



2015

A Digital Revitalization: Immigration and the Italian Market

Sean Lynch

University of Pennsylvania, seanjrl@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Lynch, Sean. (2015). A Digital Revitalization: Immigration and the Italian Market. *Social Science Studio Reports (Social Science Studio)*. University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/socialsciencestudio_reports/3

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/socialsciencestudio_reports/3
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Sean Lynch
May 10th, 2015
URBS 213
Final

A Digital Revitalization: Immigration and the Italian Market

Introduction

For the first time in decades, Philadelphia recorded an overall growth in population. Upon closer inspection of the data however, an emerging trend becomes clear. The native-born population is decreasing, while the foreign-born population is increasing. The impact of growing immigrant populations in middle sized cities in the past has been positive for revitalization (Katz). However, the effect on larger cities such as Philadelphia is still not well researched.

Concurrently with the growth in foreign born populations, certain areas of Philadelphia have witnessed significant transformation that could very well be labelled as revitalization. South Philly for example has experienced various changes such as rising property values, new businesses, and an increasingly diverse population. A vivid focal point for these transformations in South Philly is the historic Italian Market along 9th Street. Using methods exemplified by W. E. B. Du Bois, this project aims to use the Italian Market area as a focus point to explore the larger questions surrounding immigration and its effect on urban revitalization.

Modern plans for revitalization share many features that for a time have been assumed to be the correct way of thinking. In particular, our public spaces are created using antiquated ideas about how groups socialize. With the advent of digital socialization, both foreign- and native-born populations face new needs – needs which modern plans do not address. In the past, outdated urban plans and policy have been successfully challenged and re-forged to address larger social and cultural shifts. This paper calls for a re-examination of our public spaces' role in revitalization in the light of changing meanings of immigration and socialization.

Roadmap

This paper will elaborate on background information about traditional conceptions of revitalization and what digital socialization means. Along with that the background will present some useful concepts and definitions used throughout the paper. Then the methodology utilized will be briefly summarized. In the next section, case studies of four public spaces will be presented. Following that section will be the analysis of the findings, and a critique of existing plans. Before concluding, some suggestions for future plans will be included.

Background

Traditional Revitalization

A good starting point is to understand existing literature about revitalization. While there is no perfect definition of revitalization, most descriptions involve 'bringing life back' to the area, increasing property values, and an increasing and diverse population. Some models include a swelling creative class and luxurious or high-end restaurants, shops, and housing. Still others include inexpensive ethnic restaurants, community gardens and venues for socializing. Crucial to many of these models is a period of 'devitalization' beforehand wherein the factors above are decreasing or closing instead. Michael Katz writes, "Depopulation, dying downtowns, vacant stores, disappearing movie theaters and restaurants, bank closings, rising crime rates: together, these squeezed the life and vitality of older American cities. They are what revitalization has fought to turn around" (Katz).



Embedded in this concept of revitalization is an underlying and unspoken assumption that these kinds of physical places are necessary for a lively urban environment. Places like public parks, local shops, downtown plazas, movie theaters, bowling alleys and much more are declining and, strangely, incessantly being advocated for by urban planners. Some of these types of places have deep historical roots in our society and our democracy. Traces of the forum from ancient Greece can even be found in today's public spaces in America. Obviously throughout history, these kinds of places have proven their worth for various kinds of social movements, revolutions, and similar changes. Yet, in spite of their value in the past, the fact that these places are declining is a fact that those advocating for revitalization have certainly noted. However, as we have seen before that these kinds of environmental changes in our cities reflect much broader social shifts. In the case today, the rapid adoption of technological forms of communication has changed how we socialize. The assumption that these older forms of public space are still appropriate is simply lazy thinking, and their decline is a sign that new forms should be considered.

Digital Socialization

The trends of digital socialization are fairly straightforward and very well documented. The explosive and then continuous growth of companies like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat are just a sample of the new methods we use to communicate. The ubiquitous use of email, and the expectation of an 'online presence' of some sort are a couple of the digital methods that have truly become ingrained in our society in America. Moreover, the steadily increasing use of mobile devices, not just desktop or laptop computers, signals an increase in

the amount of time we socialize online and our demand for the ability to socialize digitally at all times.

