

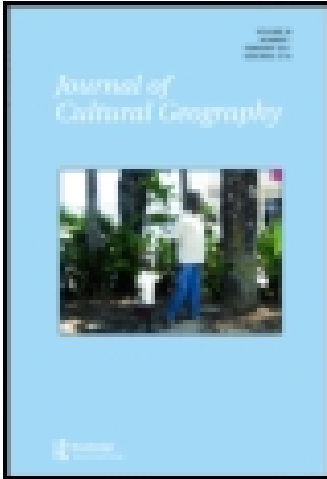
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Johanna Claire Schuch^a & Qingfang Wang^a

^a Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA

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Immigrant businesses, place-making, and community development: a case from an emerging immigrant gateway

Johanna Claire Schuch* and Qingfang Wang

Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA

Immigrant businesses have become an increasingly important component in the US economy. However, very few studies have systematically examined the role of immigrant businesses in community development, except for some cases in established immigrant gateways such as New York and Miami. In this study, we explore how immigrant businesses are shaping physical, cultural, social, economic, and political landscapes in their local communities in the emerging immigrant gateway of Charlotte, North Carolina. Focusing on the case of a multiethnic retail corridor, we find that, as active place-makers, immigrant businesses have transformed deteriorating and abandoned street fronts into vibrant and well-frequented urban environments conducive for further development. Through a systematic approach to understanding the place-making process of immigrant businesses, findings from this study call for more in-depth integration of immigrant and ethnic economies in local policies and planning strategies for neighborhood revitalization. These findings are particularly pertinent in the context of the continuous ethnic diversification of our neighborhoods and cities.

Keywords: immigrant entrepreneurship; community development; place-making; North Carolina

Introduction

With the influx of immigrants to the USA over the past several decades, immigrant-owned enterprises have steadily increased and become more important in the US economy. Between 2002 and 2007, ethnic minority-owned businesses (many of the owners are immigrant as well) have outpaced the growth of non-minority businesses in gross receipts and number of employees (Minority Business Development Agency 2009). A number of studies have suggested that business ownership could provide immigrants, many of whom are also ethnic minorities, with a springboard for economic progress as well as further social and political advancement. Beyond the

*Johanna Claire Schuch is a PhD student in Geography at the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA. Email: Jschuch1@uncc.edu

personal level, the proliferation of small businesses can also help neighborhood revitalization in some low-income ethnic communities (Portes and Zhou 1992; Bates 2006; McDaniel and Drever 2009; Zhou 2010; Zhou and Cho 2010). For instance, in Seattle, the Korean population owns over 3000 businesses, producing local tax revenues, enriching local communities and universities, and enhancing transnational business ties (Stafford 2012). Baltimore has taken a proactive approach, with the mayor launching efforts to attract immigrants to the city with the goal to bring skills, entrepreneurship, jobs, consumers, and taxes needed to revitalize blighted neighborhoods (Fiscal Policy Institute 2012).

Despite the increasing attention to the role of immigrant businesses, a systematic examination of immigrant businesses in shaping their communities and surrounding places in new immigrant gateway cities is lacking (see Liu, *et al.* 2013 for a review). Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate how immigrant businesses have shaped the physical, cultural, social, economic, and political landscapes and contributed to local community building in a multiethnic business corridor in an emerging immigrant gateway city, Charlotte, North Carolina. We conceptualize immigrant entrepreneurship as a multidimensional process through which immigrant entrepreneurs mobilize different combinations of strategies based on personal and household characteristics, group characteristics, social capital and social connections, discriminatory experiences, and societal attitudes (Waldinger *et al.* 1990; Wang 2012).¹ Place influences and is a manifestation of a dynamic interrelationship between the social actor—the business owners themselves—and the local communities in which they are embedded. Investigating the multiple dimensions of *places* in which immigrant businesses are embedded informs us how entrepreneurs can be active place-makers and contribute to community development and community building.

This study makes several contributions. First, most research on immigrant or ethnic entrepreneurship has focused on opportunities and challenges faced by the businesses and their owners, while their impacts on local communities and regional development remain largely understudied (Zhou 2004; Bates 2011; Wang 2012; Liu *et al.* 2013). In addition, most of the existing studies of immigrant businesses are contextualized in traditional immigrant destinations like Miami, New York, and Los Angeles (e.g. Light 1984; Portes 1987; Portes and Jensen 1989; Waldinger 1989). To fill the gaps, this study provides a multidimensional examination of the interaction between immigrant businesses and their surrounding places in an international business corridor in Charlotte, NC. It is among very few attempts to systematically examine the multifaceted process of place-making of immigrant businesses in a mid-sized, non-“first-stop” emerging immigrant destination.²

Second, recent demographic and urban restructuring trends have transformed the interrelationship between immigrant entrepreneurs and their embedded places. As exemplified in this study, current immigrants and their businesses are: more suburbanized rather than urban; they are more commonly

located in areas with other ethnic groups rather than in areas dominated by one ethnicity; and they are forming multiethnic and international corridors rather than ethnic residential neighborhoods (Walcott 2002; McDaniel and Drever 2009). In response to these trends, new examinations of the interrelationship between ethnic businesses and place are needed. Our study provides a dynamic examination of the interrelationship between immigrant businesses and place in considering residential and commercial settlement patterns outside traditional immigrant gateways and inner cities.

Further, with continuous diversification of the labor force and residential settlement patterns, consideration of personal social identities (such as ethnicity) and how they play into the development process becomes increasingly urgent in planning practices. While the role of community-based organizations (CBOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) has drawn much attention and been widely discussed in the process of urban revitalization and economic development (e.g., Harrison and Glasmeler 1997; Porter 1997; Hum 2010), there is almost no consideration of the role of immigrant businesses. Based on our results, we call for the integration of place-based and people-based revitalization planning strategies which incorporate inputs from immigrants, their owned businesses and their communities. Findings are valuable not only to scholars who are concerned with space, place, and immigration in the urban context, but also to practitioners and local public policy-makers.

Background: place-making and immigrant businesses' role in communities

“Place-making” refers to the “active engagement of humans with the places they inhabit” (Fettes and Judson 2010, p. 124). It is a central concept in modern design, urban planning, and architecture, and has also made its way into geographic and other social science research. Agnew (1987) explains how place is formed by the physical setting (location) and the sociocultural relations that occur in that space (locale). A “sense of place” is developed from that social and physical construction of place. Similarly, Lefebvre and Soja theorize place-making as a social construct. According to them, spaces are socially produced and are made up of conceived, perceived, and lived spaces (Lefebvre and Enders 1976; Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1996). Unlike abandoned places and structures, lived-in spaces are humanized; they reflect the social dynamics of the population and acquire their place characteristics from those who inhabit the space. This suggests that power dynamics and political structures are central in the planned and unplanned social and physical production of space.

