

2 Ethnic Minority Restaurateurs and the Regeneration of 'Banglatown' in London's East End

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INTRODUCTION

Brick Lane, a busy thoroughfare of Spitalfields in London's East End, has been a hub of religious, social and commercial activity for successive waves of immigrants for over three centuries. Over the past 30–40 years, the area has accommodated London's largest Bangladeshi population, one of the UK's poorest minorities. Initially, many Bangladeshis found work in the area's long-established textile industry. But Spitalfield's 'rag trade' was unable to keep up with global competition, pushing unemployment to new heights. From the mid-1970s, the street became the scene of periodic intimidation by right-wing race-hate groups; ugly images of these confrontations were communicated widely by the news media. Then, somewhat against the odds, a small cluster of cafés began to attract customers from the white majority culture as well as adventurous tourists. Bangladeshi landlords converted run-down commercial buildings into restaurants, and thus began a spectacular re-orientation of the local economy in the 1990s.

Over the past decade or so, state involvement in urban regeneration and wealth and job creation has helped stimulate a local bonanza in Asian-style cuisine catering to non-Asians. Less tangibly, it can be argued that prosperity and the promotion of a positive image for Brick Lane has lifted the self-esteem of a minority that only recently suffered severe poverty, a poor environment and racially motivated violence. By the late 1990s, this mix of economic and social goals seemed fully in tune with the incoming New Labour government's 'Third Way' agenda, a discourse that promised business-led regeneration combined with a new emphasis on social inclusion and capacity building: a shift from top-down government to participatory governance. Brick Lane thus became something of a showcase.

This chapter examines the circumstances that transformed Brick Lane into 'Banglatown—London's Curry Capital', focusing on the narratives of place promoted by new alliances of local government, business and civil society. While these partnerships widened participation, it would be naïve to assume that the 'stakeholders' enjoyed equal influence over decisions regarding public intervention, some of which had profound implications for

the area and their own well-being. More specifically, this chapter examines a programme to package and sell a minority ‘culture’—an exotic spectacle for the benefit of visitors more affluent than the local population—which has enabled Brick Lane restaurant owners to create new wealth and jobs. This approach is compared to alternatives that have developed in the revitalisation of two other thoroughfares associated with Asian communities—Green Street in Northeast London and Southall Broadway, near Heathrow in the West—both of which adopted a more pluralistic and hybrid vision of connections with contemporary Asian cultures.

NATIONAL-LOCAL STRUCTURES FOR INCORPORATION

The election of New Labour in 1997 followed nearly 20 years of Conservative government instilling the spirit of ‘urban entrepreneurialism’ into UK local authorities. Local authorities were not only expected to eschew bureaucratic practices and remove barriers to business-led regeneration; they were encouraged to become more entrepreneurial in their own right. As Ashworth and Voogt (1994) have observed, the principle that cities—and areas *within* cities—should compete against one another sat uncomfortably with the regional/urban planning that prevailed elsewhere in Europe. However, in the UK in the early 1980s, many urban areas faced rapid industrial decline and rising unemployment, with no prospects for state intervention to stem further losses. If they wished to attract/retain investors, developers, high-income residents, visitors and other desired groups, they now had little choice but to develop strategies of self-promotion, more typical of their North American counterparts (Ward 1998).

Local authorities were required to compete for central government grants under ‘City Challenge’, and from 1994, the ‘Single Regeneration Budget’ (SRB)—the regime that has nurtured the tourist economy in Brick Lane and other schemes discussed below. Local authorities had to make a convincing case that concurred with the government’s emphasis on ‘self-help’; councils had to enlist support from diverse agencies, such as developers, land-owners, banks, hotels, trainers, cultural and community groups. At times unlikely bedfellows, differences between members of an SRB Partnership were generally played down. If successful, a small-area programme team would be set up, typically for five years. In areas of recent immigration and settlement, the acumen of minority entrepreneurs and their contribution to the city’s ‘cosmopolitan’ tourism offering provided a compelling story-line of ‘globalisation from below’ that many interest groups and political factions could support in cities such as Bradford, Liverpool, Birmingham and London (Henry *et al.* 2002; Shaw *et al.* 2004).

Michael Porter’s influential (1995) thesis that public intervention should work with the grain of market forces inspired developments in the UK, including the third round of SRB programmes, ‘Building Business’

(1997–2002). For Porter, the relatively high cost of real estate, poor environment and infrastructure and crime and security problems in inner cities are disadvantages that must be addressed. However, the state should not respond to decline by throwing good money after bad. Rather, it should free up the economy and assist the true sources of competitive advantage, especially entrepreneurial talent within minority communities, a supply of low-skilled but motivated workers and proximity to downtown and entertainment areas. According to this argument, the enlightened self-interest of minority businesses can play a critical role in enhancing place competitiveness, in reconnecting local economies with city-wide and even global markets. All this can be presented as a potent statement of popular capitalism. At the same time, it can offer evidence of an inclusive, tolerant and cohesive society: a discourse more traditionally associated with the Left.