Just to differentiate from 'digital' methods, 'physical' methods are simply non-technological forms of communication such as face to face conversation and non-verbal gestures. Non-digital (as opposed to the wider term technological) forms of technology might also fall under the umbrella of physical – methods like books, signs, etc. all take place in a physical space rather than a digital one. The key difference being that digital forms of communication have a much wider audience, the opportunity to be anonymous, low barriers for personal expression, and the ability to share content very easily (among many other differences). What these differences lead to is a wholly new social space with different norms, language, and possibility.

More explicitly, take for example the phenomena of emoticons or l33tsp34k (integrating numbers to serve as letters, e.g. 3=e, 4=a). The linguistic impact of texting, instant messaging and email has changed how we communicate in written text. Furthermore, the idea that meet-ups between friends, families or even strangers can be organized quickly and easily without being in physical proximity is an effect of digital methods of communication. Moreover, ideas like online shopping, community forums, and digital banking have changed how various institutions conduct business.

Finally, it is very unlikely that these digital forms of communication will fade anytime soon. As very social beings, humans we will continue to communicate in the most efficient manner possible. Whether online or off, there are certain social needs that must be met.

Terms and Definitions

In fact, the places that fulfill some of these needs have names amongst social scientists. Understanding the rhetoric about these needs and the constructed places we create to satisfy those needs will be useful as explore the usefulness and changing nature of these locations.

In the discourse of revitalization seen above, there is a lot of talk about residential and commercial growth. However, there is a missing element that Ray Oldenburg would call the “Third Place”. Traditional examples of third places are German beer-gardens, French cafes, and Irish pubs. In other words, they are the informal gathering places that help us get through the day. Oldenburg refers to the third place as “a great variety of public places that host the

regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (Oldenburg, 1989). Outside of the spheres of home life (first place) and work life (second place), there is a part of our social lives which Oldenburg claims is necessary for a healthy society, and healthy individuals. Unfortunately, the book in which he coins the term also catalogs its slow decline in American society. With this decline, Oldenburg notices various negative factors impacting our society. People appear more alone than before and our communities are full of mistrust and fear.

Robert Putnam has another view on these symptoms, he cites a decline in 'social capital'. In his famous essay *Bowling Alone*, he talks about sociological statistics that point to a decline in the factors that enable democracy and civil society (or social capital). In particular, the community groups and institutions that give citizens the chance to talk to one another and discuss important community issues. His famous example is local bowling leagues, which he observes have slowly disappeared, leading to more people bowling alone (or with their friends rather than their neighbors). Without social capital he argues, our communities and moreover our democracy suffer. This term 'social capital', along with Oldenburg's third place, give us some vocabulary to talk about why these public places are valuable in our society, and how they might exist in digital spaces.

Finally, I want to make an important distinction in the kinds of community we have developed. For the vast portion of our history, we have created communities of place. That is, communities which are based on physical proximity to one another. These kinds of communities are excellent at solving immediate local problems, yet they do not particularly account for differing interests of individuals. The bond here is merely the environment the constituents inhabit.

On the other hand, there are communities of interest. As the name implies, these communities are bonded by the passions or interests of the members. These communities have begun to thrive with the introduction of digital technology. The extensive reach of online communities enable those with very particular or peculiar interests to connect and build communities. The value of these communities is that individual growth is encouraged, and the community has commonality beyond physical location.

Methodology

This project was conducted as part of an experimental studio approach to the social sciences. Working closely with five other classmates (each working on their own project), the larger question of immigration and revitalization was approached in many different ways, with close communication between the projects enabling cross-examination and new views to be approached.

For this project, site visits, field notes, and informal interviews with locals provided a plethora of primary data to analyze. Furthermore, historical sources online were examined to give context for the some of the locations analyzed. For the study of online spaces, some methods were adapted from traditional ethnographic approaches. Finally, throughout the project, secondary literature was consulted to better understand the systems and trends of American society.

Case Studies

The goal of this section is to present my experiences in the field in a way that conveys the changing nature of our public spaces. For each case study, it's type and role will be explained alongside a description of the space and particular features that exist there. There are four places to examine, Capitolo Playground, Villa Roma Restaurant and Bar, Yelp! (Italian Market), and Philatinos internet radio.

