



Conclusion: “Lifting the curtain”²⁵⁹ of Karl-Marx-Straße’s Places where Community is Practiced

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This chapter brings together the lessons learned about how store owners and their businesses foster positive interactions – a social “more” – among neighborhood residents. It substantiates the appropriateness of viewing store owners as socially important figures whose business activities contribute to local social life – by building places where community is practiced. Drawing on the deep ethnographic data described in previous chapters, it offers a grounded (emerging) theory focusing on the micro-interactions in the stores, summarizing how the manifold interactions described in previous chapters cumulate into new patterns of belonging and understanding in everyday urban life.

The first chapters of the book reviewed Karl-Marx-Straße’s street-level context and the main changes that are currently taking place, due not only to new shopping and trade patterns, but also the marketing, rental, and construction measures currently being implemented by the area’s urban renewal project. The next chapters described how the empirical sample of businesses was selected and the sensitizing concepts that led to identifying them. By looking for maximum and minimum contrasts between the cases in terms of their physical spaces and their internal social

259 “Karl-Marx-Straße is not as anonymous as it seems. Behind the curtain, it does work” (Flower Store Owner, l. 195 f.). The quote refers to the belief held by the interviewed store owners that although Karl-Marx-Straße conveys a rather anonymous impression for outsiders, there is behind the scenes mutual cooperation and social interaction and a sense of community between the store owners.

processes, the study tried to cover as many aspects of the businesses' socio-spatial and praxeological peculiarities. Drawing strongly on the interviews and participant observation, as guided by the concepts of third places, public characters, (semi-) public behavior, and senses of home and belonging, the core empirical chapters described and analyzed how the interactions taking place within the businesses added up to much more than simple commercial transactions. First, the socio-spatial qualities of the businesses shape the ways in which the staff and their customers interact, and thus, the analytic focus fell on the internal social life of the businesses. The next chapter examined the concrete practices of the store owners: how they operate their businesses and why, and with what implications for how they interact with their customers. While the study identified many specific practices, it was often hard to distinguish between what was intended and trained for and more unintentional, community-oriented, or altruistic practices that produce the central "more", as unanticipated social benefits and gains (cf. Small 2009). In short, these are the practice and the sense of community and belonging. Much more work also needs to be done to fully understand how the customers understood this "more" and its implications for their lives outside the businesses' socio-spatial settings.

We now turn to the most important aspects of the social life of ordinary local places highlighted in this research. Most centrally, business people clearly foster social benefits that go beyond the mere provision of goods. Their business settings generate important forms of interaction, with real meaning for such facets of neighborhood life as sense of belonging, rootedness, social trust, and managing difference, which have previously not been acknowledged by urban sociological studies. We must unpack the deficiencies and contradictions of existing theoretical concepts and complement them with a new analytical lens focused on local and mundane moments of togetherness in urban life. After laying out some thoughts about how to do this, this concluding chapter ends by discussing the limitations of this research, the remaining research gaps, and what more we need to learn about the social and commercial processes on Karl-Marx-Straße.

The empirical findings clearly demonstrate that neighborhood residents develop an enhanced sense of belonging and community through the ways in which they engage with local businesses and commercial opportunities in the course of everyday life. While shopping may not be the most important thing in life, it makes a surprisingly strong contribution to how people feel part of and enjoy their neighborhoods. The Neukölln district of Berlin – like many other places – is much more highly defined by consumption and reproduction activities than it is by production (Castells 1977). Its streets give specificity to everydayness. Much of what residents do in the neighborhood (aside from sleeping and eating at home or leaving the neighborhood for work) involves shopping, selling, consuming, and

just spending time on the street. The stores and gastronomic businesses where this takes place represent thus the dominant **everyday urban places**.

These businesses concretely bring (diverse) urban dwellers together far more often than other forms of civic engagement, like going to community or neighborhood meetings. While these places enable residents to encounter different kinds of people, it does not guarantee that they will interact across lines of gender, ethnicity, income, education, and so on. But they make that possible in a comfortable and routine way. As Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrated, the stores represent **important contact sites** for many people that would not come in contact with each other in their home or work places.

Sociologists and urban planners have rarely recognized the ways that shopping and consumption contribute to sociability and community building among diverse people in the neighborhood level. Only few studies – and even fewer ethnographies – have studied small businesses on the neighborhood level (Satterthwaite 2001). But as the data explored throughout this book amply demonstrate, local small-scale businesses offer places for building well-being, comfort, and inclusion, not just fulfilling important supply functions. Put in other words, **these places promote the practice of community**.

