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# MARSHALL STREET: COMMERCIALISM AT ITS BEST

**By Jessica Lam**

**Photos by Jessica Lam**

**Design by James Markowitz**

“A gathering place for all to enjoy,” says the plaque dedicated to Congressman James T. Walsh, commemorating Marshall Street, a commercial area that bridges that gap between Syracuse University and city owned property.

Historically, Marshall Street was named after a native Syracuse resident and civil rights lawyer, Louis B. Marshall. Visually, there are few rules limiting who can stay; diversity of gender, race, age, and class can be seen. It appears people, including students, guests from the nearby Sheraton hotel, doctors, in addition to panhandlers are free to use this location at their leisure. Panhandlers are commonly known as beggars who approach strangers for some resource whether it is food, money, or just attention. So, how does a group of panhandlers,

to the campus. Marshall Street is one of the only places near campus that has well-known food chains including Starbucks, Dunkin' Donuts, and Jimmy Johns. The idea of having several chain stores reveals the commercial success that Marshall has had because chain stores would not open up a store here if Marshall Street was not economically booming.

The number of panhandlers seen on a single block contradicts the very idea of commercialism and consumerism that Marshall Street epitomizes. In some cases,



usually shunned based on their lower class and wealth, fit into the image of a financially thriving Marshall Street? The commercial stores of Marshall Street represent economic benefit for the collective city as a whole and those who reside within it, while the panhandlers represent the failure of that very economy and economic gain for self. Can these two ideals coexist in a place while still maintaining its name as a truly public space for all?

Marshall Street spans for about four to five blocks up the university hill; however, student references to "Marshall Street" are often referring to the one block of storefronts. Its location is unique in that it is not owned by the University; yet, it is directly adjacent

I have seen some play instruments with an open instrument case sitting at their feet with a few coins and dollars. Although, it seems that they are able to freely use this space for their own wants, there are subtle exclusionary acts that can be seen. During one instance of my observations, I saw an African-American man with shabby, baggy clothes holding a large sized Starbucks coffee hot cup pacing back and forth in front of the entrance of Starbucks. As each individual walked past, he would ask if they "had a light". Many of the individuals nodded no or did not so much as make eye contact with him. After several denials, he entered Starbucks. Many of the customers seated at the table gave the man a quick, confused look as if to ask

him, "what are you doing here?" and went back to their business. The employees of Starbucks stopped for a second to watch this man as he walked from the entrance to a nearby table to sit. After 5 minutes, he left. He repeated this process close to three or four times until he eventually stayed outside for the remainder of the time.

I concluded he was another panhandler and had done this for warmth

are denied entrance into certain stores? According to Marisol Garcia's and Teresa McDowell's "Mapping Social Capital: A Critical Contextual Approach for Working with Low-Status Families," privilege forms the divisions we see happening on Marshall Street; it is the factor that decides one's limits as opposed to their freedoms. Our privilege is created through numerous identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality. It is

"Each part of an identity comes together like puzzle pieces that form a collective identity that later inform the opinions of how others view them and inevitably the power and rights we are given."

on a rather cold day. However, the reactions from customers revealed their belief that this man had done something offensive and wrong. Yet, peering over the crowd, it seemed many of the "customers" had already finished their drinks and sat in Starbucks for the same purpose as the African-American man. With that said, it's obvious that both the employees and customers view Starbucks as a place for only certain people. A number of the panhandlers have learned that their place is outside of shops as they do not fit the ideal of the "appropriate" consumer. It seems both the panhandlers and the storeowners are accepting of this arrangement. The idea of "appropriate" individuals is the basis that determines which types of people have the right to make use of a certain space. In the particular case of Marshall Street, the storeowners' typical customers are usually the ones willing to spend on their products further boosting the store's profit and the economy. Since the panhandlers are not there to spend, rather, they are there to ask for resources from those who do spend, they are deemed inappropriate.

