Workshop 1- Public Space and Neighbourhood Quality
Crossing Gallatin Road

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Abstract

Sprawling commercial strips receive very little attention among urban scholars. When they do they are represented either as anathema to intelligent urban design, as asocial spaces given over to the automobile and American consumerism, or they are lamented as representing the loss of community. But these vernacular spaces are far more common than Chicago’s South Side, New York’s Greenwich Village, or any other ‘vital’ urban spaces that ethnographers overwhelmingly focus on. Gallatin Road, in relatively poor East Nashville, Tennessee provides an opportunity to take seriously the lived experience of this very common type of twenty-first century urban environment. This paper explores several themes related to issues of public space, and that lay the groundwork for an innovative urban ethnography of the automobile-centric, vernacular commercial strip, including: a) issues of automobility and immobility, b) the spatial organization of low-income and auto-centric amenities and commercial uses, c) and the commercial strip as a ‘fluid’ spatial boundary that separates East Nashville’s residents along racial and class lines.
Crossing Gallatin Road

It is Friday at 5:00 pm on Gallatin Road and the Nashville Auto Diesel College has just let out for the day. Teams of twenty-something men decked in light-blue/dark-blue mechanic uniforms begin to cluster outside in the marginal space between the oversize garages that are their classrooms and the steady hum of rush-hour traffic on Gallatin Road. The men are characteristically working-class, at least their uniforms signal an honest day’s work with oil and wrenches; they are white and black and Latino Americans; they are local boys and they are from out of state; and they are all at the NADC to ply the ways of the automobile engine. At 5:00 pm they are gathering outside in groups of five, maybe ten; they are lighting up smokes and telling stories, figuring out their weekend plans, some are headed to their dormitory, others to the parking lot. Then, it regularly happens that some of these students will descend upon street. Despite the steady rush of five lanes of traffic they walk, run, and wait; they calculate their moves one lane at a time. It is expected that they will find haven in the turning lane, where having negotiated one direction of traffic, they await the next while cars are speeding around them. Their object is the Discount Tobacco and Beer store 30 meters away. There is a traffic light and crosswalk 150 meters up the street, but these men take their chances in traffic, fearless of the tons of speeding metal or unsuspecting drivers on cellular phones. After all, these men are going to make their living working on these cars, perhaps in the dozen or so auto mechanic shops within two miles. They demonstrate a particular competency to the automobile environment; they cannot fear Gallatin Road because their fates (theirs and the road’s) are intertwined. Their own circumstance, and their daily test of fate, are bound in a particular historical and geographic
moment that involves the making and remaking, or the ‘death and life’, of American cities and American spaces.

Gallatin Road, in East Nashville, Tennessee is a sprawling commercial strip. It a vector of asphalt and traffic, of haphazard buildings and billboards, of leaning telephone poles and crisscrossing power lines. In industrial design parlance Gallatin road is a ‘spoke’ that extends, North and East, out from the city center. On a map, however, Gallatin more closely resembles a tentacle that winds its way toward outlying municipalities; it is as irregular in shape as the apparent ‘ring’ of highways that it parallels and intersects. It is a characteristic space of twenty-first century American urbanism, within which citizens go about everyday life, negotiating time, space, and each other, autonomously and at moderately high speeds. Gallatin represents what John Urry (Sheller & Urry 2000; Urry 2007) has termed **automobility** – not just a means of getting around in cars, but a way of life in which civic participation, sociality, time, space, and being all revolve around the ‘auto,’ in the dual sense of self and motor.

Gallatin Road is also a decidedly low-income strip in a low-income part of the city. The street organizes a particular set of commercial uses and amenities that trade simultaneously on the necessity of the car in everyday life and on low-income residents living nearby; and with respect to the number of check-cashing and title-loan establishments on Gallatin, the strip organizes, not only low-income uses, but a commerce of poverty itself. Along with poverty in the U.S. also comes social exclusions, and Gallatin Road represents a boundary between the mostly black and mostly white neighborhoods of East Nashville. Interestingly enough, because it is a racial boundary, Gallatin Road is traveled by both black and white East Nashvillians, and is thus an interracially shared space as well. But it is, of course, a contested space, and not just by the residents nearby. City planners look to Gallatin with an eye of suspicion; they see disorder and
“negative community impacts.” They see Gallatin in relation to the more exclusive, gentrifying Five Points district, which sits at the inner end of Gallatin Road; they see Five Points as a model of enlightened planning principles, and Gallatin as its foil.

Aside from city planners, sprawling commercial strips receive very little attention among urban scholars, and when they do they are represented as anathema to intelligent urban design, as asocial spaces given over to the automobile (Jacobs 1961), or they are lamented in lieu of the vital urban communities that they once displaced (Virilio 1997). But these ‘ugly and ordinary’ spaces (see Venturi et al 1977) are far more common in the American landscape than, for example, New York’s Greenwich Village or Lower East Side, or any number of other post-industrial inner-city spaces that ethnographers overwhelmingly focus on. This paper will explore several themes that lay the groundwork for an innovative urban ethnography of the auto-centric, ordinary, commercial strip.

In the course of living near and observing Gallatin Road, I have come to appreciate the NADC and the ritual rush-hour dash as a signature event in the daily flow of things. The Auto Diesel College organizes the labor force that reproduces automobility and keeps Gallatin Road in motion. Gallatin Road is a thoroughly auto-centric space, but ironically, the NADC students regularly negotiate the street without cars. But their story, at this point, is merely anecdotal. My modest purpose in this paper is to provide a rich description of Gallatin Road as peculiar yet typical type of urban space that is sociologically interesting and relevant for future study.

