sales counter. The hatched bands are circulation aisles. The spatial experience is sequential and linear as one enters the front area, crosses the counters, walks down the aisles, and then reaches the back room.

Drawing by Arijit Sen

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<http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/images/arijitsen6lrg.jpg>

[14] The blue awnings together with blue trimmings along the building roof unite the disparate façades, many entrances, and structural bays to emphasize the central entrance door as the primary point of access. These actions, seen in isolation, may seem unimportant. But as we shall see later, the retention of a singular ceremonial entrance produced a processional sequence of spaces that not only channeled the experience of customers but also related the store to the street in a very formal manner.

[15] The central entrance sports a cusped archway. Unlike other ethnic stores on this street, Bazaar was originally designed by a local architect named William Coburn. Like many residents of Berkeley during the seventies, Coburn was interested in Indian culture, architecture, and religion. The arch on the main entrance speaks of Coburn's fascination for the Oriental. Khanna explains, "so when we built this building—at that time—we decided that we should have some Indian architecture and the architect is Mr. Coburn, William Coburn, and he had been to India and he said, 'I want to design.' So he designed and so that the front façade looks like Indian." The arched façade of Bazaar reproduces a very formal, controlled, and structured relationship to the public street that continues into the store interior.



Figure 7: Bazaar of India entrance arch and window display

Photo: Arijit Sen

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Figure 8: Bazaar of India handicrafts and religious artifacts window display

Photo: Arijit Sen

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[16] The merchandise displayed in the storefront is eclectic too. The display gives the potential customer a glimpse into the exotic wares inside the store—folk art, Indian handicrafts, books from and about India, statuettes and carvings, and musical instruments. How one experiences the store from the sidewalk is an important concern for the storeowner. Many of his customers are Berkeley residents, potential Anglo customers who get drawn in by the promise of an exotic experience (Karen Walter qtd. in Bowman EB1-2; Bowman; Lim; Cooper). The storefront window display is designed to entice these consumers, many of whom may be impulse buyers. As a potential customer stands in front of the store window, she sees handicrafts, religious statues, and books on Indian (and Hindu) culture. In short, the first look at the store is less about groceries and more about cultural uniqueness.

[17] This strategy of re-evoking the ambience of eastern architecture in order to invite a very specific clientele—curious Americans—into his store

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gives us a glimpse into Khanna's business principle: "people come from all phases of life [to our store]. Some are professors, some are engineers, some people like you. ... We get a lot of young Indians from Cyberbase [sic] ... Sybase ... Sybase and other company [skilled professionals]. ... We don't expect too many Indians because they haggle. ...This [shopping experience in Bazaar] is just like going to American store. We get lot of Americans [by that he means non-ethnic Indian customers] who don't go there [other Indian stores]."^{vii}

[18] Over the years Khanna has devised ways to actively discourage the haggling immigrant and encourage those he regards as professional, skilled clients. He does that through order, surveillance, and store layout: "I had done marketing and then we also go and look at other stores. ... I always go to Safeway and Lucky and I use their method of marketing."^{viii} The carefully planned interior of Bazaar, laid out in what he calls an "efficient manner", produces a linear, formalized, and choreographed sequence of spaces. The transitional vestibule contains free ethnic literary magazines, community news, and community business directories. Immediately after this transition zone one approaches the counter. Incense from the counter gives a hint of the interior ambience even before you have set foot into the store.

[19] Khanna explains his decision to place a non-Indian store clerk at the counter as a way to discourage any attempts by Asian Indian shoppers to fraternize or haggle. The watchful eyes of the clerk intimidate many customers—especially working-class immigrants. The smell of the incense transports the targeted Anglo visitor into what one described as “another world”—part of a carefully crafted exotic realm (Bowman; Cooper). Sights and smells engage different constituencies with different messages.

[20] After crossing the counter zone, the shopper is channeled through ordered parallel aisles of merchandise neatly labeled with prices and organized by categories—or in the owner’s words “a layout like Safeway and Nordstrom.” By that Khanna means the neat order of merchandise display seen in mainstream grocery and department stores. The merchandise in Bazaar of India is laid out in categories along aisles. The shopper is directed by the signs. The food section is against the west wall, the herbal remedy section on the eastern wall along the entrance, the handicraft and decorative object section in the middle aisles, and the clothing section on the back wall.

[21] The distinct front and back zones of this layout, a product of the long narrow rectangular interior space, is further articulated by an additional party wall portal with a sign separating a back music room from the rest of

the store. In the same location, stairs lead up to the mezzanine level. Here the customer finds the furniture displays.