The notion that place-making involves contrasting actors is widely discussed in planning literature and has sparked new ideas about place-making as a community-driven process. For example, Stout (2008) studied public art, street vendors, and sidewalk living in Cincinnati to demonstrate

how expert place-making practices are often contradictory to the informal ways in which local users interpret and add to the meaning of place. Sutton (2010) demonstrates how Black-owned businesses have played an important role in neighborhood commercial revitalization through cultivating business owners' civic capacity and shaping retail mix. In addition, Morales (2009) develops the notion of public markets as economic and community development tools. According to him, public markets are once again becoming essential parts of urban social, political, and economic landscapes because of their reciprocal relationship with place and community design, and their role in incubating new businesses, promoting the expansion of existing business, and facilitating income-earning opportunities.

Stern and Seifert (2010) focus on the agglomeration of cultural assets in Philadelphia as a way to revitalize neighborhoods. Their interpretation of cultural clusters involves cultural providers, resident artists, and cultural participants in downtown areas with diverse residential populations. This argument can be extended to incorporate the (multi)cultural assets of immigrants and ethnic communities. In that sense, ethnic businesses—along with cultural groups and nonprofits—can generate activities that enhance a neighborhood's economic and sociocultural environment.

Empirical evidence from around the country has shown that immigrant businesses have contributed to community building and neighborhood development in multifaceted ways (Liu *et al.* 2013). For example, Bowles and Colton (2007, p. 4) provided a number of examples from New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and Boston to demonstrate that immigrant-owned enterprises, as “key engines for growth,” can boost local economies, for instance, by creating jobs and recapturing “tax revenues from suburban shoppers.” Likewise, Price (2007, p. 84) points out that:

Latinos/as are revealed to be the engine behind the revitalization of decaying industrial zones, older working-class neighborhoods, and aging inner city ethnic neighborhoods in New York City (Miyares, 2004), San Francisco (Godfrey, 2004), Los Angeles, (Curtis, 2004), and San Diego (Herzog, 2004).

In addition, immigrant entrepreneurship plays a critical role in the development of vibrant ethnic communities, social integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities, and providing role models for their peers (Appold and Kasarda 2004; Chrysostome and Lin 2010). In particular, Zhou and Cho (2010) demonstrate the importance of noneconomic effects of ethnic entrepreneurship in a case study of Koreans and Chinese in Los Angeles. Here, the social embeddedness of local businesses supports the formation and growth of local social structures. Local businesses serve as a crucial material basis for the communities' relationship structures, for instance, in supplementary education, not just in Chinatown and Koreatown but also out into the ethnoburbs.

Immigrant businesses' impacts on place are also occurring in new immigrant gateways, by reducing residential and commercial vacancy rates,

generating ethnic and transnational networks, providing new products, and creating spaces for social and cultural interaction (Saxenian 2002, 2005; Bowles and Colton 2007; Oberle and Li 2008). For example, Walcott (2002) and McDaniel and Drever (2009) demonstrated that immigrant businesses have transformed the cultural landscape of Atlanta's Buford Highway and Birmingham's Lorna Road/US Highway 31 from declining retail ribbons to vibrant multiethnic business corridors. In Atlanta's case, a large number of immigrants were doing business along the 10-mile Buford Highway, making it the most culturally diverse road in Georgia (Kurylo 1998 in Walcott 2002). Along this "international corridor," businesses have generated new wealth in a part of Atlanta that might otherwise have been left vacant. Restaurants, grocery stores, car repair services, and beauty salons are common but a much wider range of stores are also present, and they represent countries and people from around the world (Walcott 2002).

These case studies of different places all show that immigrant entrepreneurship can significantly contribute to the development in their respective communities. They also suggest that the interaction between immigrant businesses and their surrounding places is multidimensional. Building on this work, we address the following questions in this study: How are immigrant businesses shaping the physical, cultural, social, economic, and political landscapes of suburban Charlotte and contributing to local community building? In the context of continuous immigration and diversification of the city, how do these findings inform us about planning strategies and local policies aimed at revitalizing neighborhoods and building community?

Drawing from the interdisciplinary literature discussed above, we conceptualize place-making as a process with multiple interrelated dimensions (physical, cultural, social, economic, and political) and an ever-changing two-way interactive process between immigrant businesses and their communities. Though subject to structural and physical constraints, immigrant businesses, we believe, influence places and communities because they are embedded in various ways. Inspired by Lefebvre (1991) and Soja's (1996) *Trialectic of Spatiality* and the Project for Public Space (www.pps.org), we employ an approach to understanding the planning, design, and management of public spaces which involves the people who live, work, and play (Figure 1).

Study area: Central Avenue in Charlotte, NC

We apply our framework through the case study of immigrant businesses on Central Avenue of Charlotte, NC. Within the last two decades, Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, North Carolina has transformed from a "regional backwater" to a city with an important regional, even national function (Smith and Graves 2010). During this time, its population boomed and went from being predominantly Black and White to multiracial or multiethnic. The 2010 US Census Data reported a population of 919,628, a 32.2% increase

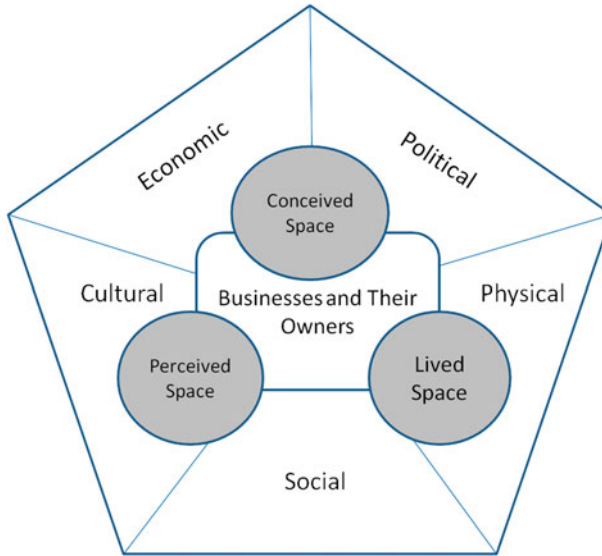


Figure 1. The interaction between immigrant businesses and their place. Sources: authors, inspired by work by Lefebvre (1991), Soja (1996), and the Project for Public Spaces (2014).

from 2000. Of this population, 50.6% identified as non-Hispanic White, 30.8% as Black, 4.6% as Asian, and 12.2% as Hispanic or Latino. The foreign-born population was estimated to be 13.4% and 18.5% of the total population who spoke a language other than English at home (US Census Bureau 2011). The foreign-born possess a diverse set of characteristics in terms of nationality, human capital, social capital, and culture. They can also help foster the rapid growth of ethnic businesses. In Mecklenburg County the number of firms totaled 89,183 in 2007, of which 15.6% were Black-owned, 4.2% were Asian-owned, and 4.8% were Hispanic-owned. This is compared to 789,966 in North Carolina in 2007 and minority rates of 10.5%, 2.1%, and 2.7%, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2013).

