Mainstreaming the Asian Mall:
Regulating Asian American Space in Silicon Valley Suburbia

Willow Lung-Amam
Assistant Professor
University of Maryland, College Park
lungamam@umd.edu

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On a typical Friday afternoon in Fremont’s Mission Square Shopping Center, known to regulars as “Little Taipei,” Chinese grandmothers stake their turf on parking lot benches while chatting with friends and comparing their grandchildren’s latest feats. Outside the Ranch 99 Market, elderly men stand around variously smoking, playing cards, scratching their lotto tickets, and reading newspapers from their hometowns of Beijing, Saigon, and Manila. A few middle-aged women convene at outdoor tables wearing facemasks, arm covers, and big brimmed hats to shade them from the afternoon sun. By three o’clock, many of parents and elders have left, while students from nearby Mission San Jose High gather at boba milk tea and frozen yogurt shops listening to the blended beats of American, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong pop music blaring over the shops’ speakers and browsing the magazine racks for gossip on their teen idols from around the world. By evening, older youth replace the teens and fill the cafés until they close at 2:00 or even 3:00 in the morning. Families arrive with three generations in tow—grandparents squeezing their grandchildren’s hands while waiting in line outside popular restaurants like the Aberdeen Café. A parking lot dance begins as a swirl of Toyotas, Hondas, and Lexuses with lace-covered seats, hello kitty trinkets, Buddha figurines, and Ivy League decals fight for the few remaining spaces.

“Little Taipei” is one of Fremont’s five Asian malls, and one of approximately 140 found throughout the U.S., most predominantly in Silicon Valley and L.A. (Asia Mall, 2008) (fig. 1). In this chapter, I ask about the ways in which Asian malls expose how immigrants are reshaping suburban space—its forms, uses, meanings, and politics. I argue that Asian malls are an emerging design typology that is neither Eastern nor Western, neither Chinatown nor typical American mall. Rather, they are a uniquely Asian American and suburban form that reflects the growing economic and geographic diversification of Asian immigrants and their practices of
everyday life, social and cultural identities, cultural and community life, and connection to the Asian diaspora. In Fremont, however, city officials have not seized on Asian malls as a successful development model, but rather have often treated them as planning problems. Their Chinese language signage, condo ownership, tenant mixes, and designs have inspired new planning and design regulations that are putting a more mainstream face on the Asian mall. At the same time, the city has used Asian malls to showcase their racial and ethnic diversity for economic and political gain.

This chapter is informed by interviews with six Asian mall managers, developers, owners and brokers; six city planners and officials; 22 storeowners and employees; and 43 customers. The majority of customer, storeowner, and employee interviews were conducted on-site, and included semi-structured questions about their use and the meaning of Asian malls. All other interviews were key informant in-depth interviews that focused on Asian mall form, history, city planning and design regulations, and the politics of Asian mall planning and development in Fremont. I supplemented interview accounts with archival research, including primary design and development data from developers, local newspaper and online articles on Bay Area Asian malls, and city planning, design, and development documents. To better understand the patterns of use and Asian mall design, I conducted behavior, place, and participant observations at ten malls in the Silicon Valley in six cities, including Fremont, Newark, Richmond, Union City, Milpitas, and Cupertino.

The evidence suggests that Asian malls provide a useful lens into the diversity of lived landscapes that constitutes 21st century suburban American life. They are spaces through which Asian Americans’ ideals and identities as suburbanites are expressed, embodied, and embedded. As spaces of vibrant social and community life, they challenge popular critiques about the
homogenous and sterile suburban landscape that have been particularly directed at shopping malls. And, like McMansions, they underscore the ways that suburban diversity is controlled, regulated, and managed through planning and design regulation.

**Asian Malls and Mainstream Suburban Mall Studies**

Asian malls are a highly understudied space in the U.S. and elsewhere. Like McMansions, most scholarship on Asian malls has come out of the experiences of Asian immigration and suburbanization in Canada. Lai (2000, 2001, 2009) analyzed the characteristics of “Asian-themed malls” in Vancouver as a marker of “new suburban Chinatowns” and how their development corresponded with changes in Canadian immigration policy. Other Canadian scholars have their architectural styles, tenant compositions, and other defining characteristics (Qadeer, 1998; Preston and Lo, 2000; Lo, 2006). Of particular interest to scholars has been their “strata-titled” or condo ownership, and its relationship to ethnic entrepreneurship and the development of suburban ethnic economies (Li, 1992; Wang, 1999; Kaplan and Li, 2006; Lo, 2006). Case studies of neighborhood controversies over the building of Asian malls and local planning regulations adopted to address residents’ concerns have demonstrated the contested and political nature of these malls (Lai, 2000; Preston and Lo, 2000; Edington et al., 2006).

In the scholarship on American suburbs, however, only a few scholars even make reference to Asian malls. Of those that do, most note them only as markers of suburbia’s changing demographic, not as meaningful or interesting spaces in their own right. While various studies of Monterrey Park and even Silicon Valley have made reference to Asian malls, they have not systematically studied their spatial form or social dynamics (Li, 1998; Li and Park,
2006). There are notable exceptions. Shenglin Chang (2006) analyzed the function of Asian supermarkets for transnational Taiwanese families, and she and I have shown Asian malls’ as a critical site of identity for Taiwanese-American youth who frequently travel back and forth across the Pacific. Joseph Wood (2006) examined the role of Vietnamese malls as sites of political refuge and free speech. And elsewhere, I have demonstrated that these malls serve as important sites of Asian American community building and geography. They mark the dominant places of Asian immigrant geographies, are vital to the development of Asian American suburbanites’ common sense of place and identity, and demonstrate the diversity of their suburban experiences (Lung-Amam, 2014). But there is still much to be understood about this emerging development model and its connection to changing social and spatial landscape of the American suburbs.

As I have written elsewhere, it is also important to situate Asian malls within the broader context of scholarly work on suburban shopping centers (Lung-Amam, forthcoming). Most of this work, like that of McMansions, is highly critical. Suburban shopping malls are often characterized as homogeneous and sterile landscapes devoid of meaningful social and community life (Davis, 1990; Duany and Plater-Zyberk, 1991; Sorkin, 1992; Kunsler, 1993). These critiques extend from those of the 1950s and 60s postwar landscape to contemporary suburbia. For many suburban critics, malls are visible symbols of an overly consumptive, capitalistic, privatized, and increasingly homogenized society. Malls are lambasted for promoting mass consumption, the privatization of public space, and as exemplars of carceral, securitized zones that limit the diversity and vibrancy of suburban public life. They are often described as Disneyfied spaces that simulate rather than encapsulate real life. And to many, they epitomize the “non-place” suburban realm, which lacks a sense of place and community. While
many critics acknowledge the efforts of early social reformers like James Rouse and Victor Gruen to design shopping malls as centers of suburban social and community life, they view these functions as supplanted by their contemporary focus on commercialization, consumption, privacy, and security. Rather, I contend Asian malls are places that can help to change the scholarly discourse on U.S. suburban shopping malls, from a focus on critique to analysis of the values and meanings they hold for their patrons and as an important space of everyday suburban life. Glaeser (2007) argued that, “While traditional urbanists may find [suburban American] malls no substitute for the market of the Ponte Vecchio, people do seem to be voting with their feet or at least their tires. It makes more sense to put effort into humanizing the mall than into reinvigorating many older downtowns” (ix). While I do not agree with Glaeser’s trade off between downtown and suburban malls, I do agree that the effort to “humanize” suburban shopping malls is sorely needed. Asian malls are a vibrant and well-loved spaces that can help broaden the discourse on the suburban landscape, beyond simply what is wrong with it, to include considerations about what can be learned from it and how to engage it and its users in a more inclusive process of rethinking and redesigning its form.

Asian Malls as Hybrid Suburban Spaces

Asian malls draw on aspects of mainstream American shopping centers, the streets of central cities ethnic enclaves, like Chinatowns, and shopping malls abroad. They mix multiple cultural traditions to reflect Asian American unique suburban lifestyles and needs. In looking at the defining characteristics of Asian malls in Silicon Valley, I find that that they are typically modern and spacious shopping centers anchored by an Asian supermarket and banquet
restaurant, and include a fairly standard array of independent service and food-oriented shops. They are usually built in the form of a neighborhood shopping center, but draw their customers from a much larger region. Their spaces are flexible, especially in condo projects, a form of ownership common and unique to Asian malls. And they are built by and support translocal and transnational connections amongst businesses, developers, and consumers.

