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Making sense of handwritten signs in public spaces

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Keywords:	handwritten signs, urban communicates, public space, linguistic landscape, London
Abstract:	<p>Abstract</p> <p>This article is an ethnographic investigation of an under-explored sociolinguistic phenomenon, namely, handwritten signs in public spaces, in a context of urban regeneration and socio-cultural transformation. These signs are a subset of urban communicates that involve handwriting, lettering or the painting of letters and text using different materials and serving different functions. We focus primarily on handwritten signs on paper or cards. The data were collected in Stratford, a ward in the highly ethnically and linguistically diverse London Borough of Newham and home of the 2012 London Olympics. Our analytical focus is on the indexicalities of the handwritten signs. We engaged ordinary residents in Stratford, customers and visitors of the two main shopping centres there, precinct management, and local council staff, all of whom interacted with such signs as part of their everyday work and life, as well as non-participant commentators, in interpreting and analysing the meanings of the signs. We also analyse the disappearance of the signs vis-à-vis urban development policies regarding the community, and the emergence of refashioned painted signs with handwritten style lettering in the global-facing commercial spaces. The study highlights the significance of handwritten signs and invite the reader to engage in making sense of their meaning potentials and symbolic values.</p>

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Figure 1. Barber shop



Figure 2. Records selling sign



Figure 3. Fruit stall



Figure 4. Bilingual 'Don't touch'.



Figure 5. Chinese sign 'Pure rice starch'.

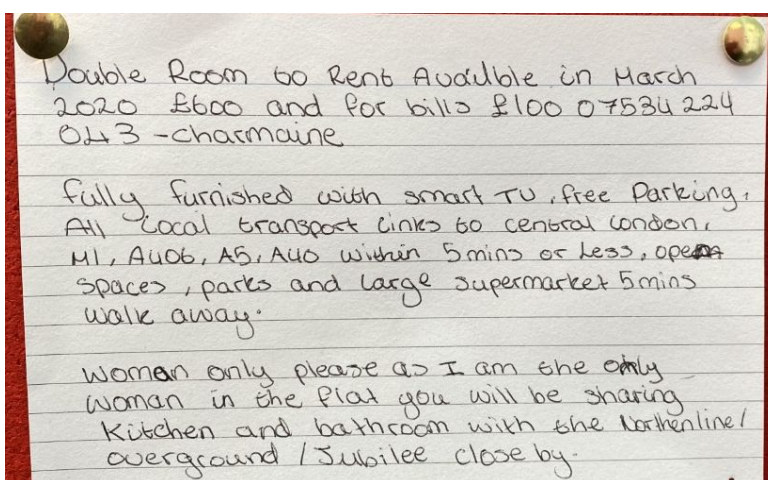


Figure 6. Room rental

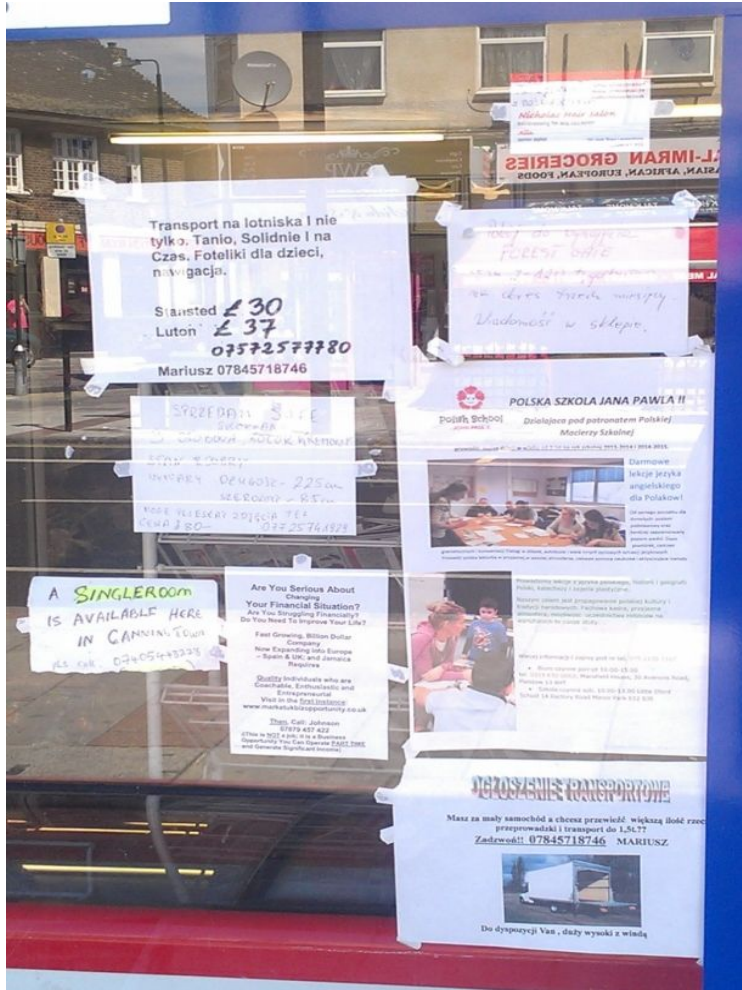


Figure 7. Polish shop window



Figure 8. Hotel front

View Only



Figure 9. Kung-fu club advert



Figure 10. Temporary closure sign, cafe



Figure 11. Temporary closure sign, charity shop



Figure 12. Charity shop window.



Figure 13. On temporary metal door



Figure 14. A delicatessen in Stratford Shopping Centre in 2015



Figure 15. A fruit and vegetable stall in Stratford Shopping Centre in 2015.



Figure 16. A fruit and vegetable stall and a children's clothes stall in Stratford Shopping Centre in 2017



Figure 17. A delicatessen in Stratford Shopping Centre in 2017.



