The social production of urban cultural heritage: Identity and ecosystem on an Amsterdam shopping street

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ABSTRACT

Though local shopping streets form an intangible cultural heritage in all cities of the Global North, there is little recognition of their significance and no public policies for their preservation. But the social capital that develops in these vernacular spaces supports a unique urban cultural ecosystem. Local shopping streets mobilize aesthetics, collective memory, and traditional forms of social interaction to create feelings of local identity and belonging which are endangered by economic modernization and global consumer culture. Using ethnographic observations, interviews, and online and archival data, the close study of an upscale shopping street in Amsterdam shows how feelings of identity and belonging are formed around a re-imagined urban village. In contrast to other streets, this street preserves traditional patterns of individual ownership and an unusual longevity of stores. Not only does this cultural ecosystem merit safeguarding for its living heritage, it requires planning to become a more socially inclusive, multicultural urban heritage.

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Through most of the twentieth century, preservation of cultural heritage aimed to restore and maintain the tangible “stones” of a historically significant built environment. By the 1980s, however, the mission had expanded to include a different goal: to keep alive the intangible “spirit” of small social groups whose customs and skills are marginalized by modern society (Vecco, 2010). After the United Nations Economic, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted a Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 (http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00,006), researchers, administrators, and advocates for historic preservation around the world began a vigorous debate about the key terms of both its interpretation and implementation. Not only would the outcomes of each project depend on how “safeguarding,” “intangible,” and “cultural heritage” were defined, but the meaning of each term—and its relation to the others—would reshape stakeholders’ interests globally as well as on the local level.

Underlying the global consensus for preservation, at least as UNESCO expresses it, is an understanding that normal processes of change in all modern societies endanger a community’s ritual practices and skills as well as built cultural forms. This implies a strong norm that both singular architectural expressions and significant group traditions should transcend the socially-shaped limits of time. Even if modern technology or economic organization seems to render cultural practices obsolete, they are “traditional, contemporary and living at the same time” (http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00,002).

Culture is in many ways the timeless “business” of cities (Zukin, 1995). The wealth that creates spectacular structures is concentrated in cities, elites build monuments there, and tourists visit to get a “cultural fix.” Yet safeguarding urban architectural forms and ritual practices poses special problems. Though governments tend to preserve historic monuments that support their own interests as well as local and national identities, there is much less agreement on the need to preserve either vernacular cityscapes or the “authentic” ways of life that develop in them (Amit-Cohen, 2008; Zukin, 2010).

Cities in dynamic market economies have a structural resistance to preservation. A Growth Machine of real estate developers, public officials, media companies, and other “place entrepreneurs” continually demolishes and rebuilds the cityscape, both following and anticipating cycles of capital investment and disinvestment (Logan & Molotch, 1986). Moreover, from New York to Shanghai, the desire to build a city’s global reputation—indeed, to make it...
modern—runs roughshod over districts where non-elite residents have put down roots (e.g., Berman, 1982; Campanella, 2008; Zipp, 2010).

With so much at stake, advocates working within the framework of cities’ historic preservation laws generally focus on protecting the tangible heritage of individual buildings and districts. At best, an urban space where ritual practices and traditional knowledge are developed and passed on may be preserved as a house-museum or denoted by a “marker” or sign for a walking tour—usually after strenuous efforts to mobilize local communities, persuade public officials, and raise funds to maintain it (e.g., Hayden, 1995).

But vernacular urban spaces that cannot be put in a museum—spaces such as streets, street corners, and public parks—are important bases for the ongoing social interactions by which a cultural heritage is produced. Both the parks—are important bases for the ongoing social interactions and “one of the forms of intangible cultural capital, namely the idea of cultural ecosystems as shared cultural networks and relationships that facilitate cultural, social, and economic interaction between members of a group.”

Vernacular spaces and cultural ecosystems

Urban cultural ecosystems are formed by ordinary city dwellers interacting in vernacular spaces. Historically, the most important of these have been markets of various kinds (Agniew, 1986; Low, 2000). Today, they are often public spaces where men and women engage in social practices of prolonged and habitual consumption: the “third space” of local pubs, cafés, and barber shops (Duneier, 1992; Oldenburg, 1989), and the casual “sidewalk ballet” of local merchants, shoppers, and passers-by (Jacobs, 1961). Equally important is the assemblage of small retail businesses that are concentrated in local shopping streets. But in contrast to either the intimate interiors of shops and cafés or the exterior focal points of public squares, local shopping streets are seldom recognized as important public spaces in their own right. They are often visually chaotic, lack a unified social organization, and respond to the ebb and flow of individual business decisions. Yet because of their “everyday” uses and the local self-sufficiency that they support, they are the vernacular spaces in which modern urban cultural ecosystems are formed (Deener 2012; Hall, 2012; Zukin & Kosta, 2004).

