

Variations on a Suburb: Immigrant Culture and Urban Design at the City's Edge

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This paper presents preliminary research about the relationship between municipal urban design practices for suburban retrofits and immigrant cultural production. It argues that current urban design theory is biased by an assumption that there is a lack of culture in the suburbs which encourages a form of practice that seeks to replace existing suburban form with a European type of form that is assumed to be culturally superior. It offers analysis of clusters of immigrant owned retail centered around associated places of worship in industrial areas as a potential space of citizen initiated cultural production. The research focuses on Brampton, a suburban municipality near Toronto.

INTRODUCTION

The suburbs aren't what they used to be. In Brampton, a suburban municipality of Toronto, for example, single family homes are occupied by multiple families, industrial parks are home to Sikh gurdwaras or Hindu temples, and strip malls have immigrant shop owners catering to their communities. Initially designed for middle-class, European descended, nuclear families; many suburbs in North America have been transformed by recent immigrants and racialized minorities who have appropriated this landscape to produce new kinds of social spaces and forms of public life. Such phenomena are playing out across many of North America's suburbs and are often referred to as "ethnoburbs."¹

Meanwhile, urban designers in the United States and Canada have initiated a campaign to systematically transform existing suburban landscapes them into a compact, transit oriented, walkable urban space. Images for this new density portray a downtown-like fabric: light rail, mid-rise street walls, and sidewalks with cafes. It is an image that draws on the cultures of European city centers, introducing a preferred ideal of urbanity to a place that is presumed to lack it.

While the ambitions to build walkable public space and new housing in the suburbs are laudable, the idea that the built fabric of the suburbs is a problem to be replaced denies the accumulated cultural knowledge and identity that that have been under production since they were first built last century. We would argue this point for any existing built condition, but it has a particular resonance for contemporary suburbs such as Brampton,

whose population is of overwhelmingly non-European descent. Brampton's residents, who are mostly descended from South Asia, have appropriated and transformed this suburban landscape in ways that would be unfamiliar to the critical/negative opinions of many urban designers.

This research has been carried out in partnership with the City of Brampton's urban design department to explore how knowledge of its existing social and cultural landscape may inform design schemes for new built form, public space, and transit. This paper is a preliminary review of key ideas that frame this research project.

THEORIES FOR "REPAIRING" THE SUBURBS

Much of North American urban design theory over the last fifty years has been framed as a critical response to the suburb.² These landscapes are often critiqued as a of sanitized space of negligible social interaction. Segregated land use, dispersed built form, and automobile dependency have created an environment that theorists argue precludes unplanned social interaction. Redlining and other political and economic measures excluded some social groups while accepting others. Progressive urbanists critique the segregated space of the suburbs for excluding racialized groups. While there are some scholars and practitioners who hold a counter view,³ these ideas are widely accepted among urbanism discourses.

As a counter point, urban design theories have valorized an image of congested and diverse culture drawn from the city center. Starting in the mid to late 1970s, design theorists studied congested urban centers, such as New York City, and argued that this dense context served as a kind of pressure cooker for producing the kinds of chance encounters that are argued to be a precondition for urban culture.⁴ In her book, *The Culture of Cities*, the sociologist Sharon Zukin describes different kinds of cultural production in New York City.⁵ "She refers to "High culture" as produced through of museums, monuments and institutions. She also refers to other forms of culture and symbolic economy as created through the efforts and experiences of artists and immigrants.⁶ A group of students she directed studied immigrant owned and operated restaurants. She notes that restaurant labor forces can be hierarchical and exclusionary – "back" employees versus "front" employees – but goes on to suggest that immigrant owned restaurants provide for a



Figure 1. From google earth: <https://earth.google.com/web/search/+E.+Sri+Katpaga+Vinayagar+Temple>

possibility of less rigid hierarchies.⁷ Her research asks the question if such immigrant owned restaurants, by providing a space where different publics interact, can be a site for a city's symbolic economy.⁸ These two studies of New York City have helped promote an idea among urban design theorists that densely built city centers are positive contributors the creation of culture.

Once absorbed within theoretical discourse, the city center became a space for broader popular appeal and focus for design practice. The story of its development and gentrification is well known, but there is a less often appreciated and arguably more substantive side effect that is playing out at the regional scale across North America. The formal qualities of downtown were codified into a system of zoning and then exported for use in reforming suburban landscapes.