Asian malls in no way resemble the streets of Chinatown and, in many respects this is precisely the point. They are designed to fulfill the needs of a different market. “In Chinatown, the merchandise prices are a little bit lower and it is almost all the Asian, they don’t speak English at all,” explained Tony, who has developed two Asian malls in Silicon Valley, “Parking is difficult and it is dirty. It is very different than here [at the Asian mall]. Totally different clientele. This is a couple of steps up from Chinatown.” Likewise Philip Su (2011), the developer of both the largest Asian mall in southern California, San Gabriel Square, and the largest in northern California, Milpitas Square, explained that Asian malls fulfill an unmet market outside of Chinatown. “In the past people went to Chinatown,” he explained, “It is dirty, it’s filthy, it’s hard to park, and we want to have another center that is very clean, and have easy access, and why wouldn’t that be very clean with lots of variety.” While Chinatown is for the older immigrant groups, Asian malls are the preferred destination of many post-1965 suburban immigrants.

Asian malls are almost uniformly anchored by large Asian supermarkets. One of the more popular is Ranch 99 (also known as 99 Ranch or Tawa Supermarket).¹ Roger Chen, a Taiwanese immigrant, founded Ranch 99 in Los Angeles in 1984 in the heart of Little Saigon.

¹ In Silicon Valley, other popular chains include Lion Supermarket and Marina Foods. Most Silicon Valley Asian supermarkets are Chinese-owned like Ranch 99 and Marina Foods. A Chinese-Vietnamese family owns Lion Supermarket. Korean and Japanese supermarkets also anchor some malls, but are far less numerous (Thomas Consultants, 2005).
Since then, it has grown to become the largest Asian supermarket chain in the U.S. with 35 stores nationwide, mostly in California. Averaging around 30,000 square feet with brightly lit, wide isles, and a modern look and feel, Ranch 99 markets resembles a Safeway supermarket more so than a typical Chinatown market. Buyers can pay with credit cards, rather than in cash. Prices and products are labeled, both in English and Chinese, and are non-negotiable. But Asian supermarkets are also distinct from mainstream American markets. Beyond their range of pan-Asian products, Asian supermarkets commonly incorporate bakeries, cafés, live fish markets, and stalls selling boba milk tea, a popular Taiwanese drink.

While Asian supermarkets can serve as the sole anchors of Asian malls, it is becoming increasingly popular for malls in Silicon Valley to have two anchors—both a supermarket and a banquet hall restaurant. “A powerful restaurant is so important to an Asian mall,” explained John Luk (2011), President of GD Commercial, a brokerage firm in the Silicon Valley specializing in Asian malls. In Asian culture, it is common to hold weddings, banquets, birthdays, and other important events in a restaurant. Like supermarkets, banquet restaurants have several popular chains, including Mayflower, Asian Pearl, King Wah, and ABC. As they have grown in number, these chains have also grown in size and popularity. Upon its opening in Milpitas Square, Mayflower Dim Sum’s 10,000 square foot restaurant was the largest dining facility in the South Bay (Grant, 1996).

Compared to many mainstream American strip malls, Asian malls include a fairly standard assortment of satellite tenants that are more service-oriented, especially towards food. They typically host a range of pan-Asian independent retail stores, restaurants, and professional and personal services, many of which seek to capitalize off of their location next to popular

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2 Luk has been involved in some of the largest Silicon Valley Asian malls developments, including Milpitas Square in Milpitas, Fremont Times Square and Pacific Commons II in Fremont, and Lito Faire in Newark.
supermarkets and restaurant chains (Thomas Consultants, 2005). In reference to Ranch 99, commercial broker Brian McDonald explained, “There’s no other market out there that has the drawing power that this market has. [Its] got quite a following” (King, 2002). When Ranch 99 opened their first store in San Jose, the mall received nearly 700 applications for its 28 store slots (Grant, 1996). Typically, the satellite stores include a standard array of goods and services, including dentists, bakeries, banks, restaurants, cafés, travel services, massage, acupuncture, books, music, jewelry, clothing, herbal medicine, and hair and nail salons.

Asian malls range of products and services fill a niche in the marketplace for affordable, Asian-oriented products that are either not available or available only in a limited variety and at a higher price elsewhere. While Asian mall patrons may go to Macy’s or Kohl’s to buy clothes, they will head to the Asian mall to purchase live fish, cheap vegetables, and an assortment of Asian goods that they cannot find elsewhere. “I prefer [Ranch 99] to the local supermarket,” said Rao Kondamoori, who is of East Indian descent, “there’s a lot more variety and the prices are better” (Wu and Eljera, 1998).

In Asian malls, like in Asian culture, food is the central focus. “Asian malls are essentially food courts,” explained Steve, a Silicon Valley developer who has been involved in several Asian mall projects. In Milpitas Square, the Bay Area’s largest Asian mall, 30 of its 62 shops offer food-related services. To many observers it may seem that many of the restaurants serve the same kinds of foods, but John Luk explained that there are so many different kinds of Asian foods that one mall can support several different types of noodle shops with little overlap. One of the main functions of the malls, explained Tony, is to give Asians more choices about where to eat.

While many Asian malls in Silicon Valley are leased, one of the innovations that this
mall form has brought to the U.S. is their retail condominium form of ownership. Retail condos are typical in many high-density Asian cities, like Hong Kong and Taiwan, but not the U.S. The reason for this form of ownership in Asian malls has typically been ascribed to culture. “The Chinese culture is made up of entrepreneurs,” explained Steve, “everyone is a hustler and wants to open a shop.” Others said that Chinese and other Asian ethnic groups simply prefer to be owners rather than renters because they can save money; avoid possible eviction and unexpected rent increases; use self-employment as a means of coping with a lack of English language skills; and use their real estate and business investment to gain equity, stability, and even citizenship in the U.S.³ Lap Thanh Tang, who was involved in the development of two Asian malls in San Jose, explained that Asians, “like to own something for their lifetime, for their children—instead of paying rent” (Conrad, 2006). One storeowner in Fremont Times Square told me that she would not be able to afford to maintain her business in the mall if she did not own the space. From the developers’ perspective, condos means that they can quickly cash out without much long-term carrying costs or responsibility for the property. This can be important to Asian mall developers, who tend to work on relatively small-scale projects.⁴

Condo-ownership can contribute to an increased flexibility in the form and function of these malls. It offers opportunities for owners to subdivide their spaces for multiple tenants, sell an unlimited variety of goods, and remain open as late or as early as they want. But even leased Asian malls tend to maintain longer hours and include stores that offer a larger variety of goods and services than traditional American shopping malls. Both Milpitas Square and its adjoining

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³ According to the 1990 Immigration and Naturalization Act, by starting a business that employs up to 10 people, foreign nationals are eligible for U.S. citizenship.
⁴ Many of the Asian mall developers that I spoke to were critical about the success of condo projects. Philip Su’s reaction was quite typical. Upon asking him about condo ownership, his immediate reaction was “It won’t work.” Pressed further, Su explained that the lack of centralized management creates too much competition between stores. Further, he argued that these projects are also not good for tenants because after the developer cashes out, tenants are left with the responsibly of maintaining the property without enough organization or technical knowledge. To be successful, Su argued, condo projects need to be in higher density environments with access to public transportation.
Ulfrets Center remain open till past 2:00am on Friday and Saturday nights. At the Pacific East Mall in Richmond, a security guard reported that he often has to kick patrons out at 4:00am on Friday and Saturday nights, when the mall finally shuts its doors. Die-hard singers from around the Bay Area patronize KTV Music Karaoke and mix with those attending Stogies’ Smoke Shop regular weekend all-you-can smoke hookah and DJ nights. A Stogies’ employee explained that because the store has been able to supplement their main business of selling tobacco-related products with DJ parties and lottery services, in the first year in business, they were named “Retailer of the Year” for the highest grossing sales of any small business in California. Though it is centrally managed, Pacific East still allows stores to sell a wide range of products and stay open late for additional earnings. “You have to be very flexible. We are not a corporate mall,” explained one Asian mall developer, “[it] gives you this survival edge.”