Local shopping streets are simultaneously a site of social, economic, and cultural exchange. Unlike the standardized architectural designs and transnational ownerships of both central shopping streets and suburban malls, they provide a “face” of local social and cultural identity. They do this through the small scale of social interactions; by the rootedness of individually owned shops in local economies; and by the on-going cultural negotiation, on the part of store owners, customers, and habitués, of two cardinal principles of urban life: familiarity and strangeness. Though they are functionally all alike, with grocery stores, dry cleaners, hair salons, and cafés, each local shopping street creates its own nested identity, the feeling that “each area is a city within a city within a city” (White, 1999 [1949], p. 35).

Because local shopping streets support the cultural ecosystem of these “cities within cities,” I propose that they be considered a crucial part of urban cultural heritage. On the one hand, this expands the interpretation of “intangible cultural heritage” to the social practices that develop in vernacular urban spaces. On the other hand, it offers the possibility of devising realistic public policies to safeguard local practices against the spiritual displacements brought by economic modernization and global consumer culture.

Social significance of local shopping streets

A local shopping street is a space so seemingly banal, so taken for granted that it hardly appears as a subject of social or cultural research. But local shopping streets are not just sites of economic transactions; they are social spaces where cultural identities are formed, learned, and reproduced. These are both local and global identities, for in the shopping street both traditional ethnic homogeneity and new ethnic diversity become embedded in a bounded geographical terrain. An everyday, “bread and butter” shopping street carries the DNA of local identity but infuses it with products, people, and practices that come from everywhere. In this sense the social space of the street is a crucible of cultural heritage where both longtime residents and new migrants belong, a malleable space of situated attachment (cf. Amin, 2012; Hall, 2012; Lallement, 2010; Varda, 1975).

To speak of social spaces as shaping collective identity calls attention to both the routine and scale of everyday social interactions in those spaces. As the classical sociologists Max Weber and Emile Durkheim noted long ago, “modernization” is experienced as an authoritarian distancing from traditional routines, a shift from personal to anonymous social contacts, and an increase in scale of human relations from the intimate to the bureaucratic. By contrast, modern feelings of identity and belonging reflect an acknowledgement of individual worth in a complex social system. The cultural authenticity of a local shopping street reflects its ability to acknowledge individual worth regardless of—and even despite—a more universal disregard.

Yet local shopping streets are marginalized by structural forces of economic modernization ranging from the growth of transnational chain stores and corporate branding strategies to commercial gentrification by rising rents. They are demolished by state-sponsored and -sanctioned redevelopment policies. They are also put at risk by an automobile culture that privileges distant shopping malls, and by consumers’ changing tastes. In addition to the continual financial problems that all small businesses encounter, each assemblage of local stores now faces sharp competition from online shopping.

Even in the best of times, retail businesses are risky. Small independently owned stores must contend with high taxes and lack of access to credit. Local shopkeepers tend to ignore or lack resources to respond to new marketing trends. Neither are they able or willing to provide for

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intergenerational succession. With greater access to, and rewards for, university degrees, many of their children become doctors and engineers instead of grocers and barbers.

The apparent obsolescence of local shopping streets neglects their important role in reproducing cultural identity and belonging: as a public space of civil society; as a component of an environmentally sustainable, walkable city; as both a visual image and an enactment of an historic community. Though different actors play roles in this enactment over time, they all may sustain feelings of identity and belonging. Shopkeepers and their customers even devise performances that strengthen the social production of an “authentic” historic community (cf. de la Pradelle, 2006; Zukin, 2010, pp. 105–115).

Problems of authenticity

Authenticity, however, is a moving target. It represents both the primordial spirit of social groups and the contemporary products of creative individuals. Though it is assumed to be inherent in a distinctive habitus, subjective impressions of authenticity can be artfully produced by aesthetic cues (Grazian, 2003; Wright, 2009). Moreover, authenticity can be used as a lever of power: to exclude social groups from the polity (Adorno, 2003 [1964]) and from the city as well (Zukin, 2010).

Though the reproduction of identity and belonging on a local shopping street creates a subjective feeling of authenticity, it may take a special effort to expand this feeling across social class and ethnic divisions. In other words, if local shopping streets are to support “authentic” urban communities without reifying social exclusion, they must mediate between longtime, often homogeneous populations and more heterogeneous newcomers. I will return to this theme at the end of the article.

Case study: an historic streetscape

In the framework of an ongoing, transnational research project on local shopping streets that I developed with colleagues in six global cities, I selected Utrechtsestraat, a small, admittedly upscale shopping street in a central area of Amsterdam, as a subject for social, cultural, and political-economic analysis. Though our collective goal is to analyze the social production of local shopping streets within the framework of globalization, migration, and gentrification, I came to see Utrechtsestraat as a crucible of cultural heritage in the Global North.

I found this street by chance. An issue of Time Out Amsterdam that fell into my hands before I began to do research contained a feature article, “Saturday shopping with...” (Hof, 2010), in which the food and restaurant critic Johannes van Dam recommended several food shops on Utrechtsestraat. Curious, I walked to the street, which also by chance turned out to be near my hotel. I was immediately drawn to the historic streetscape: the large number of stores on the narrow street, the red-brick sidewalks (which I knew to be a blatant sign of highly self-conscious historic preservation), the seventeenth-century houses that had been carefully restored, and the canals.

