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Anthropology of Environment

Observational Ethnography

Abstract: My ethnography observes in which aspects Davis Square acts as a reinforcer of capitalism and individualism while appearing as a lighthearted community center. The population of Medford and Somerville come to the square to meet with friends, find entertainment, spend time with family, and exercise. However, people enjoy the space within the confines of consumerism, productivity, and commodification. It has taken social acceptance of these norms to consider an environment that does not support safe play as space for community. In my analysis I assume that the main function of a neighborhood center should be to foster relationships of interdependence and express kindness and care for others rather than to bolster economic growth. I observe evidence that people still care for each other and strive for mutual benefit in this space. Therefore, Davis Square shows us the potential for hubs of performance, leisure, social gathering, eating, and transport to be redesigned to allow true community and stress-free space. Furthermore, Davis Square illustrates that such reimagining will also allow for more effective environmentalism and resilience.

Davis Square is a multi-use zone, sometimes considered a neighborhood, surrounded by residential neighborhoods in Somerville, Massachusetts. Most people visiting the square come from the nearby residential area or from Tufts University, as the edge of campus is about a 10 minute walk away. The center of Davis Square coalesces at the 6-way intersection of Holland St., College Ave., Highland Ave., Elm St., Day St., and Dover St. Here is located a subway stop for the MBTA red-line and a bus connection. There are plenty of restaurants and dessert shops, as well as convenience and grocery stores. People shop at first-hand and second-hand clothing

stores or at other commercial storefronts. There is a realty office and a bank, as well as a gym and theater. The area between the ice cream shop and intersection opens up for a pedestrian space with tables, chairs, and benches, where occasionally a musician will play. Street trees are interspersed at the edge of roads and sidewalks. Apartments sit atop some of the shops.

I chose Davis as the site for my ethnography because it has a lot of interactions going on at once; people on their own mission intersect paths with one another by inhabiting the same space. Anna Tsing's "Unruly Edges" prompted me to consider which kinds of relationships might be fostered and between whom (Tsing 2012). To what extent do different species interact in Davis? Is the empire tangible in the creation of margins? Moreover, I noticed that the type of space Davis resembles is familiar to a lot of people because it is pretty common in suburban areas. Such places go unquestioned by those who inhabit it. Joseph Masco, in "Mutant Ecologies," reveals how the acceptance of harmful state activities is the result of social engineering (Masco 2008). Applying this idea on a smaller scale, I wanted to examine which factors cause people to accept the organization and function of Davis Square as normal. What is the assumed function of the space, and how does it actually function? Are there harmful ideas at play in its design that seem ordinary?

I sit down at one of the tables in the open area because it overlooks the main intersection. People are either in Davis as their destination, waiting to get where they need to go via bus or shuttle, or passing through. Sedentary people are eating outside alone or with friends, talking to others, on their phone or laptop, listening to music, or sleeping. There is not much to do unless you are enjoying a commodity or have nowhere else to go; there is a contrast between the expensive goods and homelessness. I take notes about the architecture's intentional design choices and functions. The square seems to remain neutral in time and retain a sense of

traditionality. Buildings represent styles of different time periods, and the sidewalks and roads are brick or concrete—nothing too modern or sleek. The space does not advertise itself towards a particular age demographic. The above-ground space being designed around roads for motor vehicles places Davis in this moment in time. While pedestrians, bikes, and scooters are allowed more space here than other suburban intersections, there are still many single-occupant gas cars that everyone else must revolve their movements around. Signage in the area is not overtly political, but four American flags are displayed in my field of view. Aspects of the design elicit emotion. Street trees provide an aura of nature and safety in an environment almost strictly artificial. They give the space a sense of uniformity. There is minimal public art or vibrant colors at the intersection. The outdoor space is the only area where people are encouraged to exist without having to be consumers, and the chairs and tables are made of metal that are cold and uninviting for most of the year. I also take notes on relationships in the space. Interaction with nonhuman species does not seem to be a central goal of Davis Square. Some species are welcome while others are strictly prohibited. Relationships between people follow social norms of popular versus unpopular (Peter, the musician, is popular, and the “street people” he mentions to me in conversation are unpopular). Additionally, people of different races interact with each other, but most people in the space are white. People seem more willing to deepen existing relationships with friends and partners than make new ones.