Further, my observations of the customers' behavior in these places reveal the limits of Goffman's (1959; 1963) and Lofland's (1989; 1998) concepts of private and public behavior. These community places are hybrids of the two. They are privately-owned spaces that are open to the public; customers' and staff's behavior in these spaces transcends the boundaries that Goffman and Lofland draw between the public and the private sphere. People often do things that signify their occupation and appropriation of the businesses' space, such as distributing private belongings over the table, shouting to other people, taking off shoes, or teasing the staff. They reveal a public familiarity in using the businesses as a "home away from home" (Oldenburg 1999: 22 f.; Oldenburg/ Brissett 1982: 267). These practices show how customers integrate the businesses into their everyday lives. More precisely, the socio-spatial and material features of the businesses encourage social interaction between mostly unacquainted people, bringing different people together in the limited spaces – such as in the corners of the rooms, checkout lines, at common tables – blending public and private practices. Dismantling the either/or dichotomy for public/private social behavior and interactions, they become concrete local **places for practiced diversity**.

Businesses represent sites "of everyday social contact and encounter" that gather the people within them into "micro-publics" (Amin 2002: 959), where such contact subtly yields "more" in terms of sociability. When people from different backgrounds can get together in (new) noncommittal ways, they can form new

attachments (to the business, its staff, and its internal social life). Some businesses on Karl-Marx-Straße thus help people to "learn to become different," in Ash Amin's words (2002: 970). The convivial encounters with no or only few "strings attached" (Jacobs 1961) foster at least a temporary sense of belonging and maybe deeper identification through common interests (such as organic products or nutrition) and common practices (such as eating lunch in the butcher's shop). The ethnographic observations showed that fleeting encounters as well as more purposeful interactions between staff and customers and among customers contributed to these shared senses of belonging or communal feeling (cf. Fincher/ Iveson 2008). The businesses on Karl-Marx-Straße provide specific venues in which neighborhood residents encounter, negotiate, and reconstitute urban diversity.

Raymond Oldenburg outlined eight characteristics of third places, and the sampled businesses on today's Karl-Marx-Straße clearly present them – even if with variations (cf. Chapter 6). While some owners intentionally design their stores to enhance sociability – a "meeting place" for the organic store owners, for instance – other businesses only accidentally function as social contact places. The regulars and owners initiate, maintain, and strengthen the social interaction within the stores as part of keeping them economically viable, as indicated by the main café owner's quote "we are committed to all." But they also regulate and eventually may prevent further interaction and evolving social ties, if they seem inappropriate to the conduct of business. The focus on the micro-level of everyday life allows us to distinguish the different conversational elements for within-business-interaction that lead to low-threshold inclusion: the teasing on the one hand – "they are pulling my leg" – and predictability – "stability and reliability" facilitate interaction among strange or only little known people. However, even when some of the sampled businesses blur gender, ethnic, and social status differences among the customers and between the people shopping or working the stores, the gender and background of the staff set the predominant tone for in-store-conversations as well as the overall atmosphere and sociability. Hence, how the staff operates may decide whether the place is "a home away from home" or a place where community is not practiced.

With this said, the previous chapter (Chapter 7) explored in detail how the role and practices of the owners affect the enactment and maintenance of a community place. Caring owners are particularly good at creating a social "more" – easing and stimulating social interchanges and low-threshold participation that amplifies the everyday practice of shopping for or consuming something.

But this study also shows that urban planners have a quite different vision for the future of the street that is often ignorant of, if not downright inimical to these practices. The local officials are also trying to enforce a form of placemaking on Karl-Marx-Straße. In reaction, the owners transfer important knowledge to their

customers about the planned changes and vice versa. This information exchange helps them to deal with or mediate the effects of the urban renewal process. But despite the owners' status as public characters, their wide knowledge, and social networks, they rarely make strategic use of this role. Ironically, the role of local businesses in creating neighborhood social cohesion is thus asymmetric. They help neighborhood residents feel more at home, but they themselves are too fragmented and out of touch with each other to engage in collective action around urban renewal. The interviews revealed several reasons why they seem only to fight on their own. For instance, the owner of the flower store considers her business to be too small and economically weak to make a difference, while the migrant background lead the owners of the main café and café I to expect that local officials will denigrate their participation in the planning process, making them think that they won't be allowed to speak publicly for the businesses and excluding them a priori.

