Place and Small Businesses: Reflections on Ethnographic Research in and on Place

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This paper examines the often taken-for-granted role of 'place' and geography (cities, neighborhoods) in business ethnography, using research on small business as a case-in-point. Most studies of small businesses tend to focus directly on businesses themselves, eliding from consideration the social and physical environment in which they are situated. Yet especially for businesses that operate in an actual physical location, place infuses all they do: how they organize their operations, what they care about, the way they are perceived by customers and potential customers, the reputations they develop, where they cluster, and the kind of communication they engage in.

"Standard textbooks and monographs in anthropology do not contain the word 'place.' It goes without saying."

"No one lines up people and asks them to define 'place' and list three examples of it. No one really has a theory of it. No one imagines it is some sort of data set to be sampled."

—Clifford Geertz

INTRODUCTION: THE MISSING PLACE OF PLACE IN BUSINESS ANTHROPOLOGY

The academic discipline of anthropology made its reputation on the study of *places* – famously, often far-away, exotic places, narrated by monographs emphasizing difference, peculiarity, or, 'placeness.' Anthropologists in industry, by contrast, are routinely sent to far-flung places – often the 'same ones' as their counterparts in other corporations, including the BRIC countries, East or West Coast market cities, and maybe the South. But in industry the sites in which research takes place tend to be more "incidental," as Ken Anderson (2012) puts it, a box to tick so that it can be said that the project was "global." The main object of study, whether gen x'ers on bikes or food entrepreneurs, takes precedence over the place in which it is studied. Rarely is place an object of study in its own right.

Much like the 'global' research that aggregates far-flung case studies of people or products, research on small businesses tends to focus on businesses themselves and therefore misses a number of driving forces that shape how they work, what they care about, their reputations, and where they cluster (cf. Venkataramani and Avery 2012). Drawing on ethnographic research situated in New Haven, Connecticut and conducted for a major corporation seeking to restructure its dealings with small businesses, this paper considers: how cities come to be perceived as having a certain character, reputation, or even "soul;"

how that reputation attracts some businesses, customers, and phenomena, and repels others; how marketing departments of cities can shift directions of such reputations, accentuating certain elements and obscuring others; and how small businesses themselves take advantage of, and are often perceived as being part and parcel of, the "placeness" of the sites in which they are located. In this framing, entities typically elided from corporate research on small businesses take the foreground: economic development councils, city marketing departments, start-up incubators, venture capital meet-ups, neighborhood councils, incentives and disincentives.

At least for those small businesses whose work takes place in an actual physical location, "place" infuses all they do: how they organize their operations, what they care about, the way they are perceived by customers and potential customers, the reputations they develop, where they cluster, and the kind of communication they engage in. In most contexts, a deli is not just a deli, but 'my deli on Smith street in Cobble Hill,' or 'a little spot in Bridgeport by the train station.' Place is not just a backdrop, then, but a key frame for what small businesses are and do.

Attention to the place-specific drivers of small businesses is only more important in light of recent trends prioritizing the authentic, local, and rooted. Small businesses have helped build these growing business imperatives and now stand to capitalize on them. Products today often highlight authentic, made-in- origins (Peru, Brooklyn, Scotland, a local Indian village), while small business owners launch groups to market commerce in specific locales, such as the recently formed "Market New Haven." Many cities now have their own marketing departments, recalling older campaigns for promoting places that have been used by countries and cities for as long as there has been industry and tourism (think Jaffa as Bride of Palestine, Detroit as Motor City, or Paris, Capital of the 19th Century). But the look and feel and reputation of a city need not be directly marketed by a department in the city government. Like neighborhoods and companies, cities have reputations that circulate and affect beliefs about the people who live in them and what goes on in them.² And even within newly flourishing local business districts, struggling sections of town remain effectively shut out from revitalization, "across the tracks" or the "color line," as people often say. All this suggests that there are dimensions to the influence of place that business anthropologists would do well to explore and which are explored in this paper.