The incoming government was keen to promote its ‘Third Way’ agenda: a middle course between ‘excessive statism’ and laissez faire capitalism (Giddens 2000). Local authorities were expected to cultivate closer relationships with local business and ‘third sector’ organisations: non-governmental, ‘value-driven’ organisations that ‘principally reinvest surpluses in the organisation or the community’ (HM Treasury 2005: 7). The 86 most deprived areas that received Neighbourhood Renewal Funding were expected to develop Local Strategic Partnerships, a concept that was later extended nation-wide. The intention was that small area-based collaborations would foster a more ‘joined-up’ approach to tackle the multi-faceted problems of deprived areas. Far from being abolished, SRB continued through to 2007, retaining its key principles of competitive bidding and local collaboration. There was, however, a new emphasis on meeting *social* objectives—*inclusion, capacity-building and wider participation*—as well as those concerned with economic and physical regeneration.

More traditional structures of representative democracy were considered too bureaucratic to deal effectively with questions of identity in a multicultural and global/local world (Newman *et al.* 2004: 204), and often lacked the trust of local communities. As emphasised in the emerging body of governance theory, this shift from hierarchical government to participatory local governance has created new opportunities for actors previously excluded from decision-making (Taylor 2007: 297). In the case of the SRB programmes, Partnerships were required to demonstrate how they involved the ‘community’ in preparing the bid and in arrangements to facilitate wider participation. According to government guidance, this was ‘likely to include the faith-based voluntary sector . . . ethnic minorities and local volunteers’ (DETR 1998: 5). But as Edwards (2003) points out, in practice it was largely a matter for the Partnership to decide who or what the local community might be, who should be consulted, and what form this might take. On its re-election in 2006, New Labour re-affirmed its broad commitment to community engagement to improve public service delivery at the neighbourhood level. Nevertheless, critics point to the imbalance of power

and resources that persist within local communities. The ‘invited spaces’ created through ‘beyond-the-state’ governance may thus privilege certain actors at the expense of others less able to play the system (c.f. Cornwall 2004; Swyngedouw 2005; Taylor 2007).

FROM RAG TRADE TO RICHES?

The regeneration of Brick Lane highlights tensions over the development of the tourist economy and the privileging of particular voices. The case study thus illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the system of economic and political incorporation described above. By the mid-1990s, the area’s deprivation demanded urgent attention: further decline of the historic ‘rag trade’ of textile workshops and wholesaling was exacerbating already high levels of unemployment, compounded by poverty, poor housing conditions and the racist abuse experienced by many recent immigrants from Bangladesh. Some Bangladeshi entrepreneurs had nevertheless acquired commercial premises, and were responding to a market for cafés and curry restaurants that attracted white as well as Asian customers. And as a new influx of artists and designers came to live and work in Spitalfields, it gained a fashionably counter-cultural atmosphere that appealed to many young urban professionals.

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets, the area’s local authority, began to consider the potential of leisure, tourism and hospitality as stimuli for economic and physical regeneration. Together with two adjacent inner-city boroughs, city institutions and voluntary organisations, it joined a partnership led by the City of London Corporation (Shaw and MacLeod 2000; Shaw 2007a). Known as the ‘City Fringe Partnership’, the consortium applied for SRB funding for proposals that included development and promotion of the historic neighbourhoods outside the Square Mile of the City of London as Emerging Cultural Quarters (City Corporation 1996: 17):

These cultural areas, unique to the capital and on the doorstep of the City, will be developed to provide a resource for tourists as well as employees and business visitors, helping to enhance the City’s reputation as the premier European business location.

Indeed, from medieval times, this swathe of settlements just outside the city walls had provided a home to marginalised groups and institutions whose presence was unwelcome within. About half an hour’s walk north from the Port of London, Spitalfields became home to newly arrived immigrants, many fleeing religious persecution and/or poverty in their homelands. Protestant Huguenots expelled from France in the late seventeenth century established silk weaving, a luxury commodity for London’s elite (Museum of London 1985; Shaw and Karmowska 2004). As their skills

grew redundant with industrialisation over the next century, most moved away but others took their place.

