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

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Panel: Suburbia Transformed: Changing Forms & Demographics
Asian American Suburbanization

Suburban population of 100 largest U.S. cities, 2010

- White (Non-Hispanic)
- Asian American
- Hispanic
- African American
- Immigrants
Asian Americans in Silicon Valley

Asian Malls

Typical Suburban Mall?

- Suburban location
- Convenience
- Neighborhood / regional shopping center form

Not Really.

- Asian grocery & restaurant anchors
- Personal & professional services, especially food
- Mom & pop businesses
- Condo ownership
Not Your Typical Suburban Mall

Places both Special & Mundane

Comfort, Acceptance, & Identity

Culture, Community, & Socialization

Transnational Connection

Integration & Regulation

In-depth & semi-structure interviews
- 6 Asian mall managers, developers, brokers
- 22 storeowners and employees
- 6 city officials and planners

Archival data
- City council and planning commission steno notes
- City development plans, policies and reports
- Newspaper reports
- Primary data from developers
“Minoritized” Suburban Space

Subject of critique & scrutiny
Treated as problem spaces

Highly controlled & regulated
Fitting into a mainstream vision of suburban retail

Put in their Place
Ethnic retail as a means of celebrating multiculturalism
Problem Spaces

Established residents
- “Taking over” retail landscape
- Promoting segregation
- Unwelcoming to non-Asians

City officials & planners
- Asian language signage
- Clustering of like businesses
- Aesthetics & maintenance
- Size of spaces
- Redevelopment potential
Increased Scrutiny

Recommendations

- Quality of maintenance and design
- Ensuring signage not “excessive and lower quality”
- Discourage condo ownership
- Attract more non-Asian customers and tenants

Stalled project approvals
Regulation

Retail condo regulations
- Conditional use permits
- Size of units
- Visibility
- Property owners association
- CC&Rs regarding maintenance, aesthetics & signage
- Diversity of uses

Making way for redevelopment
- Limiting “fractionalized ownership” within TOD zone
- Mandating majority stakeholders
Just a Normal Middle Class Suburb

Asian malls omitted from the city’s “desirable” retail

Efforts to attract high-end retailers

No interest in “wooing” Asian mall developers or projects
Asian retail would play a key role in Fremont’s future International Street development to showcase its multicultural diversity.

Assessment of Asian-themed retail, City of Fremont (2005)
Visions of Multicultural Suburbia

With restaurants and upscale shopping, it could be like Epcot Center.

Mayor and Councilman Bob Wasserman (2007)
Just Another Asian Mall

Some people thought, “Oh, it’s just another Asian mall...which has turned out to be partially true because those are, I think, those businesses are the most marketable types of businesses here in Fremont.

Fremont City Planner (2010)
Landscapes of Difference as Spaces of Opportunity

Defy the stereotypes of suburban space

Challenge the norms, standards, & assumptions of suburban design & planning

Shift focus from form to function

Go beyond celebratory multiculturalism
Thank you!

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