Skeptical researcher that I may be, I saw that the mix of small shops, the apparent absence of retail chains, and the scale of interactions suggest an authenticity that has vanished from most other cities, the authenticity of an urban ecosystem that is most at risk from economic modernization and contemporary global consumer culture. Hearing some customers speak English in the shops, I realized that my inability to speak Dutch would not prevent me from doing research on this street, although it might be an inhibiting factor on streets in other districts of the city.

During six months in Amsterdam in 2010–11 I studied Utrechtsestraat through daily ethnographic observations, interviews, and conversations, and online and archival research. I carried out 26 interviews on the street: 18 with owners, co-owners, or children of former owners of stores, including members of the executive committee of the street (merchants’) association; 2 with managers or employees; 5 with residents and longtime customers whose history on the street goes back to 1960; and 1 with the street manager, the appointed director of the street association, whose salary is paid jointly by the association and the city government. All the interview subjects consented to be identified in published work.

By examining the changing composition of businesses, the narratives of merchants, and the impressions of store owners and residents, I connect the lived experiences of individuals and the cultural ecosystem of a local community. My research shows that a local shopping street embodies three strategies that shape an intangible cultural heritage. First, the street as a whole mobilizes powerful aesthetic themes. Second, it stores collective memory. And third, it provides a theater for performing a ritualized script of urban sociality—in this case, that of an archetypal “urban village” with both the social capital of a close-knit, traditional, working-class community (Gans, 1962) and the cultural capital of self-conscious gentrifiers (Jacobs, 1961).

Mobilization of aesthetic themes

Utrechtsestraat has an enviable location at the southern end of Amsterdam’s Canal Belt, which won designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2010 (http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1349; see Fig. 1, map). Six blocks long and barely nine meters wide, the street is bisected by three of the city’s major, most picturesque canals and two narrow side streets. A single pair of tram tracks runs down the middle of the street, providing access to the city’s historic center to the north and new residential and commercial districts to the south. Cyclists pedal through the street all day, many of them mothers who transport children in Bafiets carts attached to their bikes (see Fig. 2). Though never crowded, Utrechtsestraat has been an important “street of access” or passage as well as a major location of retail shops since the eighteenth century (Lesger, 2007, p. 46).

The surrounding district is comprised of meticulously restored, seventeenth-century, brick and limestone houses and former warehouses, most now divided into apartments or used as single-family homes. Many retain elements of their original façade while others exhibit Art Nouveau renovations from the early 1900s. As an object of aesthetic contemplation, the streetscape is superb—not surprising for a World Heritage designation.
Equally unsurprising are the area’s high property values. A small to medium-size canal house sells for one to two million euros. In fact, the blocks surrounding Utrechtsestraat, including the first block to the east of the Amstel River, are home to households with the highest incomes in the city, only slightly less affluent than households in the rich Museum District to the south (http://www.os.amsterdam.nl, 2010). Unlike in many other districts of the city, there is practically no social housing for low-income households.

The six blocks of Utrechtsestraat are filled with 125 four- and five-story buildings, and the ground floor of every one of them contains a store. This commercial density extends to the bridges over two of the canals, where herring sellers’ and florists’ stands do business. As on many streets in the center, the footprint of shops on Utrechtsestraat tends to be small, as small as 75 square meters. Some buildings are a bit wider, and several shops, especially the very few chain stores, occupy double storefronts.

Many stores sport the striped awnings that were typical of elegant, nineteenth-century Amsterdam shopping streets (Fig. 3). But this is a costly design detail, for an awning or a protruding shop sign requires the store owner to pay the municipality a special tax, the precario, for...
extending commercial property into the street. Another sign of elegance is the big, plate-glass windows. Occasionally the modernism of the glass is juxtaposed to an old painted, wooden shop sign that the store owner has excavated from under an earlier renovation and left in place to add historic character. These old signs don’t match the products that are sold inside today. “The Golden Hog” (Varkensslachterij het vergulde varken), e.g., is the name on the old butcher’s sign fronting a modern kitchenware boutique. Yet the reference evokes a re-imagined storefront community of less modern times, a semblance of an urban cultural heritage.

To be sure, modern plastic shop signs are all around. But quite a few store names are hand lettered in gold on the window to suggest high quality and status. If not for automobiles and electric lights, the contours of the buildings, their decoration and human scale ensure that Utrechtsestraat today looks remarkably like it did in the past (see Figs. 4A and B).

The street’s aesthetic coherence, like that of the entire Canal Belt, owes a lot to centuries of peace, including relatively little damage by bombing in World War II, as well as long periods of economic stagnation after the Golden Age of the seventeenth century ended (Mak, 2001). But it also refers to the swampy ground underneath the city, which prohibits the building of skyscrapers and, indeed, requires property owners to shore up foundations periodically.