[22] There used to be a restaurant on the mezzanine level. He closed the restaurant in 1997-98 when he restructured his business and converted this space into a furniture store. The bookstore area to the right (west) is separated by steps. The books are categorized by subject: spirituality, literature, travel, children's, and art. A customer encounters the travel books as soon as she steps into this room, the religion and metaphysics section soon catches her attention, and finally she discovers books on Indian/Hindu culture and religion written for younger readers. The cookbooks are clearly written for a western audience, cooking procedures are simplified, and pungency and spiciness of the recipes are reduced. The three-step drop between the floor of the main store and the bookstore, a remnant from earlier use, becomes a place to sit and browse. The customers who venture into these back sections constitute a small, well-knit group of local musicians, focused furniture buyers, or book enthusiasts—not the everyday grocery shoppers. The atmosphere in the music room is more relaxed and informal. Here a customer encounters the owner since his office is located at the back.

[23] The ordered layout of the store serves multiple functions. For the western audience, the architecture, layout, and store experience organizes the unknown and the exotic in ways that are comprehensible. To the immigrants, the order is sterile and foreign even though the space is vaguely familiar. In 1997, an Anglo columnist in the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote about Indian stores in the region: "Once a visitor steps into an Indian store, the world outside slips away. ... In many shops the air is thick with incense and filled with the music of several languages" (Bowman EB: 1-2). Another Anglo shopper in Bazaar of India explains, "Everything in America is so commercial. ... You feel a spirit in here—the spirit of the people who made this" (Walter qtd. in Bowman EB:1-2).^{ix} But to an Indian shopper, the same ambience seemed a bit too ordered: "Bazaar of India has lots of things but it doesn't seem so cluttered. In a way ... it has cleanliness about it" (Interview with C/St997).^x

[24] **Milan International** (990 University Avenue) is located at the western end of University Avenue, close to the access ramp off Interstate 80. Around 1975, the Parmar brothers, who came from Africa, opened the first Indian grocery store on the western end of University Avenue. They came from a business family and unlike Khanna didn't get a business degree. Instead the Parmars learned their trade as apprentices in their family business. Their store became very popular in 1984, following a large

influx of immigrants of South Asian ancestry in the Bay Area. Business took off as a burgeoning population of South Asian customers from the Bay Area drove to Berkeley to shop.^{xi}

[25] Most of the customers in Milan are out-of-city immigrant families who drive from surrounding cities into Berkeley on weekends. Its location at the western end of University Avenue ensures proximity to the freeway exit. A neighboring storeowner described a cluster of stores around Milan as an “outdoor mall” and a “one-stop shopping experience” (Interview with D/Sk996).^{xii}

