

Making the Marginal Visible: Microenterprise and Urban Space in London

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ABSTRACT: A research project in London is focused on the following question: Can the morphology of cities, and the typology of urban buildings, help support grassroots economic development and the assimilation of new participants into the urban economy?

We have surveyed over 2000 buildings in three London districts that have large immigrant populations, gentrification, and an active mix of shops, street markets, warehouses, and new, community-based space for start-up businesses. These surveys are resulting in maps that show the distribution of different attributes of building types, uses and businesses. We have simultaneously conducted about 120 interviews with business owners and employees, concerning the advantages of locations, building transformations, and history of the business. Combining the maps with the interviews leads to understandings of how physical factors of building type and location interact with the development and success of very small businesses.

Our results show the following:

- Small businesses are established within a wide variety of building types.
- Most of these types allow subdivision that maintains the continuation of the public realm into the building.
- Synergies exist between nearby businesses of different sizes, types and status with respect to gentrification.
- A strong hierarchy of streets, alleys and quasi-public space supports a variety of locations and rents.
- Although gentrification is not necessarily seen as negative by local business owners, it results in the loss of “back-of-house” space that is useful to small vendors and local businesses.

Our findings shed light on the fine-grained dynamics of urban structure, and help re-connect physical urban design to urban policy.

The findings are intended to be useful to local organizations of merchants and micro-enterprises in their efforts at self-advocacy; to local authorities which support and regulate business activity including micro-enterprise; and to investors and developers who want to include space for start-up businesses in their projects.

KEYWORDS: building typology, London, microenterprise, urban ethnography, urban structure

INTRODUCTION

For the last several years my research group has been investigating the idea that there is a relationship between the form of the city, the design of small urban buildings and the ability of the city to support economic development at the grassroots. Our investigations are part of a larger concern with the inclusive city—the idea that in socially and economically successful cities, there is a symbiotic mixture of people: rich and poor, immigrants and longer-term residents, young and old, black and white. The nature of this mixture allows for exchange that supports positive economic evolution of people as well as of the city itself. The city has a dynamic relationship between stability and change—and therefore needs to be understood not in the static terms that are characteristic of many urban design studies, but instead in terms of the decisions that are made by individual players in the city, that ultimately affect the city’s growth and transformation.

Our interest is in “microubanism” –apatial structure and relationships at the scale of individual buildings, streets and neighborhoods—and in particular the conditions in local areas that allow for small-scale enterprise to establish and maintain itself. This is of course more than an academic question. Most of the

world's population growth is happening in cities, and a good part of urban growth is with the "informal economy," based on individuals and individual families that are trying to make their way with tiny businesses that often happen "under the radar." Government policy with respect to this phenomenon, particularly in South America but also to some extent in southeast Asia, is beginning to change, with an acceptance of informal urban settlement and the institution of new initiatives that recognize the permanence and validity of this kind of urbanization.

But this issue is not important only in the so-called "developing world." As the economy and employment patterns change in the developed world as well, as the relationship between the central city and the suburbs changes in the United States, and as the idea of sustainable cities begins to incorporate social and economic sustainability as well as issues of energy and land use, the question of how the city can best support small-scale, self-initiated business is also important. In planning, over the last several decades, there has been a widening gap between physical planning and urban policy, often resulting in urban design practice that is rightfully criticized for often being overly scenographic and visual. One way of bringing together design with meaningful policy that is based on economic issues is by looking at the fine-grained dynamics of neighborhoods and buildings themselves, in an attempt to understand relationships, between the urban morphology of districts, the typology of their buildings, and the possible ways in which those physical factors support economic development at the grassroots.

The work has two origins:

First, the development of my book *LIVING OVER THE STORE*, in which I looked at the common urban building that combines commercial and residential uses, and which I came to see as a microcosm of a local urban system that has synergies between different uses and that is flexible in its use and transformation. This building is a cross-cultural phenomenon, strongly linked to aspects of urban geography, and in which commonalities across cultures provide a beginning insight into the larger question of the relationships between architectural form and economic life.