Figure 18. Shop sign of an oriental supermarket in Stratford Shopping Centre



Figure 19. A display in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park



Figure 20. An art installation in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park



Figure 21. A pub restaurant sign at Westfield Shopping City Stratford



Figure 22. A restaurant menu at Westfield Shopping City Stratford



Figure 23. A soft drinks shop menu at Westfield Shopping City Stratford

Making sense of handwritten signs in public spaces

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14 **Making sense of handwritten signs in public spaces**

15 **Abstract**

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25 regeneration and socio-cultural transformation. These signs are a subset of urban
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33 linguistically diverse London Borough of Newham and home of the 2012 London Olympics.
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39 precinct management, and local council staff who interacted with such signs as part of their
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41 everyday work and life, as well as non-participant commentators in interpreting and
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3 **Key words** Handwritten signs; urban communicates; public space; linguistic landscape;
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10 **1. Introduction**

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12 Between 2014 and 2018, the authors of the present paper were involved in what has become
13 known as the TLANG project: *Translation and Translanguaging: Investigating linguistic and*
14 *cultural transformations in superdiverse wards in four UK cities*. Details of the project,
15 including various working papers and reports, can be found at: <https://tlang.org.uk/>. We led
16 the London site of the project, which focused on the Borough of Newham in the east of the
17 city, the most ethnically diverse borough in Britain according to the 2011 census, with “more
18 than 110 languages” reportedly spoken
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20 (http://www.newham.com/work/history_heritage/a_newham_timeline/401,10,0,0.html) (see
21 Busch 2016 on the problems of counting languages). In addition to the ethnographic data we
22 collected in business, sports, heritage and culture, and legal contexts, we gathered linguistic
23 landscape data, primarily in the ward of Stratford and New Town and primarily around two
24 shopping centres there (see further below). This ward is popularly known simply as Stratford
25 and regarded as the capital of Newham as it is where the Borough Council is located, has one
26 of the largest transport hubs in London and is internationally known for being the home of the
27 2012 London Olympics. More information about the site where we collected the data will be
28 given section 3 of this article.
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49 As soon as we started gathering linguistic landscape data in the area, we noticed that
50 there was a significant number of handwritten signs in public spaces. We were initially
51 interested in the different language scripts that these signs represented. We then realised that
52 these signs fulfilled different functions and were strategically placed in different locations for
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3 specific reasons. But we struggled to find relevant literature directly exploring the
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5 significance of handwritten public signs.
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8 As we were doing ethnography over time, we noticed that the number of handwritten
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10 signs was decreasing quite significantly. By 2017, the Stratford Shopping Centre, a 1970s
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12 establishment for small independent traders and once the busiest shopping centre in Newham,
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14 where we collected most of our handwritten signs, was almost entirely rid of handwritten
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16 signs. Even the price tags at food and vegetable stores and clothes stands were designed by
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18 the local Borough Council and were of uniform style. All the traders were allowed to do was
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20 to write the price, which they could change as appropriate. Gradually, we noticed an
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22 emergence of designer signs that have handwritten style on them, especially in the Westfield
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24 Stratford City, a vast shopping mall built for the London Olympics and opened in September
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26 2011 which stands opposite Westfield Stratford City, and the adjacent Olympics Park, now
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28 known as Queen Elizabeth Olympics Park. We are interested in the socio-cultural changes,
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30 including changes in policy regarding public signage, that these apparent changes in the
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32 linguistic landscape reflect and are influenced by.
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37 Our project aimed to develop a Participatory Linguistics framework with two
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39 distinctive features:
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- 42 i) We see the researcher's job to be trying to make sense of the participants trying to
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44 make sense of their world, the 'double hermeneutic' (Giddens 1982) as Smith and
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46 Osborn (2008) discussed in their Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).
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48 By trying to make sense of their trying to make sense of their lives, we are
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50 participating in their social world as well. Indeed, their social world becomes part
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52 of ours and ours becomes part of theirs.
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55 ii) Doing linguistics has social consequences. We are participating in a social act,
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57 through the way we represent the community, the speakers, and their languages
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3 and language practices in our analysis. Our analysis of what we have observed is
4 necessarily subjective. We as researchers therefore have a responsibility to be
5 open, explicit and self-critical of our own social, cultural, and political stance in
6 presenting our interpretation and analysis and invite the reader to participate in our
7 analysis as a social act.
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14 We were very much aware that our interpretation and analysis of the handwritten signs in
15 public spaces were influenced by our positions as outsider researchers who are not resident in
16 the Borough nor working in these places. Our understanding of the history and the context
17 was based on our reading of historical documentation and what people told us on our visits to
18 these sites. We realised that many people, including the traders and the shoppers, had to deal
19 with these signs as part of their everyday social interaction. We felt that it would be important
20 and useful to understand their interpretive processes of the signs as part of our research
21 process. We therefore followed an IPA approach and engaged the participants and other
22 observers in discussing ways of interpreting the significance of the handwritten signs in
23 public spaces.
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37 The purpose of the present paper is therefore twofold:

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40 i) to document what we have observed with regards to the handwritten signs in
41 public spaces in a specific location and analyse them vis-à-vis the social changes
42 that are taking place in the area;
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46 ii) to explore alternative interpretations and analyses of the meaning of these signs,
47 by engaging multiple participants in the research process.
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51 The structure of the article is as follows: we begin in section 2 with the description of the
52 phenomenon of handwritten signs in public spaces, followed in section 3 by a brief history of
53 the transformation of Stratford where we collected most of the data. The main body of the
54 paper is devoted to an analysis of the presence and disappearance of handwritten signs in
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3 Stratford over time (section 4) and the reactions to them by those who interact with the signs
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5 as part of their everyday work and life as well as solicited comments from invited individuals
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7 (section 5). We will also report and discuss the emergence of refashioned handwritten style
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9 signs and discuss their significance in section 6. We conclude the article in section 7 with
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11 comments on the future of handwritten signs in public space and public life and the
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13 importance of studying them as a sociolinguistic phenomenon in the context of urban
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15 development and transformation.
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21 **2. Handwritten signs in public spaces: an under-explored phenomenon**

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23 Here are some examples of handwritten signs in public spaces that we are concerned with in
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25 the present study.
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Please insert Figures 1–13 about here

As can be seen, these handwritten signs fulfil a variety of functions. Some (e.g. Figure 2) are for selling goods, giving the name and the price (Figure 3); others are adverts (Figure 9), information notices (Figure 5), or instructions and warning signs (Figures 4, 12, 13). Some of them are semi-permanent, that is they are put up in the same place for some time (Figure 5). But many are time-fixed or spontaneous and temporary (Figures 8, 10, 11). The locations of the handwritten signs are also noteworthy. Shop fronts seem to be a very popular space for multiple signs (Figures 1, 7). Names and prices of goods are placed directly on the goods (Figure 3). Others are stuck on pillars (Figure 9), or semi-hidden at the back of the stall. Some are placed on designated notice boards (Figures 2, 6). Figure 13 is rather different from the other examples as it is written directly onto the metal door. This brings up an

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3 important issue: there are many different kinds of urban communicates that involve
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5 handwriting, lettering or the painting of letters and text using different materials and serving
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7 different functions. The ones written on paper or cards are the one that we are primarily
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9 concerned with in this study. They are only a subset of the urban communicates. We will see
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11 examples of a different subset later in the paper, i.e. painted signs with handwritten style
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13 lettering. There is a link between the primary function, the temporality, the text density and
14
15 the location of the signs. For instance, those on shop windows tend to be temporary, calling
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17 for part-time assistants (Figure 1), and usually have few words, whereas notices about
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19 services, clubs, events or rentals tend to have more text (Figure 6) and are placed on notice
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21 boards and walls. Scollon and Wong Scollon's (2003) place semiotics emphasised the
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23 durability and temporality dimension of public signs. Domke (2015) discusses both
24
25 temporality and materiality of regulatory public signs. Dray (2010) highlights the ideological
26
27 significance of public signage and links her analysis of handwritten and printed signage to the
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29 participation frameworks involved in their production and consumption. The interfaces
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31 between these and other aspects of urban communicates - function, text density, and physical
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33 location – are certainly themes for more detailed and systematic exploration in linguistic
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35 landscape research.