1 | Capitolo Playground

Capitolo Playground, formerly a decrepit graveyard for revolutionary soldiers, is located between 9th and 10th and Wharton and Federal in South Philadelphia at what is commonly referred to as the Southernmost point of the Italian Market. It is a striking amount of green, open space in an otherwise crowded market. It is well utilized by various after school and adult recreation groups, and the playground becomes very crowded after school lets out.

To me, this is a physical space that houses communities of interest. Obviously, the playground does not exist in digital space, and the mode bonding the community here is not the proximity, but rather the shared interests of various groups. On top of this, there are a

couple of aspects about the space that reinforce the idea that this is not a community of place, nor a third place as it may have once been in the past.

One of the primary indicators that Capitolo Playground is a community of interest is how activities happen and are attended. One of the most consistent aspects of the area is almost full basketball courts. These quite diverse groups of kids do not play here because it is the closest court, in fact there are several in the area. They play here because they all have a shared interest in basketball and they are able to coordinate this activity because of their cell phones. Additionally, those that attend recreational leagues come from all around South Philly and the city, not just the immediate neighborhood. Many of the after school activities must be signed up for online. All of these digitally-facilitated physical activities are based off the interest of the members. In this sense, this particular space is not exactly necessary. What is needed is a space to conduct these activities.



Furthermore, one rather disturbing trend I noticed (across a lot of the Italian Market) is the existence of barriers. At Capitolo, this take the form of a tall chain linked fence



surrounding the park, and separating various fields and courts from one another. What these barriers do is prevent neighbors from easily utilizing the area. In fact, the ‘community’ gardens have a sign saying that the garden is *not* meant for the public. As public spaces, public parks and playgrounds generally play an important role. Locals can walk there, bring children and friends, and generally

utilize the area. These types of spaces used to be quite common, but with a build-up of the urban environment, forces have altered the space. With barriers, the ability easily use the area is destroyed - since permission is needed for access, the space ceases to be public, and the local community suffers.

The takeaways from Capitolo are that this physical space is currently meant for communities of interest. Barriers have eliminated the old use of this space as a community of place, and moreover technology has spurred the growth of interest-based communities.

2 | *Villa Roma Restaurant and Bar*

Villa Roma is an old bar and attached restaurant located on the Northern section of the Italian Market. This part of the market has been heavily influenced by Italians for a long time, and remains dominated by Italian businesses.

The exterior of the bar is a flat facade of red brick, while the interior boasts slightly more fancy decorations.

To me, this place represents the dying breed of physically-based communities of place. Places that connect their neighbors and fulfill the role of a third place. A couple of observations make me think that this kind of place is dying.



For one, it suffers in some ways from the same barrier issues that plague Capitolo. The bare, forlorn, unwelcoming brick wall and sheltered entrance suggest that this is not an open place. One of Oldenburg's eight 'characteristics' of third places is that it is accessible and leveller - anyone can access it, and all are welcomed. Villa Roma does not fit these requirements. The clientele is almost mono-ethnic despite a very diverse neighborhood, and the choice to only use English signs indicates who the target audience is. Moreover, the people that come to this bar do not come for informal social gatherings, they primarily come with their friends on pre-planned dates. Which is not exactly valuable for civic conversation or action. Supposedly in our past, bars and pubs such as Villa Roma would have been hubs of activity, with neighbors coming in and out after work sharing stories of issues or events they faced that day. One can easily imagine early Italian immigrants using such locations as the focal point of their community, meeting and working together in such a space.

Overall, this place represent the oldest forms of urban socialization, location-dependant communities of place. However it is clear that the way it was used in the past is not how it is used now. It is a relic of past methods of socialization, maintained as a

destination for the same groups of friends to have the same conversations (if they aren't all on their phones anyway!).

3 | *Yelp!*

Yelp! (yes, the exclamation point is part of the name) is an online restaurant rating community. The main activity of Yelp! is writing reviews of where you have been and rating it on a five star scale. Users generally write high quality reviews, regardless of whether the food itself is high quality.

