Creating Place:
Business, Community Development, and Neighborhood Identity
In Shaw/U Street and Anacostia

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Abstract

A sense of place means a neighborhood has a particular feel to it, a particular image. Determining what this sense of place should be involves the concurrent collaboration and conflict between stakeholders in local communities; businesses form a crucial yet often overlooked part of that process. A business’s level of engagement with communities in the neighborhood depended on how tied to the space/location (not place) the business was. This degree of locational linkage depended on factors such as who the customers were, how long the business had inhabited that space, and how integral the stakeholder felt the business was in creating the neighborhood’s sense of place.

If there was a strong connection to the neighborhood itself, the character traits that the stakeholder valued (ex. through the mission of an organization) or connected with most (ex. an identity they share with the neighborhood) became their primary avenues for who they viewed as part of their community. Stakeholders could range from business employee to owner, but the more decision-making power that stakeholder had, the more significant the traits they valued were in determining what communities the business engaged with. Furthermore, by engaging more with these communities, businesses further the claim those communities have on shaping the neighborhood’s sense of place. Such claims shift or reify power dynamics and the right to a space, with reverberating effects on spatial justice and equity.
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Introduction

I blink rapidly as my eyes adjust to the different lighting indoors. I had just stepped into Ben’s Chili Bowl, one of the most famous historical restaurants in Washington, DC. The setup was that of a diner, with a bar where one could order half-smokes (similar to a hotdog) hamburgers, and milkshakes. The restaurant has the feel of a quick diner, with photographs of famous people who have enjoyed a meal there adorning the walls. Virginia Ali, who co-founded Ben’s Chili Bowl with her husband in 1958, sits across from me at a small table. She walks me through the years of the business: a successful first ten years in a prosperous Black community; the riots after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination; the couple of decades when the “beautiful neighborhood… became a ghetto”; the recent inflow of young educated people. Ben’s Chili Bowl is one of only a few businesses in the Shaw neighborhood of DC to have weathered more than 50 years of vicissitudes.

Its relation to the neighborhood has changed over time, from a popular local restaurant, to a lone beacon in a neighborhood absent of investment and business, to a historical landmark today (and still a popular local restaurant). The neighborhood surrounding Ben’s Chili Bowl has indisputably affected the restaurant’s business; Ben’s Chili Bowl, in conjunction with other nearby businesses, has also certainly contributed to the neighborhood, particularly in terms of the neighborhood’s image. Such an image includes what comes to mind when people think of the neighborhood, such as whether or not it is safe, how the bar scene is, and what “types” of people frequent or inhabit the neighborhood. Businesses like Ben’s Chili Bowl as well as more recently opened establishments act as powerful markers and agents of both change and maintenance of the status quo. The impact of businesses on a place overlaps with several issues such as gentrification, identity politics, development, and the continual creation of a sense of place.
My research question is how do businesses navigate their evolving surroundings to contribute to local communities and neighborhood identity? Businesses can affect not only who lives in a place, but the very nature of a place. The tide of gentrification in major cities across the globe, accelerated by the growing flows of capital, relies on making areas attractive for people with more disposable income than current residents. Nearby businesses and the amenities they provide help shape who would want to spend time in an area (Chapple and Jacobus, 2019: 26). While many factors contribute to who lives where and the feel of that place, the businesses located there indisputably play a role. This thesis uses two neighborhoods within a global city, Washington, DC, as case studies of the role businesses play in shaping the spaces they are located in and how those spaces in turn shape them. Focusing on these two neighborhoods provides a comparison and implications that other cities across the globe can turn to when considering how they might collaborate with local businesses to decide what types of community-business interactions they should encourage, particularly in neighborhoods on the cusp of demographic change.

**Literature Review**

**Neighborhoods and Communities**

In order to discern how businesses affect neighborhood identity and community development, we must first examine neighborhoods and communities on their own. The idea of community necessarily includes and excludes. Some are considered part of that community, while others are not. This dichotomy leads scholar Iris Marion Young (1995) to propose an alternative to community: “an ideal of city life as a vision of social relations affirming group difference” (251). However, people can belong to multiple communities, allowing for places of overlap, of solidarity, for people even of highly different backgrounds. Communities do not have
to inherently marginalize those not included and are important in shaping group and individual identity. City life can affirm group difference and maintain this idea of community. Various communities can exist in the same space, and people can be part of multiple communities; the idea of community can act as a unifier for both homogeneous and disparate groups. In her analysis of Mt. Pleasant, a neighborhood in Washington, DC, Modan categorizes three kinds of local identities: that of the neighborhood itself, that which speakers create for themselves, and that which they create for others as lesser community members (Modan, 2007: 7). As a resident and researcher of Mt. Pleasant, Modan analyzed ethnographic interviews, causal conversations, email messages on the neighborhood listserv, among other things, to examine “how community members in Mt. Pleasant create and contest visions of their neighborhood through discourses of identity” (Modan, 2007: 6). Modan’s categorization aided her analysis of neighborhood dynamics – evaluating local identities informs our understanding of a place.

Communities and neighborhoods are not stagnant. They are constantly changing, raising the question of how they evolve and who has the right to determine that. The term community tends to hold positive connotations, but slightly varying denotations. Some equate communities with physical neighborhoods, while others write that communities are not geographically confined, brought into existence through a shared belief of solidarity (Ferguson and Dickens, 1999: 5). A ubiquitous definition of community does not exist; this is evidenced by the wide array referred to by interviewees in this study when using the term “community.”

While community does refer to ties that extend beyond physical geographies, they also interact very much with the idea of place. For example, while communities and neighborhoods often overlap, they are two distinct concepts. In this paper, I rely on Modan’s framework for thinking about community, neighborhoods, residence, and participation. She writes that
“community focuses on people linked through social networks,” while “neighborhood refers more directly to the geographical space with which a community is aligned” (Modan, 2007: 326). Modan states that this division is helpful in distinguishing between residence and participation, as one can “live in a neighborhood without being part of the community,” or likewise, participate in a community without living in the neighborhood (Modan, 2007: 326). Furthermore, multiple communities can inhabit the same neighborhood but remain very much separate.

For instance, gentrifying areas often facilitate “micro-segregation;” in these perhaps statistically more diverse areas, distinct communities remain separate, both in who they interact with and the places they frequent (Hyra, 2017: 9) In my research, the people at a new coffee shop looked very different than the people at the local skate park. Because of the differences in community and neighborhood, I maintain them as distinct but equally important. The idea of residence and participation translates to businesses’ role in the community, and in effecting change or maintaining the status quo. Some businesses see themselves as an integral part of the community and take different steps to engage themselves. Such involvement could take the shape of sponsoring local events, making the business accessible to people of diverse backgrounds, or hiring locally. Other businesses may feel no obligation to the neighborhood and its residents other than the provision of quality goods and services. The criteria for being a stakeholder are subjective and parallel the idea of a right to a place.

Contention over defining and inhabiting a place has perhaps always existed. The study of such contention is rather new, however. The “right to the city,” stemming from Henri Lefebvre’s 1968 book Le droit à la ville, referred to the idea of eliminating exclusion from the benefits of urban life and as creating a claim to urban spaces for marginalized groups (Lefebvre, 1968).
Lefebvre’s focus on eliminating exclusion and marginalization exposes the greater contention for place inherent in urbanization. Chester Hartfield (1984) adds another layer to the right to the city, arguing that under current norms property owners’ right to displace trumps tenants’ right to “stay put” (581). Hartfield notes that many laws make it relatively easy for landlords to evict, and how the private market capitalizes on regulations and tax codes to either disinvest in or revitalize a neighborhood. Disinvestment disrupts people’s lives by denying them opportunities and incentivizing them to move, while revitalization often engenders a rising cost of living in an area, and lower-income residents are forced to move. As Hartfield contends, being uprooted has severe social and economic consequences for those displaced, as they lose social connections, proximity to employment, grocery stores, and other amenities they may be accustomed to, and must find another place to stay – which usually costs more, has less space, and is of inferior quality (Hartfield, 1984: 583). David Harvey (2003) similarly alludes to this contention between owners and tenants, and more broadly, between the social classes, involved in having a right to the city. He denotes this right to the city as the claim to shape processes of urbanization, alluding to the contention between social classes that this involves.

Deciding who has such a right can mean many things: one view suggests that it does not necessarily refer to who arrived first, but rather a proactive right to “put down roots... to inhabit a space, not just to consume it as an experience” (Zukin, 2011: 5–6). Putting down roots is a two-way street. People shape the places they live in and build memories there; the places they live in also shape them. As sociologist Robert Park writes, “in making the city man has remade himself” (Park, 1967 as cited in Harvey, 2003). Intentionally developing our neighborhoods presents the opportunity not only to shape where we live, but ourselves.
Despite new technologies that allow transfers of information and capital to occur seamlessly through wireless networks, physical place still matters. Mitchell (1995) and Davis (1990) argue that many cities take advantage of agglomeration economies and refer to the benefits derived from the co-location of people and firms in particular cities. These groupings of firms and skills include movie production in Los Angeles, technology corporations in San Francisco, and financial services in New York City. While large firms are able to work across city and national boundaries using new technology, globalization has made the agglomeration of services in large cities increasingly important to compete for people and capital (Sassen, 1991). Firms benefit from their physical proximity to other companies, and their employees drive demand for amenities. Aside from economic and efficiency considerations, virtual spaces cannot fully replace physical places for other reasons. Electronic media does not provide space for people experiencing homelessness to live, it does not house one’s favorite restaurant or provide access to transportation, nor does it provide a space to physically take up room, to meet, to bring that physical embodiment of oneself that is fundamental to being human (Mitchell 1995; Davis, 1990). A sense of place matters, and will continue to matter irrespective of technological advances.

**Urban Development and Neighborhood Change**

Historically Black neighborhoods that have yet to catch the eye of developers still face redlining practices (Glantz and Martinez, 2018b). As Glantz and Martinez assert, this continued discrimination results from lenders using metrics such as credit scores that do not capture a holistic profile of a person’s credit readiness. They have a “discriminatory impact on borrowers of color,” contributing to continued exclusion from capital (ibid.). Such persistent lack of investment shapes a neighborhood’s opportunities and identity. Disinvestment in neighborhoods
of color directly contributed to many of the inequalities that persist today and laid the foundations for gentrification to occur (Smith, 2005).

An influx of outside capital invested in “undercapitalized” areas cultivate the conditions for gentrification – these appear in part when financial institutions shift their lending policies to historically redlined neighborhoods and wealthier people move in (Glantz and Martinez, 2018a). Decades of disinvestment created what Neil Smith calls “rent gaps,” which he defines as the difference between “the actual ground rent capitalized from the present (depressed) land use and the potential rent that could be capitalized from the ‘highest and best’ use (or at least a ‘higher and better’ use), given the central location” (Smith, 1986: 10). He writes that as Whites and capital fled to the suburbs, the “devalorization” of city centers created wide rent gaps on which gentrifiers are increasingly capitalizing. Tom Slater (2011) echoes this idea of rent gaps, with prior disinvestment creating opportunities for profitable redevelopment. It is not the people who lived in the neighborhood through the period of disinvestment that make this profit; that yield goes to those who have the capital to invest in rehabilitating a house, speculation, or development. Slater argues that this redevelopment often comes at “the expense of urban residents affected by work instability, unemployment, and stigmatization” (Slater, 2010: 572). Today, while disinvestment continues to plague many urban areas, gentrification causes to swift local changes by outsiders investing or settling in long-disinvested neighborhoods, as amenities, demographics, and real estate all shift significantly.

Ruth Glass first coined gentrification in 1964 to explain the effects of the middle-class arriving in working-class neighborhoods in London (Glass, 1964; Lees, 2013, 217); however, in many contexts that term has shifted to include other processes of neighborhood transformation such as shifts in racial dynamics. Lees and colleagues (2013) define gentrification as “the
transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use” (xv). Gentrification is a “highly dynamic process” that connects directly with “processes of spatial, economic and social restructuring” (Smith and Williams, 1986: 3; Sassen 1991: 255).