What follows is based on my observations and references to relevant archives including planning documents, business directories, local news reports, and U.S. census data. My descriptive method is comparative, and grounded in relevant literatures. In the same way that genres help us make sense of art objects, urban environments can be understood relationally as
well. I will describe Gallatin Road through a series of contrasts that, with reference to relevant literature, will help to illuminate the unique and common contours of a type of space that is rarely written about, or that is glossed over as a negative space. These contrasts, already alluded to above, include: ‘village’ versus ‘strip’ urbanism, automobility versus immobility, black and white, commerce and poverty, and planning versus organic urbanism.

The Village and the Strip

Gallatin Road begins (or ends) at the confluence of South Main and 11th Streets in East Nashville. Heading northeast, away from the city center, Gallatin cuts like a river through East Nashville’s residential neighborhoods, only this river runs up and down rolling hills, and it runs two directions at once. Both sides of the road are cluttered with billboards and commercial signs. The Stoplights, traffic lanes, and telephone poles make up the city’s rational involvement into an otherwise market-dominated environment provide an almost a secondary language. Cars are weaving in and out of lanes, rushing to beat yellow lights, turning in and out of oncoming traffic, and in and out of the thousand randomly placed business driveways and side-streets. The speed ‘limit’ is 35 miles per hour, which means that cars generally drive at 40-45. Gallatin Road is like this for miles and miles, through the outlying towns of Ingelwood, Madison, and eventually, past all the strip malls and auto lots on the edge of the metro area, to Gallatin, Tennessee some thirty miles away. There, Gallatin Road again turns into Main Street, then Johnny Cash Boulevard, and seemingly keeps going, to Kentucky, probably to Canada. This description is only concerned with the inner three-mile stretch of Gallatin through East Nashville.¹

¹ Technically, my observations end at the point that Gallatin passes under a set of railroad tracks, where East Nashville officially becomes Ingelwood, Tennessee.
Traveling southwest towards the city center, Gallatin eventually forks right into Main Street, which runs through the city’s downtown center two kilometers away, and left into 11th Street, which runs through the recently gentrified Five Points district two blocks away. Five Points is almost the antithesis of Gallatin Road. Named for the intersection of three streets, or five corners, Five Points is characterized by its sidewalk life. Here, business signs communicate at a pedestrian scale; they are parallel, not perpendicular to the modest two-lane streets. Ten years ago, Five Points was Nashville’s Metropolitan Development and Housing Authority’s (MDHA) signature revitalization project. Today, it is home to numerous bars, bohemian and upscale cafes, art galleries, yoga studios, and a health food store – all the signature amenities of the bourgeois-bohemian gentry (Brooks 2000), ‘new middle class’ (Ley 1996) or ‘creative new class’ (Florida 2002) – all within a two block radius. In contrast to the Gallatin strip, Five Points represents chic village urbanism, a throwback to the mercantile city, or perhaps the Greenwich Village of the 1950s (Lloyd, forthcoming), for those who can afford it at least. But this village is located in the twenty-first century American South, and ironically, at its center sits an all-purpose parking lot, where Five Points patrons drive to park and then get out and walk.

Five Points and Gallatin Road are worlds apart, yet they are dramatically juxtaposed in East Nashville. For the sake of contrast, Five Points may be likened here to Greenwich Village in New York City, and Gallatin Road to the Las Vegas Strip – two places that are indeed worlds apart. In Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs (1961) characterizes Greenwich Village by its density, its diversity of residential and commercial uses, and its pedestrian life veins. Situated within the world’s largest industrial and immigrant hub prior to 1950s, the Village is a distinctive space of Northern industrial cities; its immigrant history, residential
buildings, and small business atmosphere provide a cumulative ambiance that is lived out on the
sidewalks in the shadow of tall buildings that make up grids of city walls.

By contrast, Venturi et al’s (1977) *Learning From Las Vegas* presents the Las Vegas
‘Strip’ as an uncontained, sprawling commercial vector, typified by its automobile traffic and its
larger-than-life street signs. The geography of the Strip, in fact, is made possible both by the
introduction of the automobile and by the very lack of a previously existing built environment
that would constrain its sprawling growth. Thus, while the Village represents the Snowbelt
urbanism of the industrial age, the strip represents the Sunbelt sprawl of the post-World War II
period (Rice & Bernard 1983).

Jacobs describes the Village as rich with characters, with people doing the business of
everyday life, day and night, and with continuous sets of eyes watching the streets and extending
trust to all who frequent it. Good neighborhoods are spatially concentrated, diverse in their uses,
and *alive* with real people. Five points is no Greenwich Village, just as East Nashville is no
lower Manhattan. The Five points district extends to a radius of only three blocks; its buildings
are not as tall; its history is not as deep. However, the principles of dynamic urbanism that
Jacobs describes are more evident here than anywhere else in East Nashville. Businesses abut
each other, and they abut the sidewalk, and there is pedestrian traffic, day and night. In fact, new
mixed-use, residential-commercial buildings have gone up in recent years in a conspicuous
attempt to mimic the successes of Jacob’s dynamic urbanism (Lloyd, forthcoming-a). I will
return later to describe Five Points in light of this planning discourse.

In stark contrast to the village imagery, Venturi et al (1977) assert that the Las Vegas
Strip is also a dynamic and vital, although ‘ugly and ordinary’ urban space. The Strip is
understood as an amalgamation of competing and cooperating elements and interests. Road signs
and billboards stand horizontal to the road, competing for space and the attention of drivers who are negotiating the mass of persuading images at high speeds. Gallatin Road too is dominated by its overt signage in ways unthinkable to the pedestrian-centered village. The buildings themselves are present, but at automobile speeds their architecture is subordinated to the signs that jump out in front of them. Gallatin’s buildings themselves are what Venturi et al would call ‘decorated sheds;’ with few exceptions, they are all modest boxes of varying sizes; unassuming architectural forms that hardly intend to signify what the street sign does not already.