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42 Studies that focus on the significance of handwritten signs in public spaces is scarce.
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44 There are passing comments in urban development studies that are not focused on language
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46 issues about the informality and temporary nature of such signs as well as local policies
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48 regarding temporary signage in public spaces (Tallon 2013; Roberts, Sykes and Granfer
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50 2016; Imrie and Raco 2003; Garcia 2004). Researchers seem to recognise that handwritten
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52 signs are informal and personal. But whilst they give the space where such signs appear a
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54 sense of spontaneity and even intimacy, they are often deemed as adding to the apparent
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56 chaos of a space, which needs to be managed and controlled by the local(ised) authorities
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3 including those responsible for managing the space, e.g. precinct management. This appears
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5 to be what the authorities think too, as we will see further in section 5) And most urban
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7 development policies tend to emphasise structures and uniformity rather than spontaneity
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9 (Garcia 2004). There are also studies of the so-called cultural districts in urban regeneration
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11 programmes where handwritten signs are commonplace (e.g. Brooks and Kushner 2001) and
12
13 of spontaneous events such as commemorations for people who are killed by accident
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15 (Haskins and DeRose 2003; Svendsen, Campell and McMillen 2016) and “pop-up shops”
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17 (Ferreri 2016). Krase and Shortell (2011) consider the presence of handwritten signs in public
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19 spaces as part of what they call ‘vernacular landscapes’ in globalised urban centres.
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22 Elsheshtawy (2011) includes examples of multilingual signs in a study of “informal
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24 encounters” in Abu Dhabi's urban public spaces. One of the few scholars who have explored
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26 the significance of handwriting mode in public display from a social semiotic perspective is
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28 Chaim Noy. His 2015 book examines the communicative functions that handwriting (mode)
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30 and paper (medium) serve in an increasingly digital and intermedial world. He focused on the
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32 displays of handwritten artifacts in museums and memorial sites, and in particular
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34 Ammunition Hill, the site of the 1967 six-day war, which, as Jaworski (2016) points out in
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36 his review of Noy’s book, help to establish a specific linguistic ideology that authenticates,
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38 individualizes and humanizes the site through the associations of handwriting with
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40 spontaneity, immediacy and literacy.
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47 Linguistic landscape research often looks at graffiti and protest placards which are
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49 usually handwritten or hand-painted. Most of the discussion, however, is on the contents of
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51 the messages conveyed by the graffiti or placards. For instance, there is a great deal of
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53 discussion of their political contents and the ideological stance (e.g. studies in Rubdy and Ben
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55 Said 2015; see also Massey and Snyder 2012). Some link the hand-written/painted signs to
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57 urban citizenship and identity (e.g. Lee 2013; Dong 2020). Others use them to measure
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3 linguistic diversity (Peukert 2013). Blommaert (2013) included handwritten signs in his
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5 discussion of “materialist semiotics”, and Hutton (2011) considered them in his study of
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7 vernacular spaces and “non-places” in Hong Kong. Hutton also talked about the fact that
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9 handwritten signs are receding in urban developments. The high level of creativity, humour
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11 and satire in such signs are explored by Lamarre (2014), Seargeant (2012), and studies in
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13 Shohamy, Ben Rafael and Barni (2010, see also Järlehed and Jaworski 2015). But few focus
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15 on the fact that these signs are handwritten. It is the modality of handwriting and the
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17 materiality of the handwritten signs that attracted our attention. To us, the mode of
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19 handwriting is what distinguishes these signs from other signs, especially the designed and
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21 printed one, because of the direct relationship between the sign producer and the sign without
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23 the intermediary of design software and printers. As Neef (2011) points out, handwriting
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25 throughout its history has always been threatened with erasure. It exists in a dual state: able to
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27 be standardized, repeated, copied—much like an imprint—and yet persistently singular,
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29 original, and authentic as a trace or line. We believe that the relationship between the writer
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31 and the handwritten sign, as well as the duality that Neef points out, can have a significant
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33 effect on how the viewers and readers react to the handwritten signs as opposed to printed
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35 signs. This is one of the research questions we wanted to address: how do people respond to
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37 handwritten signs in the context of urban development policies in the community?
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44 A key interest of our is in the indexicality of different kinds, including referential and
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46 non-referential indexicality of such signs. Referential indexicality refers to the way referential
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48 meaning can be derived from certain linguistic expressions in terms of their relation to the
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50 current interactive context in which the expression occurs, for example, “Ask next stand.
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52 Back soon.” Who is in the next stand? Next to the right or the left? From what time is “soon”
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54 to be measured? Non-referential indexicality refers to the way signs encode socio-pragmatic
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56 meanings, including, for example, socio-economic class, gender, ethnicity, education level,
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3 attitudes, etc. A multilingual and multi-scriptal sign at a stall, for instance, may signal that
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5 customers of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are welcome. And Spitzmüller
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7 points out a third important indexicality at play here, the semiotic indexicality in the Peircian
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9 sense, between sign and sign producer which we alluded to above. “Handwriting—as
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11 opposed to print—has the indexical vector to the body who wrote the message, which is often
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13 interpreted as ‘causal’ link to a ‘person(ality),’ ‘character,’ or to ‘authenticity.’ Also see
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15 Derrida’s take on ‘signature’ (discussed in Neef’s book mentioned above)” (Spitzmüller pc
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17 February 2020). In the present study, we pay particular attention to the indexicality of identity
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19 and affect of the handwritten signs in the context of socio-cultural development and change
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21 and affect of the handwritten signs in the context of socio-cultural development and change
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23 of the community and how the signs contribute to the atmosphere of the space.
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28 29 **3. Transforming Stratford: Between diversity and convergence**