Second, work in Guangzhou, China, in which we looked at buildings constructed before the end of the Qing dynasty (in other words, before 1912) and how they maintained their flexibility over decades of radical political and economic change in China. We began this work with a strong bias toward the traditional, densely-packed urban fabric of two-, three-, and four-story shophouses. We showed not only that these buildings maintained their flexibility partly because of one or two simple architectural attributes, but also that their collective FAR efficiency is as great as that of high-rise buildings up to about twenty stories in height, given how buildings are actually disposed on the ground.

We moved from these studies, focused mostly on individual buildings, to investigations of urban districts, also in Guangzhou. That work took place in 2010. For the last two years we have been working in London, in three areas that are characterized both by a high percentage of immigrants and in two out of the three cases, gentrification.

Within these districts, we have been using an approach that combines two methodologies: geographic mapping and ethnography. These combined methodologies are intended to reinforce each other, as the human stories help to explain the impact of geographic distributions and architectural type.

The first area of investigation is Whitechapel and the adjacent neighborhood of Spitalfields, which are adjacent to the City of London, now one of the two major financial districts in London (the other being the Docklands). This area has been a harbor for immigrants for over four hundred years: Huguenots in the early eighteenth century, followed by Irish, Jews and most recently Bangladeshis. Although many Bangladeshis have moved from Whitechapel to other places in London and the UK, they still regard Whitechapel as their cultural hub, marked by the East London Mosque, one of the largest mosques in the UK. Although Bangladeshi businesses are still being newly established here, change is afoot, with a major expansion of the Royal London Hospital, a new station for Crossrail (a major new transportation line), and the ongoing gentrification of Spitalfields.

The second area is Upton Park, about seven Underground stops to the east of Whitechapel, past the site of the Olympic Park. Here, large numbers of Bangladeshis established residences and businesses as they moved east from Whitechapel toward Essex--and numerous people have businesses in both places. Commercial life is centered on Green Street, a long north-south artery lined with ground-floor commercial spaces, with streets of two-story terraced houses perpendicular to it. The streets' businesses include necessities such as groceries, pharmacies and ordinary clothing stores, as well as upscale businesses in

clothing and jewelry that bring people in from beyond the neighborhood. Near the Overground station is Queen's Market, a public market with dozens of stalls selling food, clothing and dry goods.

The third area is Dalston, a few Overground stops to the north of Whitechapel. Dalston has a large West African population, and is gentrifying as new coffee houses, art galleries and craftspeople are becoming established in the area. We chose Dalston partly because of a relatively new initiative in which tiny prefabricated shops intended for microbusinesses were located around a new public square. (Fig. 1.) Like other areas, Dalston has a great variety of spatial types that accommodate businesses within a relatively small area. These include a major outdoor street market, an indoor shopping center, as well as many shops that directly front the street.



Figure 1. Gillett Square in Dalston. The picture shows renovated terraced houses and prefabricated structures for microbusinesses. Source: (Author 2012)

Our work in London happened over two years, with each year's fieldwork combining the two methodologies mentioned earlier.

We began with an extensive building –by-building survey in each district, ultimately including about two thousand buildings. This was a visual survey, in which each building was recorded according to attributes including building type, number and location of businesses, presence of microbusinesses, building height, building uses including kind of business, and similar factors that could be directly observed.

The second phase involved over a hundred interviews with business owners, employees, residents of the area and people who worked for local government and local organizations. With these interviews, we tried to understand people's own stories and their perceptions of how local geography and architecture were affecting their business and its prospects. We talked about the advantages and disadvantages of particular locations people's origins, where they lived relative to their businesses, where their customers came from, the origin of their goods, as well as the history and transformations of the buildings themselves.

From a methodological point of view, the ethnography and the geographic analysis were intended to reinforce each other. The individual perceptions that people had might be borne out by the overall patterns observed in the survey; and likewise, the geography would be shown to have an impact on particular lives and particular businesses. This combination of geographic and ethnographic investigations has been central to the work."

Our methodology has advanced from a technical point of view, as well. In 2010, when we first carried out the geographic survey in China, we recorded the various attributes for each building directly onto the maps. We then spent months transcribing that data onto spreadsheets that could be imported into the GIS database that produced the analytic maps. The following year, we recorded data directly into matrices that were

subsequently converted into GIS-friendly spreadsheets. But even here, that process was time consuming, with a substantial gap between data collection and seeing the results.