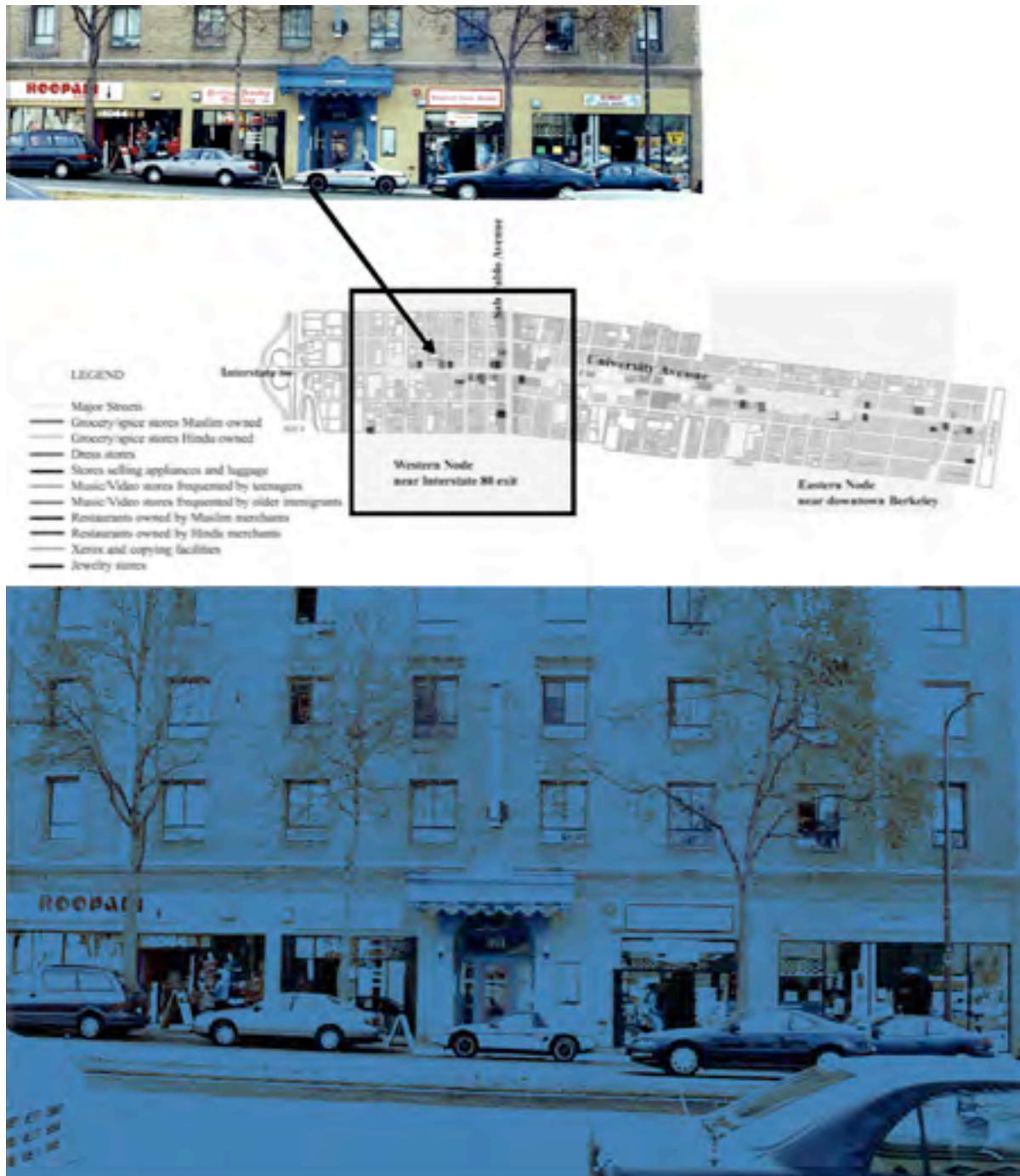


Figure 9: Deepak Ajmani, local storeowner, called the concentration of ethnic stores in the vicinity of Milan a “one-stop shopping” experience

Photo: Arijit Sen

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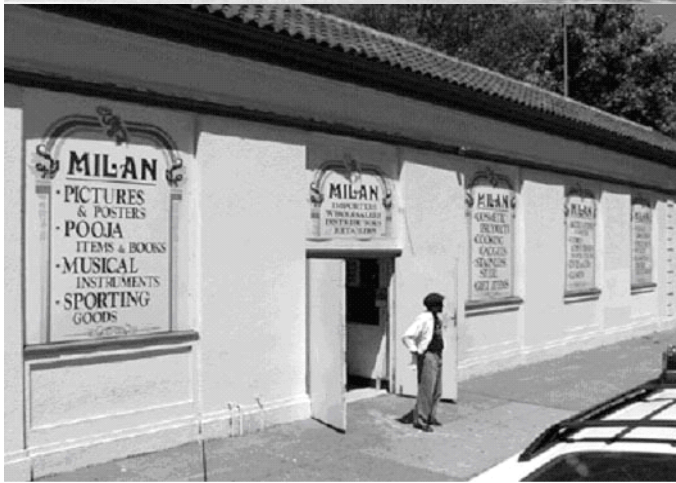
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[26] Unlike the patrons of Bazaar, the customers at Milan are individuals who come from diverse ethnic, national, class, educational, religious, and regional backgrounds. Cab drivers from Emeryville, farm workers and agriculturists from Yuba City, restaurateurs from Northern California, professionals from South Bay and North Bay, Middle Eastern clients, South East Asians, nouveaux riches, working-class immigrants, Anglo and African Americans, and students are some who shop in Milan.

[27] In Milan one will neither find the formal spatial choreography between the interior and the sidewalk as in Bazaar of India nor the neatly separated functional zones. While the Bazaar of India façade allows the potential customer on the sidewalk to browse and window-shop before deciding to enter the store, the Milan façade addresses those customers in automobiles by transforming the entire building (its walls, paintings on the wall, the large windows with posters taped to them) into a giant signpost.