Although originally applied to London, urban sociologists have expanded their scope as gentrification’s impact has spread to most major cities across the globe (Zukin, 2013: 1). Much of the research on gentrification focuses on economics, such as rising rents or the boost to a tax base, but gentrification also shapes the culture and authenticity of a place (Zukin, 2013; Modan, 2007: 318; Smith, 2005). Despite debate over the extent to which gentrification quantitatively causes displacement, it indisputably changes a place through outsiders, including new residents and businesses, moving in (Freeman, 2009; Lees, Slater, Wyly, 2013: 80). Lee and colleagues (2013) argue that gentrification can result in “the destruction of community” and the “loss of place” (216). Smith (2005) employs a frontier image to reflect how many gentrifiers view the inner city: in other words, gentrifiers may see themselves as pioneers or homesteaders, reclaiming and rebuilding urban neighborhoods. Colonists also saw themselves as pioneers, yet they failed to consider the impact they had on the people already inhabiting these “frontiers.” The frontier imagery is “neither decorative nor innocent”; it rationalizes social differentiation and exclusion as natural and inevitable (Smith, 2005: 17).

In gentrification, “people, streets, neighborhoods, and public spaces [are] upscaled, redeveloped, and homogenized to the point of losing their distinctive identity’ (Zukin, 2011: xi). Zukin writes about her own experiences in New York, describing the diversity and distinctive character of experimental art galleries, ethnic cooking, and performance spaces. While some of this remains, Zukin laments that some neighborhoods have been “Starbucked,” meaning
homogenized and no longer unique (Zukin, 2011: 97). Change does not always have to destroy a sense of place. Japonica Brown-Saracino (2004) writes about how some gentrifiers, whom she labels “social preservationists,” desire to live in authentic neighborhoods and worry about the effect other newcomers will have. Despite such social preservationists’ desire to protect an area’s identity, even they often “inadvertently [contribute] to making … (a place) less hospitable to people in working-class circumstances” (Modan, 2007: 61). The decreased accommodability results from financial strain, including the subsequent increase in property values and property taxes, as well as the newcomers’ contribution to creating “a new identity for the neighborhood.” Higher property values swell the rent for tenants, and fail to benefit even some homeowners; people who do not want to move see no financial gain yet face increased property taxes.

Improving a neighborhood’s amenities, along with the subsequent change in property prices and perhaps neighborhood identity, is not always negative; it just requires being intentional about who determines these changes and who benefits from them. The aim of equitable development is not to nostalgically cling to a past neighborhood identity, but rather recognize the history of a neighborhood – and not just a polished selective history – and have community stakeholders play an active role in determining what the neighborhood will look like going forward (Ogbu, 2017).

**The Making of a Neighborhood Identity**

The identity of a place rests on many factors, including its historical, cultural, and social influences. Sharon Zukin studies the authenticity of place-making; why do certain places feel true to themselves while others have a more fabricated superficial feel? There exists “a constant dialogue between the two faces of authenticity: between features that every generation views as ‘original’ because they have been there throughout their lifetimes, and features that each new
generation creates on their own” (Zukin, 2011: xi). For example, a person who grew up in a neighborhood full of local mom and pop shops may feel the area has been stripped of its character if they return years later to chain restaurants and new high rises; a millennial just moving in to the neighborhood may have a very different perception. Authenticity is key to the making of place. The idea of placemaking and authenticity in urban studies is not uncommon; Hyra notes nine prominent urban scholars that study why “mobile, high-wage knowledge producers crave a variety of ‘authentic’ urban experiences” (Hyra, 2017: 79).

Neighborhoods are composed of physical geographical space, but their identities rest in what their sense of place is. While geography does contribute to the creation of place, other factors such as the history, demographics, culture, types of businesses, and infrastructure of an area also play a role. A place is a space that is socially experienced and interpreted, meaning that the space has an image, a brand, or feel to it (Modan, 2007: 334). Neighborhoods act as “struggles over space – over access to space and over who gets to define what kind of place a given space was or should be” (Modan, 2007: 26).

For example, in DC, marking an area as historic often acts as a means of maintaining the neighborhood’s aesthetic. This designation also makes further development much more difficult. DC marks areas as historic – subjecting them to a host of zoning and construction rules – much more frequently than other cities. Nearly 20 percent of the buildings in DC are designated as historic, far greater than the historic cities of Boston or Philadelphia (Chung, 2018). The historic designation process represents just one of many examples of how residents vie to create or maintain the identity of their neighborhoods. In their study on retail as a route to revitalization, Karen Chapple and Rick Jacobus (2009) find that retail strips and commercial corridors serve “as a kind of ‘front door’ to” a neighborhood; if a neighborhood has visible improving or vibrant
businesses, their presence (or lack thereof) sends a signal about the quality of the neighborhood as a whole (27). This signal influences the location choices of potential neighborhood residents, businesses, and visitors, and ultimately, “the overall composition of the neighborhood (Chapple and Jacobus, 2009: 27).

While many areas’ images or identities come about organically – an area may be known for its geographical features, its historic architecture, or certain types of stores – the term “branding” is distinct and involves an intentional creation or sustenance of a place’s image. Branding differs from the organic growth of an area as it involves institutionalizing the identity of an area via mechanisms such as walking tours, preservation of buildings, particular restaurants, and businesses (Hyra, 2017: 75). Hyra introduces the term “Black branding” to describe when this process of branding uses Black historic preservation as a community redevelopment approach (Hyra, 2017: 75). Michelle Boyd expands on this idea, where a conglomeration of Black branding creates a “‘racial tourist district” where “organizations create and display cultural symbols that assert the identity of the neighborhood” (as cited in Hyra, 2017: 75). Businesses sometimes take part in this trend – in DC, Busboys and Poets attempts to be a “community where racial and cultural connections are consciously uplifted” (Busboys and Poets). Unlike Busboys and Poets, which strives to host speakers and sell books that center around social justice, some places remember Black history in name only. For example, a couple of apartment and condo complexes call themselves “The Ellington” and “The Marvin,” referencing the musicians’ ties to DC.

The branding of neighborhood affects both its current residents as well as its potential to attract newcomers and capital. Modan writes that since the “mid-to-late 1990s”, a kind of gentrification has emerged that “commodifies the ethnic diversity of the neighborhood, turning
ethnic diversity into a feature that [brings] added symbolic value to living there and add(s) economic value to real estate prices” (Modan, 2007: 9). The strategic creation or promotion of a neighborhood identity matters to both the communities located there and the flows of capital (or lack thereof) into the neighborhood. Collins and Kunz (2009) write about the use of ethnic precincts in Sydney, Australia, as a commodification of place. In order to be marketable, the ethnic precincts, characterized by clusters of ethnic or immigrant entrepreneurs, rely on consumers perceiving the precinct as “authentic.” Immigrants’ culture is thus commodified to make a place attractive to consumers, including people of the same ethnicity as well as those who are not (Collins and Kunz, 2009).

Although culture has been commodified for centuries, from the vending of artwork to music tracks, the commodification of culture through spatial geographies, and particularly Black culture, is a relatively rare phenomenon in the United States. Eras such as the Harlem Renaissance may have created spaces of interracial interaction, but to intentionally live in a multiracial neighborhood was still taboo. In the 20th century, associating a neighborhood with Blackness led to disinvestment and raising of structural barriers (Hyra, 2017: 75). Blockbusting, whereby realtors used the threat of racial changes to influence White property owners to sell their houses at a discount (subsequently selling these houses at a premium to Blacks), occurred because Whites feared a neighborhood would become Black. While the current use of Black branding does reflect a shift from the past dissociation and erasure of Black history, debate continues around whether such commodification of Black history celebrates and preserves it or acts as a form of appropriation (Hyra, 2017: 101). Such contention asks the question of who curates the history and how. Furthermore, creating and sustaining a neighborhood’s image requires being intentional about what periods in the area’s history are included in its narrative.
For example, in the early 1800s, Anacostia was home to the village of Good Hope – the first major settlement in southeast DC (Lowe, 2010; 29). A few decades later, the towns of Hillsdale and Uniontown were established in the area. Until the 1950s, both Blacks and Whites lived, albeit separately, in Anacostia. Numerous factors caused the neighborhood’s decay after the 1960s. Today, public memory has little recollection of the depth of the neighborhood’s history and instead remembers almost exclusively the last few decades. Similarly, the Georgetown neighborhood in northwest DC, has a selectively curated narrative. One of the oldest Black communities in the city, Georgetown “lost many [B]lack families that had long resided there, partly due to the rising cost of living and an increase in property taxes” (Norton, 2005; 224).

The branding of the Shaw neighborhood in DC used for revitalization emphasizes its “Black Broadway narrative.” It highlights figures with notable connections to the neighborhood, including Carter G. Woodson, Duke Ellington, and Langston Hughes in the early to mid 20th century. This polished image of Shaw excludes the area’s reputation as a ghetto full of crime and drugs in the 1970s and 1980s, and the structural factors that made it a space of concentrated poverty (Hyra, 2017: 84, 101). In a study of a neighborhood in Los Angeles, Andrew Deener writes about a similar occurrence. He writes that businesses “draw attention to certain historical themes” like artistic and cultural markers, “while overshadowing other themes, like the history of economic diversity and gang conflict” (Deener, 2007).

The image of a place is often more important than its reality in influencing how people perceive and relate to it (Mitchell, 1995). When people label a neighborhood as “bad” based on what they have heard from friends or seen in the media, they contribute to a stigmatization that worsens the disenfranchisement the neighborhood faces. As Mitchell describes, how people discuss or perceive a place affects its image more than the on-the-ground reality. For instance,
although a neighborhood may not have high rates of crime, a news story about a violent crime
can construct its image as dangerous, making people less likely to spend time there. Such a
stigma discourages investment and reifies a neighborhood’s negative image. Thus, the identity of
a neighborhood and its economic wellbeing feed into one another. Addressing the injustices
created by exclusion from capital requires a multifaceted approach; businesses constitute an
important piece of the puzzle

**Businesses in Neighborhood Development**

Focusing on businesses’ role in community-driven development and placemaking may
seem counterintuitive. In fact, businesses often do exploit a place, both at a global scale such as
in resource-rich countries, or at a local scale, such as through predatory lending practices or
selling unhealthy items for profit without an alternative. Businesses also can contribute to
gentrification, attracting newcomers at the expense of residents. However, businesses are not
monolithic: some work to serve the local community, and others are even pushed out by other
businesses via commercial gentrification as they lose their client base, are out-competed, or
cannot keep up with rising rents. The complexity with which businesses influence a
neighborhood requires a nuanced approach to understanding how their relationship with local
gentrification or disinvestment affects a place’s identity.

Businesses play a fundamental role in economic development. Blakey and Bradshaw (2002)
write that “business development is the most important component of local economic planning”
(217). They argue that business development is an imperative part of urban planning. While
businesses can negatively impact people through exploitative practices, they also can create jobs,
provide services and products, and arguably foster innovation through competition. Depending
on the model of ownership, hiring, wages, and organizational mission, among other factors,
businesses can provide a self-sustaining form of economic empowerment for marginalized groups (Bates, 2006). For example, African American cooperatives in the past have been capacity-building, “contributing to community revitalization and saving struggling communities,” such as during the Great Depression when African Americans used “cooperative economics as a solution” (Nembhard, 2014: 25). By instituting a business model centered around shared business ownership, they were able to sustain the local economy.

In the following years, discriminatory laws heightened the difficulty of business ownership and generating capital in communities of color. While many discriminatory laws already existed, the creation of segregated public housing and concurrent subsidization of White homes in suburbs via the Federal Housing Authority reified racial economic disparities (Shapiro and Rothstein, 2017). The federal government enacted a program of urban renewal and highway construction in the 1950s and 1960s (Hartman, 1984: 581). Highway construction split many neighborhoods of color into two. It also contributed to the flight out of urban neighborhoods, coinciding with the decline of neighborhood retail (Chapple and Jacobus, 2009). Urban renewal was used to clear “blighted areas” – it directly caused the displacement of 300,000 families in less than two decades (Moser). So detrimental and discriminatory was this program that author James Baldwin (1963) labeled it “negro removal.”