Moreover, national and municipal laws designate historic structures like those on Utrechtsestraat “monuments” which prevents building owners from demolishing them or making changes to the exterior. At least two stores on Utrechtsestraat also have designated monuments on the interior: painted tiles in one store and elegant shelving in another. Specific tax incentives encourage both the restoration of historic buildings and their conversion from commercial to residential use.

Though residents do not live above all the shops on Utrechtsestraat, residential conversions revitalized the surrounding streets, including the canals, in the 1980s and 1990s. Larger firms had already moved to new offices in the south of the city, while widespread protests halted state-sponsored demolition and new construction throughout the center. In the resulting uncertainty, the market for commercial real estate in the old districts languished. Taking advantage of both a rezoning for residential conversions and tax incentives for architectural restorations, highly educated, middle-class families with children bought homes in the Canal Belt, undertook extensive renovations, and moved in. This is a common scenario of gentrification.

Businesses on Utrechtsestraat gradually changed to reflect changes in the district as well as in the city as a whole: residential gentrification, on the one hand, and the growth of financial institutions, tourism, and immigration, on the other (Musterd & Salet, 2003; Nell & Rath, 2009). There is, however, much visible continuity in the street, especially in the large number of individually owned, artisanal shops (van Duren, 1995, p. 166).

During the first half of the twentieth century Utrechtsestraat was a bourgeois shopping street with many specialized stores, including wine stores, perfumers, and candy shops, as well as clothing stores, bookstores, and hobby shops for art supplies and music. One store sold hunting equipment, while another kept all sizes and varieties of knives. Around 1900, fifteen shoe stores competed for customers, and there were almost as many butchers. But over time, the number of shoe stores and butchers was greatly reduced, and by mid century food stores mainly clustered on the two small side streets near the southern end of Utrechtsestraat, along with mechanics’ and plumbers’ workshops and garages for automobiles.1

1 I am grateful to Aart van Duren for sharing unpublished historical data on stores in Utrechtsestraat in 1958 and 1968.
During the 1960s, Amsterdam became richer, and the city government undertook the modernization and new construction of both buildings and infrastructure. Dutch architects and designers became prominent; universities expanded. These changes were reflected in Utrechtsestraat. Design shops and an innovative brasserie-style restaurant opened there, attracting young shoppers with a cosmopolitan interest in the arts (Arnoldussen, 1996). A few years later, a wholesale butcher on the street who had sold cheap meat to restaurants decided to transform his business into a high-end, retail butcher shop.

These changes enhanced the street’s reputation as a destination for high-status cultural consumption. Besides design shops and the brasserie, Utrechtsestraat was known for one of the city’s first and finest record stores, that had opened in the 1950s; a shoe store and a bar that had been owned by the same families since the 1880s; and a few specialized food shops. At that point, some observers say, Utrechtsestraat began to be gentrified (Haveman, 1977, and my interviews, 2010–11).

If that was so, the process took another 20 years. The houses on the street were not in good condition, and landlords did not invest in their restoration. Alongside new boutiques, cheap stores continued to thrive. “It was second-hand city,” the owner of a computer store that opened in 1989 recalls.

Nevertheless, during the 1970s, the number of restaurants, bars, and cafés doubled, which led to their prominence on the street today (see Fig. 5). The number of highly specialized stores began to decline, reflecting broad trends like the growth of supermarkets and changes in consumer culture. Though the number of butchers, bakers, and cheese stores dwindled, this pattern was reversed after 2005, when a critical mass of old and new high-quality food stores re-created the street as a foodies’ haven (Arnoldussen, 1996; Hof, 2010). Symbolizing these changes, a cake bakery that had opened on Utrechtsestraat in the 1970s changed its name around 2000 from the typically Dutch banketbakkerij (confectionery shop) to the French pâtisserie. It won an award in 2006 for “Amsterdam’s Best Pâtisserie of the Year.”

Amsterdammers describe the look of this street as gezellig, or cosy, a term of approval that signifies the observer feels comfortable. On the one hand, gezellig invokes an archetypal folk society of rural villages, a social life that exists outside of—and in contrast to—the worldly city. On the other hand, it suggests a lack of pretentiousness, a refusal to put on airs, which conforms to traditional Dutch values of sobriety, domesticity, thriftiness, and aversion to strong expressions of personality (van Heerikhuizen, 1982).

The aesthetic ideal of gezellig signifies Utrechtsestraat as a habitat with strong social and cultural norms of both comfort and moderation. When I ask store owners there to describe their customers, they all say: “Wealthy but they don’t want to show it,” a point underlined by the optician who tells me that he once ordered a shipment of eyeglass frames with designer logos on them, but because none of his customers wanted to buy them, he had to return them all, unsold, to the factory.