The association of the area with textile manufacturing and wholesaling continued as Brick Lane became a hub of the Jewish East End following the exodus from central and northern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. When this population moved away to higher income suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s, Bangladeshi entrepreneurs acquired the businesses, while many of their compatriots from Sylhet came to work in the 'sweatshops'. The historic contribution of immigration to the life of the city, as well as the exotic culture of its contemporary residents, was emphasised in the successful application for state funding made by the City Fringe Partnership (City Corporation 1996: 5–6):

the cultural diversity and strong entrepreneurial culture have produced a strong base in leisure facilities, entertainment and the arts all within a short walk of the City. On offer is an array of restaurants, including the well-known tourist attraction Brick Lane, ethnic shops and thriving markets

While the street was now featuring in mainstream guidebooks, *The Rough Guide to London* (Humphreys 1997: 232) reveals its darker history:

each step is accompanied by the smells of spices from the numerous cafés and restaurants, the bright colours of the fabrics which line the clothes shop window, and the heavy beat of Bhangra music from the shops and passing cars . . . hidden behind this façade, though, are crowded flats and sweatshops that would not look out of place in Victorian times, and a history of racism that stretches back centuries.

In more recent times, Brick Lane has gained a celebrity status that has placed it even more firmly on the tourist map, with the world-wide popularity of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), released in film in 2007. Other literary celebrations of the street and its rich social histories include *On Brick Lane* by Rachel Lichtenstein (2007) and *Salaam Brick Lane: A Year in the New East End* by Tarquin Hall (2005).

Further away from the city centre, London's post-colonial suburbs have also become home to Asian communities. Two particular neighbourhoods have come to be known as 'quarters' for leisure consumption, though they have a much lower profile and have evolved very differently from Brick Lane. Green Street, six miles (nine km) east of central London, has come to be known as the 'Asian Bond Street' due to its growing number of Asian fashion and jewellery shops. Until the 1970s the local population was predominantly white working class; closure of the docks and several large local factories led to unemployment, and as the former group moved away, Asians and Afro-Caribbeans moved in. Key drivers in the revitalisation

of Green Street were East African Asian entrepreneurs, expelled by the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin in 1972. Experienced traders, they began to open up Asian grocery and sari shops. The opportunity to capitalise on this trend was identified by the local authority, which sought to address the high levels of unemployment and deprivation that persisted into the 1990s. In 1994, a successful SRB bid led to a £8.5m regeneration programme. Its objectives were to make Green Street a centre of regional significance for the largely Asian but multicultural community, providing a new dimension to East London's economy (LB Newham 1994).

Southall, 11 miles (17 km) to the west, has the largest Asian population in London (63 per cent), the majority originating from the Indian Punjab. Close proximity to Heathrow Airport and work in local factories made the area attractive to immigrants in the late 60s and 70s. Unfortunately, Southall also became a focus for racial tensions, including disturbances and police action in 1979 that led to the death of teacher Blair Peach. Today, Southall has a thriving retail centre that claims to be the largest Asian shopping area in Europe, offering a colourful array of food and fabric shops, jewellers and restaurants. Nevertheless, its hinterland experiences high levels of deprivation and unemployment, enabling Southall to bid for government regeneration funds. But instead of exploiting popular notions of exotic leisure consumption to non-Asians, the strategy has been to promote Southall as London's 'Gateway to Asia'—not just for the area's Asian businesses, but for all those keen to exploit potential links with growing Asian economies.

CREATING STREETSCAPES OF CONSUMPTION IN BANGLATOWN

Returning to the main case study, a significant driving force that encouraged diverse groups to support the emerging visitor economy in Brick Lane was another SRB programme, carried out in parallel with City Fringe SRB. Known as 'Cityside' and led by LB Tower Hamlets, it was awarded £11.4 million in government funding (1997–2002) to 'strengthen links with the City and encourage diversification of the local economy', of which £1 million was allocated to 'Raising the Profile'. According to the bid proposal (LB Tower Hamlets 1996: 1), Cityside would 'pioneer a new model of regeneration' that would lift investor confidence. To encourage visitors, attention was focused on the main access points: new infrastructure funded through the two partnerships included 'Eastern' style gateways, signage and brighter street lamps incorporating 'Asian' motifs. At its southern entrance, the main approach from the City, it was important to ensure that affluent visitors would feel safe as well as welcome, especially after dark.

Shortly after its inception, Cityside set up a 'Town Management' group whose remit included two annual festivals, Baishakhi Mela in spring and the Brick Lane and Curry Festival in autumn. It was through this forum