The congress for new urbanism (CNU) is a broad influential coalition of planners and designers in North America.⁹ The CNU promotes the principles of how cities and towns had been built prior to the post-war suburban expansion: "walkable blocks and streets, housing and shopping in close proximity, and accessible public spaces."¹⁰ In addition to promoting existing city centers, the CNU also includes efforts to transform the suburbs. Urban designers who are members of the CNU have redesigned less walkable suburban spaces such as malls or office parks into more compact block structure typical of city centers. Though not explicitly connected to CNU, *Retrofitting Suburbia* documents these kinds of projects that have been built in North America.¹¹ *The Sprawl Repair Manual* is a book supported by the CNU, that provides a systematic method for how to make these kinds of transformations.¹² *Form Based Code*, describes policy and real estate mechanisms necessary for its enactment.¹³ The latter two books provided a codified system for remaking postwar suburban landscapes into denser, transit accessible, and walkable urban spaces. These codes were exported and adopted into official plans and zoning guidelines by nearly every growing

city, town, and suburb across the U.S. and Canada, including the Toronto Region and the suburban Municipality of Brampton.

BRAMPTON AS ENVISIONED

Brampton is a "suburban city" on the periphery of Toronto. In 2018 it released a visioning document for how it was planning to build space for 700,000 new residents and jobs: *The Living Mosaic: Brampton 2040 Vision*.¹⁴ With the construction of two new high order transit lines along major arterial roads, and a high volume of associated development, the vision is currently well underway. The Urban Design department, who employs between ten and twenty people rivals those of the largest North American cities, is flooded with building applications and drawing up secondary plans to carry out the 2040 vision. The plan includes urban design schemes for major centers that are located along transit routes and reflect the formal ideals of New Urbanism. As figure 3a and 3b show, perimeter block buildings and podium towers replace low slung shopping malls and single family homes. New streets prioritize pedestrians and



Figure 2. Rendering from The city of Brampton, *The Living Mosaic: Brampton 2040 Visions*