Spaced among this commercial chaos of the strip are the public provisions of automobile travel. Streetlights, traffic signs, traffic lanes, telephone poles, power lines, bus stops, and pedestrian crosswalks make up the built influence of the state, which provide some semblance of a planned order, however incongruous with the persuasive authority of commercial uses. Venturi et al write about Las Vegas,

“Street lights function superfluously along many parts of the strip that are incidentally but abundantly lit by signs, but their consistency of form and position and their arching shapes begin to identify by day a continuous space of the highway and the constant rhythm contrasts effectively with the uneven rhythms of the signs behind” (20).

On Gallatin Road, however, the significance of municipal involvement appears questionable. Sidewalks are irregular, sometimes overgrown with weeds, sometimes ending abruptly to a cluster of parked cars – subordinated to the lot as a higher valued use of space. Telephone poles are sometimes crooked, as if neglected by the city, not exactly lending themselves to an identifiably ‘continuous space,’ and their waving and disorderly power lines cast a frenzied net of electricity, seemingly in every direction at once. These irregularities, however, still communicate; they identify a continuous space by their chaotic inconsistency.
Most importantly, the strip is an automobile dominated space. Aside from the street itself, which is constantly in motion, the actual physical space (area, I mean) surrounding the strip is dominated by parking lots. On Gallatin, with a few exceptions, parking lots generally blend together with sidewalks, combining to form an intermediary zone between the street and its commercial establishments, complicating what Jacobs would think is a necessary distinction between private and public space. Ironically, the public space of the street itself is the more private space, and the commercial establishments the more public spaces, at least in terms of face-to-face interaction. On the street itself, the public negotiates each other mechanically and fluidly, via turn signals, and traffic lights, at moderate speeds, and as isolated selves in metal cocoons, while in buildings, sidewalks and parking lots these same blasé urbanites politely keep their distance face-to-face.

Beyond the temporal and spatial constraints of the built environment, the Village/Strip contrast is also one of a ‘structure of feeling’ (Harvey 1989). Time, space, and being are experienced quite differently in automobile environments and high speeds than they are in the nucleated, pedestrian village. The contrast between Jacob’s Village and Venturi’s Strip, with the spatial and historical distinctions they imply, is the contrast between modern and postmodern urbanisms (Dear 2000; Soja 1989). In this sense, Las Vegas is to Greenwich Village what the commercial strip is to Main Street, what the car is a pair of boots, or perhaps, what Warhol’s screen prints are to Van Gogh’s “Peasant Shoes,” or what modern art is to Campbell’s Soup (Jameson 1991). They represent different experiences and articulations of time and space. In East Nashville, Gallatin Road and Five Points represent this contrast side by side, at the same time.

The strip, however, remains an under-theorized urban environment, though nevertheless a prominent one in the contemporary American landscape. It may be similar to Jacob’s Greenwich
Village in terms of its dynamic complexity, but it is strikingly different at the same time. On the strip there is continuity and discontinuity, clarity and ambiguity, cooperation and competition, collectivity and individuality, all sharing space, all making up a complicated urban system. I will later revisit these concerns in light of planning discourse; in light of which of these spaces gets to count as ‘vibrant’ or ‘legitimate’ urbanism and what is held as suspect or disruptive by city officials. For now it will suffice that Five Points represents for Nashville planners a model of enlightened design, and Gallatin Road its antithesis.

Automobility and Immobility

It is an interesting experience walking along Gallatin as an observer, taking pictures and taking notes. For one thing, it is not a place that tourists go, and I attract a lot of puzzled looks with a camera in my hand. But I am also out of place simply because there are so few pedestrians on Gallatin. Like the vast majority of all other users of Gallatin, I normally experience the strip from within the confines of my car. On the sidewalk the experience is much different. Gallatin is not exactly made for pedestrians; there are sidewalks, but they are irregular and in many places they give way to parking lots. It seems that no one would want to walk along Gallatin, unless they had to. This makes seeing other pedestrians all the more interesting, for a sociologist at least. I feign a blasé attitude, a calculated disinterest, but I am keenly interested. I like to take pictures of people crossing the street.

The so-called ‘spatial turn’ in critical urban studies posits that lived environments, while being socially produced, are also shaping forces in social life. Ed Soja (2000: 6) describes this spatiality of human life thus,

“[We are] intrinsically spatial beings, continuously engaged in collective activity of producing spaces and places, territories and regions, environments and habitats.”
The process of producing spatiality or “making geographies” begins with the body, with the construction and performance of the self… in a complex relation with our surroundings. On the one hand, our actions and thoughts shape the spaces around us, but at the same time the larger collectively or socially produced spaces and places within which we live also shape our actions and thoughts in ways that we are only beginning to understand.”

This is no doubt true with respect to the automobile and the built environment that has grown around it. On the one hand, the car allows the opportunity to traverse vast distances in short amounts of time. On the other hand, the building of roads and the dispersion of productive uses across distant space has in turn made the automobile a spatial necessity of modern living. Henri Lefebvre (1991) articulates Soja’s dialectic in terms of spatial practices – the competences and habits with which we go about producing and reproducing our environments, such that there becomes a certain fixity to the relationship between our environments and our mental and bodily routines. On Gallatin Road, these competences and habits are expressed in terms of the five-lane strip. Here, spatial practice may generally be understood as automobile (as an adjective). To a lesser extent, pedestrians too negotiate the auto-environment with a practiced competence.

John Urry and colleagues (Urry 2007; Cass, Shove & Urry 2005; Sheller & Urry 2000) have committed to taking the car seriously as one of the most fundamental yet sociologically neglected elements of modern life (see Hawkins 1986). They refer to automobility not only as the principle means of transportation, but also as constituting the whole complex of social relations revolving around the self, the global economy, and the public sphere. At a more profound level, automobility also refers dually to the self and the machine, and thus describes a unique “hybrid assemblage, not simply of autonomous humans but simultaneously of machines, roads, buildings, signs and entire cultures of mobility” (Urry 2007: 118; see also Haraway 1991). It is an eerie yet compelling imagery that cars make humans into machines, into hyphenated automobile cogs in the larger machinery of the rationalized urban system. That urban sociologists in
particular have neglected this topic speaks to the depth with which automobility has pervaded contemporary culture and is taken for granted as if a ‘natural’-not-social element of modern life.