Milan North Façade along University Avenue



Milan east façade along Ninth Street. Entrance facade

Figure 10: Façade view of Milan with signage

Photo: Arijit Sen

Click for larger image:

<http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/images/arijitsen10lrg.jpg>

[28] Milan's façade wall is painted, like a billboard, with the store name and a list of merchandise painted on the east wall. Like Bazaar, the entrance arch appears at Milan too, but in this case it is painted onto the wall. The merchandise list contains grocery items, daily necessities, kitchen and cooking utensils, and objects used in religious rituals. On a careful reading of this list we find that words such as "Pooja Items" refer to Hindu religious

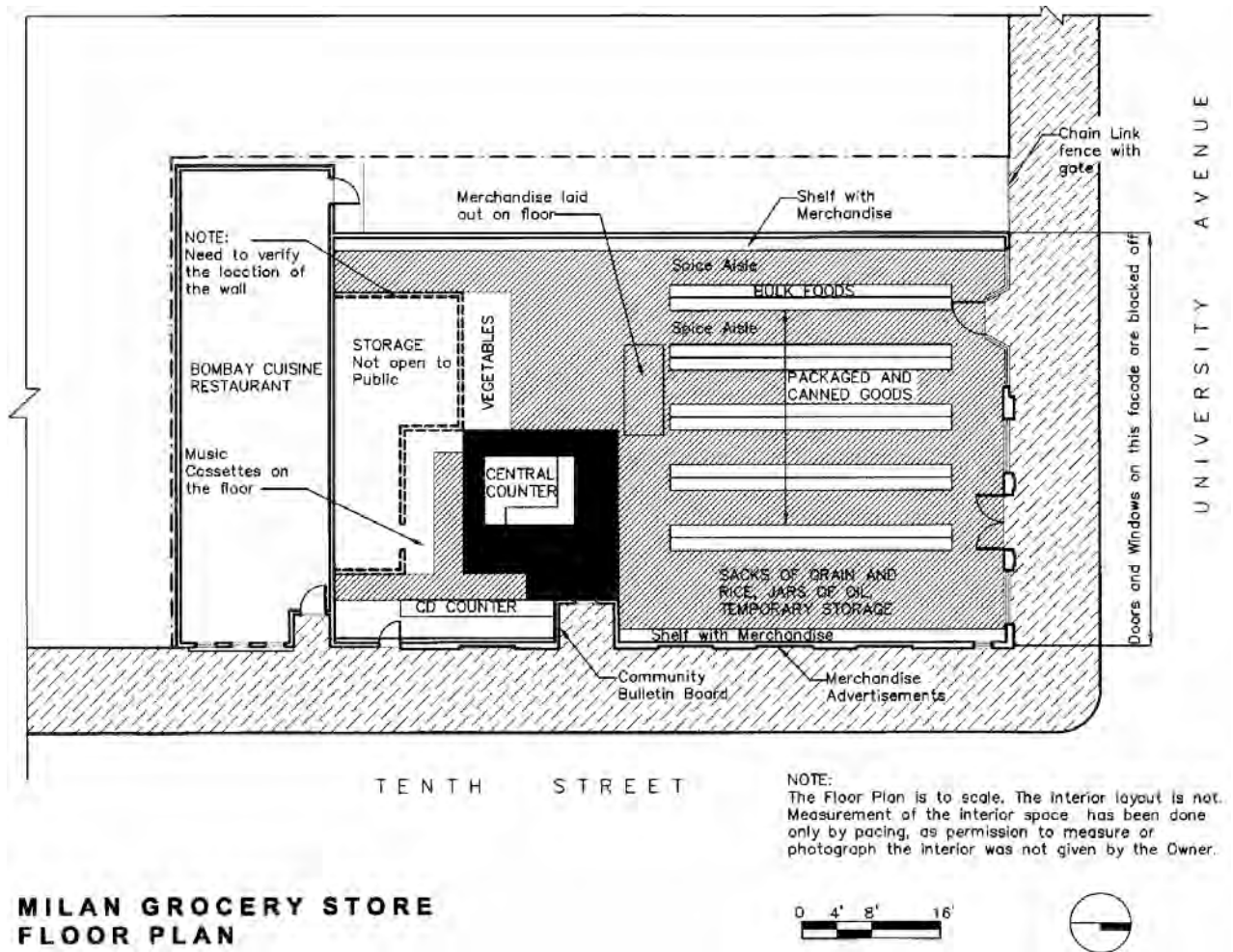
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accoutrements—a subtle sign that is understood by those who are looking for a store carrying certain prayer items and with similar religious affiliation.^{xiii} Thus the storefront material culture—both the large hyper visible signs and the subtly encoded messages—appeals to sub-groups within the ethnic community.

[29] Access, both visual and physical, is limited and the customer sees the merchandise in the store only when she enters through the small and unobtrusive doors on Ninth Street. As a customer enters the store she crosses into a dark and cavernous vestibule that serves as a transitional and community display space with ethnic language magazines and advertisements. Most customers slow down in this space as their eyes adjust to the change in light levels and their ears pick up the cacophony of voices from the interiors.