What Yelp! represents is a digitally-based community of interest. The digital nature of this place implies that it is not restricted to one particular location. In this case, I focused on the reviews pertaining to the Italian Market specifically. This is a community of interest because all of the members of the community share a common interest in writing good reviews of places they've been. There are not really bonds formed on Yelp! because of physical proximity.

The idea of communities existing online is not new. Howard Rheingold outlines some of the earliest digital communities in his book *The Virtual Community*. He explores the idea that many of the same characteristics that exist offline also exist in digital space. The community on Yelp! even has a name for its members, "Yelpers". Insider language, regular users, and self identification are just some of the attributes that make Yelp! a community. The fact of the matter is that the conversations that happen on Yelp! are the same that used to happen in physical space - just in a different setting. The kind of support that Yelp! gives its users fills the role of casual sidewalk conversation, of talk at the bar about local restaurants.

Businesses also benefit from positive Yelp! reviews, so some storefront businesses will put stickers on their doors or windows to promote customers to give them a review. One interesting observation about the use of Yelp! by businesses is that North of Washington St. there are many more businesses that use Yelp! than there are in the South. Washington St. in some ways is a dividing line between older Italian businesses in the North and new immigrant (primarily Mexican) businesses in the South. Some of the data found by other members of the studio



found that immigrant businesses may not be as interested in profit as their native-born counterparts, perhaps leading to the digital divide in the use of Yelp!.

The takeaways from this case are that Yelp! is a digital community of interest that plays the role of older institutions in the case of informal conversations about local establishments, and that more established communities are more likely to use Yelp!.

4 | *Philatinos*

The last community case study is Philatinos. Philatinos is an online radio station. Officially transmitting out of the basement of a shop along the Southern Italian Market, the community of listeners spans the globe. Started quite recently, the community of listeners has been growing steadily since the beginning. On the station they play music, host interviews, bring on guests and even have a segment executed entirely by young adults and kids.

Philatinos is primarily a digital community of place, but there are aspects of a community of interest also present, however those aspects are not quite as developed. A digital community of place can seem like a contradictory term, given that most digital communities are not localized to any one space. But what makes it a community of place is that the primary focus of the group is about the Latino experience *in Philadelphia*. This focus on a particular place gives the community attributes that are relatable to third places and older public spaces.

People who listen to and broadcast the radio station say that the place feels like a home away from home. For many listeners, the digitally-enabled connection to their ethnic home in Puebla, Mexico allows them to keep in contact with their roots, while also developing slightly newer cultural aspects. Being a home away from home is in fact one of Oldenburg's eight characteristics. And with some of the people I spoke to, they felt as though this place provided them with a community that listened to their immediate, local needs, and could help them if necessary.

From this case study, it is important to note that this is a growing community of place. For its members, it plays a role that seems to be missing in other parts of their lives. It also allows them to stay connected with others who are concerned about the Latino area in South Philly as well.

Analysis

Trends

Given these case studies, it is prudent to look for any trends in how we form communities and socialize. Identifying these trends will help us know how to craft new plans, and address the new realities we face.

First of all we can look at how the mediums of these communities has shifted. Looking at the use of barriers and declining public use of places like Capitolo and Villa Roma, together with the expanding audiences and membership of Yelp! and Philatinos, we can see that the use of digital spaces is growing, while physical use is lagging behind (one of the key observations of devitalization!).

In a similar vein, the mere existence of Yelp! and Philatinos, along with communities of interest like Capitolo demonstrate an overall increase in the diversity of the types and modes of socialization we have.

(Digital) Immigration

After examining the Italian Market area in detail and observing some of the trends we observe there, it is time to turn our attention back to immigration and revitalization.

Immigration in the past involved people moving their entire lives from place to place. Not only their belongings, but their social lives and culture. Various European groups have done this in the past, and America has become their home over time. The centers of informal social life in their home nations can be rebuilt in America, and bring life to the area.

However now, while immigration still means moving all of one's belongings, it does not necessarily mean entirely altering one's social life. Digital communities mean that we can maintain meaningful relationships with those who are not located in the same place as us. This new factor in immigration means that when immigrants arrive, they may not rebuild their social lives in the same way they have in the past. Those needs can be fulfilled elsewhere, and immigrant communities can still thrive.