These changing demographics, in combination with economic and spatial restructuring, have drastically altered Charlotte's landscapes. Clusters of people with mixed nationalities and ethnicities have formed in the older, inner-, and middle-ring suburbs. The Central Business Corridor³ (Figure 2), the focus of this study, overlaps with two Census tracts in East Charlotte with high percent foreign-born (44.7% and 35.3%; Figure 3). It also includes the intersection of Central Avenue at Rosehaven Drive which "has more nationalities per square foot than any other spot in Charlotte" (Hanchett 2011). In 2010, this corridor contained more than 400 businesses, employing 3501–4000 employees (Metropolitan Studies Group 2010).

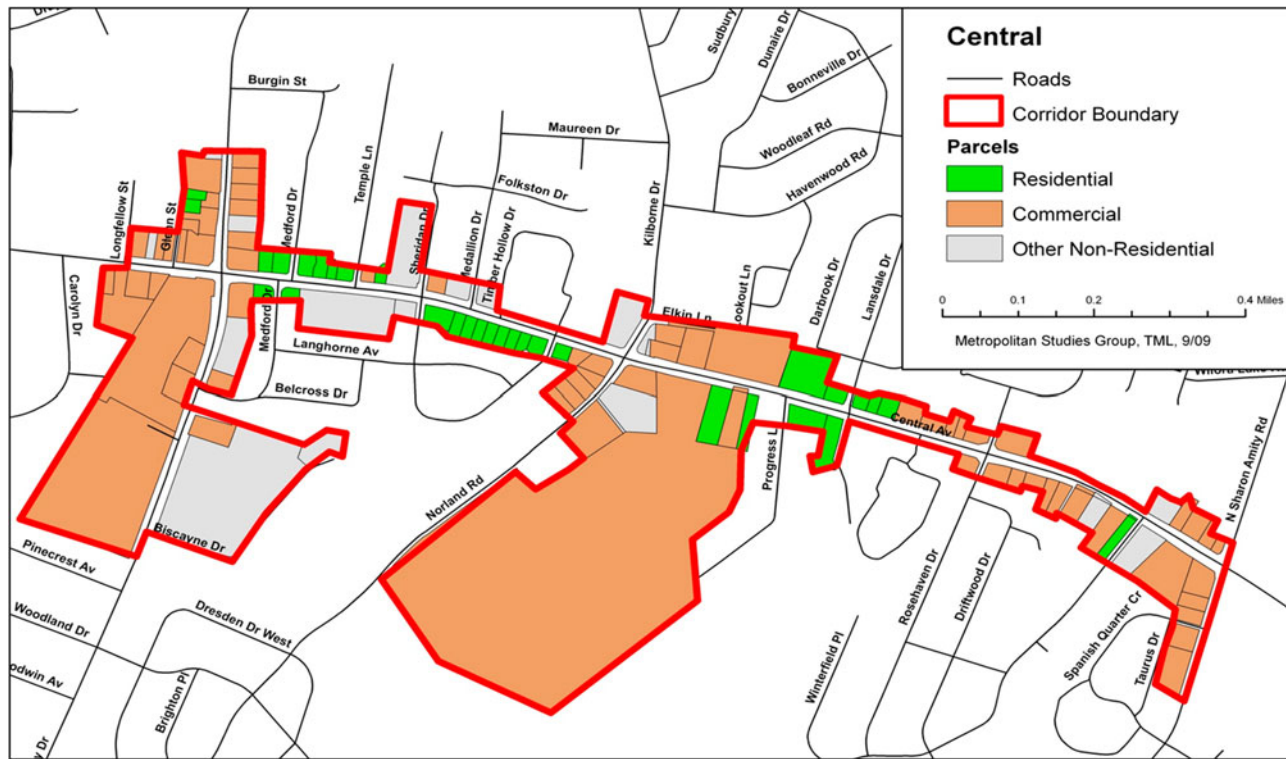


Figure 2. Map of the Central Business Corridor.
Source: Metropolitan Studies Group (2010).

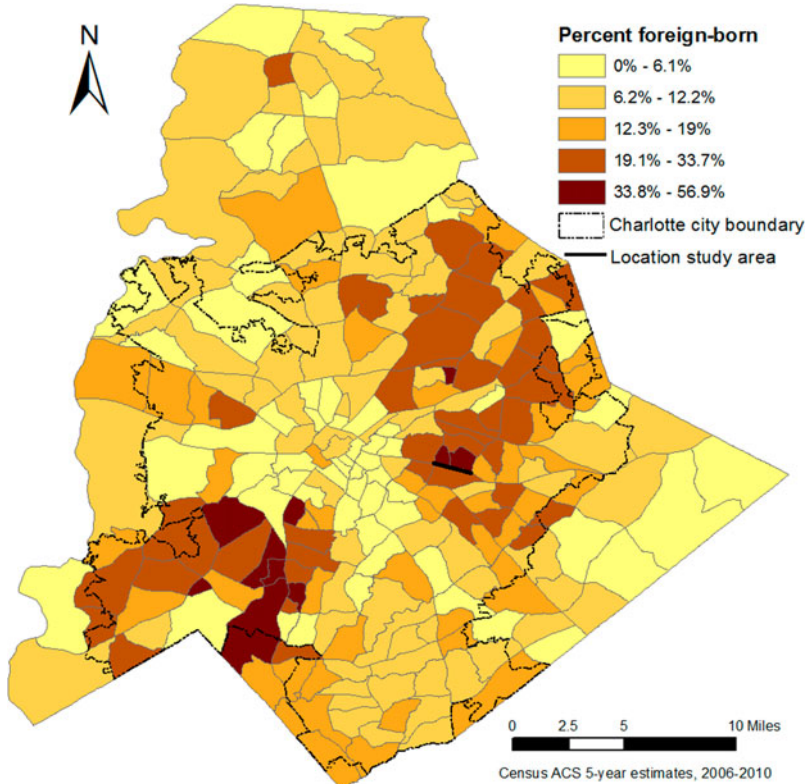


Figure 3. Percent foreign-born residents by census tract for Mecklenburg County with the location of the study area.