BRICKLANE, LONDON

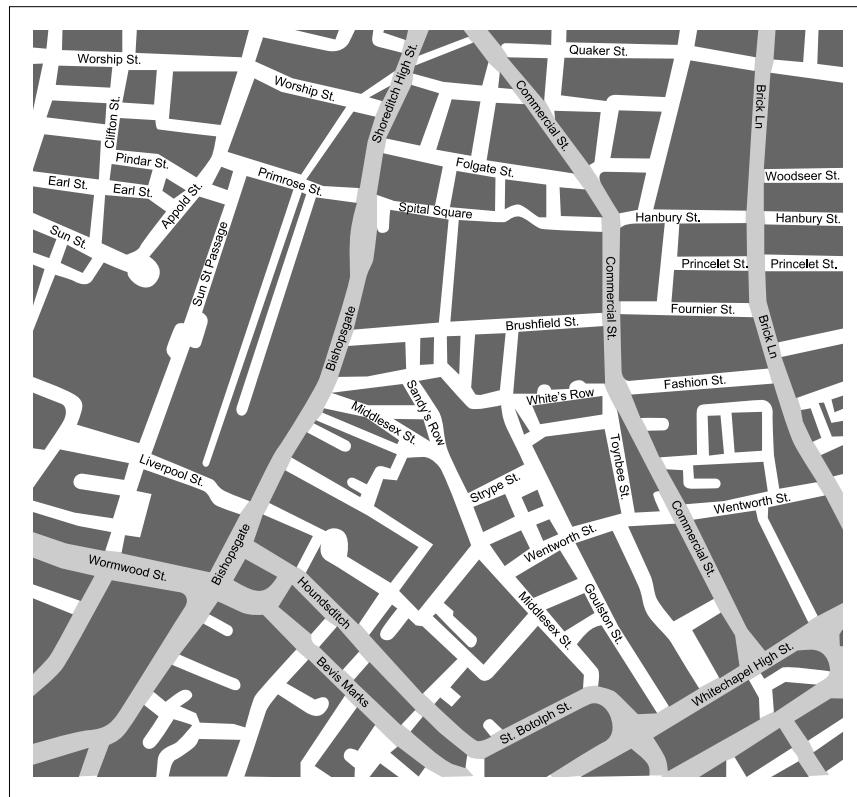


Figure 2.1 Map designed by Ana Sala

that 'Banglatown' emerged as the place-brand. Some traders wanted to create an even more striking environment with brightly coloured paving and street furniture. This re-presentation of the street for 'tourists', however, was not universally approved. By 2001, Baishakhi Mela was attracting 60,000 visitors. But as Eade (2006) observes, although the festival was promoted as a multicultural spectacle, some 'strict' Muslims frowned upon the music and dancing; there were particular sensitivities around places of worship on Fridays. Although supported by secular communities, the influential Imam of East London Mosque condemned the festival as an un-Islamic event that would lead young Bangladeshis astray.

Cityside's vision was nonetheless 'to achieve a quantum leap in the area's status as a visitor/cultural destination' (LB Tower Hamlets 1996: 13)—an aspiration that seemed ambitious to many, given the area's troubled past. In practice, the attraction of Asian food tuned to Western consumption

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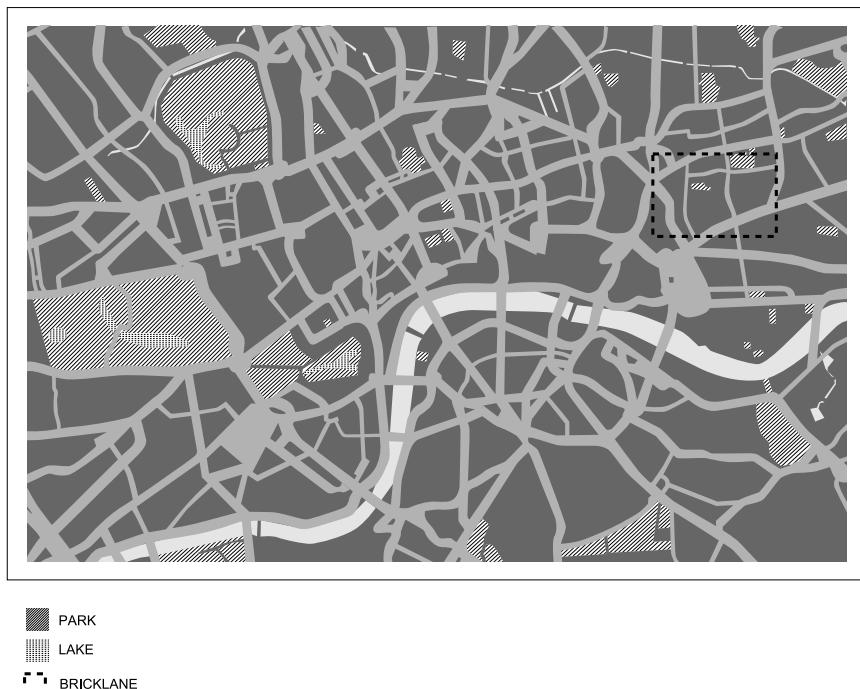


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greatly exceeded expectations as 'Banglatown' became one of London's best-known centres for ethnic cuisine. A survey carried out for Cityside noted that in 1989 there were only eight cafés/restaurants in Brick Lane, with a few additions in the early 1990s. Between 1997 and 2002, this rose to 41, of which 16 had opened between 2000 and 2002, making Banglatown 'home to the largest cluster of Bangladeshi/"Indian" restaurants anywhere in the UK' (Carey 2002: 12). All reported that by the early 2000s their clientele was 'overwhelmingly white', with a clear majority (70 per cent) in the 25–34 age group, and predominantly male (*ibid.*: 4). The restaurants now employed around 400 staff, though most had difficulty recruiting suitable waiters due to the low pay and long, unsociable hours. At the time of writing (2008), there are nearly 60 restaurants; persistent on-street canvassing of customers by waiters offering discounts and free drinks suggests over-supply of an undifferentiated product.