**MILAN GROCERY STORE
FLOOR PLAN**

0 4' 8' 16'



Figure 11: Interior store layout of Milan, Berkeley

Except for the clearly marked centralized check out counter island, the interior of Milan lacks a strict spatial hierarchy. How the interior works depends on the nature of the users in the store. The shaded band denotes the transitional area between the entrance door and the checkout counter. The circulation aisles are hatched.

Drawing by Arijit Sen

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[30] The noise comes from the central checkout counter, the pivot around which the rest of the store is arranged. Storeowners, clerks, and familiar customers crowd around the central counter area. This is also a point from

where the owners keep an eye on what is going on inside the store. Lacking the formal choreography of Bazaar, customers freely wander in any direction. As soon as the clerk spots an unfamiliar face, an uncomfortable Anglo newcomer, or a suspicious browser, he moves out of the central counter area, persistently following the customer around the store. When a familiar face enters the store, the panoptical view takes on a courtyard-like arrangement. Therefore, at any instant the same interior space can transform from a backslapping back zone into a front region policed and watched by the store hands. A customer, aware of being followed, writes in a popular website, "I am a true fan of this store. I love all the spice bins and exotic things they sell at the store. I don't care for the Mexican guys [sic] who follow you around all the time watching you shop. I was just in there yesterday and these guys were not there, good. ..." (Rabi'a M.). This customer comes for the unique, exotic, and cluttered ambience of this store, despite the obvious surveillance.

[31] The interiors of Milan have changed minimally since the store opened. Unlike Bazaar, merchandise has been rarely moved around. The restaurant next door remains exactly the same since the time it opened. Rather what changes in Milan are people's behavior and the human experience of being-in-space. In contrast to the linear processional layout of Bazaar, Milan has a centralized layout. Milan's economic success depends on attracting diverse

customers from far and wide and this business objective is achieved by an internal arrangement that accommodates diversity. The cluttered interior and sensorial overload of Milan may seem chaotic to new customers, but to the regulars there is a clear order to this environment. The bustling marketplace of Milan, with its ambiguously transforming center sustains simultaneously the diverse worlds of the cab driver, the computer scientist, and the Anglo neophyte. Unlike in Bazaar, multiple rhythms and parallel worlds coexist simultaneously inside Milan International, only to be carefully monitored and tracked by the store hands. With different customers different parts of the store become operational and people perform and consume ethnicity in different ways.

[32] A different kind of order organizes the experience of Milan. Seasonal groceries produce temporal-spatial rhythms that are subconsciously internalized by regular customers. Mangos are arranged around the front of the grocery counter in the summer while seasonal vegetables are spread out next to the entrance. Regular customers know when a certain green leafy vegetable called *methi* will be available and when curry leaves will come in fresh. Large bins full of grains overflow and spill over as older women feel the pulses to test the quality of the grains. What looks to outsiders like clutter as they negotiate the strewn merchandise is a heartwarming reminder of home to others: "What a find! If you are looking for bulk spices

or grains at a reasonable price, check out Milan ... just resist your urges to plunge your hands into the huge vats in the back and toss the lentils into the air. Anyone else see *Mother India*? Haven't been able to look at a lentil without excitement since then" (Jenny K.). This shopper refers to the Hindi movie *Mother India* and she reads the act of tossing lentils into the air and cluttering the floor as a central performative act of enacting Indianness.

[33] To immigrant customers, clutter and disorder serve as heartwarming reminders of nostalgic familiarity, in contrast to the impersonal layout of American retail chains. An Indian customer explained, "Milan feels like messy to me. [Yet] you can make sense. I mean things are organized in a certain way—it doesn't *seem* so ... You will have to know about it!" (Interview with C/St997). To this regular customer the clutter in Milan is neither disorienting nor disturbing since she is aware of where the goods are kept. The perception of order is related to the customer's familiarity with the environment. The same shopper had complained that the interiors of Bazaar of India did not give her the familiar heartwarming feeling.

[34] Of course, the fondness for Milan's clutter is not unanimous, and the experience of the jostling with "the masses" can be an irritant for some. One such middle-class Indian female customer is acutely aware of gender and class differences between herself, the store hands, and the other shoppers:

“Milan! I don’t like because [the storeowner] is so rude! It is slimy because [there is] something about [the store]. Even the way they act. They’re just sort of—uuggg! I think even as being [a] woman I kind of just felt them ... acting a bit strange or something like that” (Interview with C/St997). This notion of “sliminess” refers to her perception of a lack of decorum, especially from the younger working-class men in the store. She was hyperaware of being watched by these men from the counter. Their stares made her uncomfortable. Her response to clutter and surveillance is inflected by gender and class.