Trends and Definitions

On the one hand, places come to seem rooted, immutable, one of the few givens of life, not unlike the thought that 'when I wake, no matter what happens tomorrow, there will be

¹ Heine's article on Savannah (2012) makes a similar point about how places with reputations for having good music scenes attract not only musicians but people and businesses that value music and the arts

² As much as cities seem to possess distinct characteristics shaping local businesses, scholarship in sociology and geography points to strong commonalities across national boundaries among certain kinds of cities. For instance, the places Saskia Sassen (1991) identifies as "global cities" (e.g., New York, Tokyo, London, Sao Paolo, Hong Kong) have more in common with each other than they do with the countries in which they are located.

ground beneath my feet.' Places are the physical and experiential background to how we move through life (Cf. Feld and Basso 1996). At the same time, places are constantly invented and re-invented, transformed over time, and not infrequently, intentionally so. 3 In recent years, several elements appear to be at work, in something other than a direct, causal dynamic: the widespread appeal of the character of place (or the local) against the declining appeal of suburbs; the widespread appeal of locally-made and locally-produced against the decline in appeal (and caché) of mass produced; and the way that local and the locally-made have come to be associated not only with a refined sensibility (from locavores to small-batch bourbon) but a rejection of what is seen to have gone wrong in past decades (suburbs, big box stores, sprawl). It is no accident that the sort of people who disproportionately populate the sort of locations most associated with what we might think of as the new "place-ness" those best known for purveying things local, like Brooklyn – also disproportionately occupy positions, formal and informal, in the new media which so quickly associate those places with their new characters (cf. Florida 2002). Far more evidence would be needed to demonstrate what has made possible the emergence of a new kind of imagining of place. Here it matters more to observe that concomitant with the decline in stature of suburbs has been a rise in stature of urban places, and with that rise in stature has come an influx of cultural elites who have at their disposal the tools by which micro-places and their stories can be made. At the same time, as their reputations have grown, these micro-places have attracted increasing numbers of like-minded people. The same can be said about the sorts of businesses that operate in these locations. (Thus Williamsburg, Brooklyn attracted food entrepreneurs, and once it became known for food entrepreneurship, has attracted even more food entrepreneurs and food entrepreneurship.) This much is uncontroversial.

Before proceeding any further, let us outline a working definition of place. For our purposes here, *place* is distinguished from *space* (the latter does tend to be an object of study in workplace or organizational anthropology and organizational design research, while the former does not). *Places* have imaginary and physical boundaries; have perceived 'characters,' often felt in personal ways by inhabitants or visitors; and come to be associated with stories or reputations, which can be shifted or disrupted. Each of these elements of place shapes the way resources are allocated and the way businesses are imagined, founded, and operate.

DIMENSIONS OF PLACE: HOW PLACE IMPACTS HOW SMALL BUSINESSES' WORK, COMMUNICATE, AND ARE PERCEIVED

"For it is still the case that no one lives in the world in general"

– C. Geertz

I. The missing place of place in small business research

As a way of illustrating the absence from consideration of place in research on small business, let us take as a starting point four common types of studies.

³ Anderson (1981) famously described how this works with nations and nation-ness.

- Market Sizing. This work focuses on ascertaining the size of a given market, how
 much is being spent on a particular activity in a particular country overall, what
 organizations are the largest providers of a given product or service, and what
 proportion of the spend is made by small businesses (often defined as companies
 with less than a certain number of employees or below a certain revenue size).
 Country-level characteristics are often limited to overall spend in the particular
 market and recent and emerging trends that could affect that market.
- 2. Design research for product development. For an existing product or one in alpha or beta stage, this approach often entails a number of site visits or remote video interactions to observe the product-in-use. Most energy tends to be spent asking staff direct questions having to do with the product in question; with communication technology, for example: With whom do you tend to communicate and about what? What sort of technological means do you employ? Can you show me how you do that?
- 3. Organizational design research. Workplace studies sometimes give a great deal of attention to space the arrangement of office furniture, the physical seating arrangements of teams, how organizational structure maps physical reality, and the effects of all that on collaboration and other desired outcomes.
- 4. Marketing research. This sort of research tends to focus on take rates for a particular product or service, tradeoffs between different sets of features and functions, breakdowns or interest level of responsiveness to messaging by industry or company size.