I could talk about the planned neutrality and legibility of Davis Square, drawing on James Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (1998), and how it muddies the history and context of the space to challenge placemaking and familiarity (Basso 2010). I could talk about the spatial design of Davis, analyzing it almost as an artwork, to examine its successes and failures at eliciting positive emotion through shape and color; an altered nature in comparison to untouched

wilderness as examined by Cronon (1996). I could talk about how Davis demonstrates the empire through subtle patriotic signage, a hierarchy of organized movement, and the creation of margins (Tsing 2012) by concentration of resources. The common denominator between these observations is that they demonstrate a neighborhood void of deep community. The main takeaway from my period of observation is how attempts to foster community in Davis Square are overridden by social pressure, material and design choices, and available activities that reinforce capitalism and deter playful existence.

During my observation, I feel like there is something more I am supposed to be doing. I should write down in my notes so people think I am studious, grab a coffee to drink, or go on my phone to appear to be busy. When I go inside J.P. Licks or the creperie to sit by the windows in heated air, I feel like an intruder for inhabiting the space without buying anything. In Davis Square, consuming becomes a way to belong because almost everything is commodified. David Bond, in *Negative Ecologies* (2022), uses the commodification of oil despite its destructive effects superseding its economic benefits to illustrate capitalism as an expansive system; over time, it engulfs more aspects of life into monetary terms. I can see the commodification of oil at play in the center intersection, even though there is no gas station, because oil runs the cars and most buses that traverse the roadway. The use of oil is taken for granted and normalized. It is loaded into vehicles and the price is the only considered cost to its use. The commodification of a destructive force goes unquestioned because people already learn to build their baseline of the environment around the existence of damage (Bond, 5-7). Taking oil as an example, Bond's writing helps us understand why it feels impossible to escape commodification in general and why it is important to recognize and question commodification. Buying a water bottle at 7-11 or CVS would not have been normal a few decades ago but we have become accustomed to

privatization of even the shared resources that life depends on. When we question commodification we can realize that things like groceries, meals, and necessities should not have to be so expensive, and neither should our community space revolve around complacency in this exploitative system. Furthermore, Bond implies that trust in impact assessments and toxicity measurements is not always warranted because they are also complacent in measurable environmental destruction for the sake of economic growth (Bond, 8-9). In this hub of transportation, there is no signage indicating air quality. People walk around assuming that they are safe when their health might have been traded in some capacity for the accommodation of motor vehicles. Physical and financial well-being are not the only things impacted by the capitalist organization of Davis Square. Productivity and hustle are seen ingrained in our culture, affecting mental well-being. Peter plays music for his own pleasure but also for money. People exercise for endorphins but also in a society that praises active bodies. Someone sits at a table outside doing work on their laptop. Car horns beep and pedestrians jaywalk, illustrating an aura of impatience that never seems to be satisfied. The architecture of the main intersection facilitates a culture of swift movement, engagement with commodification, and productivity. It is unusual to stay in the leisure area for more than about 40 minutes. The chairs get cold quickly and there are no heaters during the winter nor ample shade in the summer. People are not meant to stay or play. I see kids running and playing with each other, creatively jumping on curbs around trees or subway vents that are not intended for such activity. One kid falls and nearly skins his knee on the brick—the only thing breaking his fall is a small pile of leaves from a tree overhead. Parents and babysitters discourage their kids from running around because they know they can get hurt. Not everything is designed like a playground because play is not conducive to productivity. Such an environment breeds mostly transactional relationships that stand far from

what Haraway imagines in *Making Kin* (2016). We are scripted as consumers, laborers, and most of all, strangers to each other in simplified neighborhoods such as Davis. Haraway argues that refusal of scripted categories of all living beings is essential for practicing relatedness and garnering resilience. She recognizes that the stakes are high and that a strong community tied by notions of fellowship and family is necessary to avoid mass extinction (Haraway, 160-161). Davis is a location where these ideas, among others, can be set in motion and expanded upon.