These policies disrupted and devalued primarily Black neighborhoods. Campbell (2016) writes that while the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and subsequent integration marked a step of great progress, integration also led to money that had historically been in black communities flowing to White ones. For instance, Black-owned businesses lost substantial revenues and Black-owned financial centers declined in prominence. At their height, more than 100 Black-owned banks did business in the US; that number declined to 45 in the early 2000s, and dropped further to 25 after
the 2007 financial crisis (Campbell, 2016). Neighborhood retail declined dramatically particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, and this was particularly harmful for communities of color who faced severe disinvestment; the once vibrant commercial life that sustained their economies crashed as Whites and capital fled for the suburbs (Sutton, 2010).

Deindustrialization, racist housing practices – such as blockbusting, steering, white flight, redlining, and urban renewal – and whites’ discriminatory consumption preferences drained resources from Blacks and created inner city sites of concentrated poverty (Massey and Denton, 2003; Sugrue, 1996). The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. accelerated this disinvestment and closure of black businesses, as many cities across the country experienced protests and riots (Fenston, 2013). Although President Jimmy Carter attempted to improve these marginalized communities’ access to capital through the Community Reinvestment Act in 1977, this legislation alone could not eradicate continued discriminatory lending practices (Bhutta, 2011). In 1980, DC Mayor Marion Barry said: “In Washington, as in every other major urban center in America, we have entire sections of our city which have been abandoned and neglected by the mainstream of economic activity” (Bockman, 2016:72). Such abandonment has spawned joblessness, poverty, and serious crime (Wilson, 1987). Policies that disadvantaged primarily Black areas created consequences that persist.

Having representation in the financial industry as well as among business owners is important to increased wages and employment for people of color. For example, Timothy Bates’s fundamental study demonstrated that “more than 96 percent of black-owned firms (contrasted with less than 38 percent of White-owned firms) had 50 percent or more minority employees” (Bates, 1997: 476). Investing in Black-owned businesses not only helps the owners, but increases the likelihood that the business serves and employs other people of color. Small
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businesses in particular can act as a form of place-based revitalization (Hyra, 2015). Creating an environment of investment in locally owned businesses aids in underserved groups’ economic prospects and affects how a neighborhood is viewed, both by those residing within and outside the neighborhood.

Meltzer (2016) argues that businesses influence “the nature and quality of neighborhoods” (57). Before the disinvestment of the 1960s and 70s, small businesses played “an important role in the cultural and economic capital of urban neighborhoods” (Meltzer, 2016: 57). The shift in who lives in an area changes the types of businesses that remain as well as the new ones that open. Meltzer (2016) explains that while “most businesses stay in place” during gentrification, when businesses close or are displaced, they are more likely to remain vacant or be replaced with chain establishments (58). For example, in the restaurant industry, such replacement of small independent restaurants by franchises results largely from differences in restaurant preference associated with race and education – two demographic aspects of a neighborhood that tend to change with gentrification (Waldfogel, 2006). Vacancy or the replacement of an old business with a chain, when occurring on a large scale, fundamentally change the feel of a place.

The businesses that exist in a space result from the its consumer base. For small businesses and restaurants, this base comprises people who mostly live nearby (Waldfogel, 2006). When outside businesses that cater to a higher-income clientele enter a neighborhood, they contribute to gentrification and displacement of longtime residents (Florida, 2015). Despite the possibility of negative consequences, other research portrays business in a more promising light, particularly when it is Black-owned, meaning the majority ownership is held by someone (or multiple people) who identify as Black (Bates, 2006). Neighborhoods and the communities that
inhabit them largely shape the surrounding businesses; businesses also influence the composition and brand of neighborhoods.

In *Making Business Districts Work*, a collection of essays on downtown management, David Feehan (2006) writes about the branding of a business district and envisioning what it will look like in the future. He writes that “creating the vision” for an area “conveys a sense of personality, character, and identity” that ultimately compose a “community DNA” (Feehan, 2006: 24-25).

Clark argues (2011) that while the character or culture of a neighborhood often arise organically, planning and finance organizations such as business improvement districts (BIDs), municipalities, community development financial institutions (CDFIs), and banks also contribute to a neighborhood’s image. These organizations influence people’s perception of a place as well as its attractiveness due to the types of amenities available. Parks, infrastructure, and transportation exemplify public determinants of a place’s image; the businesses present (or not) also shape who is attracted to a place (Clark, 2011: 2-3).

Cities are centers of both production and consumption. The amenities available in an area help determine its attractiveness. Such amenities span a wide array, such as public services, access to and speed of transportation, and the aesthetics of the physical setting. Perhaps the most important amenity is “the presence of a rich variety of services and consumer goods” (Glaeser, Kolko, and Saiz, 2011: 136). Glaeser, Kolkom and Saiz distinguish between national goods, meaning they are produced and shipped from factories or other vendors via the internet or other catalogues, and local goods. Restaurants, theaters, and certain types of shops offer goods and services that do not lend themselves to transportation, and therefore must remain locally provided. These types of businesses utilize brick-and-mortar stores – their physical link to a
place make them particularly important to the identity of a place and are therefore the focus of this study.

Businesses play a key role in the memory and brand of a place, both because of their physical presence and because of their relation to all that a neighborhood is, has been, and seeks to be. Commercial enterprises and culture shape urban policies, and furthermore, are “central to local community life and identity” (Clark, 2004; Deener, 2007). In his ethnographic study of Abbot Kinney Boulevard in Los Angeles, Andrew Deener writes that “commerce generates community vitality,” but questions “whose definition of community” is promoted (Deener, 2007). While large actors, such as the state, developers, and speculators, do drive change, local actors such as merchants and commercial enterprises redefine and sustain the neighborhoods. Businesses are crucial to most revitalization efforts, meaning improving quality of life in areas that are declining or low income, “from job creation to improving neighborhood identity” (Chapple and Jacobus, 2009). Commercial streets, essentially main streets with a conglomeration of shops and storefronts, “are fundamental to understanding the process of inclusion and exclusion at the neighborhood level” (Deener, 2007). Building upon this body of research, my study investigates the role businesses and business development organizations of the Shaw/U Street and Anacostia neighborhoods play in shaping neighborhood and community identities.

**International Relevance**

This thesis investigates this query in the Shaw/U Street and Anacostia neighborhoods of Washington, DC, but the question applies globally. For instance, before harsh visa regulations among other factors made the city drive many of them out, the “economies of scale, mass export potential and lax attitude to counterfeit goods” made Guangzhou, China, home to the largest African population in Asia. The economic conditions created an opportunity for new
entrepreneurial minds to flourish via middlemen businesses. Immigration to the city from Africa dramatically altered its demographic composition, the presence of supporting businesses like restaurants and hair salons, and communities (Luedi, 2018).

Cities constitute one of the most important actors in the globalizing world. While the nation-state has historically been the dominant framework of international relations and global studies, cities and metropolitan areas have become increasingly relevant. Their significance rests both on their importance as places of agglomerative economies, as well as their importance in terms of population. In 1950, only 30 percent of the world population lived in city; by 2014, 54 percent were living in cities. Urbanization is a global phenomenon, with the fastest rates existing in Asia and Africa (World Urbanization Prospects). The movement of capital, often following businesses, greatly shapes the uneven development of neighborhoods, cities, and countries (Gordon).

The presence of certain businesses not only affects the image of a neighborhood, but of a city. As cities increasingly compete with one another for financial, human, and social capital, so grows the importance of creating a strong brand, both as a place of production, and as one of consumption (Sassen, 2011: 5; Clark, 2011). This competition plays out in the global arena as cities become more and more connected and greater and greater in size. Part of the challenge that globalization brings is maintaining the unique aspects of local culture even as the influence of other places grows. Like neighborhoods that must be intentional about who they serve, who has access to the space, and what image they project, cities must do the same if they are to remain authentic and unique in the face of global pressures toward conformity.

Globalization is “the most dramatic force restructuring our cities around the world” (Clark, 2011: 209). The rise in transience of residence as well as in mobility beg the question, for whom
are the amenities that a neighborhood or a city provides? Tourism is the world’s third-largest industry (Clark, 2011: 211). Is the image a city projects for its inhabitants, or for non-residents? In a similar fashion, are the amenities provided in a neighborhood for the local residents or for people from across the city? Clearly these questions are not dichotomous. The image of a place can serve a variety of actors; however, the major stakeholders of an area, generally meaning residents and local businesses, should have a right help shape the places in which they live.

Cities can bring a host of benefits, from efficiency to environmental sustainability, and perhaps could even be a “normative ideal” with regards to being places of encounter and diversity (Glaeser, 2011; Young, 1995: 251). The rapid growth of cities can be detrimental though if not planned with intentionality. The rapid migration to cities without such equitable intentionality has created many negative consequences, causing some to even argue for a return to small sustainable agriculture in developing countries (Stoll, 2010). Approximately one billion people live in slums, with that number increasing daily – that is one quarter of all urban dwellers (UN Habitat Slum Almanac). Increased urbanization has not always led to increased prosperity.

These global slums are vastly different from the inner cities of the US, but the takeaways from this research in DC hopefully offers some insight for a couple reasons. They share a history of disinvestment, and continue to face disinvestment, or alternatively may today confront development efforts similar to the 1950s urban renewal projects in the US or current gentrification. For example, Dharavi, located in the heart of Mumbai, India, is one of the world’s largest slums. While the area was originally a fishing village on the outskirts of the city, Mumbai grew rapidly around it, making Dharavi actually very centrally located (Weinstein, 2014: 4). While the area was largely ignored for years, the increased attractiveness of the slum’s location has made it contentious for redevelopment efforts. Clearance campaigns by development
planners and political leaders have been met with resistance by residents (Weinstein, 2014: 143-144). While the context varies tremendously, people around the globe vie for the right to define a place. This research focuses on the formal economy, but also acknowledges that informal businesses play a role in sustaining people’s livelihoods and in contributing to the image of a place. Businesses, regardless of formality, impact a place’s identity. It is how they impact that identity that differs. My comparative investigation of businesses’ impact in two DC neighborhoods offers one example of such variation and may be relevant to countries across the globe dealing with very different patterns of gentrification and with different types of economic development within those spaces.

**Study Context**

**The Ecosystem of Washington DC**

Washington, DC is an exceptionally informative city to study gentrification, businesses, and community development for a couple reasons. Particularly unique are its absence of state laws, position as the nation’s capital, and historical lack of local political control. DC’s position as a federal city has indisputably shaped its economy, “spawn[ing] a large service sector” for example, but in no way does this disqualify it as exceptional and irrelevant for investigation (Modan, 2007: 36). Most prominent cities in the United States, well as internationally, are so prominent precisely because of their unique histories and economies.

In governing the city, authorities are particularly keen on expanding its consumer and business tax base because of DC-specific factors limiting tax revenue; for example, the city cannot tax commuters, nor tax the more than 40 percent of land within the city that is federally owned (Modan, 2007; 38). The unique tax pressures coupled with the restriction from using politics as an avenue for resident advocacy have placed a greater weight on the role of businesses
in shaping District communities. This heightened prominence of businesses makes DC an ideal place to study the way key business stakeholders interact with the places they inhabit. Customers and proximate residents are very much affected by businesses; my research investigates the role that owners, employees, and staff at organizations supporting local businesses perceive themselves to play in neighborhoods.

DC residents have long held little power in political decisions that affect them (Modan, 2007: 36). In addition to lacking the right to vote in presidential elections until 1961, residents could not control their local government from 1871 until 1973, when they finally regained the ability to elect a DC government through the 1973 Congressional Home Rule Act (Hyra, 2017: 25). This lack of representation spurred the formation of new organizations “based on neighborhood convening rather than citywide balloting” (Clement, 2016: 51). As Modan writes, “[b]ecause there is no possibility to affect (sic) change at a state level and no representation at a national level, what people in DC have is the local “(Modan, 2007: 38). Local businesses claimed a heightened role in neighborhood and community identities and as a more prominent means of engendering development because traditional political mechanisms of representation were closed off. Ironically, the city that is most involved with the politics of the nation is also perhaps most involved with the politics of the local neighborhood.