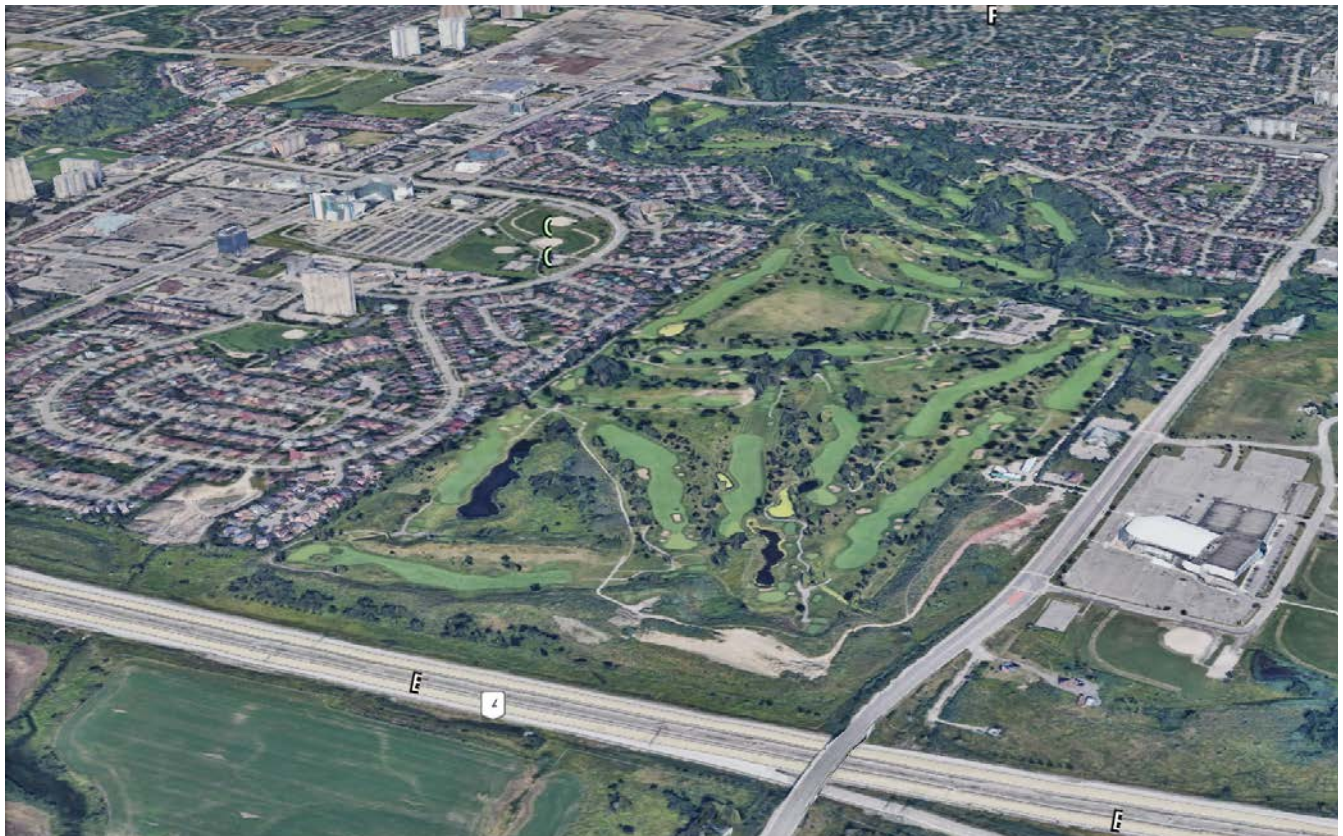


Figure 3 a,b. From top to bottom. a) aerial rendering from The city of Brampton, The Living Mosaic: Brampton 2040 Visions. b) Existing area where image 3a is taken. From Google Earth.

public spaces provide nodal gathering spots. Commercial retail is imagined on the ground floor of these spaces with outdoor dining along their edge. Renderings of the Vision foreground people who crowd pedestrian streets defined by tall buildings. Figure 2 shows a rendering of public spaces from the Vision that is inspired by the built form of European city centers such as Copenhagen and also foreground people who appear to have immigrated from this part of the world.

BRAMPTON AS IS

Incorporated in the 1970s the Brampton was designed and promoted as a satellite suburb. Advertisements and images show residents who appear to be of European descent. And indeed, demographic information shows that such groups made up the majority of the population.¹⁵ In the 1980s, immigrant from South Asia began moving to Brampton and now make up the majority of current residents. Citizens of Afro-Caribbean descent are also a significant and growing portion of the population.¹⁶ With her essay “Brampton, a.k.a. Browntown”, Noreen Ahmed-Ullah describes her experience in this suburban city, where on her “street of new semi-detached homes, (she) see(s) brown and Black families, mostly immigrants.”¹⁷ There are currently ~600,000 residents in Brampton and they expect more new arrivals.

This present research explores cultures and imagery emerging in Brampton today. We are particularly interested in culture produced by immigrant and racialized groups as they appropriate the suburban landscape. South Asian residents, Brampton’s largest ethnic group, have applied different social practices from their homeland. For example, multi-generational living which is common in countries such as India, is practiced by residents in Brampton’s low-rise neighborhoods. Homes in this city that are often associated with a traditional nuclear family are occupied by multiple generations of one family or also by multiple families. Areas zoned for industry, known as employment lands in the Greater Toronto Area, are also used in ways that they were not planned for. Religious groups who cannot afford to purchase or lease a space in a residential or commercial area are renting out former auto garages or other buildings designed for industrial uses. On the weekends, when businesses are not active, these low-slung buildings and their parking lots are used by various faith groups as a spaces for worship. There is extensive ethnographic research about these places of worship in industrial areas, ethnic shopping malls, and suburban ethnic enclaves.¹⁸ This research focuses on worship spaces explicitly. After looking more closely at these places, we found a number of retail spaces and restaurants have gathered around them. For example, caterers for special events, cultural centers selling books, vendors of ceremonial attire, or banquet halls can all be found in other industrial buildings adjacent to these places of worship.

These clusters of retail, restaurants, and worship space have produced an environment of social occupation and imagery that we see reflecting the uses and values of its tenants. Even when not activated by special events, there is signage, ornamentation, and

window displays that create a visual environment which stands in contrast to the utilitarian industrial spaces of auto mechanics, marble fabricators, or logistical warehouses. These tenants are often in close, walkable proximity to one another and the space in between them is defined by the visual qualities of each storefront. From our initial surveys, it seems that the most established and visually developed clusters are centered around Hindu temples or Sikh gurdwaras.

