

Cultural Transformation of the Strip

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What we refer to as our cities in the USA, that dissipated patchwork of strip malls and office nodes, have been formed in part as a product of the migration patterns following WWII. The forces that set these patterns in motion are now well advanced. Along with historical mutations and attempts to reshape these patterns by planners, an additional force has begun to imprint its overly on urban patterns. I refer to the latest wave of immigrants –in large part of Asian and Latino descent. This latest wave of immigration, gathering force in the late 1990s, has transformed many of the older suburban commercial areas throughout the country into international zones.

While it is reasonable to assume that any culture in foreign soil may wish to transport its own solutions and traditions, in the past these have typically been implemented as ghettoized communities seeking to re create conditions of home within controllable boundaries. Examples of urban patterns imported by ethnic cultures can be cited from the middle of the 1800s with German towns, Shaker settlements, Chinatowns, French and Latin quarters extending in time right up into East LA. The difference now seems to be that the new settlements, while not so clearly defined, are far more pervasive. They are not so much a ghetto as a collection of private acts within the body of an established public environment. For the most part these acts have not waited for public support or implementation but flow from the everyday and entrepreneurial impulses.

The physical impact the new immigrant communities have made are also not so visible in terms of stylistic trends or urban patterns. Due to the incredible inertia inherent in the American developer built environment, to re-direct the host body,

new communities have asserted their influence as collection of marginal local acts, co-opting the existing structures and systems. For this reason the relatively low profile of changes to the system can be attributed to the idea that this transformation is happening from the inside out...And unlike previous ghettoized patterns, these new "international zones" spread in rhizomatic patterns along the major market corridors from the first wave of strip culture.

While cities like Los Angeles, Houston and Miami are recognized mega centers for international populations, in some sense they are now atypical. What is more prevalent is that many cities, far from international ports or borders, have been experiencing this type of transformation. This is particularly true of the southeastern United States, where cultures were traditionally made up of bi polar black and white communities with little ethnic influences outside of the predominately Anglo Saxon heritage. This region has a high concentration of examples and the one I am on most familiar terms with, Atlanta GA, is a prime case study. Without taking the time to trace the local history of international growth or mapping concentrations, what is immediately revealing is the trace of changes and interplay of relationships that can be observed in one its major international strips, Buford Highway.

Buford Highway is a classic market road that connected Atlanta to Buford GA before the construction of the expressway parallel to it. It was an important corridor and evolved from 2 lanes to 5 in early strip patterns of the 50s and 60s. It also was the first Metro Atlanta area (from the 1970s) that the new wave of immigrants settled in. By the 1990s the area exhibited a high concentration of established Latino and Asian communities. As

a representative case study Buford Hwy is a mirror of its new inhabitants.

For purposes of examining trends and individual examples, I have divided my observations into 4 categories. Framed as subversive tactics, these categories serve to illustrate the various means used to transform the body of the host.

1. Transformation - conversion and recycling
2. Overlay of infrastructure
3. Transplanting culture
4. Clash of cultural worlds

TRANSFORMATION

Rather than build new, the primary mode of commercial response has been a rapid recycling of existing structures and businesses. These are usually altered and expanded in ways that begin to take on the aspects of the immigrant culture with elaborate layers of signage as readily achievable alterations. In many ways, except for the surplus of parking territory around them, the low scale cacophony of strip architecture lends itself to the Latino patterns of the everyday which have grown out of the culture of bricolage, pragmatics and an expression of a raw energy which owes little debt to Spanish traditions.

Two concrete examples serve to illustrate. Of particular interest is the example of a fruit and vegetable market constructed on the site of a filled in motel swimming pool (directly on the soil in the pool). This will to act, exemplifies the kind of pragmatic, everyday spirit that does not wait for consensus, excuses or legitimized resources. The market started with a few tables, added a tarp roof and exploded to cover 3000 s.f. before being pulled down by local code enforcement. It was of course constructed without permits or inspections. It is highly likely that this condemnation was a surprise to the market owners. For immigrants from countries like Mexico where it is perfectly legal and common for anyone to open a business in the front of their house, the concept of restrictions like these must seem very confusing at first encounter.

Another example of recycling is the transformation of the large ex car lot showrooms found on Buford Highway. With the migration of the middle and upper middle classes to areas further out of town,

these car lots moved with the population. While it is common place to see small strip businesses, fast food buildings etc. converted to restaurants, the abandonment of structures on this scale has presented the type of recycling challenge common to abandoned big box stores. As the immigrant community has grown it has been able to absorb more ambitious projects and these car lots have been converted to custom auto accessory stores. This choice finds a fit between the host culture and the new immigrants own fascination with car culture on the level of recycling and personalization, a form of co-opting at another level.