While not a substitute for more governmental representation, such an emphasis on the neighborhood through civic organizations and local businesses, combined with DC’s lack of statehood, make DC conducive to studying urban community development through businesses. Additionally, numerous programs, such as federal public housing and urban redevelopment were piloted in DC before being launched nationally. (Clement, 2016: 45). The urban policies and processes of development in DC have historically served as “fuel for ideological fires in debates
over American urban governance,” giving the urban processes of DC national, if not international, relevance (Clement, 2016: 45). Although DC for a long time was dependent on the federal government, its recent economic diversification has made it a city “with many of the same social, racial, economic, and geographic forces that one finds in nearly all large American cities” (Jackson, 2015, as cited in Hyra, 2017: 16). The city’s history as a Black cultural hub give it particular importance as a location to study image and identity in neighborhoods historically of color.

The rapid demographic change in DC has begun to change this city-wide image. In 1980, 70 percent of the city’s population was Black – that number dipped below 50 percent in 2011 (Washington, DC: Our changing city). Scholar Derek Hyra argues the city has gone from “chocolate” city to “cappuccino” city, linking the increase in the White population and the cost of living with the lighter shade and higher price of a cappuccino (Hyra, 2017). In the graph, the red line demonstrates the effects of deindustrialization, White flight, and disinvestment in the mid-twentieth century. Whites were able to leave the city first; the dip in the pink line manifests the exodus of middle- and upper-class Blacks after the disinvestment and discriminatory housing policies caused the decay of historically Black neighborhoods. In the maps, the increase in green
and blue colors demonstrate the growth of the White and Asian/Pacific Islander populations in central DC at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as well as the concomitant decrease in the Black population (Washington, DC: Our changing city, 2014).

East of the river composes one of the last majority-Black areas of DC, and accounts for much of DC’s Black population, as only 33 percent of residents west of the river are Black, compared to 92 percent east of the river (Zippel, 2016). Such change has forced DC to grapple with its own image and development as a city; the neighborhoods that form the city in aggregate create this image. The questions of business, community, and identity, although investigated at a neighborhood level in this study, extend to many levels of scale.

For decades, DC comprised primarily African American residents, with Whites making up the vast majority of other residents. This history facilitates the perception of DC as a Black and White city; while this research focuses on two historically Black neighborhoods, it recognizes that no race is monolithic in the experiences or perspectives people have and notes
the growing population of DC residents who identify with a race other than White or Black. This thesis investigates businesses’ role in shaping the projected and perceived identities of the historically Black neighborhoods of Shaw/U Street and Anacostia in Washington, DC, because the long-term residing communities have had comparatively little say in deciding what their neighborhoods should look like. On one hand, these neighborhoods have different levels of gentrification, divergent histories, and geographically different locations. Yet, these neighborhoods are aligned by the past disinvestment combined with other discriminatory state policies in the mid-20th century that economically crippled them; the uneven flow of capital back into these neighborhoods aimed at attracting people with disposable income; and the impending change that is very much externally driven. This thesis will identify and analyze the positive and normative processes of how established and new businesses influence historically Black communities by interviewing business owners, workers, and staff at organizations supporting business development who engage with divergent types of businesses in each context, including those that have recently opened and those that have been long established.

I restricted the places I investigated to two to limit the variability of neighborhood factors. Anacostia and Shaw/U Street stood out as particularly useful areas of study because they are both historically Black neighborhoods that faced disinvestment in the latter half of the twentieth century, but have experienced very different levels of investment, demographic change, and commercial turnover in the past couple of decades. My focus on the Shaw/U Street and Anacostia neighborhoods permit two case studies of neighborhoods through which people perceive and engage with neighborhood identity, community, and change. Because these contexts are so different, it allows a comparison of how place may affect how people perceive the role of business development. For example, although businesses located in Shaw/U Street
faced similar neighborhood factors – from the changing demographics, to the levels of income of residents, to the goods and services preferred by customers in the area – they voiced different opinions on what role they thought their businesses played in the area as well as in who they included in their definitions of the neighborhood and community. Focusing on two neighborhoods, particularly ones with similar histories in the latter half of the 20th century but very different pressures over the past couple of decades, afforded me the opportunity to learn if and how a changing commercial and residential landscape affects businesses’ perceived role in community development.

While innumerable types of neighborhoods exist in the United States and around the world, and in no way do Shaw/U Street and Anacostia embody such breadth, they do serve as useful case studies for how businesses deal with the concurrent maintenance and change of the status quo in a neighborhood. While businesses and neighborhoods around the world encounter vastly different contexts, they always have to navigate the identity of the place they inhabit, how it persists, and how it changes. By limiting my geographical research area to Shaw/U Street and Anacostia, I was able to control for many factors, including applicable laws and taxes, relevant historical differences, and city, while as much as possible isolating the role businesses play in the branding of a neighborhood (often through those changes and investment). The difference in level of gentrification and re-investment between the neighborhoods indicates varying abilities between the neighborhoods to attract businesses, who the businesses that are present serve, and their perspective on how to engage with the neighboring community. This investigation highlights such differences and similarities.

A brief history of Anacostia
While public perception often considers everything on the eastern side of the Anacostia River as “Anacostia,” Anacostia officially only constitutes one of twelve neighborhoods in Ward 8 (Lowe 2010, 10). In accordance with its definition as a neighborhood, I bound Anacostia using the lines given by the National Park Service, as “bounded by Martin Luther King Ave. on the west, Good Hope Rd. on the north, Fendall St. and the rear of the Frederick Douglass home on the east, and Bangor St. and Morris Rd. on the south” (Anacostia Historic District). Anacostia began as farmland, comprising numerous plantations, and until the 1960s included a White community, Uniontown, and a Black community, Hillsdale. Famous writer and abolitionist Frederick Douglass lived in Anacostia in the late 1800s and played an active role in guiding the community (Lowe 2010, 37). In the 1940s and 50s, urban renewal policies cleared so-called “blighted” areas in other parts of DC, pushing many to Southeast. The 20,000 people who were moved out of Southwest Washington DC needed somewhere to go (Norton, 2005; 223). New low-income apartment complexes were built, transforming its previously quasi-rural atmosphere (Lowe 2010, 44). With White flight and the further disinvestment of the 1960s, Anacostia become a predominantly Black neighborhood (Preserving Neighborhood History, 2011).

By the 1970s, city zoning laws designated “almost 75 percent of the land area in Far Southeast for apartment buildings,” encouraging private land speculation at the expense of community residents (Lowe 2010, 48). These discriminatory policies caused Anacostia to become a place of concentrated poverty; media coverage reified public, particularly non-Southeast residents’, perceptions of Anacostia as a “bad” neighborhood. Such simplistic derogatory conceptions of Anacostia, frequently incorrectly used to refer to all of east of the river, marginalize the positive attributes of the neighborhood’s identity and infringe on local residents’ ability to define the neighborhood for themselves. For example, when referring to how
they perceive their neighborhood’s identity, Anacostia residents may preface their statements by acknowledging the neighborhood’s “bad reputation,” before expressing their own opinions (Lee, 2018). They are all too aware of the singular narrative told about their neighborhood.

Over the last few decades, Anacostia has seen growth but not the same level of development and demographic change that has occurred in Shaw/U Street. For example, in 1990, Anacostia (using Area Neighborhood Council 8A), was 96 percent Black non-Hispanic. In 2010, it still was home to 96 percent Black residents (DC 2012 ANC Profile: 8A). The neighborhood’s average family income has marginally decreased over the past few decades. In 1979, the average family income was $54,223. Between 2011 and 2015, it was $48,113 (+/- $7,574). Income is not nearly enough to describe the wellbeing of a neighborhood, but it does provide some indication as to the amount of development and socioeconomic change in an area. While historically neglected, Anacostia and its surrounding areas “are experiencing great change,” making understanding its current identity and planning its future identity with intentionality imperative (Lowe 2010, 13).

**A brief history of Shaw/U Street**

I combine Shaw and the nearby U Street corridor, as the two areas are contiguous and very much part of the same neighborhood based on location and shared history. In my research, I define Shaw/U Street as “bounded by 15th Street, NW to the west, Florida Avenue to the north, North Capitol Street to the east, and M Street to the south” (Hyra, 2017: 175). Shaw/U Street has been a majority-Black neighborhood since its conception. The name “Shaw” even comes from Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, who led one of the first official Black units in the Civil War (Sheir, 2011).
Until the mid-twentieth century, Shaw’s prominence as an artistic and cultural hub led to its image as the “Harlem of DC.” Many African American luminaries lived in or frequented the neighborhood, including Langston Hughes and Duke Ellington. U Street garnered the reputation of a “Black Broadway.” Howard University, positioned at the northeastern edge of the neighborhood, provided young people and intellectuals, furthering the area’s renown. This “era of self-reliance and racial isolation” came to an end in the 1960s. Governmental policies, lack of private investment, and riots caused the neighborhood became entangled in drugs, crime, and high-poverty rates (Hyra, 2017: 17).

In the 1990s, the tide began to change. In the past couple decades, Shaw/U Street has arguably gentrified. Although the term “gentrified” implies some sort of achieved status, the neighborhood has not reached some final immutable state. Shaw/U Street continues to evolve just like any neighborhood does and, in its particular case, to gentrify further (Washington, D.C., Gentrification Maps and Data). The emergence of gentrified neighborhoods like Shaw/U Street represent “a distinct type of urban community (that) differs considerably from the neighborhoods studied in past classics of urban sociology” (Clark, 2011: 217). For example, amenities such as schools and churches, emphasized by the old Chicago School of urban studies, no longer hold such relevance. In gentrifying neighborhoods, the influx in young professionals “creates a social profile geared toward recreation and consumption”; the significance of the businesses located there has only grown (Clark, 2011: 217-218). Part of Shaw/U Street (using ANC 6E) on the other hand, contained a population that was 90 percent Black in 1990, but only 57 percent Black in 2010 (DC 2012 ANC Profile: 6E). Its average family income has more than doubled from just over $40,000 in 1979 to approximately $88,000 in 2011-2015 (ibid.). Additionally, the
population of the neighborhood has grown significantly. These factors make a compelling case for Shaw/U Street as a neighborhood that has gentrified.

Comparisons

Albeit the wide divergences in the neighborhoods’ histories, the decisions of White-owned and controlled banks and companies to deny capital sent both Anacostia and Shaw/U Street on “downward spiral(s)” into “concentrated poverty pockets” from the 1960s till the 1990s (Hyra, 2017: 6). Declining incomes and populations led to declining retail and neighborhood conditions. Shaw/U Street and Anacostia are just two examples of a national phenomenon; across the country, between 1970 and 2000, the number of central city neighborhoods with a middle-income profile halved (Chapple and Jacobus, 2009). This period constructed the idea of cities as places of poverty, crime, and drug markets; the Shaw/U Street and Anacostia neighborhoods were not exempt (Hyra, 2017: 3). Over the past couple of decades however, the areas have begun to receive investment, although differing levels, once again. Hyra (2017) writes that Shaw/U Street’s “economic and racial transformation is starkly apparent;” for example, the intersection of 14th and U Street went from an infamous drug market into a farmers’ market (3). The differences in recent investment and development affect the businesses that exist in the neighborhoods, who their customer bases are, and how they engage with the community. With the newly erected condos across the river, the construction of a large park, and the impending opening of more expensive sit-down restaurants, the arrival of gentrification in Anacostia seems only a matter of time, making the fall of 2018 a unique and fleeting time to gain insights from these two neighborhoods. Shaw/U Street and Anacostia are two neighborhoods with their own unique and important contexts; however, they both possess historic neighborhood designations and faced decades of disinvestment- and racial discrimination-caused problems.
Methodology

Data collection

To answer my research question, I conducted a literature review, learned about the histories of the areas I conducted research in for context, and relied primarily on qualitative data. I chose to investigate this topic using qualitative research as it allows respondents to describe their experiences in their own words, is an effective method for learning from voices that are not often heard, and adds nuance to a topic that is so often studied quantitatively but without much space for study participants to shape the nature of how something is evaluated. Within these neighborhoods, I spoke with workers and owners at businesses located within the area as well as staff at nonprofits supporting local business development to gain insight as to how businesses influence the development and identities of neighborhoods and the communities that inhabit them.