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31 The Stratford we are discussing in the present study is in the Lower Lea Vally in East
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33 London, and not Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare’s birthplace. This Stratford is one of 20
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35 wards in the London Borough of Newham, on the northwestern corner of the Borough. It rose
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37 to prominence during the Industrial Revolution and became a major industrial suburb after
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39 the introduction of the railway and the creation of the nearby Royal Docks in the early 19th
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41 century. It rapidly became one of Victorian Britain's major manufacturing centres for
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43 pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and processed foods. This rapid growth was summarised by The
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45 Times in 1886:
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52 Factory after factory was erected on the marshy wastes of Stratford and Plaistow, and
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54 it only required the construction at Canning Town of the Victoria and Albert Docks to
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56 make the once desolate parish of West Ham a manufacturing and commercial centre
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58 of the first importance and to bring upon it a teeming and an industrious population.
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3 "The Incorporation of West Ham," *The Times* 1 November 1886. p. 12.
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8 The opening of Stratford station in 1839 marked a significant development, with train
9 services running to and from the city of London. A workshop and depot for engines was
10 established in the mid 19th century, employing over 2,500 people at its peak and built
11 hundreds of locomotives, passenger coaches and goods wagons. The last part of the works
12 closed in 1991. But Stratford remains a key transport hub, with multiple bus routes,
13 underground services and EuroStar connection, bringing visitors to Stratford in their
14 thousands.
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23 Like many areas of the east end of London, Stratford suffered significant de-
24 industrialisation in the 20th century. This was compounded by the closing of the London
25 Docks in the 1960s. Around this time, the Stratford Shopping Centre was built, beginning
26 efforts to guide the area through the process of transformation from a working-class industrial
27 and transport hub to a retail and leisure destination for the contemporary age (Florio and
28 Edwards 2001). These efforts continued with the 2012 Summer Olympics bid for Stratford,
29 which was submitted formally in 2003 and finally confirmed as the host city in 2005. The
30 Stratford experience of the Industrial Revolution inspired scenes in the opening
31 ceremony covering the transition from a "Green and Pleasant Land" to the "Pandemonium"
32 of the Revolution and the huge social and economic changes it brought about.
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47 The regeneration of Stratford, which had a major boost from the Olympics bid, is
48 marked by a number of large development projects. The Stratford Shopping Centre, created
49 in the 1960s for accessibly-priced, small retail outlets, with a range of indoor and outdoor
50 market stalls, had a facelift, with new electric and plumbing systems, redesign of the
51 walkways and the colour scheme of shopfronts, and most relevantly to our study, improved
52 signage. The adjacent area has also been redesigned, with a new building for University of
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3 East London and Birkbeck College, University of London (where ZH worked at the time of
4 the project), a number of new restaurants and a refurbished theatre. Nevertheless, the Centre
5 is dwarfed by the purpose-built Westfield Stratford City, on the other side of the Stratford
6 station, a 73-hectare home to over 350 stores and a range of restaurants, a cinema and a
7 casino. Westfield Stratford City is a multi-billion-pound new development with most major,
8 international brands having their stores here, attracting more tourists from all over the world
9 than local residents. Our original plan for linguistic landscape work was around the two
10 shopping centres and the nearby areas. Most of the handwritten signs that we noticed were in
11 the Stratford Shopping Centre, and the outdoor market area next to it, as well as the Stratford
12 Library across the road from the shopping centre.
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26 The landmark development project in Stratford is of course the construction of the
27 Olympic Park and the athletes' village. The park features a number of permanent sporting
28 and entertainment venue, including the Olympic Stadium, the Aquatics Centre and the
29 London Velopark, and it is landscaped with riverside walks, cycle paths, picnic areas and
30 children's playgrounds. The athletes' village has subsequently been restructured and sold,
31 providing 3,500 homes, half affordable and half private. Hotels, offices, schools and
32 municipal and other facilities have helped to transform the area into a major metropolitan
33 centre for East London. The Victoria and Albert Museum and the University College London
34 (UCL) have opened new sites on the park. Our linguistic landscape work included the
35 Olympic Park, but, as will be discussed later, there is no handwritten sign there.
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49 The 2011 census recorded a population of 17,768 for Stratford, with 9,251 males
50 (52%) and 8,517 females (48%). The ethnic make-up, rather problematically categorised in
51 the census, is as follows:
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58 Census 2011 Data—Ethnic Group (%)
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Ethnic Group	Stratford	Newham	London
White British	3719 (21%)	51516 (17%)	3669284 (45%)
White Other	3522 (20%)	37700 (12%)	1218151 (15%)
Mixed	984 (6%)	13945 (5%)	405279 (5%)
Asian	5035 (28%)	133895 (43%)	1511546 (18%)
Black	3789 (21%)	60256 (20%)	1088640 (13%)
Arab and Others	719 (4%)	10672 (3%)	281041 (3%)

The religious make-up is 40.0% Christian, 32.0% Muslim, 9.3% No religion, 8.8% Hindu, 2.1% Sikh, 0.8% Buddhist, 0.1% Jewish. Only 58.6% of people living in in the area reported to speak English as their primary, but not only, language of communication, one of the lowest percentages for London and the whole of UK. Other languages spoken by the local residents include Albanian, Amharic (Ethiopian), Arabic, Bengali (7.4%), Bulgarian, Cantonese, French, Gujarati (3.3%), Lithuanian (2.3%), Mandarin, Polish (1.8%), Portuguese (1.4%), Punjabi (1.6%), Romani, Romanian (1.4%), Somali, Tamil (2.0%), Spanish, and Urdu (4.4%). Historical records show that Newham has always had a significant presence of immigrants from other countries. The present multi-ethnic and multilingual composition of the population is largely a result of post-Second World War settlement.

The population is considered to be young, with an average age of 32.5 years, and less than 10% aged over 65. The unemployment rate of the ward is reported to be in excess of 20%, with child poverty rate of 32% (based on household income before housing costs are excluded). Whilst huge investments have been made to the ward and the Borough as a whole, popular opinion views the main beneficiary being people from outside the area, not previous residents of Stratford or Newham. In fact, many complain that the housing price has gone up so much that few local residents can afford to move (Watt, 2013).

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3 The Borough Council, headed by its own elected Mayor, has been pursuing what has
4 been known as the Convergence plan for socio-economic development. The primary goal is
5 to achieve convergence with the rest of London on all key economic and social policy
6 performance indicators despite the ethnic and linguistic diversity and settlement histories. For
7 instance, with regard to education, the Borough Council sets itself a target of over 70% of
8 school children to achieve at least Level 4 in English & Maths at Key Stage 2, and over 50%
9 5 GCSE grades A*—C including Maths & English in maintained schools, as these are the
10 average percentages across London boroughs. Many welcome the plan and believe it to be
11 aspirational. But critics argue that convergence could overlook the specific needs of the local
12 community and that the strategies and investments do not always follow the aspirations (Watt
13 2013). Nevertheless, Convergence has been adopted as the key principle for the Borough's
14 Sustainable Community Strategy for 2010–2030 (Campbell 2012).