There are, of course, other ways of studying small businesses and other ways of handling the approaches characterized above. What matters for the discussion at hand is that qualitative approaches have generally attempted to arrive at the challenges and needs of small businesses by speaking directly with and visiting small businesses themselves; quantitative approaches have tended to focus on market sizes, market dynamics, and segmentation.⁴ That a business is located in White Plains or Chelsea or Toronto or Mexico City more affects the logistics of fieldwork than the direction of the analysis, let alone the deliverables. In leaving from serious consideration the places in which small businesses operate and the way ideas about those places are perceived in manipulated, each of the major approaches to studying small businesses – macro and micro – misses critical dimensions to how small businesses come into being, how they conceive of themselves, how they present themselves to the world, and how the world, including customers and potential customers of these businesses, perceives them.

Each of the typical forms of studies described above – design research, market sizing, organizational design research, segmentation – has by now a fairly established method. Shifting the frame of analysis of small businesses from businesses themselves to the place-based contexts in which they operate raises a new set of questions as to which elements to

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⁴ The rise of big data analytics has complicated the easy dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methods, as has Patel (2011). Qualitative research now frequently makes use of data analytics (e.g. product usage data), and quantitative approaches always already required interpretation.

bring into focus. The sections that follow begin to describe what some of these objects – cities and types of cities, imaginary and physical boundaries, key actors and entities, and incentives and disincentives – might bring to light about small businesses. One thread woven throughout is how places come to be associated with stories, how those stories impact the businesses that come into being in those places, and how both of these impact allocation of resources.

II. Cities and Types of Cities

An artist-entrepreneur who excavates beneath old buildings in New Haven believes the artifacts he finds for his collection tell the city's history, its story. "Cities have hearts and souls," he says. Cities matter for small business because small businesses are located in places with character, with reputations that attract or repel others (customers and potential customers), and incentives and disincentives (high taxes, low taxes, free space for start-ups, high rents, rent subsidies).

But the hearts and souls of cities do not come into existence on their own. Among many other ways this comes to pass, cities are often marketed as having certain identities. Winston-Salem, North Carolina, once a sleepy suburban town, is now described as the "city of the arts," and New Haven, long avoided by denizens of Connecticut's wealthier enclaves due to crime and decay, becomes the cultural center of Connecticut. In fact, many cities now have their own marketing departments, which promote certain neighborhoods and often mention certain small businesses by name. Small businesses are thereby affected by the marketing of cities both directly (by city marketing departments, neighborhood marketing associations and the like) and indirectly (by popular media and the broad circulation of stories that shape a city's reputation). Take for example, a promotional blurb for Market New Haven:

The organization's overall strategy is to promote New Haven as a unique and attractive destination with "something for everyone" by continuing to reinforce the strategic positioning theme "New Haven. It all Happens Here" in all marketing and communications. By forming collaborative marketing events or executing direct marketing activities, Market New Haven heightens the awareness of New Haven's offerings, drives traffic to New Haven's entertainment options, and encourages local and regional consumers to spend in New Haven. (Market New Haven promotional blurb)

This is collaborative marketing meant to drive awareness and street traffic. Many small businesses gain publicity from the same marketing campaign(s) and, for a fee, can have their names specifically mentioned.

But the look and feel and reputation of a city can come about without being directly marketed by a department in the city government. Like neighborhoods and companies, cities have reputations that circulate and affect beliefs about the people who live in them and what

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⁵ There are of course, many other dimensions to place that are worth considering but which will not be treated here, including some alluded to at this paper's outset.

goes on in them and those reputations can be deployed by small businesses for various ends. As a designer in a Greenwich, CT design consultancy put it to me when I asked her how her organization's physical location affects the business:

I'm in the business of selling style. It's smoke and mirrors. It's a matter of manipulating people's perceptions—I work with really wealthy people. If I lived in Norwalk, they wouldn't want to work with me. When T. [her CEO] brings me in, he says, 'Oh this is S, she lives in Greenwich,' and he'll modulate his voice. All these people have a connection to Greenwich somehow, but not to Stamford, where I grew up.

