FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

RESTAURANTS AND PLACE MAKING

Student Author

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Mentor

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Abstract

A bare geographic space is like a brand-new home that hasn't been lived in yet. As people begin to inhabit these spaces, they build into it to make it representative of themselves, much like we design and set up our houses to turn them into homes. This is how a place goes from just being a location to something that has a deeper meaning to its inhabitants. We look to create into the spaces we inhabit our own little corner of what is familiar to us, so that we can call a space our own. This is the essence of what place making is, and it happens through a variety of ways. Place making has been studied in the past by numerous scholars. This article takes a look at place making on a college campus, with the main focus being on place making for ethnic minority communities. It questions the strengths and benefits of place making, as well as what detrimental effects can be there when a group is denied the ability to practice place making. Four groups that have been chosen for the study: the Indian community, the Chinese community, the Japanese community and the African American community. While the article looks at the strengths of place making as a whole, special emphasis has been placed on restaurants as the agents of place making for reasons outlined later in the paper.

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The houses we grow up in and the places that we inhabit have a deep impact on us. As Gaston Bachelard (1994) eloquently says, “For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word.” This is also true of the place that we first inhabit. It becomes our first universe, and we look to find it wherever we go. Just as we make our homes our own by designing them to be a space that represents us, a community becomes a home when

its inhabitants make it their own by creating spaces in it that represent them. These spaces are often a manifestation of the memories of their first homes. It is human nature to want to belong to the place we inhabit. This is exactly what place making is, and Cara Courage, author of *Arts in Place: The Arts, the Urban and Social Practice* (2017a) puts it best as having a place that cares for you, which leads to you caring for the place in return. Place making can happen in a variety of ways and has no strict definition. It is loving a place, belonging to a place, and identifying with the place and its community.

But what about minority populations, in the case when their sense of home is alien to the place they inhabit? In such a situation, it becomes essential that they be able to create a niche for themselves. In a community as diverse as a college campus, like Purdue, this is especially significant, since so many students are leaving their homes for the first time and looking to find a new home thousands of miles away. In this essay, I bring to light four prominent minority populations of Purdue, but I do this through the lens of restaurants and eateries. These sections include the Indian community, the Chinese community, the Korean community, and the African American community. In exploring these communities, I want to develop a better understanding of what role restaurants and eateries play in place making, especially on a college campus. What are the diverse ways in which restaurants help to establish minority identities, communities, and a sense of belonging? Is a physical structure like a restaurant essential for a community to find its niche in the place it inhabits? While the question of place making has been explored before, on a college campus it takes on a new and unique form. With thousands of students streaming in from all over the globe, place making becomes essential to the well-being of these students.

INDIAN COMMUNITY: SAI SHAUKIN

Purdue is home to many Indian students. Given such a large representation in the community, several restaurants cater specifically to the Indian community. Much like Indian culture, Indian food is unique and diverse. Various parts of India have completely different cuisines. If you were in India, these differences would act like a barrier, but in a foreign country, they fade away. All the diversity combines and takes on one beautiful, colorful form. Shaukin is a perfect example of this.

Sai Shaukin caters to students as well local Indians. It offers a wide variety of Indian food, from North

Figure 1. Sai Shaukin, located on 138 S. River Road, is a popular Indian fast food joint, frequented by Indians as well as other people looking to explore Indian cuisine.

Indian street food to South Indian meals. To help non-Indians figure out what the mysterious words on the menu mean, pictures of various dishes are posted on the walls. The walls themselves are bright yellow, and Ganesha (one of the more prominent Hindu gods) keeps watch over the counter. The TV in the corner usually plays Indian music or Indian films. Add the mouth-watering aroma of Indian food to this, and as Roopa Naidu, a student at Purdue puts it, “It’s like being transported back home for a few hours.”

The places we grow up in leave deep impressions on us, and these impressions accompany us wherever we go. Relph (1976) succinctly outlines the role of place in the lives of people in his book *Place and Placelessness*:

There is for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now or where we have had particularly moving experiences. This association seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security.

These places, our experiences in them, and their meaning to us become a part of our identity, dreams, and persona. It goes beyond feeling a sense of belonging, and affects the way we see ourselves. Bachelard (1994) puts it more poetically when he says:

We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store

of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.

The memories of these significant places offer us protection, and we look to find them in any new place we occupy, as “An entire past comes to dwell in a new house.”