Source: Map created by authors based on 2006–2010 ACS data.

As Hanchett (2013) explains, Central Avenue’s evolution involved at least 17 different development groups and no recognizable lead developer. However, this fragmented development is not considered the underlying cause of the area’s economic and business diversity. Rather, it is the area’s accessibility that made it a prime location for development. In the 1900s–1920s, the area was positioned in the web of streetcars. Stores clustered along Central Avenue because this was where the streetcar lines met, serving the streetcar suburb Plaza-Midwood, Charlotte’s second largest “streetcar shopping strip” by the late 1930s. The trolley service ended in Charlotte in 1938, but the Central Avenue business district continued to grow for another 15 years, serving mostly the middle-class residents surrounding it.

Small strip malls developed in the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, apartment complexes started appearing among the single-family homes. Stores that lined Central Avenue included Dairy Queen, an automobile shopping center, Family Dollar, Bakery Thrift Outlet, Modeler’s Hobby Shop,

Hairport Wigs, Fancy Pup Dog Grooming, and Sugar Shack Deli. By the 1990s, however, many of these stores went vacant and the small houses and older duplexes struggled to find tenants as many people and businesses moved further away from the city center to newer suburbs. The area transitioned from a “good” place to live and to do business to a struggling place. Now, despite some remaining challenges, Central Avenue is once again economically and culturally vibrant (Hanchett 2010, 2013). The houses, apartment complexes, and commercial buildings are mainly the original ones from the 1960s to the 1980s (some of which have been better maintained than others), but the demographics and stores have completely changed (Smith and Furuseth 2008). As we illustrate in the following discussion, immigrant businesses have become an integral component for development of this area with significant imprints on its social, cultural, and economic landscapes.

Methodology

Data sources

We use quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources to answer the research questions. First, we collected data at the neighborhood level from the decennial census and American Community Survey by the US Census Bureau (1970–2010),⁴ neighborhood data from the Metropolitan Studies Group’s (2012) Quality of Life studies (2000–2010),⁵ business characteristics from the 2007 Survey of Business Owners, and land parcel data from 2012 Mecklenburg County Real Estate Appraisal. We focused on Neighborhood Statistical Areas (NSAs),⁶ tax parcel, and census tract data from units that overlapped with our study area, the Central Business Corridor (Figure 2), to provide an overview of the area’s economic and social characteristics, and major trends over time.

Second, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews; 11 with business owners in the most diverse intersection of the study area,⁷ and 1 over the phone with the economic development manager at the Latin American Coalition (LAC) who offers small business training programs, specifically to the Hispanic community. The businesses in the sample are owned by people of ten different nationalities and are all small, with only several employees (often family or ethnic community members). Goods and services offered include food (convenience stores, restaurants), car repair, coin laundry, and money services. The LAC is selected because of its location in our study area and the Hispanic “hypergrowth”⁸ in Charlotte. These interviews lasted 15–30 minutes. The questions covered the owners’ motivations for opening their particular business in this location, as well as their relationship with place and the businesses around them. We also asked about the demographics of their clientele and employees. We asked the LAC economic development manager about the participants in his small business training programs and the types and locations of businesses they start.

We also conducted a 60-minute open-ended interview with a supervisor from the City of Charlotte Neighborhood and Business Services to gain more

information and a different perspective about how immigrant businesses are shaping the landscapes of the Central Avenue corridor and contributing to local community building. In addition, we asked this individual and two others who work extensively with immigrants—particularly Hispanics—in East Charlotte (a research coordinator at Carolinas Healthcare System, and a social worker and co-owner of several restaurants in the Charlotte area) to what extent immigrants in Charlotte are civically engaged, why immigrants in Charlotte are—or are not—civically involved, and how to engage immigrant communities in general and business owners specifically. All notes and interview findings were compared and coded manually to identify the main themes.

Further, in order to trace the development and change of the study area, we collected archival documents from local newspapers, mainly *The Charlotte Observer*, the major local newspaper, and sources at the Levine Museum of the New South. We recognize that the number of businesses that participated in our interview and survey is limited; however, combined and corroborated with data from multiple sources, we believe our overall framework still provides a strong case study. In addition, over the past three years, we have been involved in different projects related to small business development and immigrant communities in the Charlotte region. Field observations and informal conversations with local business owners, ethnic minority business supporting agencies, and local community leaders have all significantly informed our interpretation of the data and contextualized the current study.

Operationalization of the conceptual framework

Based on our earlier discussion, we operationalize the investigation along five dimensions: physical, cultural, social, economic, and political. They allow us systematically to identify, distinguish, and measure between the different aspects of the interaction between place and immigrant and ethnic businesses. The five dimensions with examples in the literature are provided in [Table 1](#). The structure of operationalization also corresponds to our conceptual framework presented earlier as [Figure 1](#).

Findings and discussion

Physical interaction between immigrant businesses and place

The physical influence of immigrant businesses is the most apparent dimension. There are about 9000 residential units in this area. However, besides a few apartment complexes, most homes are not visible while driving along Central Avenue. You have to drive into the neighborhoods to see the residential parts of the area. In contrast, these immigrant-owned businesses and their signs are much more visible along the street. The vacancy index⁹ of the Central Business Corridor was 16% in 2010 (the lowest of the five targeted business corridors) and there were no commercial foreclosures

Table 1. Measuring the five dimensions of place-making of ethnic businesses.

Dimension	How to operationalize	Examples from literature
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observational (windshield survey) • Analysis of pictures and text on what the area looks like now and how it looked in the past • Building conditions, land use patterns, traffic data, infrastructure, pedestrian activity, and transit usage 	Project for Public Space (2014), Hanchett (2013), Price (2007)
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetic symbols, language, and spatial configurations found in ethnic store interiors; multicultural “feel” • The diversity of nationalities represented in the area (residents, businesses) 	Walcott (2002), Alderman (2008), Stewart (2011), Stern and Seifert (2010), Oberle and Li (2008)
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The self-reported social and professional networks the businesses have, with their co-ethnic community and with other businesses in the area • Street life, crime, and the number of children, and elderly in the neighborhood 	Zhou and Cho (2010), Oberle and Li (2008)
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing and property values, rent levels, median income, self-employment levels, retail sales and business revenues 	Bowles and Colton (2007), Acs and Szerb (2007), Headd, (2010), Fairlie (2008), Kenney and Patton (2005)
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The level of civic engagement and involvement ethnic businesses have with the neighborhood and larger Charlotte on the basis of previous publications 	Brenner (2009), Winders (2012)

Source: compiled by authors.

