

## CHAPTER TWO

### LATIN AMERICANS IN LONDON: CLAIMS OVER THE IDENTITY OF PLACE AS DESTINATION

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#### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the presence of Latin American businesses in Elephant & Castle (E&C), a deprived area in the centre of London that is undergoing an ambitious programme of urban redevelopment. Latin American retailers started setting up businesses in the E&C at the beginning of the 1990s and over 20 years have transformed the area and in the process contributed to a distinctive “Latin Quarter” as acknowledged in local policy documents<sup>1</sup>. This presence however is now under threat. The redevelopment plan for E&C has been received with scepticism by Latin American local retailers who despite welcoming some of the changes, fear for their sustainability and future presence in the area.

This chapter concentrates on how the presence of Latin American shops in E&C has contributed to the changing character of places and in the process developed a distinctive Latin neighbourhood in London. It is an attempt to document how Latin American retailers have contributed to the identity of E&C as a Latin place in London<sup>2</sup>. This will be done by relying on visual records and documentary evidence based on ethnographic research conducted at various times throughout the last twenty years<sup>3</sup>. The timing of the research is important because it captures a moment of transition and raises questions about the sustainability and future of the largest and oldest Latin areas in London. At the beginning of the 1990s I captured the origins of the Latin American business quarter in the E&C. Revisiting the area under the current context of regeneration allows me to examine another significant moment for Latin American shops, one that will define whether this distinctive Latin neighbourhood will survive or not.

The contribution that Latin Americans have made to London’s multicultural neighbourhoods has been conspicuously neglected in academic literature, despite its visible presence in different parts of

London. This chapter will engage with debates about the movement of people across different geographical locations and their contributions to the changing character of places. It explores how diasporic communities are negotiating and claiming their place in the global city. This discussion is framed around the concepts of place and identity. I argue for the need to consider place-identity, not just in terms of its representation or symbolic value, but through a thorough understanding of the historical processes and material practices which contribute to the changing character of places.

### **Place-identity: Dialogues between communication and urban studies**

My approach to Latin places in London is informed by urban studies, cultural geography and communication studies. Communication scholars have for long neglected cities as sites of production and consumption, and ignored the dynamic practices of their inhabitants (Graham, 1996; 1997). Latin American communication research has a long tradition of exploring the relationship between communication and the city. Research in this area (García Canclini, 1999; Martin-Barbero, 1987; Reguillo, 1991, 1996; Sarlo, 1988; Silva, 1992) has focused on the material conditions and everyday practices that make up cities. However, it is still the case that most of the research on cities from a communication studies perspective is based on its representative dimension. The urban is either represented in different media formats, particularly film, or in the symbolic value of its sculptures, monuments and plazas (e.g. Brunsdon, 2007; Mitchell, 2005; Sadin, 2007; Clarke, 1997; Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2001, 2003; Foster, 2002; Massood, 2003; Osborne, 2001).

Recently we have seen a renewed interest in the city from a communication studies perspective (Burd et al., 2007; Gibson, 2007; Graham, 1996, 1997, 2004). But most of this work, particularly in Britain, is about how new media technologies are transforming the character of urban spaces, how these are used for interpreting and managing urban spaces or in facilitating relationships and exchange across transnational spaces. Less attention has been given to how people invest, economically and emotionally, in places and how they contribute to the changing character of cities<sup>4</sup>. It is this last aspect which I explore in this article by focusing on the constructions of place-identity by Latin Americans in London.

The concepts of place and identity have been increasingly significant amongst sociologists, geographers, psychologists, architects, media studies, and policy makers (Keith & Pile, 1993; Massey, 1993; 2007; Hall, 1995; Morley, 2001a, 2001b; Appadurai, 1996; Orum & Chen, 2002) and are central to my research about Latin American spaces in London. The bulk of the research on place and identity can be divided in two main strands, one that mainly focuses on the identity of places; the other explores the links that different groups of people (defined either by their ethnic or geographical background) establish with places. Re-conceptualising place as unbounded, multi-layered and not exclusively territorial has been a central concern in these writings; whilst identity is taken to be unfixed and in a continual process of transformation. Both strands of research tend to regard places and identities as active, porous and open to transformation and contestation. Some of the work produced under the umbrella of place and identity (Zukin, 2010; Orum & Chen, 2002) has been pivotal in highlighting the particular ways in which people establish a link with places, and for understanding the practices through which places are transformed and given particular identities.