The automobile habits of space are not merely a technology of the environment, however. Rather, spatial practices inform, and are informed by, systems and relations of production (Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1989). Sheller and Urry (2000) list a series of points that would place automobility squarely in terms of larger complexes of production and consumption: 1) The car is the quintessential manufactured object of 20th century capitalism; 2) The car is the major item of individual consumption after the household; 3) Cars occupy a privileged place in the middle of a much larger ‘machinic complex’ that involves everything from auto parts and services to the oil industry to suburban home developments and shopping malls and the vast network of roads and the civic institutions that sit behind this complex; 4) Cars and automobility subordinate other forms of mobility and thus become a principle in the discourse of good life and appropriate citizenship. These points may be discussed in light of twentieth century American history.

Cars are the signature product upon which twentieth century American capitalism and its corresponding way of life were developed; and by extension, cars are the signature product upon which twentieth century American global hegemony was manifest and sustained. Automobiles represent American industry and commercial strips like Gallatin Road represent the spatial logic of America’s century. And in this way, world history is paved into the asphalt of Gallatin Road. Further, as Americans are disciplined to the Fordist or post-Fordist mandate of production and consumption (Harvey 1989), so too their way of life is regulated to the mandate of their machines. Marshall Berman (1982) would suggest that automobiles and their commercial strips, beyond signaling the contemporary moment of creative destruction that is the principle feature of
modernity, also represent the very ‘spirit of the age.’ He quotes Giedion, who as early as 1941 writes, “The time-space feeling of our period can seldom be felt so keenly as when driving.”

David Harvey (1989) also explains late twentieth century life and culture as a unique ‘structure of feeling’ that is determined, above all else, by the dominant mode of production – post-Fordist flexible accumulation. For Harvey, this structure of feeling entails particular experiences of time, space and self, resulting in a postmodern social and cultural complex that is ‘fleeting, transient, and ephemeral.’ Curiously, despite his central claim that automobile production has been the model industry upon which the dominant ‘regime of accumulation’ and ‘mode of regulation’ (Fordism/Postfordism) of the twentieth century are articulated, Harvey does not directly consider the automobile as a ‘way of life.’ How curious that critical geographers have seemed to gloss the point. For Harvey, the car is produced and consumed, but as Sheller and Urry (2000) point out, we never have to imagine it leaving the driveway! To understand spaces like Gallatin Road, the point is that cars, more than anything else, have changed the way we experience time and space, and have also changed our relationship with our environment (Urry 2007). Further, that experience is ‘built in,’ or paved over, modern life.

The car is, in fact, the ultimate embodiment of historical, economic, spatial, and social tensions, each of which influences each other, and which in turn shape and constrains future possibilities of economic, social, and spatial practices. With only few exceptions, contemporary American urban space is dominated by automobility. Interestingly, however, the dominant conceptualizations of cars in the sociological literature has been a) as mere items of conspicuous consumption – as if they are bought only for display, never leaving the front lawn (Sheller & Urry 2000), b) as asocial technologies that fragment and atomize individuals (Jacobs 1961), or c) to lament the passing of older, ‘more urban,’ ways of life (see Virilio 1997). Our dependence on
cars is taken for granted as we begrudgingly bend to the technological necessity of negotiating
time and distance in these personalized machines. Gallatin Road is an urban space that is
completely given over to the automobile. Not only does it organize traffic, but, as we will see, it
also organizes auto-centric commercial uses, as well as social divisions. Because automobility is
an embodied spatial practice, we see Gallatin Road through the lens of a windshield and an
accelerator. Stepping out of the car and taking a stroll along Gallatin, one can appreciate the
scale in which the auto has transformed our environment, and our relationship to it.

A forty-something man gets off a bus and stops to tie his shoe. We smile and nod at each
other as I pass by. He catches up and passes, walking at a very fast pace, constantly looking over
his shoulder and ahead at the same time. Finally, he crosses the street in the short window of
opportunity that he had been calculating between clusters of moving traffic. Across the street he
finds a group of friends, at which point his pace slows to meet theirs; they stop and sit at another
bus stop; they are still there an hour later as I am walking back the other direction.

A lone NADC student carrying a bag of fast food walks into the middle of the street after
having decided that the first two lanes of traffic were clear. He stops in the center turn lane as the
final two lanes are bumper-to-bumper for as far as he can see. As traffic begins to pick up again
in the first two lanes, a car moves into the turning lane where he is standing. The turning car
slows so as not to hit him, but for a moment there is an impasse. Unfazed, the pedestrian inches
closer to the final two lanes to let the car pass, now hemmed in between five busy lanes of traffic
and no where else to go.

Opposite of automobility is immobility. Next to lack of housing, a lack of access to
automobiles in this spatially expansive auto-centric built environment effectively creates barriers
to social participation and equal citizenship; it compromises one’s ability to navigate time and
space, particularly when, because of the automobile, various social and life necessities like
grocery stores and workplaces are spread across long distances. While public transportation in
America’s cities provides access to the city, it does not allow the same time-space freedoms that
the automobile does, thus putting less-mobile citizens at a time-space disadvantage (Cass, Shove
& Urry 2005). The built environments in sprawling places like Gallatin Road are made almost
exclusively for automobiles; bicycles, pedestrians, and public transportation become
subordinated uses. Further, bicycling and pedestrian practices are marginalized potentially
threatened on Gallatin; there are no bike lanes on Gallatin, and the sidewalks are irregular, giving
way to parking lots of all things. Martin Murray (2008) writes of post-Apartheid Johannesburg,
“To fully grasp how the powers of exclusion operate in the everyday life of the city requires us to
visualize...[how] the elaborate layers, barriers, and boundaries that overlay the cityscape
facilitate the safe passage of middle-class residents, at the same time preventing the easy
movement of the urban poor” (pg. 35). Although the author here is referring to the Global South,
the same may be said of poverty in the sprawling built environment of the American South.