So last year, we made a further advance allowing for an increase in the speed and accuracy of data collecting. With the use of smartphones to record data, we used an interface originally invented for community-based mapping in developing countries in connection with ArcGIS—allowing us to visualize our results almost instantly and to easily find geographic correlations among different attributes. This system allowed us to budget between two and three minutes per building, including a photograph taken on the smartphone. And because the data recording was based on a series of questions to be answered with selections from drop-down menus, there was much more of a chance that all questions would be answered, and in a consistent way.

Although each neighborhood is different, our results show the following common features:

a) Small, new businesses are established within a wide variety of building types.

There is a great variety of kinds of buildings within which businesses are established, and physical transformations they undergo in order to accommodate those businesses. (Fig.2.)



Figure 2. The variety of building types in a portion of Whitechapel. Source: (Author 2011)

These building types included the following:

- Terraced houses that started out as residences, parts of which were later converted to commercial use
- Free-standing market stalls that are erected and broken down each day. These stalls are pretty much exactly the same size, as they each fill an identically-sized pitch, the corners of which are permanently laid out on the pavement with metal markers
- Permanent market shops at the edge of a train yard
- Purpose-built buildings of different sizes used for retail, wholesale and manufacturing purposes
- Purpose-built public markets.
- Arches in railway viaducts converted into retail and wholesale shops
- Private supermarket converted into an indoor bazaar
- A movie theatre converted into retail use
- A brewery converted into a marketplace with many shops and residences
- Retail shops converted into mini-shopping malls
- Prefabricated metal buildings specially built for microenterprise
- Temporary metal sheds used for storage facilities

- Jerry-built wooden and metal structures used for retail shops
- A mosque complex that includes retail shops at its base

Some of the spaces are as small as about fifty square feet and allow just enough room for a single person to work and sell; some are just the width of a single doorway; some have direct street frontage and others are known only because of a sign that can be seen from the street.

This variety of spatial types, all in the service of different commercial uses, points to a complex relationship between form and function, and to the flexibility of buildings in the face of local economic change. Some of the examples seem to run counter to the idea that fine grain is necessary for flexibility. They show that fine grain can be readily created out of larger entities—and as I will show later, that ability may be as important as building type itself in setting up positive conditions for business and entrepreneurship.

b) Many of these building types allow for physical subdivision that maintains the continuation of the public realm to serve new businesses, even if the businesses are deep inside the building.

This physical subdivision happened in both large and small buildings.

The London terraced house, versions of which were built from the eighteenth century through the early twentieth century in all three neighborhoods, easily lends itself to this kind of subdivision, largely because of the side passage that allows access to all rooms and which may act as a quasi-public space even though it is of course privately owned. The conversion of these buildings allowed for businesses mostly at the ground floor but also floors above and sometimes below.

But we also saw the conversion of a large Tesco supermarket, into a shopping bazaar served by several corridors perpendicular to the street, along which were tiny stalls occupied by tailors, various kinds of music businesses, food businesses, and at least one businesswoman who grew up in London, became a registered nurse in New York, and then returned to London to take care of her ailing mother and then became a missionary of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church which occupation she practices out of a stall in the middle of the former supermarket.

Another phenomenon we saw in all three neighborhoods, consisted of the division of a single shopfront, no more than about sixteen or eighteen feet wide, into a tiny shopping mall, accessed by a central corridor and lined with very small stalls that were no more than about six feet deep.

In Spitalfields, the conversion of an old brewery is allowing for space that incorporates start-up businesses as well as restaurants, and in all three neighborhoods, tiny businesses, which often have to do with sales of cell phones and SIM cards, were easily established as part of existing shopfronts. In Whitechapel Road, a small supermarket was divided to include a fried chicken shop, and a phone card shop on the ground floor, with upper floor space rented to an accountant, and the basement space rented to a restaurant. An old pickle factory in Heneage Street became a brewery, then a clothing factory, and has now been subdivided into studios and galleries. In the Kingsland High Street in Dalston, office space that was rented by a Turkish television studio is being converted into residential space that has already been rented by a local housing association.

Most of the examples we saw during the fieldwork, have to do with the differentiation of space rather than the consolidation of space. In these neighborhoods, the push toward the establishment of new businesses seems to require small spaces rather than large ones. The available buildings lend themselves to subdivision in different ways, allowing for a variety of kinds of small spaces, and a variety of relationships between those spaces and the public realm.

c) Synergies exist between adjacent and nearby businesses of different sizes, types and status with respect to gentrification.