Sayali and Aishwarya, both originally from India, would agree with what Bachelard has to say. Sayali’s favorite place to eat is Shaukin as it reminds her of her favorite memories of home. During festivals like Diwali, the familiar food is more than just comfort; it is a bittersweet, nostalgic longing for home. Aishwarya says “the food does remind me of home and since they play Indian music from the mid 2000s . . . on a 17th century Cathode Ray TV . . . it low-key reminds me of childhood and, I feel nice reliving my childhood memories with my present good friends.” This isn’t very different from how Bachelard says we find our first homes in any new place we occupy, except that here this takes the form of appliances, films, and food.

Sai Shaukin does more than provide much-needed comfort food to students and locals alike. It represents the powerful relationships between community and place, “in which each reinforces the identity of the other and in which the landscape is very much an expression of communally held beliefs and values and of interpersonal involvement” (Relph 1976). Shaukin is a representation of Indian identity within the Greater Lafayette community, and its presence establishes a sense of place and belonging for the Indian community. At the same time, the restaurant also exemplifies the values and culture prized by those frequenting it. This is evident in its decor, in its clientele, in the owners speaking local Indian languages to strengthen an unspoken bond.

ASIAN COMMUNITY

Asian food is distinct in its preparation and spice palette, and this distinction means that it forms an integral part of national identities. As Nicola Frost (2015) puts it, “Readily recognizable, eminently sharable, and not dependent on a common language, ‘ethnic cuisine’ is frequently invoked as an indicator of multicultural society.” As food is such an integral part of an ethnic identity, it acts as a representative of that identity and reserves a place for it in the community. As Sabina Magliocco (1998, p. 145) puts it: “Foodways are . . . one of the most important symbols through which ethnic groups in America have

Figure 2. Kibu Café is located on 111 S. River Road and offers a Japanese-Korean cuisine.

maintained their individual identities and communicated them to the world around them.” The reasons for this are varied; one is that, as Klymasz (1973, p. 133) points out, “the loss of the ethnic language or dialect often prevents the preservation of verbal folklore forms. But food, with its sensual qualities, is also a powerful reminder of the past and an ideal vehicle for communication.” Besides acting as an anchor to one’s ethnic roots, ethnic restaurants also allow for a space to exist where members of the community can share their culture with the larger community and be represented in it.

Asian cuisine is too broad a term to for any one establishment. Even focusing on just Chinese cuisine, many places offer unique experiences. Abey, originally from China, tells me that there are distinct Chinese cuisines that vary from region to region, and several restaurants in Greater Lafayette serve authentic Chinese food. She groups her favorite places into two: restaurants that are a more sit-down affair, and places that offer quick food. Better World Market is particularly interesting in that it is not a typical restaurant. It is more of a grocery store up front, but has prepared meals in the form of a small restaurant in the back. Somehow, stepping through the door of Better World feels like stepping into a different place

altogether. It is well stocked with Asian food, snacks, and drinks. Walking through the aisles, everything seems utterly unfamiliar to me, but it helps to have Abey beside me telling me what all the different foods are. She seems genuinely happy to be sharing an important part of her culture.

Youngsik is a freshman at Purdue, originally from Korea. Even though he moved to the United States at 2 years old, he has close ties to his Korean roots and visits Korea often. His experience seems to resonate with that of Abey, but he adds on how restaurants have helped him socialize more as well. Not only does having a Korean restaurant make him feel more at home, but he has also made connections with other people, both Korean and not due to the restaurant. *Communication Education* published an article by Nithya Muthuswamy, Timothy R. Levine, and Jeanne Gazel (2006) that studied interaction-based diversity initiatives. What it primarily looked at was diversity as an everyday interaction as opposed to a topic of academic discussion in a classroom. The paper looks into the results of “Multi-Racial Living Unity Experience (MRULE), a race relations program on the campus of a large Midwestern university.” From the conclusions of this study and the related research it cites, it seems clear that a real conversation about diversity happens outside the classroom when students from different races have a chance to interact and talk about their individual experiences. Youngsik’s experience seems to corroborate these findings. Kibu, his favorite Korean restaurant, is usually very busy during Sundays when students don’t eat in the campus dining courts. Youngsik explains that having this place has not only allowed him to make connections with other Koreans on campus but also given him the opportunity to introduce Korean cuisine and culture to his non-Korean friends by the simple act

Figure 3. Kibu is a sit-down café/restaurant, spacious and light, creating a pleasing atmosphere for a relaxed meal. The décor on the walls and hangings add to the ambience of the place.

of inviting them out to eat at Kibu. A simple act like that is often all it takes to integrate diversity, because it allows for a conversation about diversity to occur in a natural and positive form.