Pedestrian traffic along Gallatin is sparse but constant. Although there are sidewalks,
pedestrians must also negotiate many businesses that have built their parking lots where the
sidewalk would otherwise be. And although there are crosswalks, pedestrians almost never use
them, opting instead to calculate the flow and alternating speeds of five lanes of traffic rather
than dignify themselves by actually waiting for a walk signal thereby displaying their
immobility to all the drivers who are made to wait and look at them. Nevertheless, there are
many pedestrian users of Gallatin Road. Curiously, for these East Nashvillians the routines of
everyday life are still organized by Gallatin Road, not the village Five Points.
East Nashville is insistently Nashville’s ‘other side.’ Across the Cumberland River from Nashville’s better-known districts Music Row and Lower Broadway, the East Side is well known for organizing many of Nashville’s poorer, perhaps less mobile residents. This is especially true for artists, who are always the catalysts (or puppets) of gentrification (Mele 2000; Ley 2003; Zukin 1982). East Nashville is the side of town that allows ‘Music City’s’ autonomous cultural producers to spatialize their claim to non-industry authenticity – away from Music Row – in the ‘field of music production’ (Lloyd, forthcoming; also see Bourdieu 1993). Five Points spatially fixes this artistic renaissance; bars, galleries and cafes offer material and symbolic supports for its artists and aesthetes to catalyze and capitalize on their outsider identities, while also drawing on the gritty image of greater East Nashville (see Lloyd 2006). Most Five-points entrepreneurs are also invested in this symbolic economy; only in Five Points can you find the East Nashville musician’s Christmas compilation CD, “Yule Tide from the Other Side.”

The postal code 37206 incorporates both the Five Points district as well as the inner neighborhoods off Gallatin Road. In recent years that code has become synonymous with East Nashville generally, and it has become a trend to advertise one’s spatial affiliation with a series of bumper stickers that proclaim 37206 as their home. These bumper stickers say things like: “37206 – We’ll steal your heart and your lawnmower”; “37206 – Not just for gay people anymore”; and “37206 – Over the river and through the hood.” These jovially impolite themes directly signify opposition to Nashville’s posher West side. The creator writes, “The idea for these bumper stickers came about after I saw the pompous 37212 sticker that says “not just a zip-code but a way of life,”” (myspace/37206). 37212 represents one of the more exclusive, or ‘pompous’ neighborhoods in Nashville, and 37206 is imagined here in contradistinction to it.
The East Nashville distinction is made here on the basis of its seedier aspects; the bumper stickers appropriate a gritty spatial identity while also othering and criminalizing East Nashville’s populations and spaces. Not all East Nashville residents celebrate the bumper stickers; rather, the stickers are most likely to be found on cars surrounding Five Points and the relatively wealthier neighborhoods of East Nashville. The othering and criminalizing function of this claim to a spatial identity is a gesture to the rest of East Nashville, which may be represented here by Gallatin Road. Gallatin Road signals East Nashville’s own ‘other half.’

Gallatin organizes a particular constellation of commercial establishments that trade on automobility and poverty. In contrast to Five Points, which is distinguished by its nightlife bars, art galleries, coffee shops, yoga studios, etc., the amenity profile on Gallatin Road is a mix of fringe banking establishments, fast food restaurants, mechanics, and other miscellaneous and low-income services. Not coincidentally, most of these businesses also trade on automobility. Drive-thru restaurants, auto-mechanics, car-stereo stores, used car lots, and even title loan services all share the car as their common denominator. It is the combination of commerce and poverty at once that make Gallatin Road a sociologically interesting commercial strip.

The 2007 Nashville phone directory lists 223 businesses on Gallatin Road in inner East Nashville. These businesses and their street signs crowd in along both sides of this stretch of Gallatin making for a unique ecology of buildings, towering signs and billboards, asphalt, street lights, and parking lots, all competing for space and crowding out Gallatin’s lesser competitive ecology of sidewalks and pedestrians. The exception arises with few corporate establishments on Gallatin, including CVS and Wal-Mart Grocery, which have afforded to build their stores away from the road, behind large parking lots, separated from the street by roadside landscaping, and repaved sidewalks. For the overwhelming majority of businesses, however, local entrepreneurs
press against the road, in many cases paving their parking lots where the sidewalk would ordinarily be. In these cases pedestrians are forced to walk the minimal space between the cars and the building or risk the road.

Fifteen of the listed businesses (6.7 percent) were cash-advancement and hock establishments. At these venues, people in need and without a mainstream bank account can cash paychecks for a percentage rate or get small cash loans at by trading the title of their car or other valuables as collateral. A recent report shows that a staggering one out of every twelve American families is without a bank account (Clark, 6/23/07); these are among the users of Gallatin Road’s ‘fringe banking’ economy. Concentrations of these so-called fringe banking enterprises emerge only in divested neighborhoods when more traditional banking institutions withdraw, and thus they thrive on customers who are both socially and spatially excluded from mainstream institutions (Caskey 1994). The title-loan racket signifies the edge of automobility and immobility; in neoliberal terms, it is the free-market solution to extracting the last drop of wealth out of the disenfranchised, socially and spatially excluded poor. Poor people whose car is their only valuable asset are offered plenty of opportunity on Gallatin to default on a title loan and experience further downward ‘mobility.’