An aversion to conspicuous consumption does not mean that stores on Utrechtsestraat are cheap. At the high-end butcher shop, the quality of the meat is high, but so are the prices. In contrast, local residents refer to the other shop, where the chicken doesn’t wear a special label and prices are a bit lower, as the “normal” butcher. They call the local fruit and vegetable store the “jeweler” of greengrocers, and many prefer to shop in outdoor food markets or supermarkets for lower prices. Nevertheless, all the store owners say that local residents make up a large part of their steady customers, and they demand high-quality goods, whether they are cheeses imported from France or shoes and audio components made in Europe. The greengrocer acknowledges his customers’ preferences with this slogan on his paper bag: “A Passion for Taste.”

Utrechtsestraat’s heritage aesthetics, then, reflect more than architectural form. They represent an historical embeddedness of social norms of consumption, and they reflexively relate a re-imagined urban community to the economic and cultural capital that supports contemporary consumers’ tastes.

Storage of collective memory

The shopping street also stores collective memory. As with aesthetics, the production of cultural heritage through collective memory depends on both spatial and social continuity. Throughout Amsterdam the preservation of historic structures maintains the small scale and red-brick backdrop of the traditional streetscape, a tangible form of cultural heritage. But Utrechtsestraat is unusual among the city’s shopping streets because it retains so many stores that have a long history on the street, often under the same family ownership. Yet it is also marked by remembered absences that refer to historic periods of disruption and trauma. Both presences and absences form a part of the city’s intangible cultural heritage.

Longevity

When I collected data on changes in stores on the street since the 1950s, I was struck by how many have been in place a very long time. Half of the stores on Utrechtsestraat have been doing business there under the same name for at least 20 years, one-third for at least 30 years, and about a
quarter for at least four decades (Fig. 6). Among the oldest businesses still under the original family ownership are three that opened in the late 1800s, three that opened after the end of World War II, and four that opened in the 1970s. It is not surprising, in light of their longevity, that all of these businesses are well known throughout the city, and according to their owners, draw customers from the larger metropolitan region as well as the Canal Belt.

Stores that have maintained the same type of business though not necessarily under the same name or ownership show an even more dramatic continuity. Three-quarters of the storefronts have been occupied by the same type of business for more than 20 years; more than half, for more than 30 years; and more than one-third, for more than 40 years (Fig. 7). If this kind of social capital is not a cultural heritage in a time when cities are undergoing rapid economic change, it is at the very least extraordinary. Though I have seen cafés and stores in other parts of the center that display centuries-old founding dates on their shop signs (“sinds 1673”), I believe the concentration of old, continuously-operating stores on Utrechtsestraat to be rare, even in Amsterdam.2

The reasons for this continuity are not completely clear. There are no commercial rent controls in Amsterdam, and most shopkeepers neither own their building nor live above the store. Though store owners complain that building owners, especially new ones, tend to double or triple the rent when the ten-year commercial lease expires, many benefit from landlords who keep the rents moderate, by Amsterdam and certainly world standards, or are willing to negotiate the rent with their tenant.3

Family ownership is surely another significant factor. Several store owners whom I spoke with have or had parents, and even grandparents, who owned stores; their brothers and sisters work alongside them; and so, in some cases, do their children. But the daily routines of a small shopkeeper are hard, and many young people prefer other kinds of work. Rent, taxes, and other business costs are always rising.

Since 1990, moreover, a small but growing number of buildings on Utrechtsestraat have been bought by investment companies or individual investors (Statistical Office, City of Amsterdam, 2010). Two investors each own at least six buildings on the street, which differs dramatically from the dispersion of individual building ownership in the past. Most important, conversations with shopkeepers suggest, new building owners are likely to raise rents above the level that longtime store owners can afford. They note this situation with alarm, especially when it results in the closing of stores and storefronts remaining empty for several years.

2 I don’t have hard data to prove this point, but when I asked Amsterdammers, including a professional retail store location consultant, they could not think of another street where so many stores have such longevity.

3 Data issued by the Amsterdam Kamer van Koophandel (Chamber of Commerce) indicate that commercial rents on Utrechtsestraat fall in the middle range of all shopping streets in the city (http://www.kvk.nl/download/Winkelhuren%20Amsterdam%202010_tcm73-221599.pdf).
High rents encourage fast turnover of stores and bring new businesses that are able and willing to pay them. But these stores may change the street’s character. Shopkeepers point sadly to the decision by one building owner in 2008 to close the furniture store that had been in his family for years and rent the double storefront to the transnational chain store American Apparel. In 2012, a Starbucks and two other franchise restaurants opened in a newly renovated commercial building at the north end of Utrechtsestraat, bringing more chains that contradict the street’s desired aura.

On the street as a whole, however, less than one-quarter of the stores belong to retail chains. Most of these are unobtrusively signed and belong to local, regional, Dutch, or European rather than transnational chains. These conditions explain why neither shopkeepers nor residents see the stores as chains, which reinforces their belief in the street’s traditional character.