Most Asian malls in Silicon Valley often resemble typical neighborhood shopping centers. They are usually single-story, auto-oriented, outdoor shopping plazas. Like most strip malls, providing adequate, if not excessive, parking is the key factor shaping their form. At Milpitas Square, its 62 stores support over 1,100 park spaces. Many malls move into existing sites, formerly operated by supermarkets, or in the case of the Pacific East Mall in Richmond, a former furniture store. Others have been built from the ground up. While a few have chosen to incorporate traditional Asian architecture, most maintain fairly standard American styles. Outside of the Chinese signage on the stores and a large fish fountain that serves as a symbol of wealth and prosperity, Milpitas Square otherwise resembles many other American strip malls. When I asked Philip Su if he had considered an Asian theme, he replied, “Architecturally, it’s a very attractive good looking project. So why does it have to look like Chinatown? Why it couldn’t be a very contemporary, very clean, and have a lot of choices?...I did something
attractive for young generation.” These malls are also uniquely Western and Californian. They are far different than high-rise malls in Asia or even those in Canada, where higher density Asian populations, foot traffic, and freezing temperatures have led to many multistory, indoor malls.

The relatively small size of these popular malls also reflect the limited market for Asian goods as well as the high cost of operating an Asian mall compared to traditional American malls. According to John Luk, the cheap price of goods at many Asian grocers means that owners of Asian malls make very little profit from their main anchor and thus, have to charge high rents to other tenants to make up for their loss.\(^5\) Shenglin Chang (2006) notes that the high rent strategy pursued by many Asian malls can also serve as a purposive deterrent to non-Asian businesses that can find cheaper rents elsewhere.

Though they often resemble a neighborhood strip center in form, Asian malls typically have the same drawing power as regional shopping centers. Customers may come from up to 50 miles away, depending on the proximity of its competitors. One Pacific East Mall employee told me that the original catchment area for their mall was about 30 miles, and has decreased only in response other Asian mall developments in the region. Two Asian American college students I spoke to while they stood in line at the Japanese noodle shop in Milpitas Square reported that they regularly travel around 30 miles to hang out at the mall and eat good, but inexpensive food with their friends.

Conventional location factors like placement near a freeway with good visibility and access are important. But the overriding factor dictating the location of Asian malls is their

\(^5\) Ranch 99, Lion Foods, and several other Asian supermarkets have been at the center of labor controversies because of their refusal to hire unionized labor. Luk argued that the slim profit margins of Asian supermarkets mean that they cannot afford to hire union labor. But labor union leaders accuse Asian supermarkets of attempting to keep profits high by using a divide and conquer strategy, which uses language barriers to keep immigrant laborers from organizing for higher wages or other benefits (HuKill, 1999).
proximity to a large Asian population. “It’s not rocket science,” explained Steve, “all you need to know is who’s living there.” It is a tried and proven formula. “I had this revelation 20 years ago,” explained John Luk, “whenever the Asian population hits 30 to 40 percent, that’s when its time to open an Asian mall” (Conrad, 2010). And that is just what Luk has done—scouted out areas around the Silicon Valley with large numbers of Asian Americans and tried to recruit developers to build Asian malls on prime sites.

These malls also rely on business networks that extend from the local to the transnational and are often tied to specific geographies. In Silicon Valley, the business and customer networks of many Asian malls are connected to one another as well as Chinatown San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose. Several of the popular mall restaurants got their start in San Francisco and still have branches there, like ABC Seafood and Mayflower. Other stores that began in the South Bay have spread out to nearby suburbs, linking towns like Cupertino, Milpitas, and Fremont through a flow of business resources, networks, and customers. Professional associations, like the Chinese American Real Estate Association and the Silicon Valley Chapter of the Asian American Real Estate Association facilitate these networks. They provide business connections that can help target and stream Asian businesses into malls and serve as important sources of information about such things as management, emerging opportunities, and best practices in development (Lung-Amam 2014). Angela Tsui, former Fremont Economic Development Coordinator, explained that informal networks have played an important role in bringing Asian businesses to the city. “In the past five years, we have seen a growing number of Asian-owned businesses and the clustering of such businesses,” she noted, “Word get out that this area is good and that encourages other retailers to join them” (Conrad, 2008).
Asian malls are also connected to specific regions of the U.S. outside of Silicon Valley, especially San Gabriel Valley near Los Angeles. Phillip Su explained that, when building the San Gabriel Square near Los Angeles in the 1980s, he recruited about 20 stores from Northern California to go open new branches there. Likewise, when building Milpitas Square, he recruited many successful businesses from San Gabriel Square, who were “anxious to get on the waiting list” (Wong, nd). Most of the Northern California developers that I spoke to had visited L.A. before starting their first Asian mall projects to investigate different models and potential tenants. John Luk recruited the developer of the Ulfrets Center from L.A, who has since gone on to build other Asian malls in Silicon Valley.

Relationships among mall tenants, developers, and customers extend also beyond national borders. John Luk said that his brokerage business has offices in Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou, which allows him to easily tap foreign companies wishing to expand their holdings in the U.S. (Simonson, 2008). Many mall chains originated in Asia, while others simply adopt the names of popular stores from overseas. Cross-national business associations and transnational financing also help support the development of Asian mall projects. Phillip Su, for instance, received the assistance of Asian international banks with whom he had established relations with in Asia to facilitate the development of Milpitas Square (Wu and Eljera, 1998).

These are not one-way connections between East and West, but rather networks that influence landscapes and social geographies on both sides of the border. John Luk said that many Asian malls developers and real estate professionals like him, who have made their money in the U.S., are also beginning to invest in China and Taiwan. Mama Liang’s, a popular

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6 Several scholars have written about the relationship of Asian banks to the development American ethnic economies. For a discussion of this literature see J. Fong (2010).
restaurant that began in the San Gabriel Valley and now has several locations in Silicon Valley, advertises that they are looking for sites in China to expand (Liang’s Kitchen, 2012). Ironically, however, Phillip Su pointed out that many new malls in China are looking for American companies like Wal-Mart as their target anchors.

**Asian Malls as Centers of Suburban Social and Cultural Life**

While in form, Asian malls reflect the diversity of the Asian American community, in function they serve as important places in the everyday lives of their patrons. Asian malls reinforce Asian American suburbanites’ practices of everyday life, their personal and collective identities, their sense of community and place, and connection to the Asian diaspora.

**Places Both Special and Mundane**

Asian malls service many ritual functions of everyday Asian American suburban life. One of the more important is to acts as a source of information—a resource for what is happening in the local community, the region, and among the Asian diaspora around the world. At the various stands found outside Asian supermarkets, patrons can pick up the *Chinese New Home Buyers’ Guide* or get information on food services, senior living care facilities, recreation, transportation, shopping, entertainment and professional services, in Chinese, English, and several other languages. On the billboards located outside of every Ranch 99 supermarket, patrons can find out about houses for rent, baby-sitting services, tutoring, or items for sale.
Asian malls typically offer a range of essential services like medical, dental, and eye care with attention to common cultural practices. In Fremont Times Square, the Asian Medical Clinic provides health care that combines an understanding of Eastern and Western medicines and address the common health concerns of Asian Americans. All doctors speak Chinese. Other “essentials” for many Asian Americans are good food and quality educational services. Youth are often shuttled to Asian malls to participate in Chinese language, music, and other afterschool activities, while adults make their ritual trips in and out of grocery stores and restaurants. Milpitas Square sponsors job fairs and career days, among many other events aimed at building the social and economic capital of the Asian American community. And in 2010, the federal government stationed census takers in Ranch 99 supermarkets across the country, showing that malls are also important sites of Asian American political participation.

Malls serve as much as places of special occasion as ritual life. Many Asian Americans go to the mall to get married, celebrate holidays, birthdays, graduations, and other important life events. Weddings are such a popular part of the business of many mall banquet restaurants like ABC in Milpitas’ Ulfrets Center that they try to encourage customers to get married during “off peak” times of the year. One promotion offered a complementary one-night hotel suite and bottles of wine for every table in addition to its standard wedding package of a cake, photographer, flowers, karaoke machine, and entertainment by Leung’s White Crane Lion Dancers to any couple that got married between January and April 2012.

**Spaces of Comfort, Acceptance, and Identity**
Asian malls are comfortable places for many of their patrons to gather, speak their native language, and purchase familiar goods and products from their home countries. Sally, a second generation Korean American, described the comfort that her mother feels when shopping at Asian malls as opposed to going to more established American supermarkets, like Safeway:

She feels a lot more comfortable [at Asian malls] in her element. I mean I would too. When she looks at something, she knows exactly what it is. If she needs help, she knows how to ask for help and feels comfortable with that. With English, even thought she’s pretty good with English, pretty proficient, there’s still just that moment of hesitation. If she needs to ask for help, she will probably just ask me to ask…I think it just gives immigrants specifically comfort, like you’ve come all this way but this doesn’t have to be as foreign as you think it is. You can come into this little enclave that we’ve made and feel at least at home.