This boom in Asian cuisine attuned to Western tastes has been stimulated, not only by public investment, but by the Borough Planning Committee's decision to permit the conversion of local shops into restaurants

in the central section of Brick Lane (LB Tower Hamlets 1999). Overriding the approved development plan for the area, this strip was designated a 'Restaurant Zone' where applications for restaurants, cafés, hot food outlets, public houses and bars would be 'favourably considered'. Improvement grants were offered to upgrade façades, together with advice on business development. The former Truman's Brewery—a prominent historic landmark adjacent to the Restaurant Zone—was renovated and converted to accommodate over 250 design studios, exhibition spaces, bars/restaurants and a nightclub. By 2000, the visitor economy was expanding rapidly, though it was acknowledged that the volume of through-traffic remained a severe constraint on further development.

An 'Environmental Improvement Area' scheme, prepared in response to this challenge, was publicised by the borough and Cityside as an uncontroversial proposal. A vehicle-free environment would attract more visitors, as well as create a safer, more pleasant environment for residents. Initial consultation suggested that local opinion was in favour; consultants were appointed to draw up a detailed scheme for full pedestrianisation. However, it soon became apparent that support for the scheme was far from universal. The proposal was strongly supported by a group of restaurateurs who anticipated new opportunities for *al fresco* dining. Understandably, other firms, such as textile wholesalers, opposed the exclusion of goods vehicles for collection/delivery of stock. Many residents were also against any further expansion of bars, clubs and restaurants, and late-night extension of their licenses.

POLITICS OF CULTURE AND CONTESTED VISIONS FOR BANGLATOWN

Unfortunately, a stormy town hall meeting led to physical blows and the police being called in. In the aftermath, consultants were able to persuade their clients that permanent closure of the street would be undesirable and unworkable. Moreover, the diverse local communities that lived, worked, owned businesses, shopped, socialised, worshipped and enjoyed their leisure time in Brick Lane had to be actively involved in the scheme's design. The two-year programme of consultation and participation that followed (2000–02) obtained a much more balanced representation of local opinion. Those who took part in the questionnaires, interviews, workshops, focus groups and drop-in sessions included residents from the socially/ethnically diverse neighbourhoods around Brick Lane, restaurant and other business owners, community organisations, police, public servants and visitors (Shaw 2007b).

As anticipated, there was a wide diversity of opinion. Nevertheless, when funding eventually became available (from Transport for London), the scheme that was implemented (2002–06) was guided by broad agreement over solutions to minimise conflicts between pedestrians and traffic,

bars/restaurants and other firms, visitors and local residents. As a result, the street is now safe to cross at most points; drop-kerbs make Brick Lane more accessible for the mobility impaired and for parents with pushchairs, while allowing access to commercial vehicles. It has also been accepted that Banglatown's image is to be reflected through public art and non-permanent features such as street decorations rather than through permanent, territorial expressions of ethnic identity. When the work of Cityside was completed in 2002, the partnership could report outcomes that were very positive in terms of its remit. The project had prioritised 'Developing visitor attractions, improving the environment and supporting events, all designed to increase the number of visitors to the area who will spend money within it' (Cityside SRB3 2002: 5). This complemented other objectives including helping local firms develop trading links with the City/elsewhere, access to jobs, and encouraging growth in small businesses. Cityside's Final Report concluded (*ibid.*: 7):

'London E1', 'Spitalfields' and 'Banglatown' are now the regular focus of media attention. . . . The Raising the Profile programme has led to the successful creation of annual events such as Alternative Fashion Week, Baishakhi Mela, Brick Lane Festival and many other community events which draw increasing number of visitors to the area.

Indeed, by 2004 the Brick Lane Festival was warmly endorsed, not only by the mayor of London, but by the prime minister, who praised its contribution to 'a truly inclusive Britain that takes pride in its diversity' (Brick Lane Festival 2004: 2). As the Official Guide (*ibid.*: 3) proclaimed:

The Brick Lane Festival captures the flavour and excitement of an area that has welcomed immigrants for over 2000 years [sic]. From its community led roots in the summer of 1996 it now promotes the attractions of Brick Lane and Banglatown to around 60,000 people from all over London and the UK.