ANALYSIS OF WORSHIP CLUSTERS

We developed a map that locates these cultural clusters centered around worship spaces in Brampton. In addition, we gathered imagery and developed visualizations of these spaces. All of this information was gathered and synthesized on a website that we have since shared with the city’s urban design department during ongoing discussions about their secondary planning process.¹⁹

To begin locating these clusters we used a database of registered worship spaces in Brampton.²⁰ These addresses were pinned on a Google Earth map. Following this, we searched for different kinds of places of worship in Google Earth – for example, gurdwaras, temples, or mosques – and found several in employment lands that were not registered on the city’s database. We zoomed in to each of these locations and used street view to survey the buildings that these worship spaces were located in and those that are nearby. Using street view we found a number of other commercial uses that appear to be related to or associated with the space of worship. For example, the Bombay Palace Banquet Hall, a restaurant and event caterer, is located in the same building as the Sri Katpaga Vinayagar Hindu Temple. As another example, the Sacha Sauda Gurmat Parchar Society which sells Sikh books is located next door to the Pashupatinath Temple. Using a 500 meter radius, we located all of the ancillary commercial spaces that appeared to be associated or related to these spaces of worship. Figure 4 shows an image board where these images and maps were gathered and analyzed. We defined areas that had five or more of such associated uses as a cluster. We then created a typology of these clusters according to the number of cultural tenants, number of nodes (or places of worship), and adjacency to street infrastructure. The circles on Figure 5A show these clusters. We identified twelve of them to study in further detail.

For each of these twelve selected clusters we created detailed drawings and measured the percentage of cultural uses relative to non-cultural uses. We built models and made axonometric drawings to locate these cultural uses within industrial areas, and measured the approximate floor area associated with each use. Using areas from these models we made a series of pie charts to visualize the percentage of cultural uses. Figure 4 shows the drawings and diagrams used to describe these places. In addition to these quantitative measures, we also gathered qualitative imagery online. Faith groups upload pictures from their worship spaces to Google Earth or on their social media pages. These photographs show the transformation of these



A- Jaipur Handicraft & Decor



A- Jaipur Handicraft & Decor



B- Sri Ganesha Durga Temple



C- Majha Malwa Doaba



B- Sri Ganesha Durga Temple



C- Majha Malwa Doaba

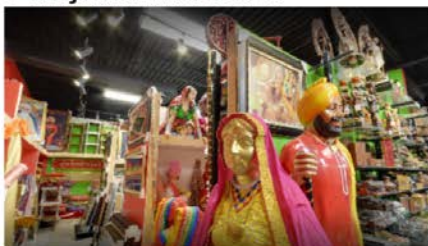


Figure 4. Images sourced from google earth and social media groups associated with institutions or retail spaces. Images assembled by author.

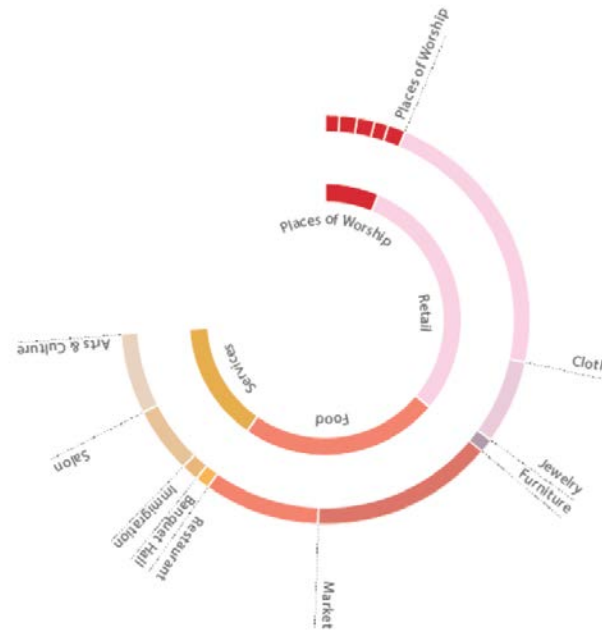
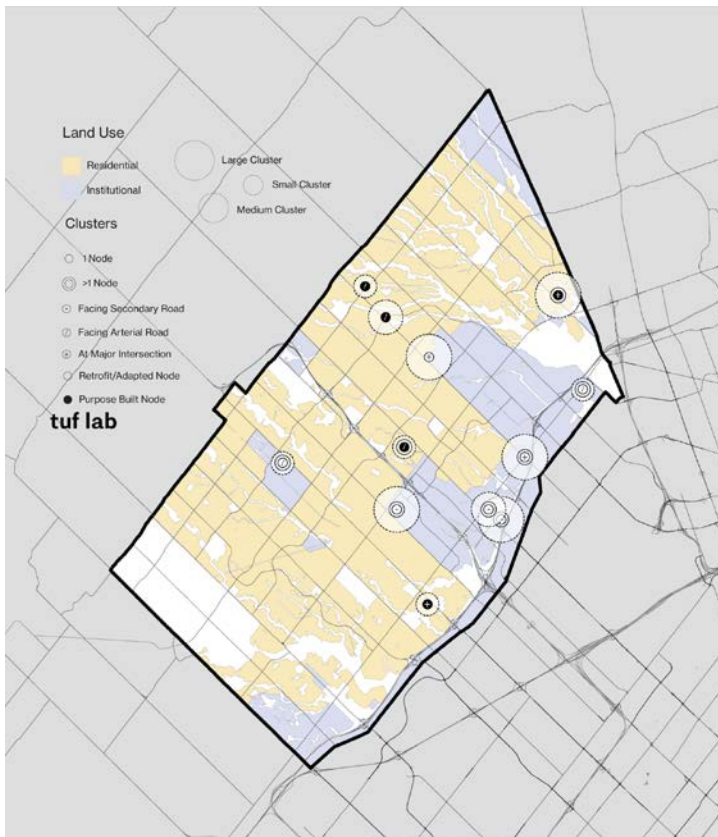