Absence

Besides the continuous presence of certain kinds of stores that reproduce historic character, several absences are notable. The main “temporary” absence, during the past few years, was the tram. A fixture on Utrechtsestraat for many years, the tram line was suspended in 2009 to make street and bridge repairs. To the store owners’ dismay, the repairs were not concluded, and the tram did not return, for three years. Though shopkeepers claimed that the absence of the tram badly affected their business, the street was calmer without the clanging bell of a tram passing every few minutes and more spacious without the tram posing an obstacle to delivery trucks, cyclists, and pedestrians. From inside the stores, however, the calm of the street was the sign of a painful absence.

Another painful absence, though much less spoken about, is that of the kosher Jewish delicatessen that closed in the 1990s. Utrechtsestraat does not lie within the historic Jewish district that was abandoned in the 1940s, when the Nazi Occupiers and the Dutch who worked with them deported most of the city’s large Jewish population to concentration camps in Germany and Eastern Europe. But after the war, Ben, the son of the delicatessen owner, told me, when his father returned to Amsterdam from one of those camps, he decided to open a food store so that other survivors who had also returned could eat kosher food. He did not have the heart to return to the devastated former Jewish quarter. Instead, he came to Utrechtsestraat because of its central location and thriving shops.

Ben’s father soon sought permission from the municipal government to open the store on Sundays, which at that time was not allowed. He received permission, probably as a form of compensation for the deportation of Jews during the war, and until the store closed “he had a paper hanging on the wall, it was a negative—white letters on a black page—saying that he had a right to open the store on Sundays, but not till 10 o’clock so as not to offend churchgoers.”

Not many people spoke to me about the delicatessen. Indeed, only Amsterdammers older than 65 recall Utrechtsestraat as one of the few places in the city where they could buy food on Sundays after the war. Today, supermarkets in the city are open seven days a week, and according to law, shops in the center that cater to tourists are also permitted to do business on Sunday. Though Sunday shopping is now commonplace and the delicatessen is long gone, having followed most of its customers to a newer district in the South, the trauma of the Nazi Holocaust is marked in memory on Utrechtsestraat by the delicatessen’s absence.

A less tragic absence is that of the prostitution that plagued the street from the 1960s to the late 1980s. This subject does not immediately come up in conversation either, but when I pressed store owners and residents to talk about the history of Utrechtsestraat, they all knew something about it and had anecdotes to tell.

Though prostitution is legal in Amsterdam, streetwalking—soliciting customers on the street for sex—is not. For this reason, the son of the delicatessen owner says, the streetwalkers used to buy noodles and walk them on the street while waiting for customers. If the police stopped them, Ben recalls, the women would claim that they were only walking their dog. According to Sjoerd, a member of the family who own a charcuterie and lived above the store at that time, streetwalkers “carved the license plate numbers of Johns into the wooden columns of our shop. You can still see those numbers today.” He says he did not mind the streetwalkers, especially because they often started to work after 6 p.m. when shops closed.

Eventually, however, the prostitutes and their pimps became linked with hard drugs and crime. They started working earlier in the day. As a result, residents, especially those with children, campaigned against them. “In 1977,” André, a shoe store owner whose family lived above the shop, recalls, “in one week there were eight ‘incidents.’ A hooker was killed, a pimp stabbed. The café in front lost his windows ten times in one year.” Anna, a longtime resident, told me that she and her neighbors pulled cobblestones out of the street to disrupt the arrival of “johns” driving cars. These protests forced the police to move the prostitutes to another area of the city. By the late 1980s, street signs appeared on Utrechtsestraat showing a pair of women’s feet wearing high heels crossed by a single, diagonal, red slash (Arnoldussen, 2011).

Like the idea of heritage, collective memory is selective. The beauty and calm of Utrechtsestraat today does not reveal the wounds of the past. But the continuity of shops and shopkeepers preserves the stories that they tell. The heritage that they hold—and hide—is made up of both absences and presences. Like the letter from the municipality displayed by Ben’s father, the absences they hide can be thought of metaphorically as “white letters on a black page”: reminders of uprooted identity and mistaken belonging.

Performance of urban sociality

When asked to describe Utrechtsestraat, shopkeepers call it an “urban village.” “It’s a small village in a big city,” Henk, the owner of the cheese shop says. “People know each other.” Jan, who opened the street’s newest café, says he loves Utrechtsestraat: “It’s like a little village in the big city. Everyone knows each other. When we opened, the other store owners brought us flowers and cakes and wished us good luck.” A new gallery owner had the same experience. “It’s easy to meet people here,” Cindy says.
But she also suggests that the “urban village” is based, in part, on a functional reciprocity: “I bought a lot of stuff for my gallery in stores on the street, so the owners—e.g., the owner of the hardware store—came to my opening.”

Maciej, the owner of a “coffee shop” on Utrechtsestraat, a café where small quantities of soft drugs are legally sold along with coffee and tea, says that people like the street “because it reminds them of back in the old days. Amsterdam has changed completely, but this street still has the former atmosphere...For years and years the area looks the same.” To a great extent this impression reflects the longevity of stores that I discussed above. But an image of traditional sociality also reflects customers’ real interactions with shopkeepers (and bartenders) who work long hours on the street year after year.