(Metropolitan Studies Group 2010). Given the declining nature of the area in the 1990s, both commercial and residential vacancy rates would have likely been much higher without the influx of immigrants and the establishment of immigrant-owned businesses. Evidence from other new immigration destinations suggests that recently arrived immigrants who work low-wage jobs are an invisible population. For instance, Smith and Winders (2008, p. 63) noted in their study, “The staff member at one Memphis temporary-labor agency commented that Latino immigrant workers are like ‘ghosts,’ working lengthy hours and then disappearing into their homes.” However, opening a business, especially along a busy corridor like Central Avenue, demonstrates ethnic presence on the physical, economic, and social landscape. While businesses benefit from the area’s infrastructure, they also increase street life activity with

local families walking to the stores, creating an urban feel in this suburban landscape. Signs in multiple languages, specialty goods and services, and customers with different backgrounds illustrate a vibrancy and internationalism which would not be present without these businesses.

Immigrant-owned businesses also impact (and benefit from) the flow of people and traffic in the area. The Central Business Corridor receives a substantial amount of daily traffic (an average of 29,500 vehicles) and has an average bus ridership of 9800 people per day (Metropolitan Studies Group 2010). A high pedestrian friendliness, relative to other parts of the city, echoes work by Price (2007) on the semi-public interactions between people, immigrant businesses, and place along Miami's Calle Ocho. Central Avenue businesses, along with the infrastructure, invite neighborhood residents to walk to the stores, creating an "urban" feel in what might otherwise be more of a suburban strip mall landscape. The main distinctions between Central Avenue and Callo Ocho are that the context and history of immigration is different; Central Avenue is more diverse (not only Latin American countries are represented, though the "Latinization" of Charlotte is most visible here), and public space is not used as intensely along Central Avenue as along Calle Ocho. That said, both case studies illustrate the importance of "place specificity" as well as shared processes of immigrant integration and dynamic interplay across scales. They add to the many examples of how immigrants and their businesses are shaping the cultural identity and physical spaces of neighborhoods across the USA.

Our study shows that increased visibility on the suburban landscape is not a conscious attempt of immigrant entrepreneurs to become visible, but rather a form of integration with the physical and social landscape and a sign that they are "here to stay" (Smith and Winders 2008). Like native-born entrepreneurs, immigrant entrepreneurs identified a demand for their product and are trying to serve their community, be independent, and feed their families. They started businesses in areas where vacant strip malls became available and other immigrant populations settled. Physical and social reproduction on the landscape is simply a "natural" consequence of their economic activities.

"[W]hen immigrants began arriving in Charlotte in the 1990s, instead of heading to the inner city, they found inexpensive housing in the older post-World War II suburbs." (Hanchett 2010, p. 256)

While available housing is very important, growth and development of immigrant businesses are crucial factors that gave rise to the international corridor we see today. However, the visibility of these ethnic businesses may not necessarily translate into political representation or social inclusion in the city. We will discuss this point in the later sections. Nevertheless, such multiethnic corridors still provide both economic means and social comfort for many of these business owners.

Cultural interactions

Census data reports that the Central Business Corridor is one of the most ethnically diverse areas in Charlotte–Mecklenburg, with a residential population that is 40% White, 27% Black, 7% Asian, and 32% Hispanic. On average, 33.5% of the residents are foreign-born, with over half arriving post-2000. This is a big change from 1970, when the percent foreign-born in this area was only 2.1% and even in 1990 it was as low as 6.1%. Self-employment rates are as high as 18.5% in one of the census tracts in the study area, which is also the tract with the highest percent foreign-born (44.7%) and the lowest percent foreign-born arriving post-2000 (37.9%; 2006–2010 ACS estimates), supporting the previous point that many entrepreneurs are foreign-born and well-established.

At the intersection where we interviewed entrepreneurs, the 19 businesses present are owned by people of at least 10 different nationalities (Somali, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Salvadoran, Colombian, Mexican, Ethiopian, Indian, Dominican, and American) with at least three more nationalities among employees (Guatemalan, Honduran, and Nicaraguan). Yet these changes along Central Avenue are recent. Sectors and wedges of foreign-born, racial, and class segregation patterns have not always existed in Charlotte. The multi-ethnic stores create a different sense of place from native-born owned stores because of their interior and exterior design, inclusion of foreign languages, and the extent to which they carry products from different countries. Entrepreneurs say this can make immigrants feel more “at home” and give other, “American” customers a “feel” of different cultures. At a larger level, this (multi)cultural place-making plays a key role in the construction of space and the contested process of attaching meaning to places.

As with place naming, expressing non-mainstream cultures and languages is a tool of control as well as a tool of resistance and “symbolic capital” (Alderman 2008). This idea rises from the notion that landscapes are “documents of power” where “some social groups exert greater or lesser effects on places around them” (Matthews 1995, p. 456 cited Alderman 2008). Due to this power dynamic, the landscape, rather than simply reflecting culture and being a container for it, participates in producing cultural relations and selective historical visions or narratives (Kearns and Philo 1993; Alderman 2008, p. 198). We see this manifested in Charlotte; the immigrant population may not have the leverage to change all spaces, but their growing portion of the population is becoming increasingly expressed in pockets around the city. As a result, retail corridors like this one are the focal points of cultural landscapes because so many people travel along them daily, serving as a constant reminder of the migrants who have settled here. We observe that non-English signage, ethnically oriented businesses, and Latino food trucks have transformed this area from historically White and Black bi-racial to distinctively multicultural (Figure 4; see also Smith and Furuseth 2004).



Figure 4. Pictures showing part of the Charlotte multiethnic retail corridor.
Source: photos taken by Schuch (2013).

Not every native Charlottean may be excited about these changes. Smith and Furuseth (2004, p. 233) commented that “the rapid in-migration of Hispanics into neighborhoods that have only recently transitioned from predominantly White to bi-racial, or mostly visible minority, is both opportunistic and tension generating.” Nevertheless, ethnic businesses can serve as a bridge between the native-born and foreign-born population in Charlotte because they offer a wide range of goods and services people need and like.