Cara Courage stresses the importance of communication in her TED Talk “Placemaking and Community” (2017b) and talks about the “hyperlocal.” Place making and the formation of identity and belonging to a place occurs when people get together and have conversations in the hyperlocal—conversations that happen in the here and now about what is happening right now. For a student who is separated from his or her cultural roots by a few oceans, restaurants like these allow for their cultural roots and identities to be happening in the here and now. Without these spaces, these students may have little representation in the community they inhabit. It would be difficult for them to communicate their identities with others, which means their cultural identity would become invisible and unknown to those around them.

AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

African American cuisine culture is vibrant, diverse, and sadly missing in Greater Lafayette. There are no restaurants that specialize in African or African American cuisine. Not anymore, anyway. This absence is significant, and may have a deeper meaning for this particular minority population in the area.

Dr. Jason Ware, a professor at the Purdue Honors College, gave me my first lead on this aspect of place making. He confirmed my initial impression that there really weren’t any restaurants, eateries, or pubs in the Greater Lafayette area that catered specifically to the Black community. This absence was something I only noticed because I was specifically looking for it. I was curious if Dr. Ware, not just being a part of this community but also having grown up in this area, felt this absence, and if he thought it was a problem. He believes that African American food assimilated itself and became a part of American food, but even so, there are other places—such as St. Yared, Beautiful Shades, and Jiallo’s in Indianapolis—that do serve a uniquely African, African American, or African Caribbean cuisine. An absence definitely exists in Greater Lafayette, and Dr. Ware believes this may have something to do with the Black population here not being socioeconomically varied enough. People who may have the means to start up such a business do not have an interest in doing so, and people who do have the interest lack the funds to undertake such an operation. It is worth noting that there is no shortage of businesses in

Figure 4. The BCC at Purdue is the most prominent organization that promotes Black culture (image courtesy of Purdue University Marketing and Media).

Greater Lafayette, and other small business owners themselves attest to how the economy of Lafayette supports new businesses. This raises the very important question: is this stable and supportive economy of Greater Lafayette only beneficial to certain sections of the population? The best way I could think of to answer this was to dig into the past of Lafayette, and this is where Dr. Ware proved to be most helpful, by pointing me in the direction of Al’s Barbeque.

Al’s Barbecue shut down quite a few years ago but was significant in its time, according to both Dr. Ware and Charles Gulliom from the Tippecanoe Historical Association. Trying to piece the timeline together from old Lafayette city directories, it seems like this restaurant was in business from the 1950s to the late 1970s or early 1980s. Little came up about Al’s in terms of written records, but Gulliom and Quentin Robinson were able to provide an account of its history. The place was opened by Albert Johnson Sr. and was centered in what was the largest Black neighborhood at the time. Gulliom believes the establishment itself may have just started out in a garage and then grown into a rundown warehouse-type structure. It catered not just to the Black populace but soon grew in popularity and was frequented by all parts of the Lafayette community. This did not work the other way around, however. The Black community was rarely seen in “White” establishments. Initially this was due to Jim Crow laws, but even after desegregation, African Americans rarely went to other businesses. This was to be expected if, as Gulliom claims, they were treated badly when they did enter White businesses.

What was initially a pillar of the Black community eventually became a run-down structure, and was finally sold off. Albert Jr., according to Gulliom, could not keep the place running as smoothly as his father, perhaps due to factors out of his control. St. Elizabeth’s Hospital started to expand around the

mid-1970s and was trying to buy up all the land that housed the Black community, and they ultimately succeeded. This was probably the main reason for Al's shutting down. According to Gulliom, to the best of his knowledge, most of the people who were displaced did not have a problem with it, since they were offered much better housing. And yet, it resulted in the dispersion of a once tight-knit Black community into the larger Lafayette community.

Al's Barbecue was a place for the Black community to be and belong. As Dr. Ware put it, it was structurally very important for this minority group (and was also the place his parents met!). And the absence of such a place undoubtedly has an adverse effect on the strength of the bonds of that community. This close-knit unit probably still exists but no longer has a physical manifestation, and this weakens it. One important question is *why* nothing has replaced Al's.