15
16 It is noteworthy that the Convergence strategy coincided with the 2012 London
17 Olympics. In fact, it was developed as part of the bidding to host the Olympics in Stratford
18 and explicitly stated in various Council documents soon after the bid was officially endorsed.
19 There were tensions in the way different stakeholders wanted to represent the local
20 community publicly. Most people recognised that ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity was
21 a strength of the local community and should be celebrated, and indeed, the final presentation
22 made by the London team included children of different ethnic appearances speaking
23 different languages. The discourse of the Borough Council, led by the then Mayor, Sir Robin
24 Wales, a Board member for both the London Olympics organizing committee and the
25 Olympic Park Legacy Company (now the London Legacy Development Corporation), to
26 whom the convergence policy has been attributed, was that 'we can do the same, if not better,
27 despite the diversity' (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/davehillblog/2012/jul/03/london->
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3 olympics-regeneration-anne-power-robin-wales), as if diversity was the cause of previous
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5 under-achievement of the Borough.
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10 **4. Handwritten signs in Stratford: Changes over time**

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14 Against the historical background and in the current policy context, it was particularly
15 interesting for us to observe how the principle of convergence was operationalised with
16 regard to public signage. We carried out a time-lagged analysis of the signs we gathered
17 through observation and photography. Below are some pictures of the indoor market within
18 the Stratford Shopping Centre we took during our initial fieldwork visit to the Stratford
19 Shopping Centre (2014–2015).
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33 Please insert Figures 14–15 about here
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40 Now contrast them to the following pictures we took two years after the initial visit
41 (2017) at the same corner of the shopping centre. Large handwritten signs on boards have all
42 disappeared. In talking to the traders and stall owners, all of them said that the Council
43 decided what signs were allowed to be put up and where, and even within their own stall
44 space, there were restrictions on the size of the signs and “consistency in style.” The later
45 specifically refers to handwritten signs. The Council provided designed price tags and
46 standard notice cards and boards for the traders to use, and from a distance, they do look
47 more consistent across the stalls. But quite a few stall owners told us that, as a result, signs in
48 languages other than English were deemed “inconsistent with the standard.” This is an
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3 example of what Hodge and Kress (1988) called institutional legitimation by semiotic
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5 regimentation of public space—the power wielded by an institutionalised ideological
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7 complex to control public dissemination of image.
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14 Please insert Figures 16–17 about here
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21 Several stall owners said to us that they had to use alternative ways to attract the
22
23 attention of customers of a particular ethnic or linguistic background. A fruit and vegetable
24
25 stall run by a Ukrainian couple used to be able to attract Ukrainian customers even though
26
27 almost nothing they sell is specifically Ukrainian. It was because they had signs handwritten
28
29 in Ukrainian. They did have some canned goods from Ukraine which they put at the back of
30
31 the stall, which are hardly visible to the general public. But people who read the signs in
32
33 Ukrainian tend to spot the goods and the stall owners also tell them about these goods.
34
35 Having been told that they were not allowed to have handwritten signs, and they did not feel
36
37 like printing the signs in Ukrainian, the stall does not look particularly different from any
38
39 other fruit and vegetable stall. They did not want to call the stall Ukrainian fruit and
40
41 vegetable stall. They did not want to be made to feel foreign, as they were very aware of the
42
43 subtle tensions between the white European stall holders and those stall owners who look
44
45 visibly foreign, that is those with a Middle Eastern, Asian or Black background.
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51 So the indexicality of the signs works in complex ways. A small, unnoticeable
52
53 handwritten sign in a specific language indexes a kind of ethnic affinity, often attracting the
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55 attention of those who can read the script. Lack of such signs suggests that the stall has no
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57 specific ethnic affiliation. But if the stall owner is visibly non-white-European, then presence
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3 or absence of signs in languages other than English has little non-referential indexicality.
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5 Large, designed, printed or painted signs with terms such as Asian or Chinese in them, or in
6
7 multiple languages, tend to appear in officially designated ethnic shops, selling ethnic goods
8
9 to the general public (see Figure 18). There are often handwritten signs in the language of the
10
11 shop, e.g. Chinese in a Chinese shop. They are aimed at a relatively small number of
12
13 customers who come into such shops. The semiotic indexicality is crucial here, because
14
15 printed signs might be authored by anyone, whereas handwritten signs point to a co-present
16
17 (contiguity) or at least formerly present (causality) person connected with the language in
18
19 vernacular terms. We will discuss further the reactions from the stall owners and customers to
20
21 the language specific handwritten signs in the next section.
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38 Apart from the signs in stalls and shops, we also saw a significant number of handwritten
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40 notices in the Stratford Shopping Centre as well as the adjacent Stratford Library (see images
41
42 in Section 2 above). These were often for advertising private accommodation, tuition and
43
44 other services, selling second-hand goods, lost and found notices, and seeking help of various
45
46 kinds. Some shop owners also put up temporary notices seeking shop assistants or giving
47
48 instructions or reminders on how to open and close the door. Some of the notices were in
49
50 languages other than English. Such notices disappeared from sight in the Centre on our later
51
52 visits. Instead, one big notice board was put up at the back entrance/exit of the Centre onto
53
54 the outdoor market area. However, the board was largely empty on several occasions when
55
56 we were there or had only printed notices or organised events and warning signs about safety
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3 and security. The owners of the barber shop opposite the board told us that if anyone wanted
4 to put up a notice, they needed to ask for a standard notice card from the management of the
5 Centre and inform the management of the content of the notice. Apparently, this was a
6 security measure in case anyone tried to sell illegal goods or organise illegal events. It was
7 known that the management did check the telephone numbers on the notices to ensure that
8 they were bona fide. Although people were reluctant to make any explicit claims, there was a
9 hint that notices in languages other than English were particularly discouraged, as the
10 management was unable to check their contents. Any notice that was put up without official
11 approval or not on the standard notice cards would be taken down. This seems to reveal a
12 tension between the sign writers who may have a specific audience in mind and the precinct
13 management who wants to control the participatory framework, i.e. determine who should or
14 should not display or see the signs.
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33 **5. Making sense of the signs: Perspectives and policies**