On Gallatin Road, these fringe banking establishments outnumber “legitimate” banks by more than three-to-one, and their road signs are among the newest and brightest. A big blue box that reads “Cash America Pawn” (a national chain) in bright white letters with its brutally subtle contrasting red box below – “Payday Cash” – lights up at night and crowds out the quiet Biscuit House sign the next parking lot over. Across the street, the bright white “Advance Financial” sign advertises its multiple services in bold red letters: “Payday Advance: Bill Payment: Title Loans: Check Cashing: Auto Insurance: Tax Services: Free Money Orders.” Despite its apparent
cheapness, this sign is obviously brand new. Next to Advance Financial sits the boarded up, graffitied, grown over shell of an old Dairy Queen that had since been reoccupied by a now defunct “C&L Furniture.” The marquee on the rusted out C&L sign reads, “whosoever will let him come!” – perhaps a dying prayer for a better economy. In any case, it appears that there is a viable economy for quick cash on Gallatin and cash-advance establishments are out pacing other businesses. The sustainability of such an economy, however, is uncertain. In the long run, the cash-advance racket might suck its clientele dry and put itself out of business. On the other hand, the current global economic recession has resulted in increasing unemployment, which could have the effect of further straining local relationships with “legitimate” banks, whereby the ‘fringe’ industry will fill the void.

In combination with its poverty industry, Gallatin organizes a considerable portion of automobile-centered businesses. Auto services and parts stores make up nearly ten percent of businesses on Gallatin. Adding used car lots and rental services to that number, businesses trading directly on automobility numbers nearly one out of every seven (30/226). The economy for auto service and parts clearly indicates a supply and demand for maintaining the automobile way of life, particularly where less advantaged populations are concentrated. Beyond direct auto service businesses, many other businesses capitalize on the necessity of the car in some way or another. On Gallatin, one can trade their car’s title for a cash loan to fix their car and drive thru McDonalds on the way home. From drive-thru restaurants to auto-mechanics and used car lots, Gallatin Road is a decidedly auto-centric place. However, given the vast amount of title-loan and other so-called ‘fringe banking’ establishments on the strip, it would also seem particularly easy to go from automobile to immobile in the ‘space’ of a paycheck.
Black and White

On the evening of August 26, 2008, Vanderbilt Anthropology professor and German native Pierre Colas and his sister who was visiting from abroad were murdered in Colas’s home on McFerrin Street in East Nashville, just West of Gallatin Road. Three hours later, four suspects were found laughing on a video surveillance tape at a local convenient store as they used Colas’s stolen identification to make their purchases. When the news broke, the suspects had not yet been apprehended, and nothing was known of their identity or of their motivation. But this did not stop some followers of the news in Nashville to come to conclusions about exactly what had happened. “That’s why they call it DIE-versity…” a blogger writes, “liberal bleeding hearts gunned down by the scum they promoted as equal” (WSMV, 8/29/09). There is no mistaking the racially coded hatred evidenced in that response, just as there is no mistaking that the East Nashville address reported as belonging to Colas was in the predominantly black area of East Nashville. Contrary to the blogger’s suspicions it turns out that three of the four suspects where white and one was black. It also turns out that homicides do occur in East Nashville from time to time, and for that matter, in every other Nashville neighborhood. Furthermore, as we will see, the ‘black’ side and the ‘white’ side of East Nashville are not so rigidly apparent. Still, the sort of attention that this particular event received illuminates the salience of race in the imaginary of space, or the salience of space in the racial imaginary. The event spurred at least one other Vanderbilt professor to suggest – addressing other white graduate students – that if such an event should recur it would be the victim’s own fault for living on ‘that side of town.’ An inspection of responses on the website of the local newspaper’s – The Tennessean – reports reveals that these sorts of feelings were widespread (Tennessean 8/27).
American cities are racially segregated. Relative to the West Side, East Nashville is understood as racially “Diverse,” and Gallatin Road is the boundary line – if there is one – that separates white and black neighborhoods of East Nashville. However, that boundary is not rigidly defined. Table 1 (Appendix) demonstrates the racial and socioeconomic patterning of East Nashville residents, using 2000 U.S. census data. The West side of Gallatin Road would be the black section of East Nashville, where black residents outnumber whites by a margin of about two to one. The East side of Gallatin, on the other hand, is predominantly white; with the exception of the James Cayce Homes housing project, which is almost all black, whites outnumber black residents by a ratio of four to one. Further analysis of each census tract (not shown) reveals that the close-in areas of the West side of Gallatin – including where Colas was murdered (census tracts 118 and 119) – were about ninety percent black in the year 2000, while some of the more exclusive areas on East side were nearly ninety percent white. Also consistent with the patterns of economic and life chances in segregated neighborhoods, the ‘white’ side enjoys higher household incomes, higher rates of homeownership, higher property values, and higher levels of education relative to the ‘black’ side.

There are complications to this racial division, however. Interestingly, among the census tracts that span Gallatin there is a nearly fifty/fifty black/white residential split, and levels of education, incomes, property values, and rates of homeownership are all consistently mixed relative to the general trends on each side. Also, the all-black public housing project James Cayce Homes sits on the ‘white’ side of East Nashville, and even abuts some of the more exclusive residential sections. Furthermore, Gallatin Road is the physical environment where the routines of everyday life are negotiated and experienced by both blacks and whites nearby. In
terms of race relations, Gallatin Road is a particularly interesting public space that is both a racial boundary, albeit a porous one, as well as a racially shared space.

While much is known about the causes and consequences of racial segregation, rarely is attention given in the literature to the actual spatial boundary lines that separate black and white neighborhoods. Rather, attention tends to focus on methods of violence, or abstractly on the manipulation of neighborhoods boundaries by real estate interests (Drake & Cayton; Massey & Denton 1993), or on the aversion among whites to accepting black residents as their neighbors (Bobo & Hutchings 1996; Farley et al 1994).