Nevertheless, there were anxieties that the wider Banglatown project was creating something of a tourist bubble (c.f. Judd 1999). The Borough Planning Department grew concerned that far from narrowing the gap, spatial inequalities had widened. From 2002, LB Tower Hamlets has protected a section of Brick Lane to the south as a 'Local Shopping Parade' to contain any further spread of the Restaurant Zone; in practice, only one 'local' grocery store remains (Shaw *et al.* 2004: 1992). Furthermore, there was already evidence of conflict over the use of public space. Planning Officer Andrea Ritchie (2002) reported from a focus group facilitated by the borough:

Older Bengali women stressed the point that they had to be escorted by their husbands and that they could not walk along Brick Lane at all

because there are just too many men there, with all the visitors and [restaurant] staff. So, although it is their area, they are socially excluded from it.

Today, visitors who tend to dominate the street, by day and especially by night, are mostly non-Asian. They mingle with the designer-artists working in the studios and the young professionals living above the restaurants in new apartments. It has grown increasingly difficult to answer the criticism that whatever Brick Lane has to offer, it has little relevance to the everyday lives of the Bangladeshi community, except those for whom it represents a business proposition. Furthermore, there are anxieties over drug dealing, prostitution and street crime, especially on the boundaries between Brick Lane and an adjacent social housing estate, a concern that was amplified in a recent set of interviews with 25 traders (Carey and Ahmed 2006). The survey also highlighted unease over the (temporary) downturn in trade following the London tube bombings on 7 July 2005; some believed that the 'Banglatown' brand might well be problematic in the event of any terrorist outrage before or during the 2012 Olympic Games.

ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOR EMERGING 'ASIAN QUARTERS' IN LONDON

Despite their concentrations of Asian shops and restaurants, both Southall and Green Street have resisted the temptation to link place-branding to any one ethnic group. In the case of Green Street, rather than creating a 'curiosity', SRB funding was used for streetscape improvements celebrating the area's diversity (LB Newham 1994: 2). These included a pavement mural designed with local schools and community groups, and lamp post decorations and street furniture to symbolise 'togetherness'. A statue of the famous footballer Bobby Moore was erected to acknowledge the area's white working class roots and associations with West Ham Football Club, while sponsored cultural events included the Asian-inspired Runga Rung festival, a winter celebration with live music and fireworks, and a range of 'multicultural' events including Afro-Caribbean music, tea dances for the older white British community and more recently, East/Central European music.

The promotion of Green Street as a visitor destination only began in 2001, towards the end of the SRB programme. *This is Green Street* featured branded merchandising, advertising in magazines and on ethnic minority radio, and familiarisation tours for the national press and travel operators. The *Quality Endorsement Scheme* identified retailers providing high quality merchandise and exceptional service. Shopkeepers have also invested in major improvements. The consultants evaluating the SRB programme described changes to the street as 'phenomenal', emphasising the contribution of younger, innovative Asian traders prepared to invest

in window displays and store layouts to improve the shopping experience (EDAW 1997). Today, Green Street is widely regarded as a showcase for new Asian British designers offering clothes and jewellery that fuse traditional Asian and Western influences. There are few vacant premises and the Planning Authority is considering an extension to the area designated for commercial use.

For some, in particular the owners of the more exclusive Asian fashion houses (towards the northern end of the street), the image building has not gone far enough. According to Shirley Coote (2007), a freelance consultant who supports small retailers, many felt that the new street lighting lacked distinctiveness and the promotional flyers did not reflect the upscale nature of their shops. While the council has continued to upgrade the streetscape, in 2003 a proposal to redevelop the popular but very dilapidated Queen Street market (at the southern end of Green Street) met fierce opposition. Traders from all ethnic backgrounds joined forces with residents to oppose proposals endorsed by the mayor to sell the site to developers. As a result, the market was saved and continues to be an important source of employment as well as affordable multi-ethnic food and household goods. It appears that the racial tensions of former times have largely faded; there remains a balanced provision of everyday food and household goods to meet local residents' needs and luxury fashions that attract wealthier Asian customers from across London and South East England.

The growth in shoppers and visitors from outside the borough led to such concern over traffic and parking that restrictions were introduced, though some shop owners complained that their stringent enforcement adversely affected trade. Nevertheless, despite the place-promotion, the street's fame seems largely restricted to Asian communities. All this may change with the development of the Olympic site for the 2012 London games, as LB Newham will be the host authority for Olympic Park, Stratford. While the borough is keen to exploit the business opportunities that the Games would bring, the survey by Carey and Ahmed (2006) discussed above suggests that some Green Street traders are unconvinced of the benefits. As in Brick Lane, some express fears that large retail and leisure chains will establish outlets in close proximity. West Ham Football Club has also announced its intention to relocate, thus threatening the survival of the remaining working class cafés, pubs and eel and pie shops near the ground, symbols of traditional East End life.