Figure 5 a,b,c: from top left to bottom: a) Map of Brampton showing cultural clusters. b) Graph of programs in a cluster. c) Isometric drawing of cluster.

employment lands into ceremonial space. We visited these sites and took photographs, however, we have chosen to foreground the pictures that were taken by the members of these communities. While it was not in the scope of the present research to conduct interviews our hope is that these images taken by these members can begin to tell a story about these spaces from the perspective of their occupants. All of the images that have been downloaded from these sites have credited to their original location. Images were referenced to the axonometric drawings and these clustered drawings and pictures were referenced back to the map of the city. The web page we produced allows a viewer to view the regional and human scale simultaneously. Our goal is to visualize the extent and impact of these spaces on the larger cultural context of Brampton.

While making this research we held weekly discussions with the city of Brampton's urban design unit to review ongoing secondary planning projects. Two of the city's projects are located within or adjacent to employment lands. One is located next two of the cultural clusters we have identified, and indeed, motivated us to study these in more depth. The city's urban design schemes tend to treat these employment areas blank slates, replacing the existing low buildings with New Urbanist built form and block patterns. As part of this discussion, we used our cultural cluster axonometric drawings to locate existing social spaces adjacent to the planned development. The existing cultural sites are not on parcels that have been identified for redevelopment so, we argue, should be imagined as part of their social and cultural fabric in the near future. What's more, imagery that we gathered of current residents, worshipers, and workers provides a cultural reference that we have argued should be used for envisioning public spaces across the site.

CONCLUSION

Following Sharon Zukin's question that immigrant owned restaurant and retail space were potential sites of a symbolic economy and cultural production in New York,²¹ this research explores the possibility that South Asian religious and retail clusters in Brampton might also produce a symbolic economy and culture, yet in the context of the suburbs. One goal of the research as discussed above is to gather imagery and pictures that have been produced by members of this community and posted on google earth and social media. Accepting that immigrant retail and institutions contribute to the culture of a place, we propose that these visuals should provide a cultural reference for urban design schemes that are being planned for them. And what's more, by locating and identifying these cultural clusters, we are also exploring the possibility that urban designs for new development might incorporate or create connections with these existing cultural spaces.

ADDITIONAL CREDITS

This research described in this paper is still under way and is in collaboration with: Michael Piper, Paul Hess, Sneha Mandhan, Roberto Damiani, and Erica Allen Kim. The research has been

reviewed and discussed with the city of Brampton as part of an ongoing partnership. Yvonne Yeung, head of urban design, and Ken Greenberg, a consultant for the city of Brampton provided insights, feedback, and access to planning staff and documentation. Research Assistants by alphabetical order include: Jacqueline Hampshire, Pradnya Mahajan, Erika Ulrich, Clara Ziada.

ENDNOTES

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