I conducted a total of 31 interviews to reach both a point of code and meaning saturation (Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi). I spoke with owners and workers at businesses in the Shaw/U Street and Anacostia neighborhoods of Washington DC, as well as with staff at nonprofits that support business development in those parts of DC. I spent time in Shaw/U Street and Anacostia to gain a better sense of each place. I frequently rode a bike to interviews and spent time afterward walking around the area. I spoke with 10 workers and owners of businesses in the Shaw/U Street neighborhood, and 7 in the Anacostia neighborhood to gain insight into how businesses interact with their local communities, and how the two shape one another. I also interviewed 10 people at organizations that supported these businesses. 4 other interviews proved useful in informing my thesis but came from people working for affordable housing or neighborhood promotion rather than strictly a business or business development organization. In
my research, I defined business development organizations as organizations that provide business coaching, offer loans or financing, and/or promote the overall business ecosystem of an area. Having several interviewees that differed from the rest in terms of their neighborhood role and relation to businesses resulted from the refining of my research question through the investigative process.

These businesses varied tremendously in their ages, customer segmentation, ownership, and product offerings. Some of them catered to the incoming class of young professionals, offering higher-end products and services. Other businesses had been established for decades. For example, I spoke with a manager at a high-end boutique fitness studio, where a 50-minute class can cost upwards of $30. I spoke with the founder of a business that installs affordable solar panels for low-income families. I met with Virginia Ali, who co-founded Ben’s Chili Bowl in 1958, to workers at restaurant franchises that had only moved into the area in the last five years. This breadth of businesses offered different lenses into the question of in the eyes of staff and owners, what role businesses play in communities.

To identify which businesses I interviewed, I relied on snowball and convenience sampling. In determining whether a business or organization was linked to a neighborhood, I primarily relied on its physical office or store as well as its service area. For example, while Cava has restaurants in a wide array of places, I was interested in the perspective and impact of the restaurant located in the Shaw/U Street Corridor. With regards to organizations that support business development, such as Wacif (Washington Area Community Investment Fund) or LEDC (Latino Economic Development Corporation), I chose to interview ones that had strong ties to Shaw/U Street or Anacostia; while they may serve a wider region, these organizations were strongly tied to at least one of these neighborhoods.
I began my data collection by meeting with a few community development financial institutions and other nonprofits supporting economic development. These organizations, such as the Latino Economic Development Center, Anacostia Economic Development Corporation, City First Enterprises, among others – possessed well-established websites and points of contact. By meeting with them, I was able to learn more about the local business ecosystem as a whole. They provided me with recommendations of others to speak with and offered insight as to how these economic development organizations think about the role of businesses. I then researched businesses in Anacostia and Shaw/U Street online and reached out to a number of them. Many I reached out to never responded, and those I did interview were self-selecting in choosing to speak with me. Some organizations, such as the rapidly expanding Compass Coffee, did reply, but stated that they were too busy to chat.

Fortunately, many of the interviewees recommended others to speak with; snowball sampling aided in connecting with people I may otherwise have overlooked or not been able to contact. While connecting with businesses online via email and phone calls to set up an interview provided valuable connections, I also spent time in Anacostia and Shaw/U Street entering businesses I encountered and chatting with the staff I met. Convenience sampling afforded me the opportunity to speak with people in a geographical area, as well as with people whose voices I would not have been able to hear had I relied solely on setting up formal recorded interviews. Employees generally had much less time to chat (although I did try to time my visits to match off-hours) and did not want to be recorded or identified in the study. While several people refused to speak with me, I was impressed and humbled by the number of people who did take the time to talk with me and offer their perspective. For my interviews with workers, I jotted
down notes afterward but maintained the confidentiality of the person and organization with I spoke with.

By interviewing business owners, employees, and business development organization staff, I gained insight into the perspective of these actors on how they view their role and the overall role of business. For local business owners, I learned about what aspects of their business they view as most important, who they include in their definitions of community, and what active steps they take, if any, to shape their surroundings. Employees provided a sense of how a person’s relation to or position in a business affects what aspects of the business and its interaction with the local area are most salient. Interviewing staff at organizations that provide business coaching, business planning and development, and microloans offered another key perspective, as these groups face different pressures than people at individual businesses and see development on more of a neighborhood level rather than on an individual enterprise level.

I employed a different set of questions depending on people’s positions and the type of group they worked for. In addition, the questions I asked shifted over time as I gained more insight into which questions generated more pertinent responses. These interviews reflected the style of semi-structured open-ended elicitations. While I had a standard set of questions, the conversation flowed organically and I would follow up on points that were not necessarily listed on my question sheet. This strategy allowed me to probe at what was most salient to the interviewee and provided more nuanced responses to what I was asking. Questions common across business owners and staff include inquiring about the person’s relation to the business or nonprofit, how long they have worked there, who their customers are, how they chose to locate the business in a particular place, who they consider part of their community, and how they engage with the local neighborhood. For business development organizations, I also asked about
the employee’s position, experience and background, but additionally inquired about the broader business ecosystem and how they envisioned development of the area (given that their financing and technical assistance programs aim to promote small businesses and economic development).

In the appendix I have included a table of the organizations and businesses at which I interviewed people, what type of stakeholder I classified them as, and what DC neighborhood they are located in. The repetition of a couple of organization’s names indicates that I spoke to more than one person at that organization because they had different roles in supporting businesses.

**Limitations**

My reliance on snowball and convenience sampling means I primarily interviewed people who either knew each other or that I happened upon walking around the Shaw/U Street and Anacostia neighborhoods. There definitely exist a plethora of voices that I missed in gathering my research. As with any research grounded on interviews, my data are also somewhat self-selecting. People had to agree to speak with me, whether that be recorded or a more informal chat. Numerous businesses declined to do so, either because they had a busy day, or because they said they simply “don’t do that.” For example, an Asian carry-out restaurant quickly declined to speak with me after I explained I was doing research and not just a hungry customer. There were also spaces I felt I should not intrude upon, both out of respect and because of a certain level of my own discomfort as a White outsider to the neighborhood. As an outsider, and as a White Georgetown student, my positionality played a role in who I spoke with and perhaps what they said. This situation occurred several times when a business was simply too busy with customers, or if I thought people would feel I was entering a space I had no right to, such as a local corner
store that also served as a spot to meet up or hang out. Remaining cognizant of positional dynamics is key to any research that involves interpersonal interactions.

This study’s investigation is set in mixed-use neighborhoods, meaning that they contain both residential and commercial properties. Being able to live and hire in the neighborhood depends on this dense mixed-use city model; the processes by which businesses influence neighborhood identities would function differently with single-use area zoning. While power dynamics, economic constraints, and the intersectionality of identities play crucial roles in many places around the world, the interactions between businesses, communities, and their neighborhoods described in this study has much less applicability in single-use developments.

The results are very applicable to the particular places I studied, but still not comprehensive and the interviewees’ perspectives should not be used as a proxy for broader extrapolation. While the insights they provided and general themes of this research do provide lessons that can even inform the way we conceptualize business and neighborhood identity on a global level, the contexts, perspectives, and relationships presented here are particular to these stakeholders in these areas at the time in which this data was collected. Furthermore, as is any qualitative research, my analysis is subjective. What I “discover is necessarily refracted through the lens of who” I am (Modan, 2007: 11).

Analytical Notes

After conducting a literature review and collecting the data, I delved into analysis. I first transcribed the 20 recorded interviews; 10 interviewees were happy to speak but wished not to be recorded. I then created a codebook based off of themes and terminology that were recurrent in the interviews and used it to analyze the data. For example, the topic of diversity came up frequently in conversation. When asked what they valued about a place, numerous respondents
included diversity in their answer. After scouring my interviews, I noticed the connection some
of them made between recent development and diversity. I then went back through all my
interviews and noted when the topic arose. A general outline of my codebook is included in the
appendix.

In my writing, I capitalize race and ethnicity (e.g. Black, White, Asian, Latinx) because
the terms refer to more than just a color. I furthermore use Black instead of African American in
recognition of the fact that some Black people do not identify as African American, but still face
the racism and discrimination imposed on Blacks of vastly different backgrounds across the
United States. Additionally, when referring to an unknown third person in singular, I use the
term “they” instead of “he or she” to be gender inclusive. This particular usage of “they” does
not indicate multiple people.

Results

Financial Constraints

In both the Shaw/U Street and Anacostia neighborhoods, most of the interviewees
highlighted financial viability a priority before everything else. Regardless of their views on
engaging with the neighborhood, price point, equity, gentrification, community, and many other
topics, they iterated that their impact was very much confined by the economic constraints they
faced. These limitations applied to various actors within the business ecosystem, from owners to
workers to staff at nonprofits supporting local businesses.

While any successful business must abide by the laws of supply and demand for their
products, the rents businesses paid to lease their spaces emerged as a recurrent obstacle,
particularly in Shaw. These complaints emanated from a context ripe with rising rents, new
development, and increasing gentrification. Anika Hobbs, owner of a business in Anacostia that
prides itself on Afrocentric fashion items, struggles with the conundrum of making a living, keeping her products affordable, and paying the artists and producers of those products a fair amount. While she followed something she loved doing, “entrepreneurship is not for everyone.” She continued,

It is kind of tough being mission-driven and also being in a capitalist society, because that’s what we have to maintain it, so it’s like how do you do that but the capitalist is robbing the artist, so how do I do this without robbing the artist but still having margins, to where people want to shop here, that we’re actually a viable option in terms of spending their money?

My interview with Anika offered a glimpse of the complexity of the impact and constraints of businesses. She sincerely wishes to pay employees and producers fair wages, but also wants to maintain low prices to increase sales volume and make her products more affordable.

Furthermore, several interviewees listed access to financing and capital as absolutely imperative to their ability to start a business. They also noted the importance of continued business coaching and loans to maintain their businesses. Washington, DC has several laws on residential leases and affordable housing, such as the Tenants’ Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA), but very little legislation with the aim of maintaining low rents for businesses. High rents play into a feedback loop where only well-capitalized businesses serving middle to higher-income clientele can survive. Wanda Tia Bamberg, who has owned gyms catering primarily to African-American women and who has made an effort to keep prices affordable, stated that the high prices charged by competitor boutique fitness studios, a staple of gentrifying neighborhoods, is “forced by the rents they pay.” Bamberg has moved her business nine times since she opened. Sarah Buie, a young woman who manages a boutique fitness studio, agreed, expressing that in her industry “it’s hard to be profitable.” This statement may seem surprising
for a fitness studio that does very little community engagement outside of servicing its customers and charges upwards of $30 per class.

Johnny Seikaly, a former business owner and now employee at a development corporation, said, “There is low income housing; what about low-income retail space? … again, it gets back to financial feasibility.” Johnny’s point demonstrates the shortcoming of solely providing affordable housing. Where can low-income residents purchase goods or services if businesses increase prices to profit more from an incoming group of people with more disposable income or to merely survive rising rents? And how can people with low incomes start or run their own businesses when the amount of capital required becomes unattainable? Johnny’s line of thinking does not conflict with the idea of marketplace competition – he even noted later in the interview the importance of it – but rather the need to maintain a diverse marketplace that does not solely cater to those with the most money.

The costs incurred by a business affect its profit margins, as well as its pricing schemes. Certain types of goods – for example, fresh produce or fair-trade items – generally cost more to source. Other factors such as rent and employee wages also play a large role in determining how much a business must charge to be profitable. The prices a business charges affect its impact on the neighborhood and who feels comfortable there. This effect is part of the reason pricey gyms and grocery stores act as harbingers of commercial and residential gentrification.

To combat a scarcity of financial capital, businesses rely on different means. Tyoka Jackson, owner of two IHOP restaurants in DC, one of which was the only sit-down restaurant in Ward 8 when it opened, uses and recommends different techniques to maintain fiscal sustainability at his Ward 8 restaurant in comparison with the other one in Columbia Heights, a neighborhood near Shaw/U Street that has also undergone significant development in recent years. While the prices
at each IHOP are the same, the operating hours differ due to the greater demand in Columbia Heights.

When talking about his Ward 8 location, he emphasized the importance of government incentives, “because you’re going into an area that has been for so long undervalued and ignored.” Mark Davis, founder of a company that installs solar panels, echoed a similar point. When deciding to begin a solar panel installation company, he understood that entering the solar business would be “very expensive.” Some industries are prohibitively costly for entrepreneurs to enter, pushing many entrepreneurs with little financial resources into industries that require less startup capital. For Mark Davis, entering the solar industry required “help from the government.”