However, my scepticism with some of the work on place and identity grows out of the argument that I present here. First, it is often the case that place-identity is vaguely explored and illustrated via a series of visible signifiers. Identity seems to be regarded as the physical characteristics of individuals, groups and places. In this sense, identity is treated as a matter of representation, and in the process of de-codification a series of assumptions are made about certain people, their practices and their place of origin. What was once regarded as a novel approach to identity and place has more than ever become a descriptive account of the series of visible characteristics about a place and the people that inhabit and live across those places. To rethink places and identities as unfixed, hybrid and open to transformation does not solve the problem of how these have been researched. It is not a matter of describing places and identities in terms of their conceptualisation—hybrid, unbounded and unfixed—but to consider the historical and material practices that contribute to our understanding of places and identities as such. To reduce identity to its representation will only result in a superficial exploration of the relationship between place and identity. Instead, I suggest an approach that considers the way in which identity and place are embedded in longer historical processes and material practices.

Thus, the identity of places should be understood as that being claimed by different groups at particular moments and locations. The identity of any place is continuously being produced in its relation to other groups

and according to the power structures in which such identities are negotiated. The identity of any place is, as Massey (1994) argues, “for ever open to contestation” in the sense that other identities of place are not static and are simultaneously produced by other groups. This way of understanding the identities of places rejects an essentialist identity of place by acknowledging the different identities being claimed and produced over the same place at particular moments in time.

Both concepts have been central to my research on Latin spaces in London. My approach takes on board some of the arguments outlined above on place-identity but I also share similar concerns to those of media studies. Thus, in exploring the identity of places through the lens of Latin American owned shops in E&C, I am not making claims for the entire city. Such a task is impossible. Instead, I am looking at one particular instance and moment by documenting how Latin Americans have made a claim over the identity of E&C as Latin, one that is at risk given the current regeneration plans for the area.

When thinking about the identity of places from this perspective, the city (in this instance parts of it) appears as a product that is designed, structured and promoted in particular ways by planners, architects, developers and government departments alike. Different discourses and visions of an area will emerge that will require a constant process of negotiation by its inhabitants. It also appears as a text—whereby a particular urban setting is analysed for its symbolic value. Finally, the city appears as lived experience by taking into account the practices that make and define the identity of places, in this instance into a Latin place in London.

### **Background to the making of Latin London**

London’s Latin locations contribute to, and transcend conceptualizations of cultural diversity in the capital. A Latin presence can be detected in the numerous Latin themed bars, restaurants and shops across the capital and at long standing cultural events such as the Latin American carnival (Carnaval del Pueblo) in Burgess Park and various Latin American film festivals across various cinemas in London. This presence and increment in cultural events since the 1990s is related to the increasing migration of Latin Americans to Britain and in particular to London.

Before the 1970s there was no significant Latin American migration to London. It was during this decade that large numbers of Latin Americans

arrived in Britain as political refugees, especially from Chile and Uruguay; joined shortly after by Peruvians and Colombians escaping from political and civil unrest in their countries. During this period a large number of Latin Americans, especially from Colombia, came as migrant workers for the growing hospitality sector in London. Although the work visa regime which allowed the latter migration flow ended in 1979, a precedent was set for future migration, with Brazilians joining to become the largest group along with Colombians (Román-Velázquez 1999). From the 1990s they were joined by increasing numbers of Ecuadorians and Bolivians seeking an alternative to economic and political turmoil. Freedom of movement across the European Union since 2006 has allowed secondary migration of Latin Americans naturalised in the European Union, notably Spain in the face of post-2008 recession (McIlwaine et al 2011). The Latin American population in London is estimated at 113,500, representing a 61% of the total Latin American population in the United Kingdom, which has been registered as 186,500 (McIlwaine, et al 2011). Latin Americans in London are mostly concentrated in South London in the areas of Southwark and Lambeth. Not surprisingly, it is in these areas where most of the Latin American shops are located, and to which I now turn.