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35 Whilst we as observers could see clear links between the presence and disappearance of
36 handwritten signs in public spaces in Stratford and the social policies pursued by the local
37 authorities, particularly the convergence policy, we were very much aware that many people
38 had to deal with them as part of their everyday experience. We were very interested in their
39 reactions to the handwritten signs and to their disappearance in the Stratford area. As
40 mentioned in the introduction, we followed a broadly Interpretative Phenomenological
41 Analysis (IPA) framework in trying to make sense of the participants themselves trying to
42 make sense of their social world. Within this framework, we were particularly interested in
43 how shop and stall owners as well as the customers and the general public make sense of the
44 handwritten signs and notices. We therefore talked to the shop and stall owners, customers
45 and passers-by, the management of the Stratford Shopping Centre and Stratford Library, and
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3 council officers. With the traders, customers, and readers in the library, the conversations
4
5 were about their reactions towards the signs when they saw them and whether the absence of
6
7 handwritten signs mattered. Some of the conversations were very engaging and people told us
8
9 about the histories of the place and the changes over time. With the management personnel
10
11 and council officers, we discussed any policies regarding the display of handwritten signs and
12
13 notices. These were informal conversations rather than formal interviews and were conducted
14
15 without prior appointment. We also showed some of the pictures we took of the handwritten
16
17 signs and the general linguistic landscape of the Stratford area, but particularly around the
18
19 Stratford Shopping Centre, to some of our students and colleagues and invited their
20
21 comments. Again, these were informal conversations whose primary objective was to see the
22
23 way they reacted to the signs and notices intuitively and, in the case of the traders and
24
25 customers, what they did with or around the signs. We had a number of findings that are
26
27 worth discussing.
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33 Firstly, handwritten signs seem to trigger small talk (Coupland 2000) and/or small
34
35 stories (Georgakopoulou 2007), and build customer relations with a much deeper
36
37 involvement. Practically all the traders told us that people saw a handwritten sign and would
38
39 start a conversation that was not simply about the price of goods on sale. The topics covered
40
41 in such conversations could be very broad and varied. They would exchange information
42
43 beyond shopping and offer mutual support in personal and family matters. Many traders
44
45 commented explicitly that the apparent informality and spontaneity of the handwritten signs
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47 were personal and inviting, making the space more intimate. We saw one incident when a
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49 woman spotted a handwritten sign at a vegetable stall that said, "Recipes available." She
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51 asked the one of the sellers about an unfamiliar vegetable. It turned out that the stall did not
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53 have any recipe for that particular vegetable. Upon asking another seller, the woman was told
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55 that the vegetable was from Brazil. That then triggered a chain of small talk about the
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3 woman's son going to Brazil for a working holiday and one of the sellers then told the
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5 woman that her husband had been to Brazil too. The husband was apparently a plumber. The
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7 woman made a side remark that plumbers were hard to find these days and they were very
8
9 useful people to know. So the seller then wrote his phone number on a piece of paper and
10
11 gave it to the woman. The woman did not actually buy anything from the stall yet left with
12
13 some very useful information. When we asked the stall sellers if the woman was a regular
14
15 customer, we were told that they had never seen her before. We must say that we had never
16
17 realised the potential affordances of handwritten signs this incident illustrated. We did
18
19 observe several occasions where similar conversations were apparently triggered by the
20
21 handwritten signs. In discussing the incident with students and colleagues at a later date, most
22
23 people said that they would not have such a conversation if there was no handwritten sign. In
24
25 fact, most people said that they would only have similar exchanges at stalls that they go to
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27 regularly and know the staff there.
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33 In addition to the informal and personal affordance of the handwritten signs, people
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35 did comment on the exclusion/inclusion effect of them, especially of those in languages other
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37 than English. We discussed the Ukrainian case earlier. A similar case is a Polish bakery,
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39 which also sells fruit, some packaged meat and other goods. Apart from the name tags for
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41 some of the bread and other goods, there was nothing handwritten and certainly nothing in
42
43 Polish. When asked about it, the owners said that they were told not to have handwritten
44
45 signs on the wall but it was too troublesome to print anything in Polish. They thought it
46
47 would "look silly" to print a partial sign and add the diacritics and special letters by hand. Did
48
49 it affect their customs? "Possibly," was their answer, as they did have occasions when
50
51 customers came in and found their bread "strange" and walked out, and Polish and Eastern
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53 European customers accidentally discovered the place as there was nothing particularly
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55 noticeable in terms of the shop's Polishness. We noticed one clothes stall where the owners
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3 were clearly of South Asian heritage and we heard them speaking languages other than
4 English. They also sell some Asian style clothes. But there were no non-English language
5 signs. When asked about it, their response was similar to that of the Polish baker: they felt
6 that it would be too troublesome to try and print any signs in Gujarati, Urdu or Punjabi, rather
7 than handwriting them. One young man working at the stall said that they could previously
8 engage some older people in their family and community to write some signs by hand. But
9 these older folks tend not to use the computer. The younger generation's literacy level in their
10 community languages is generally low and they could not do either handwritten or printed
11 signs. A member of staff in the Stratford Library said to us that when they had signs in
12 languages other than English and allowed the general public to put up handwritten notes on
13 the notice board, they had more people from ethnic minority backgrounds coming in and
14 using the library. But the library no longer allows them; only printed signs that say "Urdu
15 books" or "Chinese books" are visible on designated shelves. The staff member felt that these
16 were useless, because unless you already know which shelf to go to, you would not be able to
17 tell if there was any non-English language books in the library in the first place, and if you
18 know where the books were, there was no point to be told that those were Urdu or Chinese
19 books. But most people commented that it was the "atmosphere" that was created by the
20 handwritten signs, especially the ones in languages other than English, that mattered. One
21 Asian woman told us that she used to be able to put up handwritten notes in the Library's
22 designated notice board about a knitting group she organised. But she could not afford to
23 print such notices each time, so had to find alternative means to communicating to others.