Competing with the larger guys who are well financed, that was kind of tough. You’re a one-man band trying to compete with the larger guys, so it took time and patience to learn as you grow. And you make a mistake here and there, just hope it’s not too expensive.

Since its founding, Davis’s company has installed panels at “a couple thousand homes,” but Davis is quick to admit that much of that may not have happened without the low-income assistance program that provides incentives.

The staff I interviewed at nonprofits were also keenly aware of the importance of sufficient capitalization for businesses. One employee, Flynn Mahoney, expressed how nonprofits are also strapped for financial resources and “have limitations too.” This scarcity forces nonprofits like his to make difficult decisions about prioritizing where to allocate the money. Such choices have tradeoffs, differentially affecting the amount of investment and various forms of capital possessed by particular businesses and areas. Financial limitations
emerged as a recurrent theme in relation to its bearing on what community a business serves and how.

**A tie to the physical space**

An almost ubiquitous sentiment among the business owners and nonprofit staff I interviewed involved financial constraints. Despite this seeming ubiquity, interviewees had very different levels of community engagement and connected with the neighborhood in myriad ways. Regardless of any personal connection to the neighborhood, businesses’ (and the supporting nonprofits’) level of engagement with the neighborhood depended on how linked the organization was to the physical space of the neighborhood. The literal space or area the organization resides in, not its sense of place. As the histories of these neighborhoods has illustrated, the perception people have of the neighborhoods and their sense of place may vary greatly. The level of a business’s engagement with the neighborhood and the residing communities was much greater and sustained if the business had some linkage to that physical space.

For example, Ben’s Chili Bowl has been open in the same location since 1958. Over this period, the Shaw/U Street neighborhood has changed dramatically, from a vibrant Black neighborhood, to one confronting disinvestment and drugs, to a hip gentrifying area. Ben’s Chili Bowl is not connected to the sense of place fostered in the area, but rather the Shaw/U Street neighborhood itself. Co-founder Virginia Ali spoke extensively about the neighborhood, and her business’s evolving role. Founded in a thriving Black community, she talked about how after the 1968 riots Ben’s Chili Bowl became “a beacon of light for a long time when no one else was out here.” She talked about the impact of the city doing subway construction nearby, and about other longstanding local businesses. For Ali, being part of the community was never a choice, it
simply was. Ali and her business’s connection to the neighborhood emerges out of being deeply embedded in the area’s history. Ali’s sons have opened up other locations of Ben’s Chili Bowl, but none of the others have the same spatial tie.

In my interviews, other factors contributed to whether or not the owner, staff, or nonprofit employee felt the organization connected with the location. For example, businesses whose clientele were primarily local tended to be more engaged as well. A neighborhood pharmacy in Anacostia that had long been established in the neighborhood and served neighborhood residents diverged from a typical pharmacy business plan. One employee noted the level of trust between business and customer that arises from knowing each other and said that the pharmacy even gives out turkeys on Thanksgiving. Such a practice helps build a community that revolves around living in the same neighborhood.

While the tie to a physical neighborhood may indicate small businesses as contributing to this community based on neighborhood more than a larger business, my interviews demonstrated that it is not the size or number of locations a business has that determine its engagement with the local community, but rather this linkage to space. Several small businesses I spoke with saw little connection between their business, the surrounding communities, and the neighborhood. This lack of connection with the proximate physical space was most common among interviewees who didn’t tie their organization to the particular neighborhood but instead to a general idea, like economic development for nonprofits or a business plan for enterprises. In these examples, the interviewee generally did not emphasize the importance of the area’s history to the organization, a focus on hiring local or where most of their customer base lives, or a particular role for the business in contributing to the neighborhood identity as a whole.
While both Anacostia and Shaw have a distinct and noticeable sense of place, businesses in Anacostia seemed more tied to their specific space than in Shaw, perhaps due to a greater connection with the area history (which is space specific) and the sustenance of one of the last almost entirely Black communities in DC. Interview respondents in Anacostia expressed stronger ties to the neighborhood and a stronger spatial community than in Shaw/U Street. Although Ben’s Chili Bowl co-founder Virginia Ali stated that “we are a community-based place” in Shaw/U Street, the rapid demographic and commercial turnover has decreased the number of residents and businesses that have navigated the area’s history together and diminished the neighborhood’s spatial community. On the flip side, Anacostia has yet to experience such transformation and retains a stronger link between its commercial and residential stakeholders with the neighborhood. This phenomenon most likely is caused by the number of long-term residents and its image as one of the remaining nearly entirely Black neighborhoods of Washington, DC. Engaging with spatial and race-based communities thus increases in salience.

For example, the owner of a franchise restaurant located in Anacostia viewed engagement with the local community and contributing to the neighborhood’s welfare as absolutely essential. Tyoka Jackson chose to begin an IHOP in Anacostia very intentionally. He “saw it as an area that needed food options” and furthermore was the “community where [his] dad grew up, and again [his] brother was a police officer.” Although IHOP is a chain restaurant, Jackson opened up a location to be “for families” and to provide a dining experience that was not being offered in the neighborhood. Jackson’s view of the business being integrated into the neighborhood has influenced how he operates the Anacostia location, from providing a space for local meetings to imposing a dress code for customers. Jackson said the dress code maintains an atmosphere of a family restaurant and has precluded the location from becoming what he said naysayers called
“ghetto.” When asked about the difference between being a franchise owner and being a small business owner, Jackson delineated several benefits of being a franchise.

It’s a very tough business, and most restaurants fail fast. The vast majority fail within the first year. And you can find that percentage quite easily, but it is a high percentage. However, that number reduces drastically when that restaurant is a franchise. And when you start to talk about one of the most recognized family dining, if not the most, family dining brands in the world, chance of failing goes down just because of brand recognition and training support. It was important for us to come up with a brand that people would recognize and respect it, and knew exactly what they were getting.

Jackson’s assertions challenged the simplified categorization of small and local contributing to a stronger neighborhood community with franchises as corporate villains. Small businesses may in fact be more likely to be invested in the local neighborhood, but Jackson’s narrative serves as a reminder that such a pattern is correlative. Businesses’ contribution to the neighborhood’s community is more dependent on connection to the space itself. My interviews indicated a deeper spatial connection in Anacostia than in Shaw. Most interviewees connected to the area’s history, both because they or their family had lived there for years (if not decades), or because they felt connected with its historical Black community. On the other hand, while Shaw still has many long-term residents and a history of Black community, the influx of people and businesses new to the neighborhood and the gentrification of the area have shifted what communities are most visible.

For instance, Cava is a newly founded fast casual chain with a location in Shaw. According to an employee, the company has opened more than 60 locations since it was founded less than 10 years ago, in 2011. Cava opened its Shaw location in December 2016. The worker I spoke
with lives in Columbia Heights, but has noticed changes even in the few years he has worked in Shaw. He described most customers as White, although with a good number of students from nearby Howard University, who tend to be Black. He did not know of any ways Cava was engaging with proximate residents or with passersby. Given the restaurant’s primary clientele (non-long-term residents), its recent arrival, and dearth of community engagement activities, Cava seems to connect with the current sense of place of Shaw as a growing, diverse, and gentrifying area rather than the complex history of the neighborhood itself.

These findings do not evaluate if a business’s impact on the neighborhood is good or bad, rather, they illuminate a link between businesses and spatial communities. Being deeply connected to a specific area and its historical sense(s) of place, rather than the perception of place the area at the moment possesses, makes a business more likely to foster community; the existence or lack of such a spatial community constitutes a salient part of a neighborhood’s identity.

**Connecting a business’s identity with that of the neighborhood**

If an interviewee believed their business or business-supporting nonprofit to be connected in some way to the neighborhood, they relied on the identity or identities they or their organization shared with the neighborhood. Such commonalities include race, age group of residents, organizational mission, type of amenities available, and spatial community, among others. The degree to which such a shared identity matters in connecting a business with the neighborhood depended on the interviewee’s organizational positionality. As an owner or manager, the shared identity helped select for which communities the business was a part of. As a lower-level staff member, the influence of the interviewee on the organization waned, and along with it, the relevance of their shared identities in determining what attributes a business added to the
neighborhood’s sense of place. Although workers I interviewed may have still connected with some attribute of the business or neighborhood, they had less of a role in shaping it.

Anika Hobbs, who owns the Afrocentric boutique shop Nubian Hueman, wanted to be “in a neighborhood that was predominantly people of color.” Although Hobbs has no familial ties to DC or Anacostia, she saw the neighborhood as a place to connect with because of its Black history and the pride she takes in overcoming adversity to start a business by and for Black people.

Being a … Black person in the US, for me, I think it’s a lot about pride. I think just seeing what we’re able to create through the difficulties, the odds that are against us, whether they’re able to be seen or not, and still strive for excellence and creating is something I really appreciate.

Wanda Tia Bamberg, who founded a fitness studio that catered primarily to Black women in an industry that has long excluded such a demographic, also believed race to be important in the clientele and beneficiaries of a business. As she said, “African Americans, we buy different when the owner is Black.” Bamberg’s comment echoes scholar Timothy Bates’s study (2006) that Black-owned businesses are more likely to hire and serve people of color. Because of the history of institutionalized racism and how it has manifested itself in spatial and economic segregation, race matters quite a lot when talking about a business’s impact on who feels welcome in a neighborhood. Businesses play a fundamental role in shaping (and are in turn shaped by) the demographics of a neighborhood. They attract or deter people because of individual preferences, but also because of sociological factors.

While personal identities mattered a great deal for how an interviewee connected or not with the neighborhood, the level of perceived organizational engagement with a community depended
most on how decisionmakers for the business used them to connect with their clientele. For example, the pharmacy in Anacostia had established trust among community members by its long-term establishment and involvement with the community. It connected with the spatial community of its clientele. For Busboys and Poets, which has multiple locations that in addition to serving food, sell books and host events centered around social justice, the connection with neighborhood identity is built into its brand as a business. While the business’s owner did not grow up in DC nor is he Black, he structured the business to include the mission of being a “community where racial and cultural connections are consciously uplifted.”

By incorporating this objective into the business model, it becomes linked to Busboys and Poets’ identity as a business and thus acts as a primary avenue for community engagement. Building such a mission into the organization’s identity was commonplace among interviewees at nonprofits. While some of them did not live in the neighborhood they served or identify with its sense of place, the nonprofits’ missions provided an identity through which it connected with the neighborhood. Through this mission-based identity, the nonprofit engaged with community members in relevant meetings.

**Diversity and neighborhood branding**

Shaw/U Street and Anacostia for decades have been predominantly Black neighborhoods. The racial identity of these neighborhoods has very much shaped how people perceive the neighborhood, what businesses operate and open there, and what the demographic composition is. Historically, racism against these neighborhoods led to disinvestment, discriminatory policing, and White flight. Today, Shaw/U Street has become a hub of “diversity.” Many of the interviewees in the Shaw/U Street neighborhood emphasized how diverse the area now is. For example, the manager of the boutique fitness studio said, “We see a lot of diversity in this studio.
I think it’s a product of the neighborhood itself. We try to be open to that. Also, again it’s one of the things I really like about it.” Her comments refer to the racial makeup of the studio’s classes, although she also expressed that the classes are diverse socioeconomically, while simultaneously not being affordable for everyone.

Although much more racially homogenous, interviewees in Anacostia (who were all Black) also noted and appreciated the diversity in their neighborhood. In their references to diversity, they included race but also other types of diversity, such as gender and socioeconomic level. For instance, as business owner Tyoka Jackson put it:

I would say it's also important for us, when we talk about diversity to not just talk about racial diversity, you know gender diversity and sexual orientation diversity. I think that's a big part of the restaurant industry as well and we take pride in being a place that is welcoming for all Americans and all visitors. But also, a place where we welcome our employees that run the gamut of race, gender, and orientation as well.

Jackson’s comments highlight the fact that different images are conjured for different people when they talk about diversity. Another owner of an Anacostia business, Mark Davis, echoed Jackson’s point. “I like Anacostia. I like people here. I think it's just fantastic, with the cultural mix that we have going on, restaurants and activities.” Their comments reflect current and past ideas of the neighborhood’s sense of place.