Latin Americans started setting up businesses in E&C at the beginning of the 1990s. During the 1990s most of the retail activity was at the E&C shopping centre with ten shops owned by Latin Americans. Another twelve shops could be found around the ring of roads surrounding shopping centre near to Brixton, Vauxhall and Clapham Common underground stations. It was in these areas that a visible Latin American economic and cultural activity was initiated in shops, bars, clubs and restaurants (Román-Velázquez, 1999). However, by the end of the 1990s, Latin Americans were also running shops, restaurants and music clubs in other areas of north and east London, such as Holloway, Stoke Newington, Manor House and Seven Sisters. The editions of “*Páginas Latinas*”<sup>5</sup> or “*Directorio Iberoamericano*”<sup>6</sup>, two commercial guides catering to Latin Americans in London, provide an indication of the growth of Latin American businesses and services in the capital. Elephant and Castle, Old Kent Road, Brixton Market and surrounding areas in South London still have the greatest concentration of Latin American owned shops. However, other areas of London have witnessed the spread of Latin American shops. This is the case in Seven Sisters area with *Pueblito Paisa* and *Tiendas del Norte* and what is known as Brazil-water located between Bayswater and Queensway stations with most of the shops in Queensway market.

Elephant & Castle, in the borough of Southwark, is home to one of the largest Latin American business clusters in London. In a manual survey of

the area (June 2012) I accounted for 61 shops in the immediate area around the underground station and shopping centre, and if taking into account the shops in Old Kent Road (extending from the southern roundabout) the number increased to 70 shops . This represents a sharp increase from the number of shops registered at the beginning of the 1990s (approximately 22 shops). In a period of about 20 years (from 1992 to 2012) the distribution of Latin American owned shops in the city has become more widespread and dispersed, but also more visibly present in London. It is this visibility and transformation of places into distinctive Latin areas that I now consider.

### **Place-identity: Elephant & Castle as a latin place in London**

In 2004 the council made public plans to demolish the shopping centre in order to redevelop the site. I visited the area many times during this period and took photos, conducted interviews with retailers and informally spoke with people who knew or frequented the area asking about their feelings and position regarding the destruction of the shopping centre. The story of the E&C shopping centre kept changing. Dates for its demolition kept being postponed and I was left with a similar feeling to that registered by the retailers: nothing seemed to have happened and nothing might ever happen. However, things were slowly moving on: the council was laying out the terrain for the revitalisation of E&C to progress, a partnership agreement was reached between the council and private developers, public land was leased to developers, the documentation and planning guidance needed was set in motion and approved. In short the terrain was being set for the regeneration of the area.

The regeneration plans for E&C have heralded the area as the “new thriving quarter of central London” with a distinctive and vibrant “Latin Quarter”. This vision of E&C with a distinctive Latin quarter is recognition of the presence of Latin American owned shops and of their contribution to the identity of the area. However, the context of urban regeneration under which such recognition has been stated puts at risk the very existence of this business cluster. In the making of E&C as a Latin place in London we need to understand how and why Latin Americans started settling in this particular area of London and why retailers feel that the revitalisation of the area posed a risk to their businesses.

The current regeneration projects undertaken at E&C are yet another attempt to boost the area’s reputation and potential. This is a deprived

inner city area of London with one of the highest indices of deprivation across the country (Southwark is in the top 25<sup>th</sup> most deprived areas of England, Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010). The public housing estates, traffic and road infrastructures that have been blamed for the area's bad reputation were built in the 1960s. The scale of the development was such that it left the area with a heavily transited network of roundabouts and streets and a complicated link of pedestrian subways that is often used as an example of bad planning, and cited for its negative qualities (Althorpe, 2008)<sup>7</sup>. The following quote published in a national newspaper provides an indication of the area's reputation:

By the sixties, the Elephant appeared to be little more than a gigantic roundabout overlooked by brutalist architecture (...) and surrounded by some scary local authority estates. (Glancey, 1999, np)

It is this infrastructure that the current regeneration scheme is set to transform. Elephant & Castle was signalled as an opportunity area in the London Plan (2002), such a designation in the Major's planning vision for London diverted attention and investors to the area. The shopping centre plays a central role in E&C and it is considered as the gateway to the area<sup>8</sup>. Amongst developers and the council the general perception of E&C shopping centre is one of a "no-place", a "go-through" area, not a destination. These are some of the ways in which E&C has been described by developers:

The Elephant and Castle will again become a prestigious and attractive destination in central London. (First Base)<sup>9</sup>

We want to return the heart to E&C – to create a place where people travel to, not through. (Oakmayne)<sup>10</sup>

The E&C is a "go through area" - a "no place". (Lend Lease)<sup>11</sup>

These comments acknowledge that E&C is a transport hub (the shopping centre is a station to one of Britain's train operators, bus routes that link south and north London operate from the main roundabouts, and it has an underground station with two main lines that connect north, central, south and west London (Bakerloo and Northern Lines). But this perception as a "go through area" is also related to its reputation as a violent place with high levels of crime and unemployment, a reputation it has had since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

However, for many Latin Americans the E&C is the place where they have invested economically and emotionally. There is a sense of attachment, a sense of ownership in the transformation of E&C into a “thriving Latin Quarter”. Take for example the intervention of Carlos Burgos of the Pedro Achata Trust (an organisation promoting sustainable businesses) in one of the consultation meetings:

In reply to the question Is E&C a place? For a diversity of communities and for the Latin Americans in particular the E&C is a place. For Latin Americans it is a destination, not a passing through route. (Carlos Burgos, ELG2, 15 September 2011)

Thus, for Latin American retailers and their clients the E&C is a destination not a passing through area. It is here where Latin American retailers started settling in the early 1990s and where they have made their livelihoods. The economic situation was an important element stimulating the movement of Latin Americans into the shopping centre, and low rent was one of the most attractive features. Elephant and Castle showed the signs of a deprived inner-city shopping area that was frequented by low-income groups and that had been aesthetically neglected—and it was precisely this neglect that allowed Latin Americans to settle in the area. The E&C shopping centre was one of the first in Britain when it opened in 1965. However, given its location amongst the “... hurtling traffic on a life-threatening system of roundabouts in Southwark” (Hall, 1992: 18), and in one of the areas of highest unemployment, the Centre was also strongly affected by the economic recession at the end of the 1980s. By 1991, for example, the first floor of the shopping centre was nearly vacated with shops either closing down or ceasing operations (Hall, 1992). A year later Latin Americans started opening shops on the first level of the shopping centre. *La Fogata* opened in June 1992, followed by *Inara Travels* (now *Inara Transfers*) and by 1994 there were ten shops owned by Latin Americans including food shops, fritter stalls, a travel agency, a jeweller, an employment agency, a hairdresser and a tailor’s shop, with snack places filtering to the outside of the shopping centre. This trend extended to the surrounding area to such an extent that by 2012 there were four clearly identified clusters: the shopping centre, shops along the arches in Elephant Road and Eagle’s Yard, and those on Newington Butts next to the new Strata Tower (a new private residential development). Thus, Latin Americans have transformed the previously derelict spaces on the railway arches and inhabited empty shops in the area, creating in the process a distinctive Latin business cluster in E&C. Yet, Latin American retailers are now at the centre of a multimillion pound regeneration plan that will



see the area transformed into what developers and the council described as a “vibrant quarter of Central London”.

The Latin American presence in the shopping centre was clearly evident since the opening of the first shops. The colours, smells, products, shop names, décor, advertising, the sounds and music emanating from flat screens and speakers, and the language used and spoken in the premises were all part of this new claim to identity. This identity however, has changed over time and retailers have adapted to their surroundings and to the demands placed on them by different regulatory bodies, management requirements, economic circumstances and general changes to the area. The initial colourful wooden structures in a row in the middle of the corridor that I once described as recreating the experience of an outdoor small street (Román-Velázquez, 1999) are no longer there. Towards the end of the 1990s the external appearance of the colourful row of shops was replaced with modular white metal structures, but the internal decoration and layout of the shops remained more or less unchanged (see photos 1, 2 & 3). The change to a modular structure was imposed by the managers of the shopping centre on health and safety grounds.