This shows great myopia on the part of the urban renewal managers and local officials. Given that shopping makes up a substantial part of urban everyday life and community formation, the businesses on Karl-Marx-Straße represent a great social asset to the neighborhood and the city. Urban renewal and upward pressures on commercial and residential rents in many ordinary neighborhoods threaten the capacity of these places to engage in community building and practiced diversity. Since most of the new, independent-owned businesses in Neukölln, as in other upgrading parts of Berlin, target the new demographics, this diminishes the number of places that the long-term residents have to meet and interact. The displacement of the low-threshold businesses thus parallels and is equally important to the displacement of longtime residents. Or, in other words, **the displacement of the low-threshold businesses means nothing less than the displacement of community places.**

Despite the high diversity, commercial fluctuation, and perceived anonymity the businesses on Karl-Marx-Straße (and probably other local shopping streets) have a unique ability to sustain the intangible social life of cities "Karl-Marx-Straße is not as anonymous as it seems. Behind the curtain, it does work" (flower store owner, l. 195). With their micro and small-scale interactions, these businesses elicit a sociability that, for some, might seem romantic or recall "village life" (Zukin 2012: 10). In fact, these are quite real characteristics of neighborhood urban life as these contact sites bring together previously unacquainted people and thus **mediate strangeness and familiarity.**

Those people that then come to me and say 'did you hear this' or 'what happened there' [...] [we are] indeed popular [places] where you talk to each other and not only go in anonymously and leave again like in a supermarket or so (Flower store owner, l. 903- 907).

Moreover, these are more than "unanticipated gains" (Small 2009) of merely frequenting the businesses. Customers and owners and their employees often actively pursue these gains. The socio-economic and demographic structure of Neukölln includes poverty, unemployment, and persistent discrimination. Some people who live near Karl-Marx-Straße are threatened by social isolation, exclusion, and a lack of social support. They thus tend to spend more time in the vicinity of their apartments. Across all analytical levels, the empirical findings reveal that the longer-standing residents depend more on the businesses as sites for interaction and help. Hence, the presence of businesses that act as third places, i.e. places where community is practiced, is particularly important for those people who are at risk of isolation or further exclusion.

This study has not explored the various reasons why people shop where they shop; however, it finds that the "village-like" sociability and social life (Zukin 2012) also mean a higher level of social control and less personal freedom for some people (cf. Simmel 1903). Mutual help, regeneration and well-being, social interaction and the further nurturing of social relationships, having a **place where people feel welcomed and like they belong**, as practiced in the stores, represents only one part of the balance that owners are required to maintain for a social life with "no strings attached" (Jacobs 1961).

The other part is that the businesses also function as (subjectively defined) **effective places for supply** without being interrupted and forced to interact more than necessary beyond the purchase act. As the empirical examples demonstrate, the store owners on Karl-Marx-Straße acknowledge this balancing act.

Even as local social networks contribute the economic health of these businesses, they can also be detrimental. Business people do not let social obligations get in the way of maintaining sales and profitability and they make sure that people looking to socialize do not disturb other customers who don't want to participate in the conversations. Hence, the owners' practices along with the specific social dynamics within their stores seek to **enable "more" social life without attaching (constraining) strings**.

This work also finds that neighborhood changes can affect urban social life through a quite different channel than has been prominent in the literatures on gentrification and urban renewal. In particular, the structural disadvantage of business owners within and their exclusion from formal participation in the urban renewal planning process has had a deleterious effect on neighborhood social life. Moreover, the exclusive notions and visions of the urban renewal planners explicitly discriminate against some of these businesses. They discriminate physically by reconstructing streets in ways that impair accessibility to and therefore social life within the sampled businesses. These beautification measures also contribute to

rising commercial and residential rents that threaten the smaller businesses. The (state-supported) gastronomization of selected streets in Neukölln seems designed to accelerate the area's demographic and residential changes (see Chapter 7.2.). Hence, policy should be reformed to **(re)integrate commercial developments into gentrification theories**. Today, the term gentrification is widely used in a wholly residential context. Urban studies need to pay much more attention to its commercial dimension.