Vaughn Perry, who has worked with his nonprofit on an equitable development plan for a bridge project connecting with Anacostia, expressed hopes of an even more diverse, and accessible, future.

So in the future ideally I would love to see communities where they can have diverse demographics and especially as it relates to economics, there doesn't have to be a
concentration of any particular income, but for them to find, for there to be ways where no matter what income level you are at, you can feel like you have a safe and secure home.

Diverse spaces do not always emerge from the intersection of historical processes and coincidental business decisions, they are also created (or destroyed) by intentional choices.

The diversity of Shaw/U Street seemed a major component of how people both in and outside of the neighborhood perceived it; however, if one takes a stroll for only a short bit of time, they may notice the deeply ingrained micro-segregation that persists. While I did not interview workers at either of these places, a new coffee shop and a carryout restaurant exemplified this observation. At the carryout restaurant, nearly everyone in line was Black. In the coffee shop, while there were people of color, not one of them was Black. This discrepancy seemed based off both race and class. Although this clearly is but a single example, it represents the stark divides that remain even under facades of integrated diversity.

Shaw/U Street has transformed its sense of place, from one of a Black community to one of diversity. At the Howard Theatre, a historical emblem of Black entertainment in Washington, DC, employee Hannah Wubishet noted how the theatre’s audience has reflected the changes of Shaw/U Street, “becoming more … diverse.” The theatre’s path also echoes the economic vibrancy of the neighborhood, shutting down several times in the 1970s and 1980s but reopening in 2012 with the wave of investment that has come. The Howard Theatre, along with restaurants such as Busboys and Poets (in reference to Langston Hughes’s occupations) or Marvin (referencing the singer Marvin Gaye), provide an example of businesses acting as curators of history. They pay some sort of homage to Black artists with local ties, celebrating their
accomplishments. In other ways, they neglect the discrimination and adversity these figures faced because of that Blackness.

Businesses must decide how they interact with the history of the area in which they open for business – there is no abstention. Those that do not recognize such history facilitate forgetting. Businesses that engage with the history must be intentional about what they promote and what they omit. One choice is not necessarily better or more ethical than another; what we must emphasize is the question of who curates a neighborhood’s historical narrative, why, and how that affects current stakeholders’ claim to shape that space. While not the only actor in shaping the narrative, businesses constitute an important one.

In addition to the actual statistics on socioeconomic or racial diversity, exists the perception of socioeconomic and racial makeup and inclusivity. Perception can have even more implications than the actual demographic makeup. The perception of Shaw/U Street as diverse, gritty, and growing contributes to its appeal to young professionals and gentrifiers. On the other hand, in a conversation with another student about my research, he exclaimed, “Oh Anacostia, isn’t that supposed to be a bad neighborhood?” Although the neighborhood has gotten safer, the bias against Blackness, particularly lower-income Blackness, remains strong. Such perceptions in aggregate shape cultural paradigms, which ultimately influence the allocation of capital and policy decisions.

Businesses also affect the identity of a neighborhood with their price points. If an area only has expensive fine dining, people with lower incomes will be less able to afford to live in or visit the area. The neighborhood may shift from lower to middle or upper class; such change in availability of disposable income reflects a fundamental shift in the neighborhood’s identity. One group displacing another group of people based on different income levels embodies the classic
original denotation of gentrification, wherein the gentry displace the working class. Studies on gentrification today recognize the process is more complex than that, varies, and in the US often has a racial component; however, the idea of competing claims to access and shape a neighborhood persists. Businesses only have so much agency in their price points, as they must navigate the pressures of rent and frequent tradeoffs between quality/ethicality and frugality of supply chains. Anika Hobbs grapples with paying her producers fair wages while maintaining prices that are affordable. With her price points, she feels the store may be a certain type of gentrifier. They're used to seeing this (the products), they're not used to seeing it for $120. And like, I know I am presenting a different level and that has typically been here before, east of the river, so I often think about that too, like my price point, and my gentrifying, am I keeping out the community that I'm seeking to be part of? Thus, while Hobbs does promote an Afro-centric identity that has long been marginalized in the US and caters primarily to African American women, she understands the importance of prices in accessibility and their implications on neighborhoods and resident communities.

**A collective re-creation and sustenance of place**

The line between revitalizing neighborhoods and causing gentrification is a thin one. As scholar Neil Smith investigates (1986), the cycle between capitalist disinvestment and reinvestment is a difficult one to break. Because of this delicate balance, people like Anika Hobbs who are promoting styles and cultures that are underrepresented in the United States, must grapple with the economic effects their businesses have.

Located in Anacostia, a new juice bar aims to provide new amenities to the neighborhood without being a force for gentrification. They offer healthy and vegan options at lower prices. An employee noted that the business is owned by a Black woman, and that it serves a wide array of
demographics. Across the street lies the future site of a Busboys and Poets, a DC restaurant chain that has a focus on social justice and community involvement. Busboys and Poets is owned by Andy Shallal, an Iraqi-American activist and lifelong admirer of poet Langston Hughes. Turning Natural Juice Bar and Busboys and Poets both possess ostensible missions of local engagement and serving marginalized communities. However, Ty Harvin, who also lives nearby, believes that shops like Busboys and Poets pave the way for gentrification and externally driven neighborhood change.

For instance, say when that Busboys comes in. That'll bring a new face to this area but when those houses behind the Busboys are gone, that'll change completely and then all you need in Southeast is a Whole Foods in this area, … but when a Whole Foods comes it's completely going to change this area. Then you'd have more White people who'd be like, “I'll live down there now, you know Anacostia Park's right there.”

During our conversation, Harvin recognized the area’s lack of amenities and need for an inflow of capital. He pointed out the lack of gas stations in Ward 8 and questioned why a person cannot buy certain goods at the few proximate grocery stores. Harvin concurrently talked about the impact of an inflow in capital, such as the planned new location for Busboys and Poets. Despite the restaurant’s engagement with the surrounding community and commitment to social causes, Harvin sees it as being a stepping stone for gentrification. In his perspective, it may be the tipping point that makes Whites and people with higher incomes more comfortable in moving to Anacostia. Such an influx could drive up prices and transform the neighborhood from historic, Black, and comprising long-term residents, to a very different place. In Jackson’s eyes, the arrival of a restaurant like Busboys and Poets could act as a harbinger or perhaps direct cause of subsequent gentrification.
Processes like economic development and gentrification generally involve a multitude of actors. In Shaw/U Street, many interviewees, particularly those who had lived in the neighborhood for decades, were excited about the increased heterogeneity and flood of new businesses. For them, the wave of investment was not something new, but rather, a return of the thriving economic scene they had participated in a few decades prior. Business owner Stanley Mayes has lived in Shaw/U Street for decades, and voiced this idea of an although different, return to vibrancy.

Except now it just has, I was around here before the riots so I saw this community when every available storefront was taken up with a business and so the fact that it has now come back to a point where almost every available storefront is taken up with a business, albeit different businesses, that was not something that to me was a major change, it's just simply a revision back to the way things were.

Mayes employs the newly opened businesses as an indicator of a revitalization of the neighborhood. He asserts that this process of economic growth is not new to the area, but simply a new cycle. The process of economic growth, as Mayes points out, requires numerous businesses. Businesses interact with one another, attracting customers with certain tastes, who then may be interested in patronizing other nearby businesses.

Hannah Wubishet, who works at the Howard Theatre, spoke about the ripple effects of businesses in proximity with one another. She talked about how when people come to see a show at the theatre, they also notice the surrounding businesses and may get dinner beforehand at a nearby restaurant or see a clothing store that they want to return to. For her, this business ecosystem created a type of community.
When people don't know about shows, people aren't … coming to support the businesses surrounding it either. So you know it's, it's everybody. And so if nobody is coming out to support here for example, they might not come out and see the store across the street and be able to buy some clothes across the street while they wait for the doors to open or go to the restaurant next door after the show is over and they still want to have drinks. You know it all is connected so it's like you know with promotions and with other businesses. It's helping each other. You know it kind of helps build the whole community.

Businesses need one another to thrive. In my interview with Virginia Ali, she referenced the slowdown in business and economic vibrancy in the neighborhood when most of the other businesses shut down. Despite their interdependency, interview respondents at businesses did not speak much about collaborating with other organizations. A few found inter-business collaboration important, but very few of them highlighted it. Thus while businesses, particularly in aggregate, play a major role in shaping a neighborhood’s sense of place, what demographics the neighborhood attracts, and different communities’ right to realize their visions for the area, they did not reference this impact. They also rarely mentioned other businesses in the area.

Interviewees at nonprofits, on the other hand, provided a very different paradigm. All 10 of the interviewees at nonprofits discussed their efforts at collaborating with businesses, the government, and/or other nonprofits. Their organizational missions depended on working together. Anaia Peddie, who works at the Washington Area Community Investment Fund nonprofit, related collaboration to community.

It's a collaborative process. So it's about understanding what the community value is, so for a lot of people in the community, it's about highlighting the fact that people live here,
there are resources here, and definitely having a hyper-local focus on bringing a lot of
these people experiences that they may have not had happen in this area.

Nonprofits’ reliance on collaboration demonstrates the importance of the larger ecosystem in
shaping a sense of place. Peddie saw collaborative events as “what allows people to begin to
associate the area with activities.” These events would showcase local businesses, as people who
participated in them would notice the surrounding area and its amenities. Through this
interaction, Peddie believed a neighborhood could create or sustain its brand. Of course, the
brand of a neighborhood is not singular nor monolithic. Places mean different things to different
people. However, the businesses present in or absent from neighborhoods directly influence the
plethora of perspectives that people hold.

Understanding how businesses shape a neighborhood is so crucial because in doing so
they advance certain claims on what a place should look like. People hold different visions for
places that matter to them, and not all visions can co-exist. These competing claims play out in a
world full of hierarchies of power, a diverse myriad of communities, and different contexts. A
business furthers one group’s right to a neighborhood based on many factors, particularly the
ones noted in this paper such as amenities provided, price point, and tie to the neighborhood. For
instance, if no businesses offering inexpensive services exist in an area, that area may become
inaccessible to people with lower incomes. As Sarah Buie pointed out, boutique fitness studios
aim to locate on the ground floor of newer condominium complexes. By doing so, they make that
complex more attractive to people who want such a service and inherently take up the space of a
business that would attract people who prefer another service.

The presence of one business and not another caters to certain people and contributes to a
neighborhood image, which then contributes to an area image. Neighborhoods do not exist in
silos. The connotation of one area affects that of other areas. In conglomerate, whose claim to a neighborhood is realized (and furthered by the businesses present) impacts who feels welcome in a much larger area. The right to the city begins with the right to the neighborhood.

**An international process**

While this research focused on the Anacostia and Shaw/U Street neighborhoods in DC, its findings proffer insight into similar global processes. Evolving neighborhoods lie host to rival claims for creating place. Gentrification, by classic definition, constitutes the displacement of the working class by the gentry. While the process is much more complex and intersectional than that, the competition between one idea of place and other ideas of what a place should be occurs globally. In addition to economic class, gentrification may involve factors like race, sexuality, and religion, among others. In regions across the globe, businesses advance the claim of some groups while neglecting or actively pushing back on others. They do this in a number of ways. Furthering one group’s ability to access a place at the expense of another can occur overtly, such as with segregation or apartheid, or can be much more subtle.

Problems of inclusion and exclusion, change and status quo, and power hierarchies exist everywhere. Businesses catering to a particular clientele increase their customers’ access to the surrounding space; in aggregate, they can make an entire neighborhood hospitable or not. Although the particular identities or organizational values that connect a business with communities in a neighborhood may differ, a struggle for space remains. Globalization has complexified and intensified this struggle, as connectivity and inequalities in capital are unprecedented.

While the findings of my research have wide implications on how businesses relate to communities and neighborhoods, we must understand its limitations and contextualization. Cities
and neighborhoods across the world possess widely ranging histories and cultures. Recognizing this limitation hopefully allows us to avoid perpetuating “an image of the city which is essentially Western, and subconsciously insist that all cities, wherever they are, be interpreted in that image” (Gandy, 2005: 40).