Since the 1970s, Southall Broadway in LB Ealing has been an important shopping (convenience, clothing) and entertainment (especially restaurants, cinemas) hub for Asian communities in West London and further afield. It attracts a different crowd from Green Street: those seeking the 'Southall experience' who may buy specific items such as spices. Non-Asian visitors do not dominate the area. The Himalaya Palace cinema shows Bollywood blockbusters; Diwali celebrations (processions, fireworks and entertainment) attract thousands. 'Little India' walking tours are run by a well-

known Indian cookery writer who takes visitors to local temples, Glassy Junction Pub (where customers can buy pints with rupees) and around the shops and markets, explaining the ethnic foodstuffs and the meaning of local festivals (Czerniawski 2005).

In the late 1990s the *British Panjabis* (a voluntary organisation promoting the minority's language and culture) launched a campaign to brand the commercial area as 'Panjabi Bazaar'. Over 2,000 shoppers, shop owners and local MPs reportedly signed a petition proposing bilingual street signs, Asian-inspired street furniture and a handicraft market to sell specialist souvenirs to tourists. Campaigners, however, argued over how 'Punjabi' should be spelt; there were also fears that links with the Sikh community would divide the area along religious lines. A recent survey of local residents and businesses revealed scant support for such place-marketing, particularly among the younger generation (Verma 2007). And as community leaders point out, Southall has a growing Somali and Afghani population—to develop a mono-cultural brand would not reflect the dynamic nature of the community (Verma 2007; Bains 2008).

SRB nevertheless funded street decorations with Asian motifs, including neon chillies, and streetscaping with stylised pavement murals. Compared to Brick Lane, these are discreet, with benches that seem designed and positioned primarily for local residents to rest and converse. More recently, Southall Regeneration Partnership Board, the body that oversees the area's regeneration plans, has been keen to promote a more inclusive and contemporary international image for the area. The extended partnership—renamed 'Heathrow City Partnership' in 2003—has established itself as a more broadly based agency that will outlive the SRB-funded schemes; with funding from the London Development Agency, it gathers diverse community and business stakeholders. These include some of the UK's most successful and well-known businesses: multi-million pound enterprises such as Noon Products Ltd. and Sunrise Radio, symbols of a very different type of Asian enterprise to those visited on the Little India tours. The Greater London Authority (2002) has cited the board as a model of multi-racial co-operation that has helped transform Southall's previous reputation as a flash point for racial tension.

The partnership's current strategy emphasises the area's important global links. The *Southall Town Centre Strategy 2002–12* (Southall Regeneration Partnership 2002: foreword) envisages that '[b]y 2010 Southall will be an international gateway for excellence in multiculturalism and commercial development'. It thus seeks to foster and promote Southall's links to Asia. For example, it anticipates that the global popularity of Bollywood can be exploited by a range of local businesses, and encourages bilateral trade and networking between British and Asian businesses around the world. To support this interpretation of the Southall brand, the strategy suggests that the culture of the area's many communities should be further reflected in streetscape art and on high-quality gateways located at the town's entrance

points. It suggests that a specific marketing strategy for Southall should ‘increase awareness of the unique Asian retail offer to the pan-London and national market’ (*ibid.*: summary). The divergences between these case studies mirror Ching Lin Pang’s argument (in this book) that ethnic precincts may emerge and evolve along multiple trajectories and with very different outcomes in the post-industrial economy.

CONCLUSION

In all three case study areas, a handful of enterprising Asian businesses initiated investment to upgrade run-down commercial premises. From small beginnings, they created niche markets for ethnic cuisine, speciality retailing and other services that attracted customers from wealthier areas of the city and beyond. The stimulation of a visitor economy required co-ordinated action and public funding to re-image places long associated with the poverty of immigrant communities, and to make streets and public spaces more welcoming to casual strollers. From the 1990s to 2007, urban authorities in the UK were encouraged to form partnerships with commercial and third sector organisations, and bid for central government funds to pump-prime the regeneration of disadvantaged areas, including commercial streets in London’s multicultural neighbourhoods. Where applications were successful, some ethnic minority traders and landlords found themselves in favourable positions. Individuals could benefit from schemes to assist business development while interest groups—notably restaurateurs—could help shape the local planning and policy-making framework.

There is good reason to conclude that such collaborations have encouraged an unprecedented level of strategic thinking and action to restructure local economies (c.f. Cullingworth and Nadin 2006: 371). From the late 1990s, the New Labour government targeted local initiatives that could meet their social inclusion criteria and demonstrate that the ‘community’ had been involved in formulating the vision. Nevertheless, the ‘mix and match’ approach (Jayne 2006: 196–98), with its emphasis on local responsibility for delivery, produced wide-ranging interpretations of the national Third Way agenda. ‘Beyond-the-state governance’ created new spaces for participation, opportunities for actors whose voices were seldom heard in the past (Somerville 2005; Swyngedouw 2005; Taylor 2007). However, within these ‘invited spaces’, some stakeholders made themselves more audible than others. The shift from more established systems of local democracy to intervention and funding through non-elected partnerships at times created circumstances that allowed well-connected players to capture the process and influence policy outcomes—perhaps to the detriment of others less able to make their views known.