In class, we have not examined how the design of public space in suburbia is involved in the conversation about new environmentalisms. The local public spaces that we become familiar with can determine what we expect from the world outside of ourselves. When town centers are organized around capitalism rather than community, we cannot expect support in the face of overwhelming crises because we still feel alone. We have been urged by Joseph Masco (2017) to consider that the status quo is violent and cannot be preserved while truly addressing the crises at hand. But it would be helpful to look at what this means locally. By reimagining public space to foster deep community and shed capitalistic limitations, sustainability and justice are given space to emerge naturally. Davis offers a local scene for this imagination to take place.

Some might argue that Davis Square does not have to be reimagined; it is merely meant to be a pocket of commercial activity within suburbs. It does not have the expectations of a community center because it is just a development that occurred because commerce made sense at the intersection. I respond that we do not have to settle for the capabilities of a space to be limited by just commercial use or transportation. Even if we did, there should still be a space in the suburban neighborhood that allows interpersonal relationships to form. Why not have it where people already go? Why not set higher expectations on shared spaces to *really* be shared?

There is evidence that humans and nonhumans alike want a more community-driven space. Grasses growing between bricks and at the edges of concrete see the cracks in Davis as an adequate space for their home and family. The concentration of people around Peter and his music illustrates the shared desire for public art and integration of loveliness in daily routine. There is a “blessing box,” a repurposed newspaper stand, labeled “leave what you can, take what you need.” Homemade birdhouses are strung up on branches above the center of the square. A large banner announces resources for ending domestic violence in the neighborhood. People buy *Spare Change News* at the corner to learn more about issues facing people in different circumstances than themselves. Kids hug each other and want to run about together. People care and strive for mutual benefit, but it is difficult in a space and socio-economic system not structured around that goal.

What does an ideal Davis look like? Allow me to dream. The area is still structured around public transportation (which would be free) so it is easy to access, but the flow of low-occupancy cars is limited to encourage people on foot, bicycles, scooters, skateboards, and other modes of transport. Bus-only lanes are easily distinguishable from the rest and allow emergency vehicles to get through the area. Comfort, leisure, and play have as much priority as commerce—social dealings between people, less buying-and-selling. There is an outdoor space with heaters and wood furniture to remain comfortable after the summer. Multiple indoor recreation areas are dispersed for the main purpose of for people to sit, relax, and talk with one another. Neighborhood clubs can meet in these areas. There are informal libraries where people exchange their favorite books, magazines, or journals. Large spaces are available to draw on, like whiteboards and chalkboards. There are safe areas for kids and adults to jump around away from the road. Hard surfaces here are replaced with softer but still durable materials such as recycled

tires and mulch. Basic amenities and needs are met. Restrooms in storefronts are not restricted by codes, and there are ample drinking water fountains. More trees provide shade and reduce the energy use of buildings for cooling. Fruit trees provide food for people and birds, squirrels, bats, bugs, and other critters. Bushes, flowers, and small gardens provide vegetables and herbs as well as a pleasant aesthetic. Art is a medium for community. Walls and paths are painted in mural initiatives, areas are designated to display art by public school students, playing space is available for local musicians (hired by the city to play on alternating weekends), the Somerville Theatre features films and performances by college or other students in the area. Tufts Office of Sustainability shares its connections to waste management and other resources with Davis so the square can accept more recycling and initiate a system for composting. There is a space for free mental health counseling, and city-organized mental health services can be called upon in scenes of emergency. Alternatives to police are well-established and reliable for ensuring safety. The living spaces above ground level are a mix of co-ops, tenancy-in-common, affordable housing, and homeless shelters. Sustainable design is utilized for functionality and beauty. Buildings have green roofs to prevent runoff or solar panels depending on their orientation. Signage communicates live air and water quality, temperature, and UV exposure.

Determinations between community-strengthening design and “eco-friendly” design do not have to be made because they work together to create a space that is safer and more enjoyable for its inhabitants. When people are not pressured to engage in consumerism, we waste less. We share more. Items in our lives come to be used more as gifts than property. Profits are stripped of meaning. Wealth is measured by positive impact on others. Success is measured by how much you rest. The reimagined Davis Square in this paper is by no means a plan of action

but more so an urge to question and expand what we consider to be possible for the seemingly mundane spaces we encounter.

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