[35] The use, interior layout, and experience of walking into Bazaar and Milan recreate two very different sets of social behavior, spatial rhythm, and order.^{xiv} These different rhythms frame the experience of social circles and networks in the two stores. They sustain imagined communities and bring forth collective memories. One may not be conscious of it, but becoming ethnic is related to the way we experience, engage with, and embody the multiple rhythms within such places.

Dissonance, Clutter, and Embodied Experiences

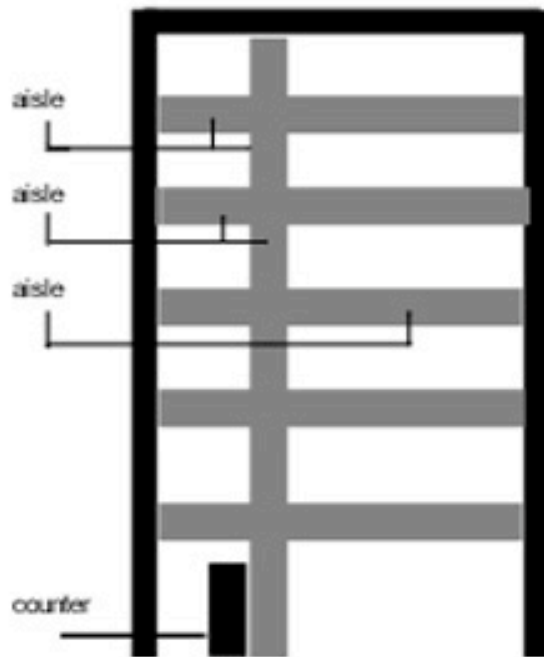
Reading and evaluating places like Milan and Bazaar requires a different set of criteria than those traditionally applied to evaluate architecture. These spaces are not designed as architectural exemplars.

Rather they are functional spaces adapted and transformed by various individuals and groups for different purposes. In the case of Bazaar, the storeowner deploys formal layout, stereotypical exotic imagery, and linear sequential interior arrangement as a marketing device. In Milan, a dissonance emerges out of the use of an ambiguous store name, the external façade treatment, and the courtyard-like interior layout. Analyzing the spatial order in the two stores discussed above allows us to appreciate the careful production of an extraordinary architectural experience in these stores.

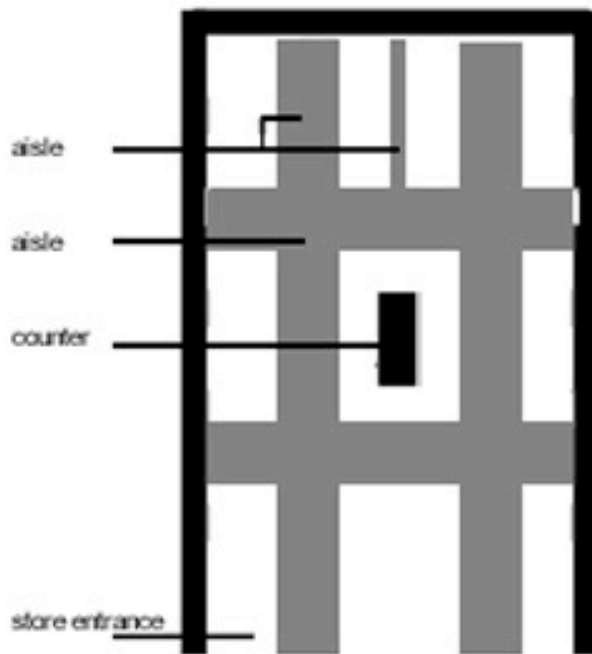
[37] Merchandise and material culture play a central role in the way these spaces are experienced and remembered. Bazaar carries rice in small sampler packages, incense sticks in new age scents, and how-to books that cater to a non-South Asian clientele. The immigrant shopper finds that the average prices of grains, grocery, and spices are not competitive—in fact they are often more expensive than those of Milan and other South Asian grocery stores. In comparison, Milan's merchandise selection and prices create a more expected and familiar environment for immigrant shoppers, a sense echoed by the clutter. In contrast, department stores in the United States are privately owned premises where experience is controlled, merchandise is carefully selected, and entry and access restricted to those whose class and social position is deemed desirable by the management.