Several points are worth emphasizing. Cities, and *places* really, (with the help of a host of actors within them) participate in their own invention in the form of a certain character. At the same time there is a tension between this fact and the narratives of their distinctness that come to circulate. ⁷ On the one hand, cities are marketed or perceived as having reputations as a whole; on the other hand, not only are they typically internally divided (by neighborhoods, districts, highways, train tracks), those divisions can shift. Such internal divisions and the way they come to seem natural or intractable is the subject of the next section.

II. Imaginary and Physical Boundaries: "Across the Tracks"; Highways that Cut through Cities

"A neighborhood is a quarter mile radius, from centers and edges. The center might be a park; it might be more dense...Clusters of commercial areas a half mile

6 "Downtown Winston-Salem Partnership, a member and advocacy organization, is the lead organization implementing the downtown plan developed in 2007. Part of the revitalization plan includes the Restaurant Row Program, introduced by the city with federal and state support to help recruit and finance new eateries. The plan also calls for promoting Winston-Salem as the 'City of the Arts' and for attracting businesses in the design industry" (Kodrzycki and Muñoz 2009). 7 "In the mid-1980s, Yale University, New Haven economic development officials, and business leaders got together to address service sector employment. Out of this came "New Haven 1990"—a marketing proposal that grew out of conversations among development, business, and neighborhood representatives, and with experts from other cities that had undertaken similar initiatives, including Baltimore, Boston, and Indianapolis" (Kodrzycki and Muñoz 2009). The title of the report documenting these activities is "Resurgent Cities." The very existence of such a report is an indication of how cities are perceived to be part of a common set, with common sets of initiatives meant to transform them, or bring about their renaissance or "resurgence." This duality - at once represented as unique in character, soul, heritage and at the same time part of a broad phenomenon (the rise of certain types of places, imagined in certain ways, and the concomitant influx of people, capital and publicity – mirrors the phenomenon of the rise of much larger places: nations (cf. Anderson 1981). Much has been written on that subject. It's relevance here is to underscore how places are at once imagined (made up, or just made) and real, in the sense of having real effects once imagined and experienced as real.

apart. And neighborhoods have personalities that attract different kinds of people" (emphasis added).

-Architect, New Haven, CT

Cities are divided by neighborhoods, blocks, districts—each of which have a different character that can be exploited or developed—and which facilitates the development of some types of businesses and inhibits others. On one end of Chapel Street in New Haven, Yale and a group of retailers in the central business district worked together to develop a common aesthetic for lighting. Now all the businesses in the district use it. The lighting in the windows unifies the feeling of certain blocks. The look gives a sense of festivity, shared community, and shared character of businesses (upscale, safe, within walking distance, all lined up in a row). Further down the same street, past a sort of invisible barrier, past a certain block, we enter another business district with a very different character, encouraging very different types of businesses, and in a sense, discouraging the more upscale establishments a few blocks away. "People don't go there because of the color line," the owner of an architecture firm tells me. Visible are mostly people of color, minorities, people who seem to have less money than a few blocks down. Signs of shuttered businesses left and right. People waiting for the bus in a place where riding the bus has a down and out connotation. The storefronts are wigshops, pager shops, tattoo parlors. On the other side of the invisible barrier lie the upscale strips of Chapel.

Such boundaries take physical, emotional, and imaginary form, but their effect is this: they come to seem natural, and the physicality of some of these boundaries – train tracks, highways, mountains, police precincts – accentuate this sense of seeming naturalness. People literally don't cross certain tracks (racial, physical—highways that inhibit crossing on foot or by bicycle). A man tells me his story of growing up in New Haven's the Hill (one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, one of the poorest areas in the state). He has a girlfriend in an upper middle class, more suburban neighborhood in Hamden, and he literally has to climb over East Rock, a small mountain, to visit her at night—to cross the tracks. Mountains are physical boundaries that here accentuate imaginary ones; and imaginary boundaries, once in place, can be difficult to shift:

We bought this building seven years ago and wanted to do the conventional thing—rent it. But we haven't been able to. It's the street...People have this attitude—culture—and its hard to change. Six realtors couldn't imagine anything beyond a pager or a tattoo shop that would need more than 800 square feet on this part of Chapel.