OVERLAY OF INFRASTRUCTURE

One of the first examples of the new infrastructure overlay was the establishment of an international bus station.

(Bus Station on Buford Hwy) By the 1980s Greyhound and Trailways provided poor service from remote locations. The Latino community took matters into their own hands with Trailways type bus service directly from Buford highway to all points in Mexico. The station of course inhabits the space of a former restaurant. This trend has been so well established that now there are two international stations on Buford Highway.

The next stage in transportation was the implementation of local corridor (Buford Highway) transportation systems by Hispanic companies. The city system (MARTA) ran the same route but employed large buses with infrequent stops. The Latino system (or systems, as there are several companies) in contrast, employed a fleet of smaller buses common to many Latin cities and ran them often.





(small local bus system) The small sizes were matched to the actual number of passengers they service and were fuel efficient. While MARTA became upset by the fact that their poorly run system was losing rider ship to these companies, the Latino community was learning how to play the game when it came to carrying out its desires within the rules of the host culture.

In the Asian community, in response to a lack of concern and attention by the local police force, the community established its own private police force. The force consists of a small control station located in the parking lot of an Asian strip mall with 10 patrol cars.

At the micro level, a network of ambulatory ice cream push carts traverse the length of the Buford corridor and extend into the nearby neighborhoods. The carts provide work and a tertiary layer of vehicles to the highly motorized nature of the strip.

TRANSPLANTED CULTURE

Aside from the inundation of restaurants which serve the immigrant culture, within the facades of strip malls and ex big box stores, a new order has been imported. Although it is barely visible to the casual observer, its contents thrive with vibrant market life that has little to do with the world it inhabits. I refer to the now pervasive establishment of Mexican / Latino style Mercados inside of existing buildings. One such market is located in the Fiesta Mall, a recycled Mexican owned strip mall on Buford Highway. The typical Mercado is built out inside the large mall space as a warren of small wooden booths layered with a cacophony of goods and articles in a way that



defies the orderly sensibility of the American made mall experience.

(Mexican Mercado in Mall) These markets spring from a tradition that reaches back to European roots but has become formalized over two centuries in the older quarters of all Latino cities.

Up to recent times, the majority of economic power in this area has resided in the Asian community. Along with the acquisition of many defunct strip malls, an attempt was made to reconfigure the formulaic design of the typical small strip malls along the lines of Asian traditions with a new development "Asian Square". Aside from the usual stylistic ornamentation, rather than forming the typical open U pattern with parking centralized in front, the spaces were organized around a centralized open courtyard. The courtyard was composed of an Asian garden space that reflected their social patterns. While this small development still is viable after more than fifteen years, the attempt has not been replicated.

CLASH OF WORLDS

In the 1990's, the small town of Chamblee GA, in an excess of planning zeal, created an international village overlay for the Buford Highway area.

Rather than leave the international area to its own pragmatic devices, and ignoring the fact that the international community existed in this location due to affordable apartments, Chamblee proceeded to draw up an idealized plan complete with the required renderings of delighted international consumers strolling through plazas with balloons.



(International Village) Their proposal centered on razing a large area of affordable housing and replacing the structures with an open air mall and housing component beyond the income reach of the community. Stylistically, the development appears to be aimed at Greek population with little understanding of the actual demographics. Unfortunately, unlike many planning dreams which die a natural death waiting for funding, as of 2007, ground is being broken on the new international village.

The most recent ironical twist in well intentioned planning attempts by the host culture, has been the addition of 1880's style street lamps running up Buford Highway. **(1880's street lamps)** Although one unforeseen aspect of the lights is to provide an additional layer to the inherent overload of strip culture, the net result is that this quaint small town make over package is highly incongruous with the strip architecture it hopes to ameliorate. However, the aspect that raises this effort to planning absurdity is the location of these modest sources of light directly below many of the existing metal halide street lamps.



CONCLUSION

The examples I have cited point to a sense of ownership that has begun to transform the architecture and infrastructure of this area. This grass roots proliferation of services follows a dramatic shift in demographics and in retrospect seems only natural. However, these acts follow not so much from an impulse towards assimilation but of adaptation and accommodation. Year by year the transformation is spreading so incrementally that the change is almost invisible...and each year the ability to adapt, achieve property ownership and real political power is growing. In time, the community may even be able to establish a developmental force of its own and redirect the underlying assumptions of the prototypical strip mall that now seems to be the fate of all USA suburban places.