**Fig. 2-1 - La Bodeguita and El Costurerito**



**Fig. 2-2 - La Bodeguita**



**Fig. 2-3 - Nicole's Fashion (previously El Costurerito)**

As I write in 2012, the space in the middle of the corridor is still occupied by Latin American shops, but the owners and types of shops have changed over time. The structural changes had an impact upon the distinctively orange *Bodeguita* and the pink *Costurerito*; whilst the services offered by *El Costurerito* remained more or less the same. *La Bodeguita* concentrated on the café side, which was originally limited to weekends only, rather than on the retail side of businesses. The *Bodeguita* became “*Café Bar La Bodeguita Delicatessen*” and changed location

(from unit 252 to units 256-257) but still remained in the middle of the corridor. It later (2001) acquired bigger premises on the corner of the shopping centre for what is the *Bodeguita Restaurant* (units 222-223 in the first level of the shopping centre), also visible from the outside of the shopping centre (from Walworth Road). The menu and window advertising are in Spanish and English, catering to their main clientele but also seeking to attract those whose first language is not Spanish. This is also evident in the name change of *El Costurerito* to *Nicole's* (reflecting not just a change of administration, but opening up to a different clientele and catering for the cultural context in which they are located). These two examples are evidence of economic growth, transformation in business practice and an indication of how Latin American retailers have set root in the area and taken into account the surroundings in which they are located.

The selection of products and the way in which these are displayed also constitute an important part of the way in which the identity of the shops is communicated to passersby. A further way in which these shops are mediating representations of a particular Latin American identity is through decoration and display windows which become notice boards containing a diversity of messages including accommodation, courier dates, concerts and announcements of support or fund raising events for natural disasters such as hurricanes or earthquakes. Alongside the food, handicrafts, icons, the sounds of Latin music or Latin American television programmes could be heard or seen in the background.

These shops have always offered a variety of services. For example, *La Tienda* (as it is commonly known, or *Agencia los colorados su tienda Latina*) is a café, retailer, and it also offers courier services to Ecuador. In the retail section food products are alongside national sports team t-shirts, handicrafts, DVD's, CD's and medicines. Most of these shops sell products that are not otherwise available in the UK. For example, the banana leaves to wrap the "tamales", the flour for the 'arepas' or "empanadas", soft drinks, chocolates, and boxes or ready mix desserts from Latin America, along with Latin American newspapers, magazines and handicrafts. Most of these products were difficult to find in the UK in the 1990s. In 2012 it is the demand and familiarity of brands, though not necessarily Latin American labels, what customers look for. This is the case with the Mexsana powder used for medicinal purposes, which is produced by Dr. Scholl, but not readily available in national retailers in the UK, and the nail varnish products with different colour tones that are specific to the Latin American market (See photos 4 & 5).



Fig. 2-4 - La Tienda



Fig. 2-5 - La Tienda

The variety of services within one shop takes a slightly different form in the shops below the railway arches alongside Eagle's Yard and Elephant Road. The space under the railway bridge has been converted into restaurants and small commercial centres whereby one unit (arch) is divided up and sub-let (under licence agreement) to other small retailers. These commercial units such as *La Vida Loca*, *El arco del centro* and *Distriandina* in Elephant Road and *San Andresito* or *Arko 146* and *EcuFood* in Eagle's Yard are divided up to provide space for independent businesses, but the space is managed by one lease holder. The main leaseholders in the area are *Corporación Naranjo*, *Distriandina* and *Tiendas del Sur*. The sub-let agreement tends to offer cheap rent and flexible short term contracts (in 2010 the average rent was £100 per week on short term contracts); it also offered access to telephone, internet, water and electricity for example. This agreement provided the opportunity to start up small businesses without the associated risks or management responsibilities for the site which the leaseholder is accountable for. It was also a way of testing out a business venture and if successful moving into different premises. This was the case of *Mr Piggy* in Elephant Road which started as a take away café for a period of six months and later leased an entire arch and opened as a restaurant; and of *Macondo* which was located within *La Vida Loca* arch and in July 2012 moved to larger premises in Sheraton Court, Newington Butts (previously occupied by Colombian restaurants *Donde Lucho* and *El Paisita*).

Signs of transformation are evident outside of the shopping centre; most investment is taking place around, rather than in the shopping centre. Equally, most of the changes to Latin American shops are evident outside of the shopping centre, particularly those located on the railway arches in Elephant Road (behind the shopping centre) and Eagle's Yard (next to Strata—private residential building completed in 2010). The revitalisation plans for E&C have required adjustment from Latin American retailers, who have seen the need to improve the appearance of the shops and change their business practices to accommodate a more diverse clientele.