“I always know a lot,” Mr. Jong, the “normal” butcher, says. “Customers know that, so they come in and ask me if I know an apartment with an elevator for sale or rent—these are very rare in Amsterdam, you know. I have helped people to find apartments.” Store owners like him are nodes of information and also gossip. “Same with the hotel story,” Mr. Jong continues. “Customers of this shop work in the construction industry, and one of them told me about the plans for a new hotel. In that way I am a real ‘local shop.’”

Even more than the shops, the bars on Utrechtsestraat are real “third spaces” of sociality between public and private space, between workplace and home. Each bar on the street has its own regular clientele, and locals know it: the “intellectuals” go to Café Krom, young people out shopping to Onder de Ooievaar, “young people who want to marry well” to De Huyschkaemer, “taxi drivers” to Bouwman. What is even more extraordinary about the bars on Utrechtsestraat is that there are so many of them. One-third of all the street corners are occupied by bars, which must set a record in the city. In warm weather, when customers stand outside the bars to chat and drink (and smoke cigarettes), the street seems to be a continuous social gathering.

Moreover, because Utrechtsestraat is fairly short and compact, and is bounded by small parks at either end, it has a morphological sense of containment. “When you come on your bike and enter the street,” says Anton, the manager of a music store on Utrechtsestraat, “you feel it is your street.” That too contributes to the feeling of an urban village.

This feeling is also shaped by the quasi-intimacy of personal service by store owners. In interviews, the shopkeepers emphasize that only this degree of service gives them a competitive edge against supermarkets, discount stores, and Internet retailers. The good service that they offer refers partly to the quality of their products and the speed of their response to customers’ needs. Partly too it refers to “being a bit of a performer,” as Henk the cheese seller says, and to carrying on a conversation, as Sjoerd does at the charcuterie, with everyone who comes into the shop.

Though conversation is usually initiated by the shopkeeper or an employee, it is encouraged by the small size of the shop, hands-on management by individual owners, and—paradoxically—the counter that separates the servers and served (Fig. 8).

The counter is not only a place to rest the goods that are the object of economic exchange in a shop. It physically establishes the relation between those who serve and those who are served, and evokes traditional small shops of the past. But being served in this situation requires that the customer have some fluency in Dutch—or alternatively in English, since the staff in all the shops are practically bilingual. Potential customers and employees who lack these language skills may not feel comfortable. So the social construction of heritage in intimate service interactions on this street favors an educated stratum of the population; it also favors native-born Amsterdammers over foreign and rural migrants (cf. Blokland, 2001, 2003).

Since the 1980s, the urban village trope has been a discursive marker of gentrification (Zukin, 2010). The personal service norms that embody this trope confirm a traditional social hierarchy. They suggest that identities are secure, and that people know their roles. Like the old shop signs, these norms invoke earlier times, a time before supermarkets and ATM’s handled commercial transactions. This may make many people feel comfortable, but it is also a sign of privilege.

A heritage of exclusion?

I had spent two months on Utrechtsestraat before I realized that nearly everyone in the street is “white.” Only a small number of about 125 store owners are not “white” Dutch, as are a handful of employees and very few shoppers.

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4 “Urban village” is closer to the U.S. vision of Gans and Jacobs than to the “global village” of Marshall McLUhan and Johan van der Keuken (cf. de Waard, 2012).

5 I was mystified by this last report because I saw no taxis parked next to the café. But a bartender at another café told me that “taxi drivers” refers to people of “conservative views.” I couldn’t confirm that they are really the café’s clientele because the only time I tried to go there, there was so much cigarette smoke I couldn’t enter, unlike in all the other bars.

6 I use the racialized term “white” to indicate a master status of European-origin ethnicity in the Global North. The Dutch, however, do not use racial categories; they have devised an indirect and somewhat contradictory set of categories based on the opposition between native-born and non-native born. Within the latter category they differentiate between allochtonen and non-Western allochtonen, or “immigrants” and “non-Western immigrants;” but in practice “non-Western” refers to everyone born in an underdeveloped, i.e. Global South region, including China. Moreover, though these are “official” categories, they are applied in different ways in different institutional settings (see Yanow & van der Haar, in press).
customers at bars, or passersby. In contrast, the businesses that are “ethnically marked” as not Dutch are the 17 or so restaurants that offer a foreign cuisine—and among these, none represent Amsterdam’s three biggest groups of transnational migrants: Turks, Moroccans, and Surinamese. In fact, several restaurants are French or “international,” two are Italian, and two Indian. An Indonesian restaurant on the street is ranked as the best in the city, with unusual recipes and prices to match. Most of the restaurants cater to an elite form of cosmopolitan consumption.