In Washington, DC, race and socioeconomic class play a key role in the creation and sustenance of Shaw/U Street and Anacostia’s identities. Other factors such as area history, proximity to city infrastructure, and public investment, also matter, other neighborhoods around the world have their own array of factors that interact in a quasi-feedback loop with businesses to determine who has a right to the neighborhood and on what grounds. While further research would be needed, my case study in Washington, DC illustrates heuristics that business employees, owners, and staff at supporting nonprofits use to navigate these claims to the neighborhood between and within communities.

Discussion

Garnering a more comprehensive understanding of what makes community development equitable involves examining our very definitions of what development is and who it is for. It demands that we investigate both development and equity from multiple angles. In cities, gentrification has picked up the negative connotation of engendering displacement. More amenities may be available, but for whom? Also deleterious is the disinvestment many neighborhoods face, leaving them without access to food, infrastructure, transportation, or employment. Repairing for such disinvestment through community development without displacing those who live there remains a central question.

My research furthers this question, asking not about circumventing displacement (which is necessary but not sufficient), but about ensuring that the development is community-led, and
that the development is holistic. Providing affordable homes is not enough; thriving neighborhoods must also have necessary goods and services and furthermore, facilitate community ownership of place. With community buy-in and ownership of their neighborhood comes the pride, authenticity, and development led by those with most at stake. Considering the ecosystem as a whole is crucial; investigating businesses’ role in facilitating those communities and fostering a sense of place constitutes an essential key to the puzzle. Not only do they create jobs, draw in capital, and provide amenities, businesses have the opportunity to validate people’s claims to a space.

While businesses can be exploitative or cater to those with higher incomes, they can also help empower marginalized communities. My research found that an important factor in contributing to whom they benefit is the communities they connect with. Employees, supporting nonprofits, and particularly business owners and managers engage with certain communities based off their own identities and the ones embedded within the business. If the business has a strong tie to the neighborhood itself, then it is more likely to view itself as part of a spatial community. If the business has an integral mission statement (i.e. Busboys and Poets with its commitment to social justice) or shared identity with the surrounding area (i.e. Nubian Hueman with its identification as part of the Black community), then it is more likely to serve or engage with that community.

Engaging with a community can vary from providing amenities to participating in events or forming connections with locals. The ownership, management, customer base, and organizational values interact to form this impact. In many ways, businesses are cogs in a greater economic machine, pressured to set price points, cater to certain markets, and locate in areas rich with disposable income. However, they concurrently maintain the agency be forces for the
change, maintenance, and/or communities they care about. Businesses’ connection with communities, and which one(s), matters because it shapes how they affect an area and to what degree they empower marginalized groups or reify power hierarchies.

For example, if a business has a local connection, whether through a tie to the area’s history or as part of their organizational values, it may be more likely to hire locally, offer space for community meetings, or help with neighborhood fundraisers. By engaging with certain communities (or perhaps solely with the community/communities that constitute their clientele), businesses promote certain interests. This promotion contributes to whose voice is heard, whose vision is realized, and who has a right to a place.

The findings of this thesis challenge the idea of businesses being solely economically relevant. The financials of businesses absolutely shape who has access to a space, and responses from interviewees commonly highlighted the role price points play in determining the customer base. Price points and rents shape which socioeconomic classes are welcome in certain stores, and reflect Ruth Glass’s concept of gentrification and struggle between classes. The thesis furthers Andrew Deener’s (2007) claim that “commerce generates community vitality,” and pays particular attention to which communities actually benefit from this “vitality.” It extends traditional conceptions of vitality past solely economic wellbeing, to one that also considers a sense of place and who has the right and means to determine this image.

While my results primarily relate to the neighborhood level rather than a larger area or city, this focus on the local allows the results to have more relevance to business owners and neighborhood stakeholders than results limited to more macro policies. The branding of a business, as well as how that brand then affected surrounding establishments, arose frequently in interviews and exemplified how each individual business contributes to a larger collective sense
of place. These places contain communities, which included different people depending on the respondent. Discrepancies between who was included in an interviewee’s community reflect Modan’s (2007) distinction between neighborhoods, the literal space, and communities, which inhabit that space.

Additional research on the impact of businesses on individual neighborhoods’ images and the competing claims of communities to that space could provide more insight into the variations that may be caused by different commercial compositions of neighborhoods. For example, a neighborhood heavily dominated by a particular industry may have a unique relationship between its businesses and communities. Or perhaps a neighborhood with different patterns of land ownership experiences an even different way in which businesses affect its identity. My findings illustrate the importance of connection of identity between business and community in furthering spatial claims, and provide a baseline to which further research could be compared.

Conclusion

Businesses play an important role in community development. They create jobs, provide amenities, and help shape the image of a place. While they often receive attention as economic engines, businesses are overlooked for their role in forming neighborhood identity. Each business can add a new dimension or further what makes a neighborhood unique. Collectively, they bear much weight in an area’s access to amenities and in its image; however, businesses do have their limits. They must remain financially viable; this necessity influences if and how they engage with their surrounding neighborhood. Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), Main Streets, and Community Development Corporations, among others, are critical to creating a vital business ecosystem and in helping shape the types of businesses and their relation to communities (Meltzer, 2016: 81). Organizations such as these facilitate maximizing businesses’
contributions to both the economic and community aspects of a place. As many of the interviewees at nonprofits accentuated, development must be coordinated and intentional.

This research focused on Shaw/U Street and Anacostia, as the neighborhoods both provided an exemplary setting for better understanding the intersection between business, community, and neighborhood, and because of their similarities and contrasts. Businesses have enormous potential to build on what already exists in both neighborhoods, and the responsibility to make the continuous development of identity of each neighborhood community-driven. As some development critics point out, “too often new residents and entrepreneurs have sought to “fix” the problems of Far Southeast without any notion of community assets already in place” (Lowe, 2010: 12). In accordance with Lowe’s assertion, engagement with the community becomes imperative to effective community development and identity formation through business.

Consideration of the importance of businesses to neighborhood identity should be an integral part of governmental policies on business. As Clark (2011: 7) writes, “public decisions about cultural policy shift options for nightlife, restaurants, theatre, and music, as well as schools and museums.” Because businesses influence who feels welcome in a particular space, policies that deliberately promote certain businesses ecosystems are imperative to creating a more equitable ownership of place, and thus a more just society as a whole. A major goal of these policies should be to increase accessibility and break down unwritten norms that exclude people from particular areas because of race, sexual orientation, and homelessness, among other facets of identity. This goal merits import because it fosters flourishing of all communities, regardless of culture or background. For instance, progress can be made through policies that internalize environmental externalities, incentivize entrepreneurship by people of color, encourage local
business growth, and coordinate neighborhood economic ecosystems. Businesses and the policies that regulate them play an important role in creating spaces that are more inclusive, particularly for people who have been marginalized. Fostering an intentionality around businesses’ relation to an area’s sense of place would help in making development more just and equitable. Understanding and utilizing businesses in relation to community and neighborhood identities is not only crucial to better neighborhoods, but to better cities. And as David Harvey (2003) says, the “right to the city is worth fighting for.”
Works Cited


Ogbu, L. (2017). What if gentrification was about healing communities instead of displacing them? Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/liz_ogbu_what_if_gentrification_was_about_healing_communities_instead_of_displacing_them


### Appendix

**A) Interview Log**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Type of Stakeholder</th>
<th>DC Neighborhood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nubian Hueman</td>
<td>Local business</td>
<td>Anacostia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WDC Solar</td>
<td>Local business</td>
<td>Anacostia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Hope Hydroponics</td>
<td>Local Business</td>
<td>Anacostia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juice bar(^1)</td>
<td>Local Business</td>
<td>Anacostia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio business</td>
<td>Local Business</td>
<td>Anacostia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local pharmacy</td>
<td>Local Business</td>
<td>Anacostia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anacostia Economic Development Corporation; on board of Anacostia BID</td>
<td>Nonprofit supporter</td>
<td>Anacostia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBAR and 11th St. Bridge Park</td>
<td>Nonprofit supporter</td>
<td>Anacostia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wacif</td>
<td>Nonprofit supporter</td>
<td>Anacostia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglass Community Land Trust</td>
<td>Nonprofit supporter</td>
<td>Anacostia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit focused on community development</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Anacostia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IHOP</td>
<td>Local business</td>
<td>Anacostia and Columbia Heights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MezzeBox, MCN Build</td>
<td>Local Business</td>
<td>DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City First Enterprises</td>
<td>Nonprofit supporter</td>
<td>DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPDC</td>
<td>Nonprofit supporter</td>
<td>DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City First Homes</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Area Community Investment Fund</td>
<td>Nonprofit supporter</td>
<td>DC and DMV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben's Chili Bowl</td>
<td>Local Business</td>
<td>Shaw/U Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busboys and Poets</td>
<td>Local business</td>
<td>Shaw/U Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SolidCore</td>
<td>Local Business</td>
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<td>Workit</td>
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<td>Shaw/U Street</td>
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<td>The Howard Theatre</td>
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<td>Shaw/U Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divine Shine</td>
<td>Local Business</td>
<td>Shaw/U Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locally owned restaurant</td>
<td>Local Business</td>
<td>Shaw/U Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franchise restaurant</td>
<td>Local Business</td>
<td>Shaw/U Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locally owned store</td>
<td>Local Business</td>
<td>Shaw/U Street</td>
</tr>
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</table>

\(^1\) Some business names have been changed to preserve anonymity
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locally owned restaurant</th>
<th>Local Business</th>
<th>Shaw/U Street</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaw/U Street Main Street</td>
<td>Nonprofit supporter</td>
<td>Shaw/U Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEDC</td>
<td>Nonprofit supporter</td>
<td>Shaw/U Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manna Inc</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Shaw/U Street</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local businesses$^2$</th>
<th>18</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit Supporter</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>31$^3$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shaw/U Street</th>
<th>13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anacostia</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^2$ “Local” in this case does not necessarily signify locally owned, just that the business is located in the area.

$^3$ This number is higher than the number of organizations listed because I interviewed a couple people at the same organization.
B) Codebook for interview themes

Types of Interviewees

Workers at a business
Owners of a business
Staff at community development financial institutions and

Codes

Intentional engagement w/ community: focuses on importance of deliberately interacting with the community

Empowerment

Sub: Empowering marginalized groups: businesses (or new development or gentrification?) as providing opportunities specifically for marginalized groups

Sub: Employment/job creation: businesses as providing jobs and employment opportunities (not just marginalized groups)

Sub: Increasing access to amenities: believes there to be more amenities available because of current and recent development

Small and local: Sees being small and locally owned as important attributes to the types of businesses that should be promoted in neighborhoods

- Different conceptions of what local means? When people do use it, what do they mean?

Collaboration with other local organizations: believes collaboration with other nonprofits, businesses, and community groups to be key to equitable or intentional development

Personal investment/pride in the community: interviewee has pride in the neighborhood

Diversity: sees development as making a place more diverse

Development led by outsiders: touches on question of who has the most say in defining the vision for a neighborhood

Positive effects of Gentrification

Sub: Negative: Displacement, rising rents, change in character of a place

Sub: Positive: More amenities, more jobs, more diverse, better image

Negative effects of gentrification

Rising rents: sees development as causing rising rents in the area

Sub: Residential: Rents have gone up for local residents

Sub: Commercial: Rents have gone up for businesses located in the neighborhood

Negative narrative about area: believes the neighborhood to have a bad reputation

Sub: Within: locals (commercial and residential) themselves believe the neighborhood to be or have been “bad”
Sub: Locals’ perceptions of outsiders’ conceptions: locals believe others perceive the neighborhood negatively

Segregation or micro-segregation: separation of groups of people based on race, class, or gender

Who is included in "community": who the interviewee expresses to be part of their community

Changing Demographic Composition
  Sub: Positive: speaks about this change as positive
  Sub: Negative: speaks about this change as negative

Changing Commercial Composition
  Sub: Positive
  Sub: Negative

Financial Viability: highlights the importance of financial sustainability
  Sub: Customer base/Price Point: Providing goods and services that are accessible to clientele of a certain income levels
  Sub: Fiscal sustainability: Remaining fiscally sustainable as a business or organization

Race: views race as an important aspect of the neighborhood or of the business

Area History: speaks about the history of DC or the neighborhood as a reference point for how the neighborhood is now

Business as branding/shaping image of proximate area: commercial establishment influences the image of its surrounding neighborhood