Examples of how such boundaries affect how key individuals and entities act in a given city abound: the visitor who feels unwelcome; a small business owner who refuses to work with the EDC on a parking initiative; a Yale faculty member hosting a new hire who accidentally drives to the Hill (an impoverished neighborhood abutting Yale's campus) and curses out loud to himself, "I should not have taken you here!" In these and other ways, imaginary and physical boundaries affect: the sorts of businesses that emerge in certain locations, the sorts of people that frequent those businesses, and the way official entities organize their efforts to stimulate growth or revitalize.

III. Key Individuals, Entities, and Initiatives

In a city, key organizations, individuals, and entities can play an outsized role in shaping socio-economic, infrastructural and other conditions for businesses to thrive—or not. In the case of New Haven, these entities — such as the community and state relations office at Yale — have tended to focus on specific streets, blocks or neighborhoods. Some focus on types of industry or work: CTech, for example, provides office space, training, and access to venture capital for high tech and biotech startups. These entities may not be "customers" in the strict sense of purchasing goods and services from small businesses (though some do). They are, however, a key constituency that some savvy small businesses spend time communicating with, wooing, and possibly benefitting from their assistance or coffers.

Many cities now have an economic development council (an EDC)—certainly those cities aiming at urban and economic renewal. These tend to work closely with chambers of commerce and various offices in city government. As one EDC staff member put it to me, the city "trots out" certain business owners as success stories. And then uses these stories to attract foundation and federal funding; these stories are used, in turn, to attract entrepreneurs to apply for city programs for help. These efforts do not go unnoticed: "The good news is the City of New Haven has been very encouraging. And has helped promote [the organization] and championed the work we're doing here" (local entrepreneur).

As in many university towns, the major university there, in this case Yale, has a considerable influence on the micro-climate for small businesses. One example is Yale's involvement in the division of the city by business districts. The university owns the real estate on a strip of Chapel Street, which is devoted to upscale merchants and restaurants and is always kept up in appearance. Yale has not put the same effort into another district on the very same street mentioned above—where there are vacancy signs displayed every few steps. Such efforts (or the lack thereof) underscore the role that key entities can play in shaping the environment in which small businesses operate, and particularly in influencing the clustering of certain types of businesses in very particular areas, blocks and clusters of blocks.

And just as organizations, city, offices, or powerful institutions like Yale can influence the micro climates in which small businesses operate, so too can key individuals. Bruce Alexander, the Mayor, Yale President Levin and a handful of others — in cooperation with developers — have played a key role in the shaping of the new New Haven. Alexander helped give the shops on Chapel and Broadway their cohesive look. As one shop owner said to me, "Whatever you're doing, you eventually want to sell it to Bruce Alexander, because he's the retail person for Yale."

Among many other influences worth considering, these key players are pivotal in getting incentives earmarked for certain districts and not others. Such incentives and disincentives are the subject of the following section.

III. Incentives and Disincentives

Like reputations and the imaginary and physical boundaries with which they tend to align, there are a variety of concrete and material incentives and disincentives for small businesses

to locate, or relocate, in particular places,⁸ and to stimulate the growth of certain types of businesses already there (e.g. biotech). These vary by city or state, and by neighborhood or even blocks within them. Examples include tax abatements and grants from incubators, interested parties (like Yale in New Haven), and from state funds earmarked to stimulate technology innovation and startups. Certain incentives, like abatements on income taxes and for equipment — are targeted by neighborhood or district where income levels are especially low. This is where economic development projects affecting small business overlap with anti-blight efforts. So in New Haven, neighborhoods with reputations for crime, poverty, and neglect, like Fair Haven and the Hill, tend to receive more abatements than the central business districts.

One thing we do is help businesses with taxes—we meet with Aldermen and other politicians to abate the taxes of specific businesses.... I run interference with the state. One company that employs 90 people in Fair Haven and employs a lot of Latinos—the floor is all minority men. Last year we did this successfully for a different company. I'm delaying them paying their taxes and jerry rigging it so they can file late. There's no way a politician is going to let a business with 90 employees go under in Fair Haven. And we're doing this with another one in the Hill with 50 employees—they do ornamental lighting all over the world. (NGO staffperson)

Equally at work in affecting the number and character of businesses, and clientele, in a given location is the absence of incentives, not to mentioned disincentives—like high rents. A Yale School of Management professor remarks that her MBA students found that the Audubon district (right near Yale) is failing—businesses constantly in and out—in large part because the rents are so high. So it is not only the apparently struggling neighborhoods and districts impacted by the differential allocation of resources and incentives; in fact the struggling reputation can itself be a justification for incentives and development assistance. In so-called higher-rent districts, the attractiveness for new entrepreneurs is at stake in part precisely because of those high rents. For this reason, would-be entrepreneurs move elsewhere (to Bed Stuy, Portland, Detroit).