Social interactions

The 2010 Charlotte Quality of Life study labels the Central Avenue area as “transitioning”¹⁰ though it is “trending up.” Demographically, it has a relatively young population, with 16.0–20.2% under 20 years and only 6.6–9.8% above 64 years. That said, the differences among the census tracts and neighborhoods indicate the heterogeneity of the area, making it difficult to make generalizations about its characteristics. This is particularly apparent in the percentage of families in poverty, which ranges from 7% in one census tract to 42% in another. The latter is also the tract with the highest percentage foreign-born and the highest percentage Mexican. Through these figures it becomes evident that the Central Avenue area is not uniform and, as a result, the businesses target clientele from multiple demographic groups. For instance, small corner stores offer products originating from different countries and employees often speak multiple languages.

In our interviews, accessibility is mentioned by business owners as a main attraction of the Central Business Corridor because it provides access to downtown, to a main road (Central Avenue), and to a concentrated group of international residents. This physical connectivity allows the immigrant businesses in this area to be substantially embedded in their multiethnic neighborhoods as well as accessible to the larger Charlotte community. Even though some entrepreneurs commented that their customers were mostly co-ethnics, most mentioned that their clientele is very mixed.

The sharing of space by different ethnic businesses is not unique to Charlotte but it is a new trend that challenges some of the traditional theories about immigrant settlement and comments on tensions in multiethnic areas, such as, “Ethnically mixed neighborhoods can become sites of tension, white flight, and/or establishments of ‘parallel lives’” (Phillips 2006, p. 31). All the business owners we interviewed claimed to have positive or neutral relations with the other businesses around them belonging to owners of the same or different ethnicities or nationalities. They spoke about how they help each other out and look out for one another to reduce break-ins.

Crime, however, remains the number one concern that business owners we interviewed expressed about their location. Though the violent crime index is 0.22 (almost five times less than the city average), the property crime rate is 1.29 times (129%) the Charlotte average and 10% of this particular area is covered by a concentration of violent crime (Metropolitan Studies Group

2010). It becomes clear that safety is a fundamental factor of place-making. Despite its intangibility, perceptions of crime have a significant influence on people's experience and sense of place. Central Avenue has faced similar issues as Atlanta's Buford Highway in terms of crime, unsafe built environments for pedestrians, dangerous intersections for pedestrians, and zoning limitations¹¹ (Whitacre 1996a, 1996b; Breen 2003; Newsom 2008). The common goal of reducing crime created new connections among businesses in the area as the entrepreneurs united to help stop crime and started having monthly meetings with the police. Since 2006, crime decreased, our interviewees noted. A similar story was published in the *Charlotte Observer* (Breen 2003). Police increased patrols along Central and made 39 arrests from 15 June to 15 July 2003 (compared to 24 during the same period in 2002) on charges ranging from disorderly conduct to drug violations. The changes came after about forty of the city's Latino business owners teamed up to ask police for more protection against break-ins and robberies. Now, thanks to ongoing efforts, businesses look out for each other more, interviewees report. Business owners mention this improvement makes them more willing to keep their business in this area.

Maintaining low crimes rates along Central Avenue is important for various reasons; safety is essential for the people living there in terms of their health and overall quality of life. This point is particularly pertinent for migrant, low-income, and underserved communities, who are more likely to face crime. At the same time, lower crime rates can improve the relationship the area has with the police and the rest of the city. Having the reputation of being a "crime-prone area" can cause distrust in the people living and working around Central Avenue. Conversely, improving the image is important for the successful revitalization of a commercial area (Fitzgerald and Green Leigh 2002, p. 137). Keeping crime low will demonstrate the potential marginalized groups or areas in the city have rather than reinforcing stereotypes. If outside communities have a better image of Central Avenue, they are more likely to spend time in the area and become exposed to the diverse goods and services it has to offer. More trust in the police can encourage immigrants to contact the police if they witness a crime or are victimized. The Central Business Corridor offers opportunities and examples of collaborations between business owners, local communities, and the public sectors to work together to provide security, clean and safe streets, usable public spaces, convenient transit, and other facilities to cultivate a continuous development in this area and surrounding communities.

Economic interactions

Of the 417 businesses in the Central Business Corridor, the largest industries represented in 2010 were retail trade (97 businesses), construction (59 businesses), and management of companies (42 businesses). The presence of four traditional financial institutions and ten non-traditional ones¹² points out

the various ways businesses and residents here access capital. The aggregate tax revenue for 2010 was \$12,691,256 (Metropolitan Studies Group 2010). Data on housing values and other measures at the neighborhood level reveal the diversity within the Central Avenue area. For instance, the percent of the self-employed ranges from 3.6% to 18.5% in the tracts intersecting the Central Business Corridor and median rent varies between \$492 and \$1392. Likewise, NSA average housing values range from \$97,046 to \$183,397 (the city mean is \$228,128) and social, crime, economic, and physical dimensions vary from low to high levels of need (Table 2). This solidifies our earlier point that, even when looking at a small area like the Central Business Corridor, the neighborhoods intersecting the corridor may be quite different in their characteristics and therefore needs within the area may differ. With current city efforts to help Eastside businesses improve their storefronts, we anticipate commercial property values will increase.

Whitacre (1996a) stated that, after decades of decline, Central Avenue's business district is on its way back up. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Central Avenue was one of the best shopping places in Charlotte. However, like other cities, inner-ring suburbs experienced decline as a result of White flight. Whitacre noted that the signs of new prosperity are there; new tenants and businesses are coming in. She also observed that Atlanta has neighborhood-business districts like Central Avenue that have been rejuvenated, and she predicted that the same thing would happen here in Charlotte (Whitacre 1996a). Our results support her "forecast." Although migrants are not specifically mentioned, other studies show that foreign-born groups—particularly Latinos—have moved into inner- and middle-ring suburbs where affordable housing was available (Smith and Furuseth 2004, 2008; Smith 2008). The migrant influx filled vacant apartment complexes and houses, and immigrant-owned businesses brought new life and capital to previously declining areas. The invasion-succession urban ecological model of immigrant integration of the early twentieth century (Park *et al.* 1925) is mainly based on experiences in inner cities. The case of Central Avenue, however, offers an example of succession and replacement in more suburban areas in a new immigrant gateway. As Smith and Furuseth (2008) explain, more affluent residents moved to outer-ring suburbs, leaving behind a surplus stock of affordable retail and housing units for newcomers, in this case migrants.

Political interactions

The socioeconomic position of ethnic entrepreneurs can only properly be understood by taking into account not only their connection through social networks of co-ethnic groups and immigrants, but also their involvement in the socioeconomic and political institutional environment of the country of settlement (Kloosterman *et al.* 1999; Kloosterman and Rath 2001; Price and Chacko 2009). Overall, as a new immigrant destination, the international

Table 2. 2010 Quality of life results for the NSAs intersecting the study area compared to the city mean (2000–2010 time frame for trend data).