The findings in this study show how the businesses and their owners mobilize aesthetics and special services that resonate with the desires and tastes of the long-term local residents while also adapting to a changing clientele. Because they offer and ease inclusion of both groups, the sampled businesses shape collective memories and narratives by embodying both the district's past and its current commercial, social, and physical dynamic. They offer **stable anchors** for many long-term residents on the one hand and **important information hubs and points of inclusion** for newcomers on the other hand.

The planners and shopkeepers alike both agree that the street has always changed and its ability to continue to do so an indispensable ingredient of urban life. The local officials, however, partly neglect, partly endorse, and partly exploit the manifold efforts by most store owners to adapt to these changes. Their valorization of the street and the upgraded future they envision often results in what Susan Fainstein calls "staged authenticity" – a specific variety imposed from above (2005: 11). The planners' vision for Karl-Marx-Straße reflects Richard Florida's argument that "diversity and creativity work together to power innovation and economic growth" (2002: 262), conflating economic competitiveness and social inclusion. Hence, the local officials call for altering the new commercial mix on Karl-Marx-Straße to be "colorful" and represent a specific kind of "diversity." But they understand diversity to mean anything that supports economic growth rather than the things that currently yield practiced diversity and social inclusivity. Their rather exclusive "diversity" has become a mantra that it is possible to have "a happy reconciliation between the values of economic growth and social diversity" (Fainstein 2005: 12). For this reason, these **urban renewal officials need to give more official recognition and protection to businesses and their owners**.

The urban renewal agents are currently busy planning for a "different street," and for "a different socio-spatial situation." They reckon that those businesses which they don't consider as "fitting into their planning vision and understanding of diversity" will "simply disappear" (urban planner l. 171 ff.; see also Chapter 7.2.). This direct threat raises the question of why the store owners don't cooperate more with each other and collectively engage to counter-balance the powerful placemaking strategies of the urban renewal programs. Conspicuously, the interviewed owners



Fig. 54 Narrow, interrupted sidewalks prevent crisscrossing the street and accessing the businesses

all used to be actively involved in the (formal) street development issues of the past, but officials pushed them out of the official placemaking boards because they did not fulfil their vision’s characteristics of “young, colorful, and dynamic.” Owners felt disadvantaged, not taken seriously, exploited, and ignored. They feel like the formal placemaking measurements are planning for a street that is no longer “theirs” anymore – if they survive the urban renewal at all.

This fragmentation undermines the small business owners’ common interest in developing the street as a thriving business location for them all. Although they all make positive efforts to engage with their customers, none of the business owners suggested they need to cooperate more closely with other stores or to form a business association. Working long hours and not feeling well represented by the larger and more costly chambers of commerce also led the smaller retailers and gastronomic facilities to undervalue the possibility of strategic cooperation. The urban renewal agencies often seemed to promote distrust and skepticism among the smaller and marginalized businesses toward the local administration and planning offices. Despite their seemingly noble aim to include “all” local actors and to develop the street with a highly participatory and integrated approach, the urban renewal agents worked assiduously to ensure that all placemaking and decisional power for the future of the street remains exclusively in their hands.

Most of the shopkeepers are also not thinking strategically about how to attract new customers, even as they know that their customers’ shopping patterns and preferences are changing. My field work did not uncover any new marketing campaigns, product developments, or special staff training designed to adapt to new shoppers. Hence, there seems to be **an asymmetry between the individual and**

(lack of) collective efforts by the shopkeepers and the determined and focused official commercial planning of the district authorities. While the shopkeepers manage to satisfy most of the newer residential groups and their longer-standing clientele, the local officials consider the majority of examined stores nonetheless not oriented toward the "future."

The local officials' repeatedly mentioned "cell phone store" as the kind of businesses they do not welcome for the future commercial structure on the street: they see these businesses as owned by people with lower educational backgrounds and as "immigrant owned" (urban planner), but not by the right kinds of immigrants who can contribute to an attractive value-improving diversity. They serve a comparatively poor clientele (and "no business managers," urban planner l. 396), have an "old-fashioned design," and owners who "don't care about business" (l. 198) and "make shady dealings" (l. 397 f.). Thus, the local officials think people will not complain if urban renewal decreases their number (l. 455 f.). Discriminatory attitudes like the urban planner's exemplary one prevents the renewal agencies from including some of the sampled businesses as part of Karl-Marx-Straße's future and highlight how the **urban renewal is deliberately undermining the existing stores' efforts to adapt.**