For Sally, Asian malls serve a similar function to urban ethnic enclaves like Chinatowns, as spaces that help immigrants adapt to life in a new place.

For second-generation youth, the mall does not so much provide comfort by reminding them of their home overseas, but their homes in the American suburbs. The mall connects youth to their families and culture—it is a place, many said, where they go to “feel Asian.” Several interviewees confirmed what Patrick (2006) recalled as having been “practically raised” in Ranch 99. They grew up being shuttled to and from Asian malls for art and piano lessons, shopping, and eating out with their families. After they leave home, the mall is still a place where many return with their families during holidays and other special occasions. Ethan, a
college student I spoke to at Pacific East Mall in Richmond, said that he spends most of the time during his trips home to Los Angeles being taken out by his parents to their local Ranch 99 mall, just as his family did for out-of-town guests for as long as he could remember. It is a place of first jobs, dates, and many childhood memories—an intimately known and familiar space. “They remember the Asian mall,” said John Luk in reference to second generation Asian American youth.

Asian malls also reinforce Asian Americans’ everyday cultural practices. At Ranch 99, those wanting to celebrate Thanksgiving with non-traditional fare can pick up an entire meal consisting of roasted turkey, crispy fried shrimp balls, grilled short ribs, sautéed lotus root with Chinese cured pork, braised rock cod, and chow mein noodles. This alternative to the “traditional” American holiday, normalizes and celebrates a different set of cultural practices. “In Ranch 99, I don’t feel I am a minority at all,” explained one customer (Chang, 2006, 105).

This sense of comfort and acceptance extends not only to Chinese immigrants, but also second-generation youth. At the Pacific East Mall in Richmond, I met a group of four Asian American teens break dancing in the hallways. When I asked them whether they felt comfortable to dance in this space, they responded that their presence is scrutinized by mall security, but was generally tolerated, especially compared to other malls they visited. The nearby café sometimes played their requested songs and the mall is a familiar place where many of them had come regularly since they were in middle, and for some, even elementary school. Now as juniors and seniors, although they could go elsewhere to hang out, they still come to the mall up to three times per week. Taking a phone call during our interview, one teen referred to his location as simply “Ranch”—a destination that was apparently well known amongst his peers.
Asian malls also offer opportunities for patrons to appropriate mall space for their own purposes and develop a sense of ownership and identity. On billboards at the J&S Coffee and Tea House in the Pacific East Mall, youth leave love notes in Japanese animae, and express their poetry, art, or simply their love of boba in many different languages. Outside the Milpitas Square Ranch 99, employees and patrons regularly gather around tables to smoke, gamble, talk, and play cards. Through these daily acts of appropriation, mall space comes to reflect the identities and meanings of its many users.

The mall can also help Asian Americans straddle between their Asian and American identities, by reflecting aspects of both. Shenglin Chang and I (2010) have shown that Asian malls act as important spaces of identity for transnational youth that spend their lives shuttling back and forth between Taiwan and the U.S. Among many second-generation youth, urban ethnic enclaves are considered too “old-fashioned” or “traditional,” whereas Asian malls offer more “hip” and “modern” products like cell phone gadgets and car accessories that they feel better reflect their lifestyles and preferences. Boba milk teashops featuring funky, modern decors and Taiwanese and American pop music are popular youth hangouts. At Milpitas Square, Quickly, an international chain of boba milk teashops, features an “In Board” that reports on news of importance to Asian American youth, from the death of Apple® founder and CEO, Steve Jobs, to the latest Chinese pop star drama. Its shelves are lined with Asian American magazines like East 38, which is written in Chinese about Chinese celebrities, but marketed only in northern and southern California. Asian malls help to bridge multiple cultural landscapes and blend them in a uniquely Asian American, suburban space. Likewise for Asian immigrants, Asian malls are a meeting point between two worldviews. Phillip Su described the importance of Asian malls’ wide food selection as it relates to Asian Americans’ sense of identity in the U.S,
“When I go back to Asia, maybe from time to time I want to have doughnuts. I feel like you need to have burger to feel like American. And from time to time [in the U.S] you feel like you need to have some rice to feel like Chinese.”

**Spaces of Hybridity and Experimentation**

At Asian malls, patrons not only encounter the culturally familiar, but also unfamiliar people and practices that promote experimentation and border crossing. Asian mall patrons are not exclusively Asian Americans, nor are they from one Asian ethnic group. Through most malls in Silicon Valley serve predominantly Chinese American customers (especially those anchored by Ranch 99 and Marina Foods), Fremont’s Northgate Shopping Center only has about a 50 percent Chinese American clientele, according to one Ranch 99 employee. Latinos, African Americans, and East Indians make up the majority of its other patrons. But even among Asian Americans, the range of languages, cultural traditions, practices, and preferences are quite varied.

The mall creates opportunities for daily exchange and interaction among these different groups. Patrons frequently meet at newspaper stands, grocery isles, parking lots, and other banal spaces of the mall. Ash Amin (2002) argues that these microgeographies of everyday space contain the greatest potential for intercultural exchange that build respect and tolerance for difference. A Filipina immigrant who I met at the Northgate Shopping Center said that although she came to the mall mostly to pick up newspapers about Filipinos in the U.S. and abroad, because the stands outside Ranch 99 have other ethnic newspapers available, she frequently also pick up other papers to “learn about other cultures” (fig. 2).
For many patrons, food is one of the primary means of experimentation. Asian malls generally maintain a broad selection of pan-Asian cuisine and its supermarkets sell foods from Asia, Latin America, and the U.S. Asian mall restaurants also imbibe this sense of hybridity. Two of the more popular restaurants in Milpitas Square are Coriya Hot Pot City and Darda Seafood. Coriya describes itself as an all-you-can eat restaurant “where Japanese shabu shabu meets Korean barbecue to create Taiwanese hot pot.” Darda is a popular Chinese Halal restaurant where Islamic prayers and pictures of a ritual Hajj hang alongside Chinese New Year banners. Philip Su explained that most patrons seek out opportunities to experiment with new cuisine. “Every time we have a new restaurant that join our shopping center, there’s always a draw because everybody wants to try something new,” he explained, “People want to come here, and say wow, look these restaurants, let’s try this one.”

For non-Asians, Asian malls are often an interesting space to try out different ways of being and seeing the world. For many, Asian malls offer not only the opportunity to try new foods, but a whole range of new activities and products. At Pacific East Mall, I spoke to a white teen that was visiting the mall for the first time. He explained that he typically hates malls, but “this is different.” He was excited by all the different aspects of Asian culture that he had not previously been exposed to. Likewise, the mall can offer opportunities for patron to try out new things as well as try on different roles and identities. At KTV Music, a karaoke café that offers over 110,000 English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, and Korean music videos, an employee reported that non-Asian patrons were particularly drawn to singing in Japanese. As Drew (2001) observed, during karaoke one is able to “position themselves physically, socially, and culturally through the choice of songs and renderings,” or what he called, inhabiting their “vocal alter egos” (22).
Cultural Community and Socialization

Many Asian mall patrons visit often and for long periods of time. At several of the Asian malls I visited, customers would regularly spend several hours on a given visit, especially on Friday and Saturday nights when parking was hard to find. “It appears as if Asians do not go to the mall to shop, but rather to take their weekend vacations,” quipped marketing scholar Roger Blackwell (Brown, 2003). At Pacific East, I met several shoppers who reportedly visited every weekend. One Mien teen told me that he visited the mall every Sunday after church and several times during the week, mostly to eat and meet up with friends.

Part of the reason for the popularity of Asian malls is their roles as cultural and community centers. They are places of gathering for everything from the Lunar New Year to religious ceremonies. In Silicon Valley, these events can draw crowds that are as large, if not larger, than those for similar events held in San Francisco or Oakland. In addition to special holidays, malls often host regular cultural events like lantern, kite-making, and calligraphy workshops, fine art demonstrations, folk dances, puppet shows, and drama and music performances. L.A.’s Asian Garden Mall holds weekly night markets similar to those found in many Asian cities. “The objective of these planned events is to create a social atmosphere to expand the role of an Asian shopping center from purely commercial. By creating a gathering place, it is intended that the center form a social hub that attracts Asians from a wider trade area,” concluded a report on Asian malls commissioned by the City of Fremont (Thomas Consultants, 2005, 10). On opening day for Milpitas Square, more than 10,000 residents from around the Silicon Valley participated in the festivities, which included lion dancing, kung fu
demonstrations, and a Chinese orchestra (Lyons, 1996). The prominent role of food in Asian malls also enhances their role as a community and cultural space.