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25
26 In exploring public signs in languages other than English, one language that
27 transpired to have more cultural and political sensitivity than others was Arabic. There are
28 some signs in Arabic visible in the Stratford area, but all of them are designed, for example,
29 multilingual welcome signs, directions pointing to prayer places, mosques, and Islamic
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3 cultural centres. There was not a single handwritten sign in Arabic in the Stratford Shopping
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5 Centre. Even during our initial visit to the Centre, we only noticed one tiny handwritten note
6
7 in a booth selling international phone cards. There are in the meantime plenty of stalls by
8
9 Arabic-speaking owners, who often speak with some of their customers in Arabic. They were
10
11 reluctant to talk about the signage issue. But one did say very briefly that they did not want to
12
13 be too visible as they felt that people were rather sensitive about anything Arabic. It seems to
14
15 reflect an unease some people felt about the presence of multilingualism in the community
16
17 and a fear of (linguistic) xenophobia. We did get asked many times by the stall owners and
18
19 the management when we went around taking photographs of signs why we were doing it.
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21 Most people were understanding and friendly after we explained our project. But some asked
22
23 not to show the name of their shop or stall or images of the staff working there.
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29 This brings us to another finding about people's reactions to handwritten signs and
30
31 their disappearance over time. There were clear tensions in the interpretation of the aesthetics
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33 and socio-cultural significance of the handwritten signs between the policy makers and
34
35 implementers on the one hand and the individual traders and the general public on the other.
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37 Whereas the policy makers and implementers see chaos and disorderliness in handwritten
38
39 signs, the traders and the general public see friendliness and distinctiveness. All the
40
41 management staff we talked to said that handwritten signs and notices were "messy" or
42
43 "make the place a mess," because they look so different from each other. The policy is to go
44
45 for uniformity and convergence. But uniformity and convergence are "boring" to the traders
46
47 and the general public. They want liveliness of the space and handwritten signs give the place
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49 life. Several traders remarked that they did not feel "trusted" by the council by policing what
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51 they can put up in their own rented space. "They think we might be advertising some illegal
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53 goods" was one of the comments by a stall owner. The management staff denied this and said
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55 they were simply following the council's guidelines that everything that is advertised needs
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3 to be checked and verified to make sure that they met the advertising standards. But as one of
4 the café owners said, “I just need a helper washing the cups or cleaning the table, and they
5 can do how long they want to, I don’t mind. I can’t afford to go through agencies and pay the
6 council for advertising the job.” One of the Stratford Shopping Centre management team
7 members did say with regard to notices in languages other than English, “We don’t know
8 what they are about. The council wants us to check, but we can’t.” So the only solution was
9 not to allow any handwritten notices in languages other than English. Council members were
10 reluctant to comment directly on the situation, but one did repeat the official line that “safety
11 and security of the local residents is paramount.” How exactly are handwritten signs and
12 notices linked to safety and security issues is not a question they were willing to discuss. In
13 our attempts to engage the local council and the management of the shopping centre precinct,
14 there was a general denial of explicit policy forbidding handwritten signs. They point out that
15 the council and the shopping centre issue designed signs, on which the stall owners could still
16 handwrite names of goods, prices and other information, and the general public could still ask
17 for a standard notice card to write information on, which needs to be approved by the
18 management before putting on the designated notice board. They also point out that there was
19 no penalty as such if any stall owner did put up a handwritten sign temporarily, but the
20 general trading standards would apply when it comes to the size of public signs. Often their
21 comments were couched in health and safety discourse. For instance, one person of the
22 Centre’s management team said, “People used pins to pin the notes on the board. That’s not
23 safe. People can get hurt.” But when asked if there has been any such incident, she said no.
24 She then remarked, “But the Council can’t be responsible if something did happen.” This
25 particular comment and her use of “people” as a generic reference is very telling: the Council
26 and the ordinary shopper are two separated but hierarchically linked social groups, with one
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3 policing the other. Yet the council was not willing to take any responsibility for the welfare
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5 of ordinary people.
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8 Another topic that generated some interesting comments is the so-called Olympics
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10 legacy. The Borough Council is very proud of the fact it hosted the 2012 Olympics and as a
11
12 result the Borough has had huge investment for development programmes of various kinds
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14 including housing, commerce, transport and education. There is no question that the London
15
16 Olympics brought significant benefits to the Borough. Stratford, as a result, is a very different
17
18 place even from the first decade of the 21st century. But critics claim that those who have
19
20 directly benefited from the new developments come from outside the Borough, especially
21
22 those who can afford the new housing development and those who set up businesses in the
23
24 area (Silk 2014; Macrury and Poynter 2008). The traders of the Stratford Shopping Centre
25
26 clearly cannot afford to set up stalls in the glittering Westfield mall on the other side of the
27
28 road, not that Westfield would allow any fruit and vegetable stalls, second-hand furniture
29
30 stores, independent barber shops, shoe repairers, etc anyway. The “them” and “us”
31
32 demarcation is very clear between the two shopping centres, with Westfield indexing
33
34 business corporation values and global connections and Stratford Shopping Centre indexing
35
36 community values and local connections. The clientele is also very different, with
37
38 international tourists and customers from other parts of London, the UK and Europe shopping
39
40 in Westfield and local Stratford and Newham residents shopping, for their daily goods, in
41
42 Stratford Shopping Centre. Westfield has never allowed any handwritten signs since its
43
44 establishment, although a new phenomenon is emerging to which we will turn in the next
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46 section.
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54 The discussion in this section points to a need to engage multiple perspectives in
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56 studying handwritten signs in public spaces and linguistic landscape in general. Different
57
58 groups of people who have to deal with the signs on a daily basis have different
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3 understandings of the meanings and significance of the signs and experience the impact the
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5 signs have on their everyday life in different ways.
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10 **6. Reappearance of refashioned handwritten style**

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12 As the post-Olympic developments expanded, a new phenomenon has been observed in the
13
14 Stratford area, but mostly in the Westfield Shopping City and the adjacent Queen Elizabeth
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16 Olympics Park, that is, designer signs in handwritten style and script fonts. Here are some
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18 examples:
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24 Please insert Figures 19–23 about here
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31 The first thing to notice is that all these signs are monolingual, in English only. There
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33 is no sign of this style in languages other than English. They are printed on laminated posters
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35 or painted on boards. They are more colourful, often with decorations, than the handwritten
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37 signs on paper or cards.
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40 Our immediate question upon seeing these signs was: Why the handwritten style? The
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42 designers of these signs must have felt some added value of the handwritten style and took
43
44 the effort to design and produce them. So we invited our students and colleagues to comment
45
46 on them. Most of them felt that the handwritten style, as opposed to standard print fonts,
47
48 indexed informality and spontaneity. Yet these are designed and manufactured signs. They
49
50 went through rather formal processes, and there is nothing particularly spontaneous in the
51
52 making of such signs. They are stylised performances of handwriting (Coupland 2001, 2007).
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56 It seems that the people who designed such signs realise the significance of
57
58 informality and spontaneity the handwritten-style conveys. And the precinct management
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3 would not regard them as messy as real handwritten signs because they are in standardized
4
5 format and size and usually on standard boards or in standard frames. Spitzmüller (2013,
6
7 401–411) discussed similar cases in terms of what he calls “emulated authenticity.” Some of
8
9 the people we invited to comment did not realise the “Today’s Special” sign was actually
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11 painted and there were apparently only two options the pub restaurant that used the sign
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13 displayed on alternative days. So today’s special is the same as that of the day before
14
15 yesterday and the day after tomorrow. In fact, the pub restaurant staff told us that depending
16
17 on the supply of ingredients, ‘today’s special’ could be the same on consecutive days. But
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19 assuming few people would go to the pub restaurant every day, the deictic reference is a
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21 shifting one and the customers would accept it as spontaneous, at least on the day of their
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23 visit.
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29 Some people commented that the handwritten style makes the place more welcoming
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31 and affordable. They seemed to think that handwritten menus on board would be less
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33 expensive than printed menus. We did not have systematic evidence to support such an
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35 assumption. But it is interesting the people would have such a perception which may well be
36
37 part of the rationale behind the designer handwritten style signs. It is certainly true from our
38
39 fieldwork that independent traders are more likely to have handwritten signs than chain stores
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41 and international brand shops. But the prices of goods at independent stalls are not
42
43 necessarily lower.
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48 We asked our commentators if they think the designer signs in handwritten style
49
50 would invite more small talk between the customers and the shop or restaurant staff, like the
51
52 handwritten signs in the stalls in the Stratford Shopping Centre apparently did. Nobody
53
54 thought they would.
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57 Other comments included that the designer signs have more colours and drawings and
58
59 therefore seem more “creative” than the handwritten signs on paper and cards. However,
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3 neither the handwritten signs nor the printed or painted signs in handwritten style have any
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5 language play or language mixing that we were hoping to see. We do not think that any of
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7 them is particularly creative, except that the designer signs in handwritten style are more
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9 colourful.
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14 **7. The future of handwritten signs in public space and public life**