NSA	49	55	150	151	City mean
Unemployment index	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	N/A
Violent crime rate	1.3 →	1.8 →	1.4 ↓	3.0 ↓	1.0
Property crime rate	0.5 →	1.4 →	0.7 →	1.5 →	1.0
Crime hot spots	0.1 →	0.1 →	0.1 →	0.2 ↓	N/A
Percent change in income	1.3 ↑	2.1 ↑	0.6 ↑	0.9 →	1.1
Percent change in house value	11.1 ↑	10.1 ↑	0.5 ↑	10.3 ↑	5.1
Overall trend 2002–2010	Trending up	Trending up	No change	No change	N/A
2010 social dimension, relative level of need	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	N/A
2010 crime dimension, relative level of need	Low	Medium	Low	High	N/A
2010 physical dimension, relative level of need	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	N/A
2010 economic dimension, relative level of need	Low	Low	Medium	Low	N/A
2010 citywide quality of life index	Stable	Transitioning	Transitioning	Transitioning	N/A

Source: Compiled by the authors from the Metropolitan Studies' Group (2010) quality of life report.

Note: Trending down, ↓; Trending up, ↑; No change, →.

communities and ethnic entrepreneurial activities are still being developed in Charlotte, and political participation by immigrants is at its very early stage. The local social and political infrastructure for immigrant integration is far from being developed to the same extent as that in the established immigration gateway (Singer 2004; Wang 2010). Limited political involvement may hinder social and economic mobility, and broader immigrant integration (Jiménez 2011).

There are numerous reasons for this limited engagement. For instance, “living in a segregated area decreases the likelihood that Latinos participate in community-building activities” (Pearson-Merkowitz 2012, p. 701). In new immigrant destinations such as Nashville, institutional visibility of immigrants remains limited because there is a “gap between social geographies of immigrant settlement and the institutional structure of neighborhood governance” (Winders 2012, p. 65). One of the Hispanic leaders who answered our questionnaire feels that the concept of working toward common goals is not familiar to most immigrants and this limits their civic presence. Competition between agencies and disagreement on how to reach common goals are also mentioned as reasons for the lack of coordination. Moreover, diversity in terms of nationality, class and culture within the immigrant community (even within ethnic groups) makes it challenging to unite. Additionally, a hostile climate toward immigrants creates distrust and fear among immigrant communities, making them less likely to speak up. For instance, restrictive policies—often meant to create barriers for the undocumented—hinder civic engagement for all non-citizens (Wrigley 2012). Interestingly, the example of entrepreneurs along Central Avenue uniting to fight crime seems to contradict this broader trend. The reason for this may be the identification of a common, specific goal (reducing break-ins) that directly impacts businesses’ success.

Our qualitative data and observations suggest there is more of a passive role when it comes to broader political and planning goals. For instance, the City of Charlotte Neighborhood and Business Services Area Supervisor we interviewed in 2013 shared these views:

In my experience, I have seen varying degrees of civic engagement among immigrants on the Central Business Corridor. There are some instances of business owners taking an active role [...]. That being said, most of what I have seen has been more of a triage approach. Businesses have approached the City in response to security issues and code enforcement issues. Businesses have also responded to us when we conducted outreach along the corridor. Again, they are most interested in security and day to day survival. I have not personally been approached by immigrant-owned businesses who wish to take a proactive approach to place-making or neighborhood organizing. I think this may have to do with the fact that many businesses on this [Central Avenue] (and the Albemarle Rd.) corridors are small and have been struggling over the past few years. They do not have a lot of time to organize. The City has tried to organize businesses through our Business District Organization Program (BDOP), but has not been able to create an immigrant-based BDOP thus far.

Linguistic and cultural barriers as well as distrust of government agencies could play a role in this. This quote also suggests there may be a division between owners of small service sector businesses who spend most of their time at their store and owners of larger, professional sectors companies where more value is placed on networking and community involvement. Since many immigrant business owners fall within the first category, the City's Neighborhood and Business Services and the Charlotte–Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD) have been proactive in reaching out to immigrant business owners to get them involved in their communities and get their input about how city resources can support them. On 16 May 2012, for instance, former Mayor Foxx partook in a well-attended open forum in East Charlotte as part of the city's efforts to increase minority- and women-owned small businesses and to find out what challenges business owners face and how the city can help.

Getting immigrant entrepreneurs involved with business associations and local government may be challenging because this is often not a priority for the owners and they may not feel comfortable in these settings. This does not necessarily mean they are not interested in engaging in their community, but that it may work better to involve them in neighborhood-based rather than city-wide initiatives and in a way that makes them feel heard and part of the process, as one of the questionnaire participants argues.

Trust and involvement from within the community seems to drive social and political involvement in the Central Business Corridor. This is illustrated by one immigrant business owner who explains there is a sense of community among residents and businesses in the Central Business corridor. She explains how, if one Latino is connected to a civic engagement project, word will spread to other Latinos in their church, workplace, or social circle, making them more likely to get involved. Mostly, business owners work together with the City around common goals like security. When owners are able to see the direct benefits to their business this is an encouragement to work together with the City and other businesses in the area because they all benefit from a safer, more thriving environment. Another example of such an initiative of groups coming together around common economic development goals is the Eastland Area Strategies Team (EAST), a volunteer board of businesspeople, nonprofits, and neighborhood representatives. Though the central focus is economic development, EAST provides an avenue for immigrant entrepreneurs be part of events like Taste of the World, which introduces people from the Charlotte region to a variety of international restaurants in East Charlotte (www.charlotteeast.com). Such initiatives can improve the overall quality of life in East Charlotte and encourage connections between people of different cultures living within the Central Business Corridor and other parts of Charlotte.

In comparison with another 36 US cities (Brenner 2009), Charlotte is highlighted as the city with the highest Latino growth rates from 1980 to 2000, one of the most linguistically isolated Spanish-speaking Latino populations (over 70%), and the second highest amount of immigrant

integration strategies. Brenner (2009) particularly looked at an active police outreach program and the Mayor's International Cabinet, a 30-member board that advises the mayor and city government and includes residents, representatives from nonprofit organizations, as well as immigrant- and foreign-owned firms. The article concludes that, of all the cities, "Charlotte had the widest range of services and initiatives involving the Latino community, yet the representatives from five city departments interviewed for this study were frequently not aware of initiatives undertaken in other areas of city government" (Brenner 2009, p. 59). Likewise, we find that immigrant business owners are often unaware of programs, loans, or grants that could benefit them. This may be related to the fact that immigrant business owners do not always take a proactive approach to political and civic involvement.