Patrons come to the mall to socialize, and build and renew friendships. They come with friends and commonly run into them at the mall, sometimes even old friends from Taiwan or China (Chang, 2006). The mall acts like a suburban Main Street—a place to see and be seen. On the weekends, the sidewalks and hallways are overrun with customers dressed in their Sunday best, with the symbols of their success apparent in the cars they drive, the clothes they wear, and amount of dishes they order in local restaurants. “Food is the ostensible attraction [of Asian malls] but the real draw is the chance to renew one’s identity by casually rubbing elbows with other Asians,” wrote Nahm (2011). Shenglin Chang (2002) observed that Ranch 99 serves as such an important social hub that a trip to the market by a dating couple can serve as almost as their official “coming out” to the larger community. Asian malls are places to meet other people and socialize. Like bowling alleys, movie theatres, cafés and other “third spaces” that critics suggest have been lost amidst contemporary suburban sprawl, Asian malls are places where Asian Americans participate in their local and cultural communities.

The role of Asian malls as a social space is especially important for Asian youth and elderly. One Chinese senior I spoke to at Northgate Shopping Center in Fremont, who spoke little English and had no family in the area, said that the mall was an important space for him to socialize with old friends and make new ones. He had found his apartment on a posting outside the Ranch 99 and now walks to the mall everyday from his apartment. Recognizing the importance of the mall for the elderly, several Bay Areas groups that serve Asian seniors like Self Help for the Elderly, provide transportation to and from Asian malls. For many Asian American youth, the mall is an important site of their social lives and identities. Two college-
aged girls I met in Milpitas Square explained that Asian malls are important places for suburban Asian youth who have so few other places to hang out, especially those with good, cheap, and familiar food options and a vibrant nightlife.

Asian malls are also places to strengthen familial bonds. Blackwell referred to them as “family places, symbolic of a culture that is able to take commercial and cultural interests and blend them.” (Brown, 2003). Mary, who is Indian, said that her husband will not let her cook on the weekend so that their family can spend time together eating out, often at an Asian mall. “It’s a family event on the weekend,” explained John Luk, who reported that Asian American families will often reward the grandparents for working hard during the week watching the kids by taking them to the mall. It is not at all uncommon to see families with three generations in tow streaming in and out of mall restaurants and shops. Asian malls help to bridge the cultural divide among generations. As Nahm (2011) wrote, they show Asian and non-Asian American youth that “Asian culture offers shiny modern attractions as well as old dusty ones.”

Asian malls also attract customers from different social classes and ethnicities and foster their interaction. “There is a sense of the mall integrating different waves of ethnic Chinese immigrants from all over Asia. They may come from different classes, but the mall represents common ground,” argued Aiwha Ong, “a place where different streams of Asians become Asian-American,” (Brown, 2003). Although Asian malls have become more geographically and economically diverse, at any given mall in Silicon Valley, most still contain a variety of pan-Asian restaurants, customers, and stores selling products that range in quality from high-end jewelry to knock-off purses and knick-knacks. At Milpitas Square, luxury clothing boutiques adjoin gift shops selling cheap imports along their narrow and crowded isles. At most of the
restaurants, even the most popular and seemingly exclusive ones, lunch can be bought for less than $10.00 a plate.

Transnational Connection

Asian malls not only connect Asian Americans to their local, ethnic communities, they also provide a bridge to loved ones overseas and everyday life in their countries of origin—points of connection to places that are geographically distant, but ever-present in the minds of many patrons. They do so, in part, by offering a wide selection of Asian brands and products. Popular youth magazines like éf and Body arrive hot off the Taiwanese presses with the latest in overseas news and fashion. Music from popular Taiwanese bands like Girl’s Generation and Super Junior and the latest Japanese anime movies and comics can be found in many mall stores. Japanese and Korean animation comic and films are widely available and often streaming from laptops and smart phones in mall cafés. Dan said that when he and his wife first moved to Fremont in 1982, they used to bring back lots of things that they missed when visiting with family in Taiwan. Now they can find everything they need at their local Asian mall.

Mall patrons can also virtually link in to everyday life in Asia. Televisions in several restaurants broadcast overseas news and popular Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese dramas and music videos. At i.tv in Fremont Times Square, customers can sign up for 12 channels of Chinese television, while an employee reported that some of their competitors offer as many as 88 channels. Cheap phone cards can be bought for calls to Asia, travel arrangements made for return visits, and money easily sent to relatives at the many Asian bank branches typically found in Asian malls (fig. 3). East West Bank, which specializes in international banking, bills itself as
a “financial bridge.” Its patrons can use ATMs anywhere in the world without fees and change money into almost any Asian currency. According to Joe Fong (2010), Asian banks “provide the missing link between the global hemispheric domains and the Asian diasporic regional field,” connecting the local to the global and global to the local (53-54).

The lived experience of Asian malls also provides a touchstone to distant places. To some, watching the neon lights come up at night, getting stuck in an overcrowded vegetable isle, or passing a door plastered with fliers and advertisements recalls the feeling of everyday street life in Asian cities. “It’s amazing how much like Singapore or Hong Kong these malls are,” observed Ong (Brown, 2003). Many of the stores are named after popular restaurants in China and Taiwan and carry similar items. During the Lunar New Year, the mall is filled with red banners and signs wishing patrons good luck in the coming year. Fights break out in the grocery isles and parking lots and, just like in China, everyone stops to stare. A violin and piano duet plays classical Chinese ballads outside a music store, while an ad hoc group of mall patrons begin ballroom dancing through the hallway. I too sometimes feel as if I am watching a Shanghai street scene.

Asian malls are spaces that serve many ritual functions of everyday life and are places that have a special meaning and function in the life of their patrons. For many, they are spaces of comfort and acceptance for their cultural practices and identities; places of hybridity that present opportunities for experimentation with different ways of being and understanding the world; places of community and socialization; and places where they can connect with loved ones overseas and to a larger sense of themselves as part of a global diaspora. These different functions shows that, for many Asian Americans in the Silicon Valley, Asian malls are very much a part of what it means to be suburban.
Asian Mall Backlash and Regulation

While Asian malls are a significant site of identity and meaning for Asian Americans in Silicon Valley, non-Asian residents as well as city officials have been highly critical of them. In responding to these concerns, city officials adopted various new review processes and regulations to oversee their design and development. These heightened level of review and scrutiny these malls have received demonstrate how they are often perceived within planning and public policy as problem spaces—spaces that need to better “fit in” and adapt to the norms of their suburban context.

Asian Malls as Problem Spaces

A thread on the Tri-City Beat, a popular Fremont blog, sums up many residents’ complaints about Asian malls. A posting discussing the failure of the city to attract Whole Foods led to several heated criticisms of Asian malls. Jen asked, “Why does every center around have to become Asian themed? I think there are enough of those” (Artz, 2011).7 Marty commented, “I don’t take issue with a demographic being represented. But I take issue when an entire retail project is dedicated to a specific ethnic group. It promotes segregation and a fractional community.” Jen complained, “Asian shopping centers are not exactly welcoming to those that are not (primarily) Chinese” and that too many of the new centers in Fremont “catered” to Asian Americans. “Why is it so many of the Chinese retail establishments are so inclined to put the

7 I am using here the pen names of those that posted comments to the site.
name of their store in Chinese characters on their store fronts?” asked Vor, “It certainly tells me who the owner is attempting to attract and who they are not.” As these comments indicate, the most common complaints among residents about Asian malls is that they are segregated spaces, unwelcoming to non-Asian customers, contain non-English signage, and there are simply too many of them in Fremont.