[38] Customers often refer to the spatial ambience as an important experiential category within these stores. They remember the commotion, smells, music, chatter, and visuals of Milan in a positive way. The sensorial and experiential complexity of Milan lends legibility to it for South Asian immigrants. As an immigrant explained, “the times that I have been to [the South Asian stores] were like going to Karol Bagh. There were a lot of people; there was a lot of *hulla gulla* [Hindi for commotion, festivity] going on... Sight is the primary sense. So somehow one tends to take it for granted. But I have always felt that it is the sound and the smell which differentiate an Indian place. And smells are of course [that of] *masalas* and the *agarbattis* ... and the sound is of Indian music and chatter” (Interview with A/sh997).^{xv} This immigrant’s nostalgia for disorder could actually refer to the immigrant’s yearning for a more different or “othered” public space. Sensorial disorder becomes an experiential antithesis to the order encountered in mainstream America. Milan’s interior becomes cognitively impenetrable for outsiders; an “other-space” controlled and appropriated by insiders. Bazaar’s strict sensory choreography and proscriptive behavior alienate Indian customers while putting Anglo Americans at ease. The experience of order lends visual clarity, spatial identity, and legibility to both retail stores. By focusing on the haptic and performative dimensions of the stores, a researcher can better evaluate how the stores are experienced.

[39] The discussion above should not be confused with physical deterministic arguments about plan layout and morphology. Rather, the focus is on the experience of being in these spaces. These examples show two different ways of being-and-operating-in-space. The experience of being in linear and courtyard arrangements supports certain forms of behavior, practices of surveillance, and mannerisms of social interaction. The position of the sales counter in relation to the store interior generally determines these spatial experiences.^{xvi} However, there are stores along University Avenue that are physically laid out in a concentric fashion but where the behavior of the users resembles the linear sequential model. Stores such as Shrimati's and Bombay Super Market follow a combination of concentric and linear arrangements.



A. Linear Layout



B. Radial Layout

Figure 12: Interior store layout of ethnic stores

The position of the sales counter generally determines the way the store is laid out. When the counter is near the entrance the interior layout follows a

linear pattern of aisles (A) originating at the counter and ending at the back wall. When the counter is located centrally (B) the interior layout follows a radial pattern.

Drawing by Arijit Sen

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[40] In all these stores employees and users actively transform and inhabit the physical space in embodied ways. Through planning the bodily engagement with store interiors, storeowners create distinction, maintain social boundaries, control the kinds of customers, and determine appropriate behavior. From the point of view of customers, spatial performance in these stores offers tactics by which they claim territory and situate their selves within a larger community—and in the process reproduce their ethnic identity.

ⁱ A large part of this argument comes out of the theoretical position of scholars of interactionalism. Among them, Rogers Brubaker explains the performative production of culture and identity among ethnic groups. According to Brubaker, such complex and contested conditions (ethnicity) can “best be understood if studied from below as well as from above, in microanalytic as well as macroanalytic perspective” (Brubaker et al. xiv). He argues that if we only examine rhetorical production of ethnicity and culture at a macro level we encounter an illusion that renders invisible the beliefs, desires, hopes, and interests of ordinary people on the ground. Thus our methodology will need to incorporate strategies to read how ethnicity and identity are produced, “experienced and enacted ... in everyday life” (167).

Constructivism provides a way to study identity as multiple and negotiated. Yet recent constructivist accounts of ethnic groups seem “clichéd” and predetermined. For instance, discussions of ethnicity assume, a priori, the ethnic category. By examining how individuals retain their ethnicity research serves a self-fulfilling prophecy: it finds ethnicity exactly where it searches for it. Brubaker’s model argues that ethnic ideas, practices, identities, and boundaries are performatively constructed when individuals interact with each other in quotidian circumstances “through the deployment of categories” (169). Ethnicity “is embodied in everyday encounters, practical categories, commonsense knowledge, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, mental maps, interactional cues, discursive frames, organizational routines, social networks, and institutional forms” (6-7).

ⁱⁱErving Goffman explains that social interactions are performative. Goffman calls this act “impression management.” Like a performance on a stage, public performance takes place in a front public realm while performers practice and prepare in private back regions. By

using Goffman's model we can see how users participate and perform inside an immigrant space.

Acknowledging Goffman's assertion of public rituals of performance as central to human social life, Alan Wolfe notes that, "Goffman's tone nonetheless manages to convey a sense that authenticity, if it is ever to be found in modern society, is more likely to be found in the shadows than in the sunlight" (184).