Elijah Anderson’s ethnography *Streetwise* (1990) is a notable exception that focuses on the lived experience of residents on the border of two neighborhoods. Bellwether Street in “Eastern City” U.S.A. divides “The Village” – a mixed-race, mixed-income, gentrifying community – from “Northton” – a predominantly black, decidedly poorer ghetto neighborhood. Like Gallatin Road, however, Bellwether Street does not so neatly divide social groups – there are poor residents and low income commercial uses in the Village as well as some pockets of gentrification in Northton – so much as it signifies the distinction between two racially and class coded neighborhoods. Moreover, and this is the import of Anderson’s work, Bellwether Street becomes the “edge,” a shared space where racial and class distinctions are articulated in the minds of local residents whom draw upon these codes in informing their strategies of interaction and behavior in day-to-day inter-class and interracial interactions on the street. A telling example involves the use of dog walking, particularly among whites, who have incidentally or subconsciously come to understand a racial difference in the meaning of pet ownership. In an illustrative vignette, “The [white] dog owner understands on some level what his animal means to others… since the black person backed off and gave him and his dog a wide berth.” These
subtle and racially complicated strategies of approaching daily interaction on the edge also serve to reinforce racial boundaries on the neighborhood level.

“By not walking their dogs across Bellwether… the Villagers themselves help create and enforce lines of division between their own neighborhood and Northton. Although one usually thinks first of stone throwing or other forms of harassment as determining were boundaries are drawn, it is also through daily activities like dog walking that borders are made and remade by people on both sides of the dividing line” (Anderson 1990: 225).

*Streetwise* allows the reader to imagine that these sorts of racial-spatial boundary practices operate in any large city where classed and raced neighborhoods abut each other. Although it is widely acknowledged that Anderson’s work takes place in Philadelphia, his use of the pseudonym “Eastern City” would seem to suggest these processes are generalizable to any city, at least any number of cities on the East Coast. However, while there is face validity to the claim whites and blacks articulate and reproduce racial, symbolic, and spatial boundaries in their daily interactions, there is reason to believe that the processes by which these boundaries are enacted and reproduced do vary from place to place. That is, Gallatin Road in Nashville, Tennessee is different from Bellwether Street in Philadelphia, just as the American South is different from the North, and the built environment of the Sunbelt is different from that of the Snowbelt. It is with respect to the difference between ‘village’ and ‘strip’ urbanism, articulated above, that we may expect to find differences in the way that racial boundaries are articulated and reproduced on Gallatin Road. In particular, the auto-centric environment that we find on Gallatin Road should manifest in different strategies and behaviors of perceiving and negotiating interracial and interclass tensions. At this point, however, that is a question for future investigation.

*Planning and Organic Urbanism*
Among the myriad of brightly lit signs that advertise the many fast food restaurants, check cashing establishments, and auto parts stores on Gallatin at night sits the Foo Bar. Foo bar is one of only four taverns that dot the inner three-mile section of Gallatin Road. I walked in on a Friday evening at 6pm; it was early. I was the only customer, and I had a chance to make conversation with the two bartenders, two very aesthetically done twenty-somethings, who were watching Family Guy on the flat-screen T.V.

A strange coincidence happened. A commercial for the NADC came on; the NADC sits one block away from Foo Bar. I asked one of the bartenders if NADC students ever came in to the Foo Bar. “No,” he said chuckling, “You’d think they would, but I imagine those guys are all pretty broke.” I agreed, “I suppose.” Not ten minutes later a young man sits down at the bar stool next to mine. “What’ll ya have?” asked the lady bartender. “Umm… what kinda beers y’all got here?” The bartender was visibly annoyed that she would have to recite the list of bottles and drafts. But she had done this before. She sized her customer up and began with some recognizable labels, or perhaps in alphabetical order; “Amstel, Amstel Light, Budweiser, Bud Light, Blue Moon…” The kid settled, nervously, on Blue Moon. “Can I see your ID please?” asked the bartender. In a place like Foo Bar in East Nashville, it is not so compulsory to check one’s identification as it is a sort of boundary ritual. This exchange revealed the bartender’s judgment of his youth as well as his naivé, and that judgment was no doubt communicated to the patron. In any case, the ID was from the state of Indiana. “Indiana!? I interjected, “What brings you to Nashville?” As it turns out, he is a student at the Auto Diesel College. He is getting a fourteen-month degree in “high performance,” which meant, “you know, like, high performance engines, I guess.” Sensing my opportunity to make an acquaintance I said, “that’s
interesting, I’m a student too. I go to Vanderbilt, I’m getting my PhD.” He didn’t say much after that. He drank his beer quick and left. I felt like a bad ethnographer.

The Foo Bar represents a different kind of business for Gallatin Road. Unlike the other bars on Gallatin that cater to working class and poorer residents of East Nashville, Foo Bar offers some more pricey beers and liquors, a nightly lineup of rock bands and DJs, and attracts a hipper, youthful crowd. Having been there for only two years, it represents the colonizing arm of the East Nashville bohemian ethic, and on Gallatin Road, as opposed to Five Points, that bohemian nightlife is tinged with a grittier glamour, all the better for the purveyors of practiced urban authenticity (see Grazian 2003; Lloyd 2006), but not, perhaps, for the more familiar habitués of Gallatin Road. Foo Bar is more Five Points than Gallatin; its signage is modest and faces the street, not the traffic; its patrons are mostly young, white, and artistically (or stylistically) oriented; and it is fairly well attended on a nightly basis. The major difference is that the Foo Bar’s front door opens up to a five lane commercial artery, as opposed to the vibrant sidewalks of Five Points. Foo Bar is, nevertheless, a welcome addition for city planners.