City officials have their own complaints about Asian malls, most often regarding their condominium ownership. Though not prevalent in Fremont, this type of ownership is common in Asian malls in other cities—a scenario that city officials have proactively tried to avoid. The conclusions of the 2008 *Fremont Market Analysis and Retail Strategy*, a report commission by the city to assess its retail landscape, summarizes the opinions of the city officials I spoke to (Strategic Economics, 2008). The report gave a great deal of attention to the issue of retail condos, even through there were few in Fremont at the time, concluding that retail condos promote excessive use of signage that is “visually unappealing” and an “undesirable clustering of businesses” that can lead to “overpowering competition” among businesses and higher turnover rates. Fractionalized ownership also makes redevelopment difficult for the city, it explains:

> Historically, cities could use their power of eminent domain to assemble such centers for redevelopment. As the courts and public opinion have pushed for limiting the use of eminent domain, however, this tool for facilitating redevelopment is no longer viable. Therefore, retail condo projects have a built in functional obsolescence that will be almost impossible to address (68).

Angela Tsui (2010) explained that retail condos from the city’s perspective were simply “too
The concerns of both residents and city officials have been addressed through new regulations and raised planning scrutiny of Asian mall projects. The heightened level of review came in response to the conclusions of the *Assessment of Asian-Themed Retail City of Fremont*, a study commissioned by the Fremont Economic Development Department, assessing “the potential for Asian-themed retail centers in Fremont, particularly vis-à-vis their suitability to the City’s intended strategy [for retail development]” (Thomas Consultants, 2005, 1). When I asked Fremont Community Development Director Jeff Schwob (2011) why the city felt compelled to conduct the report, his response indicated that the study was also meant to address the complaints and questions of residents and the city. “As I say, there’s fear in the unknown, so there’s a desire to figure out at least what [Asian malls are]? What are the fears? How do we address those?”

The report spoke directly to residents’ and the city’s concerns by proposing a series of key issues that should be addressed before the approval of any future Asian mall project. These issues, which were shared with city planners and the economic development staff, include the quality of maintenance and design of Asian malls, their signage, especially ensuring that the signage is not “excessive and of lower quality,” discouraging condo ownership, and encouraging malls that attract more non-Asian customers.

While many city officials saw the report and their heightened review of Asian malls projects as an attempt to better understand these types of projects, many developers viewed the report as a targeted attack on Asian malls. Steve argued that the fact that the city felt compelled to commission the report showed their bias towards Asian malls:
Now, what would the outcry be if they said “You know what? We’re going to do [a study] about African Americans.” Or, “We’re going to do one about Native Americans.” Why are you commissioning the study and why are you spending the money on a firm that’s not even in this area, from Vancouver, to come in here and give you an analysis of all the shopping centers here. Because are you trying to inhibit their growth? Are you trying to control them in a certain way rather than let the market dictate what it is? That, to me, was quite disturbing.

Diana, a Fremont developer, responded that she felt that the study was done because the city was already fairly skeptical of allowing Asian malls, and it simply served to reinforce their perspective.

Moreover, developers complained that the city’s distaste for Asian malls had resulted in several potential projects having been turned down or delayed in recent years. They cited a propensity for stalled applications, and excessive study periods and planning requirements. “We fight through this, that, and then the city would just hold our application, just leave it as ‘no, no, no. No Asian, no Asian,” explained one Fremont developer. Referencing a proposed Asian mall project that took nearly four years to go through planning review, one developer explained that the planning department “threw everything in the way.” Manny, a Fremont city planner, agreed that the department had “discouraged” Asian mall projects in the past, especially those with smaller shops because the city was interested in larger and more “upscale” retail.

While most city officials denied any inherent distaste of Asian malls, they were openly hesitant about condo-owned projects and have adopted regulations to address these concerns directly. The 2008 retail study concluded that, “Although this is relatively new territory as most
cities have not adopted such policies, Fremont would be well served by taking a proactive approach to the future and actively addressing the retail condominium issue as quickly as possible, rather than waiting for more serious problems to arise” (Strategic Economics, 2008, 69). At the time, Fremont had no built projects that included retail condominiums, but had several either approved, in the final approval stages, or under review. In 2009, by a unanimous City Council vote, the city adopted two new regulations regarding retail condominiums.

The first was a zoning text amendment that established new standards for the design and operation of all new retail condominiums or condo conversions in the city. Under the new law, retail condos are issued a conditional use permit, which subjects them to an additional level of planning review. To receive full approval, developers need to show their compliance with a set of standards that include a review of the size of the units to ensure that they are “typical and customary to the zoning district.” Developers must also establish a property owner’s association “to warrant the continued viability of the project, avoid conditions of neglect and blight, and retain aesthetic consistency and conformity, and ensure a mechanism for funding the maintenance and replacement.” The association is required to have initial reserve funds equal to five years of annual maintenance costs and to hire a licensed, professional management firm. In addition, associations are required to adopt covenant, codes, and restrictions (CC&R) that cover among other things, “promoting a high quality and professional physical appearance and cohesive operation…that avoids deteriorating and inconsistent conditions including but not limited to design, architectural treatments and features, and signage.”8 The emphasis of the ordinance on condo unit sizes, and malls’ look, maintenance, and signage, indicated that the regulations were adopted largely to deal with Asian mall condos. And in fact, the Council was

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8 Fremont sign ordinance does not require, but rather “encourages” English language signage, unlike some other English language signage requirements that have affected Asian malls in Cupertino, Monterey Park, Flushing, New York, Vancouver, and elsewhere (Fong 1994; Horton, 1995; Domae, 1998; Li, 2006; Smith and Logan, 2006).
rather forthright about this point, as most of the discussion around the ordinance centered on their concerns about Asian malls, despite the fact that the law would impact other types of condos like medical offices. The city sought control over these projects to ensure their development was consistent with other retail projects and they fit into their neighborhood context.

The regulations also addressed the city’s desire to make way for future redevelopment opportunities. This was made most clear in the second component of the ordinance, which applied additional standards to commercial, industrial, and other non-residential condominiums within a half-mile of current or proposed rapid transit stations. It emphasized the need to “limit fractionalized ownership” within these zones designated by city plans as areas for future high-density development. According to Max, a Fremont city planner, this component came as a direct response the proposal to build Fremont Times Square, Fremont’s first condo-owned Asian mall (fig. 4). The draft ordinance adopted in 2007, two years before its final adoption, stated that part of the reason for the regulations was that the city “anticipated one or more condominium development applications in the coming months,” and specified that the regulations would apply to any approved project whether or not regulations had been fully adopted at the time of approval.

The timing of the draft ordinance gave the city the ability to work with the developers of Fremont Times Square to ensure that they complied with the city’s terms. The mall was required to adopt CC&Rs, have a management team in place, and ensure that their units were “appropriately” sized. According to then Planning Director, Jeff Schwob, this regulation helped them to negotiate a reduction in the number of units at Fremont Times Square to nearly half of the units originally proposed. Another planner told me that the city was also able to work
directly with the developers to structure the CC&Rs and ensure that provisions were made for
the units to maintain a minimum level of visibility on its widows and that the majority vote
within the property association was vested with its anchor tenant, Marina Foods. Thus, if the
city wanted to redevelop the site, they only had one owner to contend with, not the owners of its
other 63 stores. Fremont’s ordinance enabled the city to control “the problem” of retail condos,
before they began.

**Putting Asian Malls in their Place**

While regulations and review processes have been used to control, and perhaps at times
restrict, the growth of Asian malls, their development has been further inhibited by the city’s
vision of “desirable” retail. This vision focuses on attracting retail establishments that are
“typical” for an upper-middle income suburb. Despite Asian malls apparent popularity and the
critical functions they serve for Fremont’s Asian immigrant population, Asian malls are not a
part of the city’s larger plans for advancing its retail. Instead, city officials have often used
Asian malls as opportunities to showcase Fremont’s racial and ethnic diversity for financial and
political gain.

**Just a Normal Upper Middle Class Suburb**

While Asian malls have been the subject of much debate and regulation in Fremont, they
are not part of the city’s strategic retail vision. Fremont’s General Plan lays out a goal for
attracting retail in “targeted” sectors, including upscale groceries, and high-end eating and
drinking establishments. Nearly every city official and planner I spoke to about retail mentioned the city’s consistent efforts to try to attract high-end retail establishments. “We are not getting the higher-end, traditional places,” explained Mayor Bob Wasserman (2011), “We would like to get some nice, white tablecloth restaurant. We always have, and we’ve always gone after them.”

In a brochure put out by the Office of Economic Development, the city advertises that it is looking for “high-quality retail,” including “more boutique shops, outdoor dining and cafes, and entertainment venues” (City of Fremont, nd). The vision of future retail emphasizes getting the city up to par with the kind of development common for its upper middle income demographic, but is not nearly so focused on the needs of its large Asian immigrant population.