ⁱⁱⁱ These stores gain from visual consistency and similarity. Madhulika Khandelwal's research on Indian stores and Rick Bonus' work on Filipino stores show us that standardized storefronts and cluttered interiors often project a consistent image of cultural difference to the broader audience and thereby "brand" these stores. Visual and perceptual signifiers are symbolic and contextual, and like a language, these signifiers are social constructions that can lend themselves to manipulation. The formulaic material culture, hypervisible visual form, and banal content of these storefronts are like fronts that, despite their appearance, produce diverse responses/readings from different subgroups within the ethnic community.

^{iv} Khanna claims that Bazaar of India was one of the first immigrant South Asian stores to open on University Avenue although a neighboring store (Ajanta Enterprise, 1624 University Avenue) opened in 1970.

^v For more on the relationship between assimilation and immigrant entrepreneurship in America see, Light; Light and Bonacich; Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng.

^{vi} The western end of the street started in 1853 with the settlement of Oceanview (now incorporated into the City of Berkeley and called West Berkeley), an industrial outpost of working-class cottages interspersed with flour mills and taverns. The empty shells of its industrial ruins still dot the landscape of West Berkeley.

^{vii} The owner of Bazaar discourages haggling. Khanna explains, "We don't expect too many other Indians because they haggle and they want bargains that we don't have and when we talk to them in a professional way, they don't like it. They want us say '*behenji aao kya kya seva karje?*' [Sister how can I serve you?] And they [unwanted South Asian customers] get all uptight. [They feel that], you know, 'this is just like going to American store!' [When they] come to Indian stores they expect bargains. And then on top of that they want to return the merchandise after using it for a day or so. Which we don't do that and so they feel uncomfortable." *Behenji* in Hindi means "respected sister," but it is also used colloquially to refer to married women, usually middle-aged. Sometimes it is used as a disparaging term to refer to someone who is not suave and educated. Here he is referring to homemakers who haggle for the best deals.

^{viii} Khanna mentions stores like Safeway and Lucky, local grocery chains, and Nordstrom and Macy's national department stores.

^{ix} This view is ironic not only because of the very commercial nature of this store but also because the artifacts in the stores, most of them mass-produced objects, say little about the individual spirit of the invisible artisans, their lives, or their location. Instead of being symbols of an esoteric traditional culture, the easy availability of these goods halfway across the world points towards a highly mobile global economy. Take the merchandise she describes: the chutneys, spices, and sticky sweets are all produced in factories in Chicago and New York for national distribution. Therefore, other than mere factual ignorance, Walter and Bowman's allusion to the commercial-versus-spiritual dialectic can be primarily

attributed to their personal sensory experience and perception of this landscape. For a more reliable discussion of the garment industry and the origins of the Indian garments, see Koos.

^xName changed for privacy.

^{xi} These were the years before the South Bay concentration of South Asians encouraged businesspeople to open stores in places like Fremont and San Jose. In fact, during the eighties Milan was one of the few stores that supplied spices and grains to Indian immigrants in the Bay Area.

^{xii} Deepak Ajmani, owner of Bombay Music House (1038 University Avenue) described the concentration of South Asian Indian stores in the 1000 block of University Avenue as similar to an open-air mall.

^{xiii} Other nearby grocery stores (such as Indus Food Center, 1920 San Pablo Ave) owned by Pakistani immigrants who are Muslims, cater to the specific needs of Islamic customers. The signage and material culture in the stores—posters of mosques, copies of the Koran, listings of Islamic cultural and religious organizations, and advertisements for halal meat—inform the potential customer that these stores cater to the specific religious needs of the Islamic community.

^{xiv} Yet the internalized, haptic, sensorial complexity of these stores does not mean that these spaces act outside the American urban marketplace and urban space where they are located. The acts of the government impose a different beat to the system. Longer economic processes impact rent and neighborhood property values via the urban and national economic cycles. Without getting into these details, something I explain elsewhere, the city's identification of the region-serving business node between San Pablo and 4th Street along University Avenue responds to the out of town customers patronizing the ethnic stores that have mushroomed in Milan's proximity since the 1980s. A discussion of such macro conditions influencing the experience of a store can be found in Sen ("Global Cultures in Local Economies").

^{xv}It is important to point out that all markets in India are not chaotic as the above idealization may suggest. In the contemporary stores and department stores in India, behavior, demeanor, sound, heat, smells, and visual clutter are carefully controlled. In contrast to those spaces, the crowded bazaars in India are democratic economic institutions open to people of various ages, economic brackets, classes, religions, and genders.

^{xvi} For a discussion on the nature of store plans, positions of sales counters, and the resultant store plan typologies refer to Green. For a historical example of modern store designs in the United States, see Westwood and Westwood. For a historical account of the American corner store and the role of immigrants who ran it, see Beasley.

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