Over the study period, the publicly funded programmes to regenerate Brick Lane, Green Street and Southall Broadway incorporated their

respective interpretations of the government's priorities for regeneration and renewal. However, this was grafted onto a structure designed by the previous Conservative government to encourage a new spirit of competitiveness—the turn from urban managerialism to urban entrepreneurialism. State intervention that enabled favourably positioned firms to exploit the 'genuine competitive advantage' of their inner-city locations was advocated by Michael Porter (1995: 55–56) over a decade ago, and his arguments seem to have had a lasting influence in the UK and North America.¹ From this neo-liberal perspective, the disadvantages of the inner-city location must be identified and addressed; they may include run-down infrastructure, inadequate for business transactions and poor security (*ibid.*: 62–64). If these disadvantages can be overcome, a symbiotic commercial relationship may develop between inner-city neighbourhoods like Spitalfields and the brighter lights of the Central Business District. An accessible, safe and attractive enclave with a 'cosmopolitan' ambience to complement attractions in the nearby city centre and entertainment district—a multicultural neighbourhood transformed from a welfare-supported 'revenue sink' into an asset for the city, paralleling New York City's aspirations for Harlem discussed by Novy in this book.

In the competitive market for inward investment, visitors and government funding, there is considerable pressure to spin optimistic place-narratives for up-and-coming 'cosmopolitan' enclaves. Positive visions are formulated to 'raise the profile' while Cassandra voices are generally silenced to present a united front. Indeed, it can be argued that pragmatic urban entrepreneurialism tends to underplay social realities, the very problems that necessitate regeneration in the first place (Williams 2003: 24). If bids are successful, tensions may well re-emerge, not least over how the money is spent. This is well-illustrated in the case of Brick Lane, where a very public argument in the early 2000s erupted over proposals to further expand the 'tourist bubble'. While public engagement informed a very different scheme to improve the urban realm without overt territorial ethnic branding, important questions remain as to whether an urban visitor economy established through such agencies and national/local political structures bring lasting economic and wider social benefits to areas such as Spitalfields.

From the perspective of social policy, there is continuing anxiety that unacceptable levels of poverty and deprivation persist behind the colourful façade that this model deliberately sets out to create. In practice, it is questionable whether the desired harmony of economic, physical and social regeneration has been achieved. Cityside's *Final Report* (2002: 13) emphasised:

the complete regeneration of an area is dependent on a much wider set of initiatives, particularly those that relate to social and leisure provision, the environment and safety. . . . Although we accept that the artificial split between economic and social programmes is far from ideal, Cityside Regeneration will be supporting Tower Hamlets Council to attempt to implement a joined up solution locally.

The re-imaging of Brick Lane, Spitalfields, has been remarkable. The shabby-chic of its New East End streetscape now features in most mainstream tourist guides to London. The popularity of its festivals is cited by policy-makers as evidence of a vibrant and inclusive multicultural society, in marked contrast to the violence against recent immigrants from Bangladesh in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, the stereotypical post-colonial images of the Indian sub-continent that prevail in the restaurant trade—Café Raj, City Spice, Le Taj and so on—seem a far cry from the higher goal of '*inter-cultural cosmopolitanism*', recently defined by Wood and Landry (2008: 93) as 'a capacity to recognise and engage with cultures other than one's own', or Sandercock's (2006: 37–38) hopes for cities in which people will live 'alongside others who are different, learning from them, rating new worlds with them'. Bloomfield and Bianchini (2004: 12) contrast the multicultural model, where state support is directed within well-defined boundaries of recognised cultural communities, with the 'pluralist transformation of public space, institutions and civic culture', an approach 'to facilitate dialogue, exchange and reciprocal understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds'.

The Partnership for Southall is now designated a 'City Growth' area: a very different, longer-term strategic approach. Though again based on business-led regeneration, it has a wider remit (and a wider geographical scope) than previous SRB schemes. Furthermore, Southall and Green Street have adopted approaches to the development of minority commercial enclaves that look beyond what Jacobs (1996: 100) has characterised as 'racialised construct[s] tuned to multicultural consumption'. Both have embraced a variety of cultures and seek a wide set of benefits for businesses, residents and community organisations. An optimistic view is that these partnerships are helping to establish quarters that will stand the test of time, able to evolve as residents with other identities move in. They certainly promote a more contemporary image of local communities: Green Street by promoting cultural fusions in fashion and jewellery, Southall through its proximity to Heathrow and its global links to Asian superpowers—images more likely to appeal to second and third generation Asian communities as well as to the varied tastes of non-Asian visitors.

NOTES

1. For example, Professor Porter stressed the need for business engagement and private sector leadership at the launch of 'City Markets', Centre for Cities, Institute for Public Policy Research in London, June 2006.

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