The changes taking place in the Latin shops located below the railway arches next to the Strata Tower might reveal some of the negotiations that have taken place in the area. For example, when the Strata Building was under construction the shops in Eagle's Yard were affected economically as access from the main entrance was limited, making it difficult to see what lay behind the scaffolds on the path leading to the shops. The shops were very much under a dusty building site, with the added noise pollution of construction. Latin American retailers were worried that their businesses were in economic decline and that the lack of access to the

shops contributed to the perception of a squalid and dangerous area. The developers of Strata were also worried about their neighbours. Not about their economic difficulties, but about the appearance of the shops—literally these were now within a few steps of the new private development. A tour around the Latin shops organised by Community Action Southwark (CAS) with council workers, representatives from Strata and other public utilities personnel, ended in a compromise. The Council agreed to create a safer and cleaner neighbourhood by planting trees, placing and collecting trade bins and improving street lighting. Strata committed to pave the area and the retailers agreed to comply with regulations and refurbish their premises.

*La Chatica* a café and food retailer in Elephant Road is a good example of the trajectory and the changing nature of Latin shops in London. *La Chatica* is also a distributor of Latin America products with further premises in Druid Street for food manufacturing and distribution. So far it is the only distributor that has created its own brand, whose logo is used in the packaging of some of its locally produced food for sale in the café. *La Chatica*, registered as *La casa de Jack*, as with most businesses, started as a small and informal enterprise. Initially it was set up in 1999 as a business to export baby clothes to Colombia. It formally registered as a food distributor in 2001 extending its operation to food production and a café soon after that. As with other shops it started with a small unit in “*La Vida Loca*” (one of the arches in Elephant Road) as a “*panaderia*” (bread shop) and cafe, and in 2010 acquired the arch next to *La Vida Loca* and in early 2011 opened *La Chatica Café*, where most of the food production takes place. When it first opened the café stood out from the other arches. It is a modern café, with a glass front that opens up to the Road, allowing easy access to the vibrant colours and decorations inside (see photos 6 & 7).



Fig. 2-6 - La Chatica



Fig. 2-7 - La Chatica

This is an important aspect, not only because *La Chatica* is new and modern, but because its ambience is evident from the outside. The structure and arrangement of most of the arches is so that the diversity of the units are not visible from the outside. The fact that there are multiple units offering a diversity of services and products from one arch, make these more hidden. As one of the new residents of Strata commented when referring to *La Chatica*, “this is the café we all come to”, adding “you know what you are getting into”. Whilst for example, in relation to *Los Arrieros Rest* (just behind the Strata) he commented that he never visited it because “it is not evident from the outside and even as you go in, of what

exactly you are getting into”<sup>12</sup>. The Latin American shops relied heavily on a Latin American clientele for whom the language, products, services and food were familiar. However, retailers are aware that they need to attract a more diverse type of customer. For this they need to make adjustments to the appearance of the shops and to business practices such as asking their employees to speak English and providing translations and descriptions of the products and services on offer.

The transformations of shops in the railway arches behind Strata Tower and in Elephant Road are not only physical. An entire business community is in transition: from informal to more formal ways of conducting everyday businesses, from a naïve approach to setting a business to a more legal and formalised approach. What we can see here is the transition from informal to formal transnational economic network. From a close business community in a deprived inner city area to a vibrant Latin Quarter in Central London—a world class city. Also evident here is a transition in self-definition—from mono-Latin identity to a “British-Latino” identity, one that locates itself amongst the multiple layers that make up London. Yet, this is a Latin identity very much embedded in power structures that will demand constant re-negotiation.

### **Conclusion**

The Elephant and Castle is a destination for many Latin Americans in London, a routine stop for many in search of goods and food, a place where many can feel at home<sup>13</sup>. It is an information centre, a place to socialise, to chat and to meet friends. Its location and transport connections make it easy to reach and unlike the many who pass through on their daily commutes to work or leisure, it is a destination not a “passing through place”.