For example, the former supermarket was itself adjacent to the Ridley Road Market, an old street market in Dalston. This adjacency was important for two reasons. First, the intense pedestrian traffic in the market helped support the business in the old supermarket; it was clear from observations and from interviews that the street market was the engine without which there would be little business in the old supermarket. But second, rents for spaces in the old supermarket were low enough so that some of the spaces could be used for storage, rented by stallholders in the market. It turned out that gradually-rising rents in the area were a problem, as it meant that those storage spaces in the former supermarket were turning over to retail uses.

In Whitechapel, there is a strong relationship between the outdoor stalls in the market that lines Whitechapel Road, and the permanent shops that are opposite those stalls. (Fig. 3) This was somewhat counterintuitive, as we might have expected that the shopkeepers would feel that the stallholders were taking away their business. But in fact the situation was the reverse—the shopkeepers felt that their own businesses depended on the market stalls. People moving between the Whitechapel Underground station and the Royal London Hospital across the street shop at the outdoor stalls, and incidentally find the fixed shops. The shopkeepers felt that without the outdoor stalls, their business would be much less.



Figure 3. Whitechapel Road, showing fixed shops at right and temporary stalls at left. In the background is 30 St. Mary Axe (the “Gherkin”) designed by Norman Foster, indicating the proximity of this area to the City of London. Source: (Author 2011)

Other, specific relationships include the following, among many others. The owner of a shop in Whitechapel selling Islamic religious items reports that his business is helped by the presence both of a Halal poultry shop and a religious school on the same block. A food truck provides prepared food for many of the merchants and employees in the Queens Market, in Upton Park, and another takeaway food business in the same place sources its food from other food vendors in the market. A tailor in one of the tiny prefabricated shops in Gillett Square in Dalston says that his customers can have coffee and food in the other shops while they are waiting for him to work on their clothes.

d) A strong hierarchy of streets, alleys and quasi-public space supports a variety of locations and rents.

Each of the three neighborhoods is characterized by a strong hierarchy of different kinds of streets, alleys and quasi-public space (which is defined as space that functionally acts as public space even if it is actually privately owned). These public spaces of access support a rich variety of uses, with the distribution a result of both the persistence of historical pattern and the variations of rent that come from different levels of visibility and accessibility.

This variety of public spaces may be formally described by a typology that is analogous to the typology of buildings. For example, in Dalston, this typology includes the following elements:

- the main north-south artery of Kingsland Road
- side streets such as Birkbeck Mews, Sandringham Road, Bradbury Street
- the narrow pedestrian paths that serve the individual stalls in the Ridley Road Market
- Gillett Square

- the outdoor galleries allowing access to rooms in the old terraced houses that have been converted into offices for local community organizations
- the corridors in the converted Tesco supermarket that provide access to the individual stalls
- corridors in retail shops that have been converted into mini-shopping malls
- the passages in the Dalston Cross shopping centre

In Whitechapel/Spitalfields and in Upton Park, there are equivalent typologies and hierarchies, ranging from major through-arteries like Whitechapel Road or Green Street, down to tertiary streets and alleys, and private spaces that allow for public access.

These hierarchies, and the variety of rents that they support, allow for choice, and for new businesses to establish themselves in the neighborhood but off the most expensive and highly-trafficked streets. This allowed a new café owner to put his business on a side street, near but not directly on the main street in Dalston; it allowed the seller of Islamic religious goods to put his business next to other businesses oriented toward the Islamic population of Whitechapel, but off the main streets; it allowed recent Ghanaian immigrants to establish small businesses in an informally-organized outdoor mall at the quiet end of the Ridley Road market in Dalston.

e) Gentrification is not necessarily seen as negative by local business owners. But it results in the loss of “back-of-house” space that is useful to small vendors and local businesses.

In many cases, we heard longtime owners of businesses say that they welcomed gentrification, because they felt that new businesses and new people would make their own businesses more viable. These owners tended to be welcoming of economic change but wary of social change. People we talked to who were most negative toward different ethnic groups tended not to be business owners but instead long-time residents of neighborhoods who dealt with other people at arm’s length rather than in direct economic interactions. The business owners were more balanced in their views. A wine merchant in Kingsland Road changes his stock on a regular basis to serve a changing clientele. A takeaway food vendor in the Queens Market has developed a new item to bridge the gap between cultures—an English pastry filled with Caribbean stuffing and spices.