The informal ethnic exclusivity of the shops, coupled with the ethnic marking and social selection of the restaurants, contradicts formal public policies. Like other cities in the Global North, Amsterdam in recent years has developed public policies to encourage “multiculturalism” and social integration of recent transnational migrants (see, e.g., Uitermark, Rossi, & van Houtum, 2005). Often this takes the form of combating spatial concentrations of migrants who share a non-native Dutch ethnicity: in other words, the municipality wants no ghettos (Fainstein, 2010).

During the past few years, urban planners have focused on shopping streets in the eastern district of the city now dominated by Turkish shops, trying to persuade both chain stores and “creative” retail entrepreneurs to open businesses there and even subsidizing rents for the latter group through the (formerly non-profit) housing corporations that own many residential buildings in working class neighborhoods. The entry of these new stores would modernize the streets, planners say, and dilute the concentration of Turkish shops. Though the Turkish community only dates back to an influx of guest workers in the 1970s, the goal of restructuring shopping streets currently dominated by Turkish stores risks losing a viable urban cultural heritage to ethnic homogenization by the same sort of privileged “cosmopolitan” consumption that we see on streets in the center of Amsterdam and many other local shopping streets in the Global North (cf. Bridge & Dowling, 2001; Lagendijk et al., 2011).

Unlike on shopping streets in some other districts, only five of the 110 or so businesses on Utrechtsestraat aside from restaurants are owned by non-white Dutch. One is a bakery that sells mostly “Dutch” bread and cakes with a few North African pastries; one is a “snackhouse” or fast food restaurant that is owned by a Chinese but serves practically no Chinese food; the third is a small grocery selling Dutch foods and European wines that is open late at night, part of a small Amsterdam chain owned by an Egyptian and run by young North African men. The other two stores cater to a more upscale clientele: a high-end, Italian bathroom fixtures shop owned by a woman who migrated from Surinam years ago, and a men’s hair salon frequented by professional soccer players which is owned by a Dutch man in his thirties whose mother is Dutch and father Surinamese. Unlike in the eastern and western districts of the city, there are no shops selling Turkish, North African, or Surinamese products.

There is no attempt at multiculturalism on Utrechtsestraat because there is little ethnic diversity. Without overt discrimination, it is difficult to say why this is so. Store owners who do hire “non-white” employees don’t want to talk about it. For those who don’t, the question doesn’t come up, partly because older stores are either run by family members or by longtime employees. The same is true of the “ethnic” restaurants, which are generally, but not always owned, managed, and staffed by family members.

Moreover, the lack of ethnic diversity on the street reflects the residential demographics of the surrounding neighborhood. “This is a white neighborhood,” says Anna, who has lived on or near Utrechtsestraat since the 1960s. She has known only one family from Surinam and one from Morocco in the area in all these years. Today, in fact, 65 percent of residents of the southern Canal Belt are native-born (and presumably “white”) Dutch. Of the other 35 percent, 26 percent were born in Europe, North America, or Japan, and only 9 percent in “non-Western” countries (https://www.os.amsterdam.nl, 2010).

Going forward

Is it possible for Utrechtsestraat to represent a multicultural urban heritage? Or, like the social class privilege reproduced by high quality products and intimate personal service, does a “white Dutch” ethnic homogeneity shape the urban village’s strong feelings of identity and belonging? These are difficult questions when public policies of multiculturalism are facing criticism and rejection throughout Europe.

But researchers, followed by public officials in many regions of the Global North including the Netherlands, do recognize the economic value of immigrant business ownership (Rath, Swagerman, Krieger, Ludwinek, & Pickering, 2011). One step toward ensuring that local shopping streets reproduce a more inclusive cultural heritage would require explicit recruitment of, and support for, shops that offer products of a broader “multicultural” origin, with owners and staff drawn from a wider variety of migrants and native-born social groups. The vernacular space of Utrechtsestraat deserves to be designated an urban cultural heritage. Yet the social formation of this streetscape should also be more representative of Amsterdam’s continually developing ethnic diversity.

Local shopping streets have a unique ability to sustain the intangible cultural heritage of urban life. Their small-scale interactions that evoke the traditional sociability of “villages,” individually owned businesses that support a local economy, and sensory cues that mediate between strangeness and familiarity: these assemblages of social, economic, and cultural practices produce the nested identities of urban life. But they are threatened by the standardization and anonymity of modern consumer culture, from transnational chain stores and global brands to online shopping. For this reason they need official recognition and protection.

I have identified three ways that local shopping streets develop intangible cultural heritage. They mobilize powerful aesthetic themes that resonate with the desires and tastes of local residents. They shape collective memory by embodying both longevity and absence. And they provide a theater to enact a script, both remembered and imagined, of traditional sociality. These multiple dimensions of intangible cultural heritage require innovative public policies of historic preservation—of both vernacular cityscapes and subjectively authentic ways of life.
A local shopping street’s ability to mobilize aesthetics and intimacy creates situated attachment. Preserving this can only make cities better anchors of civil society. But urban cultural heritage, like the city itself, is a living social process. To survive, it must incorporate new as well as old traditions.

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