Ironically, some city officials said that the main reason why Fremont has been unable to attract upscale retail establishments was, in fact, its Asian American demographic. When I asked Mayor Wasserman why the city had not been successful in attracting high-end restaurants and stores, he responded, “That has a lot to do with our demographics, unfortunately. Like Whole Foods. Whole Foods will never say it publically, but the reason they’re not here is because of our ethnicity.” Wasserman and other city officials argued that many large retailers view Fremont as an Asian American suburb and make assumptions about what they will and will not purchase. Angela Tsui explained that it can be difficult to bring in national chains that look at Fremont demographics and say, “I don’t really think that your Asian population is really going to come and eat at a Claim Jumpers. But lo and beyond, we were able to get one and it does very well.”

Likewise, Mayor Wasserman explained that Fremont’s stigma is unfounded. “I know that they’re wrong, but how do you tell Whole Foods that they’re wrong?” he said, “You can’t tell

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9 Claim Jumpers is a popular restaurant serving traditional American fare. Fremont officials often site this among the city’s retail successes.
them they’re wrong. They don’t listen.” Interestingly, in July 2011, Whole Food announced that it had found a suitable location and would be opening a new location in Fremont.

The Asian mall developers and customers that I spoke to, however, were skeptical about whether the city’s vision of desirable retail accurately reflects the needs of its largely Asian immigrant population. “Fremont has been talking about Whole Foods for 20 years,” explained John Luk. But, he argued, they were not able to make it happen because retail is market driven and what is desired by the market are Asian malls and stores. Diana doubted that Asian immigrants in Fremont really would shop at the kind of establishments that the city was trying to attract. “I’m not sure about it. Asian, they will spend money on housing, education,” she said, “They will spend money for their kids to play but in turn they wouldn’t spend money to dine at the fine tablecloth restaurant.” Steve characterized the Fremont planning department as, “basically a bunch of white males, middle aged,” whose vision of the city is “sort of a yuppified version of things.” Thus, he argued that when someone wants to build an Asian mall, the planners tend to react by saying, “we’re not really for that over here. We want to see an upscale supermarket.”

This lack of attention to the development of Fremont’s Asian mall market runs counter to the findings of the 2008 retail report, which concluded that, “The predominance and growth of the Asian population suggests that specific strategies should be developed to assist Asian business owners and encourage Asian-oriented retail in order to create a more vibrant and successful retail environment” (Strategic Economics, 2008, 46). When I asked Mayor Wasserman about the city’s efforts to attract Asian businesses, he responded that the city does not have to “woo” the Asian businesses; they just come. But John Luk argued that Fremont had still not managed to attract the type of quality Asian retail that a city of its size demands. Luk
noted that unlike Cupertino and Milpitas with comparably high percentages of Asian Americans but much larger and well-known Asian malls, “Fremont is almost 50 percent Asian, but lacking quality Asian malls.” No city officials that I spoke mentioned their efforts to “woo” Asian malls or businesses to Fremont.Á Quite the opposite, many said that Fremont already had enough or speculated that the market for Asian malls in Fremont was built out. Interestingly, one Asian mall project that was tied up in the planning department for nearly four years was changed to a proposal to build a mall anchored by Berkeley Bowl, a well-known northern California organic food chain and stressed the environmental features of the new plans. While the proposal retained many of the features of the Asian mall concept, including small retail spaces and office condos (all of which received push back from the Council), it dropped the idea of attracting a large Asian grocery store as anchor. As the developer reiterated to the Council, “It is not an Asian market…This type of grocer crosses over to various cultures and to everybody.”ii It seems as though the developer had a clear sense of what the city wanted to see and what it did not.

Diversity for Sale

While city officials have been reluctant to promote Asian mall development, they have strategically used Asian malls to promote Fremont’s diversity and attract other types of investment in the city. Fremont’s Assessment of Asian-Themed Retail study recommended the use of Asian malls to “showcase” the city’s diversity in its downtown:

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Á One exception was reportedly when Mayor Wasserman encouraged Asian Pearl to locate to its current Pacific Commons II location. This arrangement, however, was set up by the developer John Luk rather than as a part of the city’s own proactive marketing efforts, as has been the case for other high-end retailers (Luk, 2011).
Asian retail would play a key role in Fremont’s future International Street development to showcase its multicultural diversity. Given that the raw ingredients for a unique Downtown Fremont are being pursued along the freeway interchanges, the alternative opportunity to be a part of the ‘heart’ of Fremont should be vigorously marketed to developers (Thomas Consultants, 2005, 31).

Accordingly, as development applications for Asian malls come to the city, the report suggested that planners ask, “Would the proposed mix of retail be better suited to Downtown Fremont (such as the development proposal to showcase all Asian communities in its offering)?” This strategic positioning of diversity is meant to attract new business and other investments to the city. As Sharon Zukin (1995) observed in New York, culture is viewed by cities as a marketing tool.

It was especially critical that the 2005 report suggested putting Asian malls at the center of Fremont’s Central Business District. For nearly 60 years, the city had tried to bring its five original town together under a central downtown that could enhance and develop its sense of place, identity, and desirability. Plan after plan has been proposed over the years, but most officials recognized the city’s failure to produce a vibrant downtown, relative to other Silicon Valley suburbs like Mountain View and Palo Alto, or as Councilmember Sue Chan (2011) put it to put the “there in the there.” Interestingly, in the latest reincarnation of its Downtown Community Plan, the centerpiece was a new cultural arts center and one of the main objectives of the plans is to “reflect Fremont’s cultural diversity.” While it does not appear that the city has tried to follow up with the report’s recommendation to try to attract an Asian mall to the downtown, the city was intent on displaying diversity in the heart of its retail landscape. In fact,
in the debate over the retail condominium ordinance, Councilmember Natarajan stated her concern at the limits on fractionalized ownership within the TOD zones not impose on their plans for downtown. Whether her concerns centered on a broader vision for increased density in the downtown or ensure that Asian businesses would locate there was unclear.

**Visions of a Multicultural Suburb**

Another example of how Fremont city officials have strategically positioned ethnic diversity within its retail landscape was evidenced by the city’s handling of the Globe Mall project. In 2005, Fremont received a proposal for what its developers called, “the first internationally-themed lifestyle center in the United States.” According to its marketing materials, the Globe Mall sought “to create an environment that is inclusive of the different cultures of the world and to express them through the design of the architecture as well as the types of products and services offered” (Imperial Investment and Development Company, nd). The mall was proposed to be 250,000 square foot and later expanded to 700,000 square foot, which would have made it one of the largest developments in Fremont. It included various retail, restaurant, and entertainment spaces, representing 12 regions of the world at its various centers—Pacifica, Saigon Village, Little India, Europa, China Village, Little Tokyo, Korea Town, Australia, New Zealand, North America, South America, the Middle East, and Africa. “The Heart” of the project was where all its parts would come together to “celebrate cultural differences while at the same time promoting discovery of our commonalities,” through art, music, dance, lectures, fashion shows, cooking competitions, and other community events.
(Imperial Investment and Development Company, nd). The mall proposed to showcase and celebrate the diversity that was the world and, developers claimed, Fremont.

This grand multicultural vision reflected the kind of inclusionary space that many city officials and residents felt Asian malls lacked. The Globe Mall thus presented the city with the opportunity to at once display an ethnically integrated model of retail and the city’s diversity. The former was highlighted in the 2005 Asian mall report, which concluded that, “new Asian-themed development in Fremont should demonstrate a degree of cross-cultural appeal” and “new Asian development proposals should demonstrate a clear strategy to attract non-Asian Americans through merchandise mix and ‘soft programming’ of public events” (Thomas Consultants, 2005, 30). In addition, “development proposals that cater to multiple closely-linked Asian markets (such as Japanese and Korean or Chinese and Vietnamese) should be preferred to those that target a single group” (31). The Globe project was the right project at the right time.