V. Conclusion: Implications for Business Anthropology

It should be clear by now that attempts to understand "small business" which focus their attention principally on businesses themselves miss a wide range of phenomena, entities, actors, and activities that shape the sorts of small businesses that emerge, how they work, the

⁸ Material incentives and disincentives are by no means the only drivers influencing where entrepreneurs choose to locate or relocate. Reputations of places themselves have incentivizing and disincentivizing effects. Thus the growing attraction of neighborhoods like Bed-Stuy in New York or cities like Portland, Oregon or Detroit for entrepreneurs feeling squeezed or intimidated by the high rents of New York and San Francisco.

visitors and customers they attract, and the sort of support they receive. The stories and boundaries (real and imagined) surrounding a particular place impact the sort of entrepreneurial activity that takes place, the way it takes place, as well as the distribution of resources supporting it. At the same time, key individuals, organizations, social movements and marketing departments can come together to disrupt or redefine what seem like fixed boundaries, not to mention identities and reputations of places (so by making parking more accessible, improving the aesthetic of storefronts, supplementing police protection, New Haven's reputation for crime and decay has begun to erode, especially in certain central business districts).

There are many other elements of place that were not taken up in any depth in the foregoing discussion. Notable among these is the way small businesses increasingly employ stories about or reputations of place to promote themselves, or even to *define* what they do. Examples abound, particularly in my current home, Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The neighborhood's reputation for cool and entrepreneurial-mindedness attracts ever more likeminded entrepreneurs, and that reputation, in turn, draws visitors and customers from around the world. But my aim has not been to elaborate all the dimensions of place business anthropology could attend to or that matter for understanding small businesses or other targets of corporate products, services, and marketing. Instead, my aim has been to illustrate some of the consequences of leaving place out of typical frames of analysis in business research, in this case on small businesses—and to gesture to some of the advantages of bringing place more to the center of the frame. Indeed, a place-based approach could bring a number of benefits for corporations that sell and market to small businesses and those who seek to advise them with research:

- Target markets. The character and reputation of a place, as well as the key entities
 involved in shaping them, play a significant role in the future of the small business
 landscape there. The relevant bounds of 'place' for understanding a company's
 particular target audience, such as small businesses, need not be national. Worth
 considering are neighborhoods, cities, or types of cities (global, resurgent, university
 towns).
- 2. *Method.* Along with the merits of observational research more generally, a place-based approach poses another challenge to the by now almost reflex assumption that the way to understand a marketing or product target (whether they be tweens or social entrepreneurs) is to talk to those targets. Such work would do well to consider

⁹ In addition to those described above, there are a host of other entities influencing the micro climate for small businesses in New Haven alone:

The Yale Entrepreneurial Institute: an organization that provides assistance with business plans and offers seed money to Yale students and faculty who have an idea for a start-up; YEI helped put out YouRenew, which recycles handhelds and has been a big success.

The Livable City Initiative (LCI): an anti-blight program that aims at revitalization, and, among other details, housing code enforcement. New Haven has been able to "surge" in part because it has been able to contain crime and make neighborhoods "look" more welcoming.

Project storefronts: the city pays 50% of storefront renewals or improvements up to \$60,000. This initiative helps areas look more welcoming and prosperous, attracts customers and other businesses.

- the broader social, political, geographical and cultural environments in which these targets are situated.
- 3. A more nuanced sensibility about the places in which small businesses operate could be a way for corporations to develop credibility with those businesses (which often tend to view big corporations with skepticism or even derision). As a corollary, such understanding could lead to different ways of segmenting small businesses (no longer employee size, revenue or industry), which in turn could correspond to new ways to message or position to those segments.

NOTES

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