What the urban renewal actors and urban scholars fail to see about these businesses is that they are vernacular and authentic urban places that offer important opportunities for social interaction and inclusion and continue to give Neukölln and Karl-Marx-Straße their distinctive character – far more than any of the official themes and narratives. Without these businesses, Neukölln and Karl-Marx-Straße will lose their ability to make people feel at home and practice diversity and community in everyday life. The cumulative impact of the data analyzed and presented in this study is **communities, and the sense of belonging to a community, result less from a shared geography or common interests than they do from the positive social externalities of everyday consumption practices** such as having a drink or buying a piece of meat. In other words, communities are built by everyday practices in specific locations, among which local businesses are prominent. Stores owners frame and enable interactions that promote community. The store owners are, in Jacobs (1961) words, "public characters" and their businesses important institutions that constitute "third places" (Oldenburg 1999) alongside the integrative dynamics of work and home.

As important as these conclusions are, this research still has some obvious **limitations.** If contemporary communities arise partly out of ordinary everyday micro-interactions in specific material and social spaces, an ethnographic approach cannot tell us how members of these communities understand the relative importance of this source of community relative to many others they may experience.

Focusing on the meaning and consequences of the social life in the stores shows us how they help to generate one important aspect of sociability and sociality, but not the other aspects of the customers' lives. Frequenting neighborhood businesses is a temporally and spatially limited phenomenon. Neighborhood residents undoubtedly have many other venues for developing senses and forms of togetherness. At the same time, this study does provide a detailed analysis of one important – and largely ignored – venue for generating a sense of belonging to the neighborhood. So while the strong focus on the micro-level could not include interviews with the customers, this micro-focus revealed how community develops, evolves out of, is practiced through particular **low-threshold interactions**.

This study also limited its focus to independently owned businesses. Chain stores and franchise businesses also may have the potential for promoting neighborhood sociability. Even if these business operations are more standardized, they may still generate meaningful interaction and enable the generation and maintenance of local social ties. The difference may be that owners are more distant and chain store employees less responsible for the (development and maintenance of the) business' ties to the locality or the customers' loyalty. Employees may also be less free to chat with customers beyond the purchase act. However, research on these types of businesses may bring out their similarities and differences with independent and chain stores.

In addition, my findings may be limited by the reluctance of many business owners to take part in the study. Hence, it was not possible to learn about some of the dominant business types along Karl-Marx-Straße. My findings apply only to the stores studied, though they undoubtedly hint at what is going on in similar businesses on Karl-Marx-Straße and elsewhere.

Bringing different (local) people together in business premises clearly offer them opportunities for informal and noncommittal yet often helping social exchanges. These interactions do not always lead to greater feelings of belonging or further practices of openness towards others. Gestures of friendliness by store owners and staff, such as leading to the chair, taking off customers' coats, offering a seat, pleasing the customers' tastes, and the often mentioned "smile" (e.g. pharmacist, l. 213) may also be rejected by customers, depending on their experiences, attitudes, and mood (cf. Amin/ Thrift 2002; Wiesemann 2012: 22). Furthermore, it is in the owner's interest to use an increased sense of well-being and comfort to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty. Hence, promoting conviviality is a standard operating procedure, to be limited if social exchange produces negative incidents. We need not romanticize the community-fostering side effects of local business practices. At the same time, social scientists should not ignore the fact that the stores on Karl-Marx-Straße have socio-spatial qualities that offer easy inclusion and generate

meaningful positive social externalities. Its business owners are important public figures, who not only play a commercial role, but also a social role, and potentially a political influential role in making the current and future social life in cities.

This study began by drawing on Oldenburg's and Jacobs' concepts of third places and public characters. They turned out to be more problematic than initially expected, even though they were quite useful in focusing the nature of this ethnographic research. Both authors focused on white working-class neighborhoods in Northern America. Increasingly, these are things of the past. Today's metropolitan neighborhoods around the globe show much higher levels of social and ethnic diversity. This study has developed some new concepts appropriate to this context.

Even though this book focused on few businesses on one street in one city – in the Global North – it sheds light on the ways in which globally comparative urban studies might go about using everyday urban life and the study of its micro-interactions to generate a broader-ranged-theory of neighborhood life. Looking closely at how interactions within everyday spaces can help use evaluate their potential for generating and increased sense of home and belonging. Neighborhood businesses are an excellent place to apply this sociological method.



Fig. 55 Stores that had to close (permanently and temporarily) due to the construction site (March 2016)

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