What creates the division between those who are accepted and others who

vital, as Garcia and McDowell state, to "[understand]the influence of our multiple intersecting identities relative to power within specific local structural contexts" (Garcia and McDowell 97). In order to better understand the circumstances of power we are given, we must study our own identities. Each part of an identity comes together, forming a collective identity that later influences the opinions of how others view them and inevitably the power and rights we are given. Therefore, how would this situation have changed if the panhandler had been white? Consequently, the panhandler held multiple identities that individuals usually attribute to those with little privilege. Because he is an African-American male, and seemingly of a lower class, based on his attire, the customers in Starbucks saw no harm in giving him looks of distaste. All elements of his identity deemed him not worthy or privileged enough to be one of the "typical" customers one may see in Starbucks or any other store on Marshall Street. The unequal relationship that has formed between the poor and the privileged is indeed direct and present on Marshall Street.

Secondly, dominant culture is

formed through those individuals who hold a greater privilege than others. Garcia and McDowell describe this as the “insider” group, individuals who are allowed to determine the power of others because of the higher level of privilege they hold based on their identities. Often this “insider” group can be described as the “standard” individuals of society usually being white, middle class, and male. Those who are a part of the “dominant culture,” in the case of Marshall Street, include store owners, students, and Syracuse locals. The majority of these individuals appear to be white with some sort of average income. Both identities follow more closely to society’s “standard,” giving

yet, the panhandlers’ only way of becoming an accepted consumer is by asking for resources from the higher class individuals.

Many argue that the panhandlers simply do not fit the clean cut image of Marshall Street. Marilyn C. McEntyre on Susan M. Schweik’s “The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public,” describes America’s obsession with “clean[ing] up the streets” (Schweik 46). America is a nation who prides itself on visually pleasing aesthetics. When certain individuals “dirty” the streets, they are immediately deemed the incorrect representative of that space and are cleared from the area. This is vital in understanding how the panhandlers affect the image of



them the power to dictate who frequents this space. Garcia and McDowell state, “In order to gather [opportunities], it is necessary to become an insider to social webs that allow access to class-based resources” (Garcia and McDowell 98). In order to gain a greater privilege in society, those with low economic status such as the panhandlers on Marshall, must conform to hold identities similar to these “insiders.” It seems that the beggars are caught in a double bind. They are not wanted as consumers and individuals who frequent Marshall because store owners feel they do not hold the privilege to be there;

Marshall Street. Aesthetics are directly related to the comfort of our consumption in those places made for shopping. Those who use Marshall for an economic boost are seen as keeping this space clean and encouraging commerce while those like the beggars, who represent a low, unsuccessful economy, are seen as using this space negatively, making the streets a dirtier place.

Along with being perceived as “dirtying” the streets, panhandlers are perceived as dangerous and making the streets unsafe. A survey I took of fifty Syracuse University students revealed that

80% of them believed that Marshall Street was unsafe due to the panhandlers--people whom they described as "scary", "homeless", and "dirty." Is this true or are individuals formulating conclusions based on pre-judgment of images? In order to answer

Street.

So the question arises why allow panhandlers to stay if individuals believe they pose a threat to the order and safety they occupy? One reason could be that this is truly public space; the University and the



these questions, I spoke with the Department of Public Safety (DPS). In an interview with Captain John Sardino, in charge of Community Resources, Events, and Crime Prevention, he states that he feels the safety of Marshall is determined by perception. In describing the crime on Marshall, he directly states, "If you look at it statistically, we don't get much reports about harassment, robbery, or larceny. The biggest problem is students being intoxicated and fighting. Usually DPS responds to situations where students get into mutual fights because they get intoxicated at the local bars or somewhere else." This statement is supported with the crime logs on the Department of Public Safety's website, which keeps a detailed list of the number of crimes that occur every month along with a statement describing the reason and location the report was made. Looking through the records from the last two years, Marshall Street does not appear more than once on each of the lists. Therefore, it appears there is no concrete data to show the panhandlers create a more dangerous image of Marshall

city of Syracuse are not entitled to displace them from property that should be free to all. However, it seems there have been a number of instances in history where cities have made the effort to clean up the streets by moving panhandlers and the homeless to shelters and soup kitchens. Marshall Street becomes a symbol for larger societal commercial space. It represents the idea that we allow the lower class to stay in areas of great commercial prosperity to juxtapose our wealth and status to that of the poor. In the case of Syracuse University and Marshall Street, the University uses the division of the gate to show that those panhandlers are not a part of their image and that they stand at a higher status than them. It seems the panhandlers of Marshall Street are just another commercial tactic to boost a name as well as profit. The negative assumptions about panhandlers are used to segregate them from the majority identity, positive consumerism, while still creating a "we are better than you" mentality.