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16 What our linguistic landscape fieldwork in Stratford, as part of our ethnographic and
17
18 participatory linguistic project on the linguistic and cultural transformations of the area, did
19
20 was to reveal an under-explored sociolinguistic phenomenon, namely handwritten signs in
21
22 public spaces. They are a subset of a wide range of urban communicates that serve diverse
23
24 functions. And there is an interesting and complex relationship between the locations of the
25
26 signs and the functions they fulfil. Our main analytical interest was initially in the
27
28 indexicalities of the signs, especially the non-referential and semiotic indexicalities. First of
29
30 all, they seem to index informality and spontaneity. The informality and spontaneity than
31
32 afford a specific kind of interpersonal relationship between the people who own or display
33
34 the signs and the viewers: they are brought closer to each other by the signs, triggering more
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36 small talk and other interactions that go beyond straightforward sales transaction. Signs in
37
38 languages other than English have a specific inclusion/exclusion effect, as they attract the
39
40 attention of specific ethnic groups.
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47 In the meantime, we realised that the presence and disappearance of the handwritten
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49 signs in public spaces were closely connected with the urban development policies of the
50
51 community. In the Stratford area, which itself has gone through tremendous socio-economic
52
53 and cultural changes, the convergence policy in particular that is being promoted by the local
54
55 authorities seems to have had a direct impact on the handwritten signs. The council and the
56
57 precinct management seem to have a very different perspective on the aesthetics of the
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3 handwritten signs from that of the ordinary people who come into contact with the signs as
4 part of their everyday social interaction. The former see the signs as messy and the need to
5 manage them, whereas the latter see intimacy and liveliness of the place. Ultimately the local
6 authorities want to control the space: public space belongs to the council, not the real public.
7
8 They want to reduce the informality and spontaneity of the space and make the space
9
10 seemingly more orderly. Yet, the informality and spontaneity the handwritten signs index and
11
12 the more intimate interpersonal relationships and social interactions these signs afford are
13
14 clearly significant and must have been realised by business managers and public relations
15
16 specialists as the emergence of the designer signs in handwritten style suggests. But as our
17
18 commentators have indicated, genuine spontaneous interactions and interpersonal
19
20 relationships cannot be faked. The designer signs in handwritten style do not index the same
21
22 values as the real handwritten signs. In this regard, it is interesting to observe that the
23
24 handwritten signs dominate the recent public protests, against Brexit, for environmental
25
26 protection, and anti-American attacks on Iran, etc., whereas the pro-Brexit demonstrations,
27
28 for example, had only printed signs and banners. In the meantime, as Spitzmüller (2013,
29
30 269ff) points out, in football ultra-cultures, it is a no-go to use printed stickers and posters;
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32 they must be hand-painted (cf. Monaghan, 2020). Handwritten signs will always find their
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34 places in public life, because of the values they index. Indeed, as we are putting the final
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36 touches to the article, we are witnessing another upsurge of handwritten notices in public
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38 spaces related to COVID-19 (Zhu Hua, 2020).
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49 In our research, we actively engaged the people who are in contact with the signs as
50 part of their everyday work and life. We also invited comments from observers who did not
51 directly take part in the fieldwork. We believe that their views are crucial in our
52 understanding of the indexicalities and values of the handwritten signs. The engagement of
53 different groups of people in the analytical process should contribute methodologically to the
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3 development of linguistic landscape as a field of enquiry which thus far has been largely
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5 researcher-centred. The writing of this article is also an integral part of the research process,
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7 as it structures our trying to make sense of the people in the community trying to make sense
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9 of the handwritten signs. We welcome further comments from the reader of this article in
10
11 making sense of the handwritten signs in public spaces.
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30
31 dedicate this article to the fond memory of Gunther Kress (1940–2019), who saw many of the
32
33 images in this article, knew what we were trying to do, and suggested several useful ways of
34
35 analysing the handwritten signs.
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Figure captions

54 Figure 1. Barber shop.

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58 Figure 2. Records selling sign.
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3 Figure 3. Fruit stall.
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5 Figure 4. "No tocar"/"Don't touch."
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8 Figure 5. "100% 纯米打浆" (100% pure rice starch).
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10 Figure 6. Room rental.
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12 Figure 7. Polish shop window.
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14 Figure 8. Hotel front.
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16 Figure 9. Kung-fu club advert.
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18 Figure 10. Temporary closure sign, café.
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20 Figure 11. Temporary closure sign, charity shop.
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22 Figure 11. Temporary closure sign, charity shop.
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24 Figure 12. Charity shop window.
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26 Figure 13. On temporary metal door.
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28 Figure 14. A delicatessen in Stratford Shopping Centre, 2015.
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30 Figure 15. Fruit and vegetable stall in Stratford Shopping Centre, 2015.
31

32 Figure 16. Fruit and vegetable stall and children's clothes stall in Stratford Shopping Centre
33 in 2017.
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35 Figure 17. Delicatessen in Stratford Shopping Centre, 2017.
36

37 Figure 18. Shop sign of an oriental supermarket in Stratford Shopping Centre, 2017.
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39 Figure 19. Display in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.
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41 Figure 20. Art installation in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.
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43 Figure 21. Pub restaurant sign at Westfield Shopping City Stratford.
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45 Figure 22. Restaurant menu at Westfield Shopping City Stratford.
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47 Figure 23. Soft drinks shop menu at Westfield Shopping City Stratford.
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