Fremont city officials were excited by the mall’s prospects. “My first reaction was, you’re going to build an Epcot Center with upscale shopping in it,” explained Mayor Wasserman at a 2007 Council hearing. “It has such great potential for attracting people from all over the world, really.” Councilmember Dutra agreed, “The diversity component is a great, great theme.”iii If done right said Fremont Councilmember Natarajan “This could be magic.”iv Although she expressed concern that the architecture not be a “Disneyfied mockery,” she assured the consultant that the project was interesting and the council would work with them to “make sure this happens as quickly as possible.” And indeed they did. While the project was proposed in January 2005, by March 2006 the Fremont City Council had unanimously voted to rezone the property from industrial to high-volume retail, the critical step that gave the developer the go-
ahead for the plan. This despite the fact that the plan included retail condos in the initial section of the development, over which the Council had “serious concerns”

The emphasis of several of the comments surrounding the plan suggested that the multicultural appeal of the mall was critical to its popularity among the Council and planners. When introducing the project to the Council in 2006, planners explained, that they been they had already begun to think about how to make the project “appeal to a broad audience and not just one ethnic or cultural group.” Councilmember Cho later stressed the importance of this aspect of the project in terms of its public perception. “Although the predominant businesses that are shown on the map are Asian, the idea that we need to get across is that this is international,” he said, “I think that’s important to portray that image to the public.” An exchange between Councilmember Natarajan and the developer, Roger Shanks, former Fremont Planning Director and consultant to the developer for the project, at a 2007 Fremont Council meeting exemplified the desire to distance the Globe project from the image of ethnically exclusionary retail space commonly associated with Asian malls. Natarajan reminded the developer to heed to the city’s requirements that signage be predominantly in English to “reiterate that this is not an Asian Center but a Global Village.” In response, Shanks reminded her that indeed it was an “international center.” “We are looking at everybody from European to Asian,” he reassured her, “We want it to be inclusionary not exclusionary.”

Yet the city’s dream soon became its nightmare. In 2009, with only one section of mall complete and only a few tenants, including East West Bank, the institution that had financed the project, Saigon Village, LLC, the owners of the Globe filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy (fig. 5). In explaining the failure of the project, city officials offered various explanations. “Their business model wasn’t sound,” said Councilmember Sue Chan (2011), who voted to approve the
project. It was a combination of bad economic times and an inexperienced developer with big aspirations, explained a city planner who had worked on the project. But the Asian mall developers that I spoke to saw something else. They saw a city that was so eager to support this multicultural vision of an inclusive shopping center that it blurred the city’s assessment of it as a do-able project.

Ironically, however, the end product of the Globe was essentially an Asian mall. Before filing for bankruptcy, the only section of the site that got built was Saigon Village, and its only tenants were Asian. After emerging from bankruptcy in 2011, the company reorganized their remaining built out of the mail to only focus on a couple remaining sections—Pacifica, Indus, Sino, Siam, Nippon, Europa and the Heart. Outside of “Europa,” the cultures represented in the new mall were exclusively Asian. As Max poignantly observed, in initial review of the Globe project, many thought, “oh, it’s just another Asian mall which has turned out to be partially true. Because those are the most marketable properties here in Fremont.” While the Globe held the possibility of concretizing the multicultural and inclusive vision that the city wanted to project, it instead came to represent the opposite—just another Asian mall.

“It appears that Fremont is facing significant challenges in overcoming its historic development patterns to create a more vibrant, retail environment for the community,” concluded Fremont’s 2008 retail study. To improve this condition, city officials have been actively trying to locate new retail opportunities, but its vision of desirable retail has been limited to an appeal to mainstream, upper-middle class establishments that may not be addressing the needs of the city’s predominantly Asian and immigrant patrons. Asian malls, while often viewed by city officials as an opportunity to improve the visibility of diversity in the city, are not well integrated in this vision.
Asian malls disrupt stereotypes about suburbia. They show it as a far more complex, fluid, and globally-connected space that is as much outward- as inward-looking. They present it as a space alive with creative possibilities and innovative design ideas that embrace migrants from many different parts of the world. And they suggest a new orientation towards the suburban that is less enchanted by the homogenous, exclusive and static, and more by possibilities of democratic, open, and dynamic spaces.

Asian malls imbibe these different ways of being and seeing suburbia, while redefining and reconfiguring the very idea of the mall. These vibrant centers of social and cultural life are regular spaces for the engagement of new migrants to the American metropolis. They are spaces actively constructing and informing new identities as they enmesh and entangle the familiar and the strange, places both near and far, and patrons across various racial, ethnic, class, cultural and neighborhood lines. They are not only homes away from home, they are places through which home is being constantly negotiated and rearticulated. They imbibe the flexibility, fragility, and fluidity of their customers’ complex place identities. They are spaces of active place-making that show how people are coming to think about themselves as part of communities linked by common geographies and attachments to what Ash Amin (2002) has called the “banal spaces of everyday life.” In these pseudo-public spaces, patrons strengthen the bonds of family, exchange stories of hardship and triumph, make new friends, reunite with old classmates, celebrate life’s special moments, and develop a sense of themselves as both Asian Americans and Silicon Valley suburbanites.
But as these are also contested spaces—contested for some of the very same reasons that make them unique and important to so many of their patrons. The differences that set them apart from the traditional American suburban shopping center have become the basis upon which critiques have been leveled, and regulations adopted. Their non-English language signage, unique condo ownership format, small spaces, product selection, and street side appearance has brought into question the “foreign” elements they introduce and materialize. When viewed from the outside, these malls are rarely painted as the rich and diverse places they seem from the inside. Many of Asian malls’ important social and cultural functions fade away, while their departure from the traditional American landscape becomes amplified, but not affirmed. They come to be judged more for what they are not (traditional, standard, and conforming), rather than for what they offer. And accordingly, regulations focus far more on standardizing them than enhancing their performance or functionality to better meet the needs of users.

To turn away from suburban policy and planning frameworks that deny or even denigrate difference, however, are not simply a matter of making space for these “landscapes of difference.” As the case of Asian malls exemplified, ethnic and cultural difference has long had a place in the urban landscape. From Chinatown to Japantown, Little Italy to Little Saigon, these spaces of cultural otherness have long been heralded as places to represent diversity and difference, though they grew out of policies of exclusion designed to curb the contaminating influences of cultural differences and guarantee the privilege places of those beyond their walls. Policies designed to contain and constrain the spread of Asian malls and other “ethnic retail” in Silicon Valley act in the similar manner. They function to create hollow representations of diversity, caricatures of culture that treat it as if it were a “thing” fixed in space that could be observed, understood, or somehow vicariously experienced, and tourist sites for the economic
development of cities celebrate diversity, while pushing those populations that represent it to the margins. They privilege those with the ability to define what difference is and fix their ideas into urban policy, places, or development practices.

A more inclusive and open framework for suburban planning, policy, and place-making would focus more on the function of the landscape and the people who live in and use it—their purposes, meanings, values, and everyday practices. It would take on the rigid structure of urban planning and policy and decision-making that often falls back the ways things are and always have been done; that cedes to precedent; that heeds the most vocal and influential; and that fears change, messiness, and the unknown. Formulating sites for fuller expressions of difference, for more open debate and dialogue, for dynamic users and ever-changing populations, for spaces that meet the needs, aspirations and desires of multiple groups, and for more truly democratic and just spaces, requires new processes, policies, and a different suburban spatial imaginary.
Fig. 1: Fremont’s “Little Taipei” is one of approximately 140 Asian malls in the U.S. Asian malls blend Eastern and Western traditions to create a uniquely Asian American suburban space. Photo by author.
Fig. 2: Outside of Ranch 99 in Fremont’s Northgate Shopping Center, stands carry newspapers from 12 different language groups. This is an important place of everyday intercultural interaction. Photo by author.
Fig. 3: Asian malls serve many important everyday life functions for its patrons. These include the ability to connect with loved ones overseas by sending money using one of Asian malls’ many Asian bank branches, or as this ad outside a Ranch 99 suggests, Western Union. Photo by author.
Fig. 4: Fremont Times Square is Fremont’s first condo-owned Asian mall. Because the city passed a retail condo ordinance just before the mall was built, planners were able to manage and control the development process to ensure the property fit with mainstream mall configurations and could easily be made available for redevelopment. Photo by author.
Fig. 5: The Globe Mall filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2009, turning the city’s multicultural dreams into a nightmare. The only section of the mall that was built was Saigon Village, and its only tenants are Asian. It is considered by many today to be “just another Asian mall.” Photo by author.
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i Fremont City Council Meeting, Transcript, December 1, 2009.
ii Fremont City Council Meeting, Transcript, April 22, 2008.
iii Fremont City Council Meeting, Transcript, March 7, 2006.
iv Ibid.
v Ibid.
vi Fremont City Council Meeting, Transcript, February 13, 2007.