The other question is how the absence of such an important place-making tool—as enjoyed by other minority students—affects Black students at Purdue. Michael, a junior in industrial engineering, helped me gain a better understanding of the experience of African American students on campus. Originally from Indianapolis, Michael admits it is strange to him that West Lafayette does not have any African American eateries compared to his hometown. He believes that this might be due to the fact that even though there is a significant Black population in Purdue and Greater Lafayette, the population in raw percentages may be too small to be conducive to businesses. On a deeper level, he believes this may tie back to racist sentiments that are still present in our society, more so in predominantly White institutions like Purdue. A gathering of Black students is often eyed with suspicion that might not have been directed at a similar group of White students. Michael's opinion on this was one that I hadn't really considered before. All this time I thought that perhaps the lack of a casual gathering place was simply due to the lack of initiative. It never occurred to me that it might be something more institutional. A gathering of African Americans is, on some level, still considered troublesome and suspicious. Ironically, if Black students did have a place that they could gather, like a restaurant, people might become more normalized to seeing Black gatherings, and they wouldn't be eyed with suspicion anymore.

Of course, Michael's experience is not singular. A *Journal and Courier* article by Taya Flores from 2015 chronicles the rally staged by Purdue students against racism. Multiple Black students spoke out

about the small ways that they experience racism in their everyday lives. Compounding the problem is a lack of interracial communication that would ensure those outside the Black community are listening. Chanel Beebe, one of the organizers of the rally, encouraged students to interact across racial borders: "Stop asking your White friends why Black students are angry," she said. "Ask us." The lack of an informal space for Black students leads to a lack of a real conversation about the challenges they face, a lack of representation of them in the community, and a prejudice against them if they ever do happen to gather. This is an important example of how the lack of place making for a minority population can have a seriously detrimental effect on them.

The Black Cultural Center (BCC) is really the only representation of African American students on campus. It provides a space for Black students to come together and celebrates Black culture by putting on shows and events. While it does a good job, as a formal institution it does not cater to the needs that a more informal space might satisfy. It provides a formal setting for moments of celebration, the benefits of which are largely limited to select Black students who chose to be involved with the BCC. Michael explains that it isn't easy to get involved in the BCC unless you happen to know someone who is already involved. On being asked what could be a way to get more people talking and being involved in the BCC, he says it would help if there were a more casual place for people to gather and talk about their

Figure 5. The BCC organizes events celebrating Black culture (image courtesy of the BCC Instagram).

experiences. Michael raises an intriguing point, and it seems strange that the Black community does not have such a place similar to what Asian and Indian students enjoy, a place that would act as a safe, informal space for African American students to gather, develop a sense of belonging, and communicate their cultures and identities to others.

As the MRULE study points out, a formal setting only has a shallow impact, and to some extent even depends on an informal space to be more impactful. If an informal space for Black students existed, the BCC might impact more Black students as well as non-Black students who might just be interested in a culture that they have glimpsed at an informal gathering, like at a food truck or restaurant. Clearly, representation of a minority group in the community is not just important for them but also essential for a community that is inclusive and healthy about matters of diversity.

AFTERWORD

It's difficult to lead a life if home does not feel like home. In my research, I've realized the indispensable role restaurants play in the act of place making and allowing minority ethnic groups to have representation in the community. All the establishments that I included in this exhibit provide something unique to the community they represent. Even in the absence of such a place, as in the case of the African American community, there is great significance. Restaurants and eateries are important for many reasons, but I think the most important are that they provide a safe space, represent a community's identity through its cuisine, allow an ethnic group to communicate their identity, and act as catalysts for a healthier, more diverse environment. When a group is not able to practice place making, their identity remains alien to those around them, which unsurprisingly leads to fear and prejudice against them. This is especially harmful on a college campus, where many students have left their homes and cultural roots far behind for the first time. This is why it is so important that

ethnic minorities be able to practice place making, so that their culture has a place in the community.

INTERVIEWS

- Abey, November 29, 2017
- Sayali Nilangekar, November 13, 2017
- Aishwarya Ray, November 13, 2017
- Callum Amigelo, November 29, 2017
- Johnathan Gregor, November 29, 2017
- Dr. Jason Ware, December 6, 2017
- Charles Gulliom, December 14, 2017
- Quentin Robinson, December 14, 2017
- Youngsik Yoon, April 17, 2018
- Michael D. Bailey Jr, April 21, 2018

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