But in addition, the increase in rents that comes along with the influx of new businesses into the neighborhoods began to eliminate uses that depended on cheap rents. In the Dalston neighborhood, for example, some of the street vendors who operated stalls in the Ridley Road Market relied on spaces in the converted Tesco supermarket for after-hours storage of their wares. Some of this storage space was converted into retail space as rents began to increase. And this in turn put pressure on the owners of the market stalls, who either had to pay more rent for their storage space or increase their storage costs by paying more for transport from locations with cheaper rent.

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Most of what we looked at can be characterized as “organic” urban growth—development happening business-by-business, within a physical structure of buildings that were themselves changing slowly over time. From one point of view, our project is intended to show the structure of this kind of organic growth, linking economic issues to physical ones.

But in one case, a single community initiative showed that these kinds of “natural synergies” might be successfully designed from scratch. In Dalston, a local NGO called Hackney Community Development developed a new project relatively near one of the Overground stations just off the high street. This project consisted of several adjacent and interrelated parts:

- a new public square near the principal street, carved out of a previously-existing parking lot
- the conversion and re-use of a row of dilapidated terraced houses at one edge of the square. The ground floors of these houses had shops, facing away from the square, and were converted into spaces for start up retail businesses. The upper floors, previously with dwellings, were converted into spaces for local community organizations and arts groups, accessed by new outdoor galleries overlooking the square.
- the construction of a new jazz club and café at the west edge of the square
- and finally, the installation of ten prefabricated metal buildings, no more than about 80 square feet each, for microbusinesses, right on the edge between the terraced houses and the square. At the time we visited, these microbusinesses included a tailor, a recording studio, a coffee and juice bar, a cell phone store, a money exchange office, and others.

The variety of businesses in this initiative, working alongside existing businesses, helped support a vibrant place with an active mix of uses. The square was busy all day, and was occupied by people using and hanging out at the microbusinesses, homeless people who occupied a shady place at one end of the square, local business people patronizing the café during the day and people from farther afield coming to the jazz club at night. This included mothers who brought their children to toddlers' jazz classes in the morning, a car-washing service for people who left their cars to be cleaned at what was left of the old parking lot, children using play equipment brought into the square in the afternoon. On the adjacent street, facing away from the square, were new businesses in the renovated spaces of the terraced houses, and across the street, in different properties altogether, including an upscale restaurant and a café opened in the last year by a former lighting designer from New Zealand.

This initiative is a complex design that happens to incorporate many of the principles that seem to be the result of our research. It has a variety of spatial types; it makes use of the transformation of old terraced houses; it puts businesses of the gentrifying economy next to those of people who have been in the neighborhood for a long time. It raises the question of the extent to which the economic diversity of cities, to the extent that such diversity is supported by spatial configurations, can actually be planned for. Indeed, I would suggest that the value of our research is partly in the insight it gives into the complex spatial/economic dynamics of urban neighborhoods, but also in the ways it might suggest principles for policy and design.

The first part of the title of this paper, "Making the Marginal Visible," speaks to both the content and the dual methodologies of our work. Our observations and interviews indicate a wide variety of spatial types that accommodate an equally wide variety of business functions; the ability of spaces to easily transform; and strong functional relationships between different uses. This complex variety, within small geographic areas, is the context for economic mobility, allowing people of little means a spatial and economic armature within which their own efforts are supported. Combining the spatial survey with the interviews has allowed us to detect and confirm these relationships.

As mentioned at the beginning, this work is part of a larger effort that is more generally concerned with the question of urban inclusion. This effort is incorporating historical studies as well as investigations of design and policy initiatives that are intended to legitimize and support what is often considered to be marginal and objectionable activity. There are implicit assumptions in our current work—that urban inclusion will lead to a more resilient and stable economy. Those assumptions themselves need to be tested with further investigations into the literature of urban economics and its relationships to social mix.

We conjecture that making this kind of activity visible, and beginning to understand its spatial structure, is a first step toward its legitimization and toward the understanding of how designers, developers and policy-makers might support the inclusive city.