In sum, we find that political participation and civic engagement are limited among this community, in part because of cultural, linguistic, or trust-related barriers. That said, the city, community-based nonprofit organizations, and foundations are initiating ways for business owners to become more involved in the local civic society. These partnerships are particularly important in new immigrant destinations to mobilize immigrant incorporation and broaden urban planning agendas. Particular attention should be paid to the inner-ring suburbs where many immigrants are settling in new geographic patterns and places. We encourage local governments to cultivate immigrant entrepreneur leadership and seek input from the immigrant business community in developing inclusive public spaces. This is in line with the policy and planning perspective to confront issues of inequality by applying equity strategies to economic and community development (Fitzgerald and Green Leigh 2002). That said, creating a space in which immigrants and ethnic minorities feel comfortable participating and encouraged to contribute is required in order for these efforts to be sustainable.

Conclusions

This study systematically depicts how immigrant businesses and their owners have made imprints on their local community, through an examination of a multiethnic Central Business Corridor in a new immigrant destination. The impacts range from serving the unmet market needs of certain neighborhoods, to creating job opportunities and generating revenues, to revitalizing and fueling the commercial development of possibly abandoned communities, as well as making immigrant groups "visible" to the Charlotte community. Although it is challenging to pinpoint the causality, the vibrancy and upward development trend of this area relative to other corridors most likely resulted from the impacts of immigrant businesses. We demonstrated how immigrant business corridors can act as centers for economic, social and cultural activities. Though owners may be hesitant to get involved with local politics, they have worked together with law enforcement and community organizations to decrease crime and attract outside visitors.

The daily lived experiences of people visiting and living around the Central Business corridor are shaped by the presence of these businesses. The multicultural images and signs add to the physical space in new ways. Business owners cultivate a sense of place in the stores in terms of décor, layout, and brands available to cater to the needs of the ethnic community. This provides a familiar and comfortable place for immigrants themselves, many of whom are visible ethnic minorities. This is important for Charlotte's foreign-born community, especially those who do not speak English or have recently arrived from a very different culture. At the same time, this study confirms that the process of neighborhood change is complex and multifaceted; in this process, promoting neighborhood development and revitalization are unlikely to be the main goal of individual business owners. That said, because of the congregation of businesses and the economic, social, and cultural roles, they are collectively able to have a broader impact. In this sense, promotion and development of immigrant business can be used as a planning tool in community development. In particular, in new immigrant destinations, immigrant businesses can work as the local focal points, and their owners can act as community leaders by working with planning commissions, thereby potentially improving understanding and building trust between foreign- and native-born populations. In today's cities, the need to build bridges between different groups and neighborhoods is great, and immigrant businesses can help facilitate this.

We particularly want to emphasize that immigrant entrepreneurs are embedded in local economies as well as in urban morphology, socioeconomic and cultural dynamics. They are affecting cities by revitalizing formerly derelict shopping streets by introducing new produce and new marketing strategies, by fostering the emergence of new spatial forms of social cohesion, and by opening up links to resources abroad. It is evident that their place-making and involvements in the local area need to be understood within the larger institutional context of the receiving place and the social, economic and political receptivity of the host community as well as larger processes of economic and spatial global restructuring of production and social reproduction.

Impacts on community and regional development and quality of life are hard to measure and take a long time to manifest. Though results from this case study may not be generalized everywhere and we cannot control for all possible variables in the community development process, we believe this case study provides an accurate snapshot and new insights into the multiple dynamics between immigrant businesses and place. We hope the perspective and the analysis framework are informative and useful as planning and policy instruments, especially in considering the inputs from local communities where the role of ethnic businesses has not been paid sufficient attention.

Opportunities to further this study include adding more refined statistical tools to evaluate the multidimensional interaction between people and place, and between business and place. For example, comparative studies between different types of neighborhood at the intra-urban scale or multiple cities at

different stages of impacts under immigration and demographic diversification will allow us to measure the changes from immigrant entrepreneurship. In addition, more in-depth qualitative research is warranted. Documenting and analyzing the life history of local community development under the impacts of immigrant entrepreneurship activities will be particularly useful.

Notes

1. A-priori categorization of immigrants as ethnic groups needs to be cautioned (see Wang 2012 for a review). However, in many cases in the USA, the identity of being foreign-born and belonging to an ethnic minority group often overlaps. This is particularly true in new immigration destinations like Charlotte. Thus, at times we discuss both in this study.
2. Foreign-born migrants are arriving in Charlotte directly from their countries of origin as well as from other US states.
3. The City of Charlotte identified five corridors with 11 market areas for focused economic investments, each radiating outward from Center City into older suburban neighborhoods. Based on 38 locally derived statistical variables, the Central Business corridor is the most international and contains 665,840 total retail square feet, 80,634 total office square feet, and 83,536 total warehouse/light industrial square feet (Metropolitan Studies Group 2010).
4. Census CDs with 1970, 1980, and 1990 data were available through the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's library. 2000 and 2010 data was retrieved from the U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov).
5. Since 2000, UNC Charlotte's Metropolitan Studies Group (MSG) has produced bi-annual Quality of Life assessments. The reports assess a range of variables for social, economic, crime, and physical dimensions for each Charlotte Neighborhood Statistical Area (NSA).
6. As indicated in note 4, NSAs refer to the neighborhood unit that is used by the Charlotte Quality of Life study. NSAs are based on US Census block group and block boundaries, and were designed and updated by the city's Planning Commission staff with input from neighborhood organizations and community groups to reflect the geography of neighborhoods in cities. Data from these units is used to facilitate local decision-making.
7. Interviews were conducted in person by going door-to-door to all businesses in this intersection on five occasions within a two-month timeframe and interviewing owners who were available and willing to participate.
8. The concept of a "hypergrowth" city was suggested by Suro and Singer (2003) to describe Latino destinations that experienced Latino growth rates of over 800% between 1980 and 2000.
9. Measured by the percentage of unoccupied commercial space.
10. Transitioning NSAs often have social, physical, crime, and economic dimensions around the city average, but also have weaknesses on one or more of these dimensions. Stable NSAs exhibit few neighborhood-level problems.
11. Newsom (2008) argues that old-fashioned zoning standards in older, suburban-style business areas like Central Avenue restrict urban retrofitting and revitalization.

12. Traditional financial institutions are full service bank branches and credit unions, whereas nontraditional ones include check cashing, payday loan, and pawn shop locations.

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