In some ways, we are all immigrants to this new form of socialization. At least in the sense that as we go on building communities (digitally, about our interests), we are all learning their place in the urban environment. When we move to a new city now, one does not

go down the street to the pub to meet people, you go online and find some kind of meetup group. With this idea, our landscapes are changing to address this shift. And in some ways, all the rhetoric around ‘devitalization’ indicates this, and the idea of ‘revitalization’ simple assumes we should go back to the way things should have been - and this thinking is wrong.

The last sections of this paper are devoted to pointing out this flawed thinking in existing plans and making suggestions for improvement.

Critiques of Plans

Before diving into this section, it is important to understand that these criticisms are not all-encompassing. Many of the features of these plans are necessary and will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the neighborhoods. The kinds of changes that address infrastructure, utilities, transportation, and safety are important and will likely remain important despite any kinds of social or cultural shifts we may encounter as a society.

The first plan we will examine is the “Lower Italian Market Revitalization Project” for the Passyunk Square Civic Association. Overall a comprehensive, well researched and well designed project. There are a few places where this plan could use improvement.

The first of their recommendations is to “build community”. Obviously this suggestion has a great sentiment, however the sub-recommendations themselves are somewhat outdated and shallow. For example, the idea of handing out a brochure to new residents informing them about useful local shops and such is a nice gesture, but as far as



building community it does very little. Another example is the suggestion to ‘welcome the neighbors’ with signage in various languages and generally create a friendlier atmosphere. This recommendation caters to the idea that community is formed through our local environment, which as we have clearly seen, it does not. Signs like in the concept picture above are strikingly shallow and mean very little toward actually building a community. Another suggestion was to create a local exhibit on immigration in the past, however the experiences of immigrants right now is different in many, many ways, making the exhibit seem unrelatable and in some ways perhaps quite alienating.

Instead of these suggestions which cater to the space of the Italian Market. It might be prudent to cater to the interests of the immigrants instead. Obviously this takes a little bit of community outreach to understand and address the interests of new neighbors. But the result would lead to a much better plan of what to do for them to make them feel welcomed and part of the community. Who knows what hobbies are common between native and foreign borns, but creating an exhibit about that hobby rather than immigration would instantly build a strong community. With the awareness about what one another like to do, it is easier to bridge gaps and talk about community issues casually, in the spirit of the third places Oldenburg talks about.

Another suggestion that the plan makes is titled “Getting There, Getting Around”. This deals with several infrastructure recommendations such as better lighting, better bike lanes and sidewalks. All of which is fine and appropriate, however some of the suggestions seem rather pointless other than for aesthetic pleasure. The first is the idea of ‘green medians’ on the streets. And while this would certainly look nice, as far as revitalizing the area, I don’t see the point. Located in the middle of the busy Washington Avenue, this area would likely get little or no use, and probably collect litter and garbage. Another suggestion is to ‘take back the sidewalk’ with new awnings and such. But why do we need to take back the sidewalk? People are less likely to stop and talk to one another now more than ever, in fact, they’re probably on their cellphones instead. The sidewalk is less necessary for social interaction than it has been before, and this plan doesn’t recognize that.

One suggestion to improve this part of the plan might be to put in secure cellphone recharging spaces throughout the area. People will definitely be more likely to use their phones to find their way than ask a stranger, and this addresses that concern.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this report has demonstrated the need to re-evaluate how we plan our cities. With regard to immigration, this need is especially clear - since the way immigrants (and locals) are socializing now is very different from what it once was. This report pointed out a few of the ways this thinking can be applied to current proposals for ‘revitalizing’ an area such as the Italian Market in South Philly. Hopefully the ideas presented here form a coherent case for thinking deeply about how we plan our cities and how we can address change over time.

Bibliography

Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day*. 1989.

Putnam, Robert D. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy*: 65-78.

Rheingold, Howard. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub., 1993.

Vitiello, Domenic. "The Politics Of Immigration And Suburban Revitalization: Divergent Responses In Adjacent Pennsylvania Towns." *Journal of Urban Affairs*: N/a.

Katz, Michael. "Immigration as Revitalization."