The idea of place as a destination is central to the strategies of developers. The image of the place under consideration is represented as a point on route to somewhere else, a passing through site where people do not want to remain or spend time, and more so as a “no place”. The continued demand from developers and government officials alike to re-invent a place as a destination ignores the fact that for many of its ordinary citizens this very same place is already a destination. It is a place where people not only spend time, but in which their livelihoods are realised; a place where the significance of roots and routes is very much alive. As Sharon Zukin (2010) observed “the continued urge to build a “destination culture” destroys “city dwellers” ability to put down roots...” (218). Latin



Americans' claims over the right to set roots in place are as important as the very routes that made possible their move to London and the possibilities of a continued redefinition of their roots.

The idea of place as destination and claims over its identity highlights the tension arising between people's experiences of places and their re-invention as destination. The re-invention of places as destination cultures invoked by developers (Zukin, 2010) relies on a misconceived perception of places as "no-places" (a term introduced by Augé, 1995). Such misconception ignores people's claim to places and the material practices and historical processes that contribute to their identity. The study of Latin American retailers in E&C highlights the tensions that appear in the construction of places as destinations. The re-invention of E&C as a destination ignores the fact that for many Latin Americans and for the many inhabitants of the area it is a destination. The study highlights the tensions over claims asserting the identity of a place at a particular moment and how these are inserted in wider discourses and power structures.

Latin American businesses—once located in an economically marginal position within the city—are now at the centre of a regeneration scheme that will see the area incorporated into central London. The regeneration plans for E&C have caused a lot of anxiety amongst business owners who have settled in the area. Their contribution and visibility has been acknowledged in government planning documents to the extent that it has been signalled as a thriving Latin Quarter of central London. Despite this acknowledgement, retailers believe that the current regeneration programme might pose a risk to their sustainability and future presence in the E&C. The economic and emotional investment of Latin American retailers in the E&C further enhances the identity of the area into a Latin place in London.

The different perceptions of E&C are part of the aspirations for the area; and even though a Latin American presence is highly visible, their emotional investment and involvement in transforming E&C has been less evident. Latin Americans have contributed to the diversity of the E&C by developing a distinctive Latin Quarter, and their aspirations are to continue improving the quality of businesses and for this they are aware that they need to raise their profile and participation in the regeneration process. They also have aspirations for E&C—aspirations for a better place, but one that they can afford and a place where they can remain—not pushed out; a place where the individuality and local identity of the area is not compromised.

Investment in the area is welcomed by all parties, but the aspirations for the E&C are rooted in different agendas. For developers it is an economic development in partnership with the council and despite their commitment to community engagement this is a business venture, and one that should prove economically successful. For Latin American entrepreneurs who have successfully created a business cluster in E&C their aspirations are also about economic success, but less visible is the emotional investment undertaken by Latin Americans in the transformation of the E&C when there was little hope of becoming an “opportunity area” in London. Aspirations for a better place are high on everyone’s agenda, but whether Latin Americans will be able to afford a place in the redeveloped E&C remains uncertain.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Southwark’s Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See Román-Velázquez (forthcoming) “Claiming a place in the global city: Urban regeneration and Latin American spaces in London” where I discuss in detail the impact of the regeneration of E&C for Latin American businesses.

<sup>3</sup> Periods of research include: 1993-95, summer 2006, summer 2008, summer 2010 and 2011-12.

<sup>4</sup> For a longer discussion on this topic refer to García Vargas & Román-Velázquez (2011).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.paginaslatinas.co.uk/> Published by Express Media International Ltd. Unit 28 Skylines Village, Limeharbour, London, E14 9TS.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.directorio1.com> Arch 183 Manor Place, London, SE17 3BB

<sup>7</sup> Some of these buildings are due for demolition under the current regeneration scheme and the pedestrian subway in the southern roundabout has been blocked to give way to a new street level crossing.

<sup>8</sup> ELG Liaison Group meeting, 15 September 2011, London.

<sup>9</sup> First Base website: 1 December 2011:

[http://www.firstbase.com/pj\\_elephantcastle.html](http://www.firstbase.com/pj_elephantcastle.html)

<sup>10</sup> Oakmayne website: 1 December 2011: <http://www.oakmayneproperties.com>

<sup>11</sup> Consultation meeting 2, 15 September 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Notes from Guided walk around Latin American businesses, 26 May 2012

<sup>13</sup> Though this is not the case for all Latin Americans as discussed in Cock, 2011.