Nashville’s Metropolitan Development and Housing Authority (MDHA 2008) has recently initiated a plan called the “Gallatin Pike Improvement District.” This plan calls for sweeping regulations to buildings, commercial signage, parking structures, sidewalks, and landscaped buffering all along Gallatin Road. Among the goals of this plan are; “reduce visual clutter from signage along the corridor,” “improve aesthetics and economic viability along the corridor by using zoning discouraging land uses perceived [my emphasis] to have a negative impact on the community,” and “to encourage walking, cycling, and public transport.” It is certainly the case that walking, cycling and public transportation are discouraged on Gallatin. It is also hard to argue with the vague language of ‘improvements’ and ‘negative impacts.’ On
closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that the planning discourse of “Gallatin Improvement” casts Gallatin and its users in relation to Five Points, which being a previous project of MDHA is now seen as an example of enlightened urban design, and Gallatin is its ‘other.’ I will end by returning to the contrast between village and strip urbanism, with a critique of planning discourse.

The Village/Strip difference is not an innocent one, and it is not simply an historical accident either. The introduction of the automobile to the American landscape is credited with considerable violence – or what Jacobs describes as a matter of ‘death and life.’ In describing the vibrancy of life in the Village, Jane Jacobs opposes her arch nemesis and builder-destroyer Robert Moses, who in the 1960s planned the Lower Manhattan Expressway which would have cleaved the Village like a ‘meat axe,’ just as the Cross-Bronx-Expressway did to the Bronx (Berman 1982). Modern planning principles are misanthropic, cried Jacobs; their myopia stems from nineteenth century principles of monumentalism and escape. Moses was building for an automobile future, an increasingly atomized modern world in motion, and destroying the vital foundations of community in the process. Jacobs attributes the death of cities to builders like Moses, but also to the asocial, vehicle-centric future. The life of cities, on the other hand, is a function of interacting human beings, sharing space, holding each other’s interests in plain sight; their daily routines, that sidewalk vitality, provides an organic dynamism that it is impossible where automobiles dominate. Jacobs would laud the Five Points, as East Nashville planners believe, and she would applaud their efforts to transform Gallatin in its model.

Interestingly, Venturi et al also describe the organic dynamism of the commercial strip, and they too cast their description in contrast the received wisdom of the accepted planning discourse. Contrary to modernist architectural principles that hold contempt for exterior space
and outward symbolic display, Venturi et al demonstrate how in the automobile age the commercial strip works as a complex communication system. They emphasize the ‘near chaotic’ complexity of signs, symbols, and uses, where order is determined not by everyone looking out for everyone, but by the sheer difficulty of the built environment itself. While Jacobs found order in organic social relationships between strangers sharing space, Venturi found order in the fragmented, commercial, automobile, ‘near chaos’ of the vernacular strip. Just as Jacobs teaches us the invaluable lessons beneath our noses, Venturi et al urge us to learn from Las Vegas. Although the village and the strip are very different types of places, both Jacobs and Venturi emphasize the organic urban processes that take shape over and beyond the ideals and wishes urban planners and architects.

Moreover, while Venturi and Jacobs analyze very opposite types of spaces, each is profoundly couched as an anti-modernist intervention. Jacobs opposes the neglect and the destruction of her ‘vital,’ organic urban communities, while Venturi et al oppose the pretenses of ‘high-modern’ architects who neglect the dynamism of the commercial landscape and the new postmodern experiences of place. But their interventions are also profoundly different; Jacobs writes about people, while Venturi is merely concerned with architecture. While Jacobs takes a moral position, as a matter of ‘death and life,’ Venturi dismisses moral content altogether – ‘from an architectural perspective there is no difference between a drive-thru restaurant and a drive-thru church.’ (Venturi et al 1977: 6). However, the ‘lessons’ from Las Vegas are no less important than those from Greenwich Village. We have learned to find urban vitality where we would least expect it, and that planning discourse often runs counter to that organic ‘vitality.’

Nevertheless, in 2008 in East Nashville, Jacob’s village urbanism represents the archetype of intelligent planning. Here, Five Points is MDHA’s and East Nashville’s
representative of village urbanism (Lloyd, forthcoming-b), and Gallatin represents its ‘other.’

Ironically, what city planners now consider acceptable village environments where once slated to be demolished to make room for the automobile. Now, automobile spaces like Gallatin Road are lamented as organizing uses that have a “negative impact on the community” (MDHA 2008), and they are designated for ‘improvement’ by village design principles.

Regardless of planning principles, however, it may be evident that the real target of ‘improvements’ is not necessarily the built environment itself, but the concentration of low-income and marginal residents and commercial uses that these ‘negative’ spaces organize. After all, Gallatin Road is not the only auto-centric commercial strip in Nashville. In fact, sprawling commercial strips are everywhere in Nashville. But Gallatin is a target; it is an antithesis of Five Points vitality, but also it represents the antithesis of Five Points uses and their users.

There is more to be said of the arbitrariness of any one particular planning discourse over another. Marshall Berman (1982) derides Jacob’s depiction of village vitality as hopelessly naïve, a ‘melodramatic and surreal farce.’ Although he recognizes her as one of the brightest modern thinkers since Marx and Baudelaire – as do Nashville urban planners – she fails to understand the modern context in which she writes. In Berman’s terms, modernity means that creation and destruction go hand in hand; the ‘death’ of village urbanism is assumed by the ‘life’ of the automobile era, and this is merely the ‘spirit of the age,’ however brutally immoral it sounds. Jacobs takes a moral stand against automobile urbanism, but does not grasp the moral imperative of the people, the ironic self-divisions, the deep psycho-social divide which is riven by modern history: we drive away from our contradictions, we “hold back the tears and step on the gas.” To overlook the urbanism of the vernacular strip is to misunderstand modern experiences of time, space, and being, and the centrality of ‘auto’-mobile spatial practices in the
contemporary city. Nevertheless, Gallatin Road is understood relative to village principals, is made a target by contemporary planning discourse, and is thoroughly othered in the process. Such discourse makes Gallatin and its users ‘less worthy’ urbanites.
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Appendix: East Nashville Census Tracts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select demographic characteristics for census tracts surrounding Gallatin, 2000 census.</th>
<th>West(^a)</th>
<th>Gallatin(^a)</th>
<th>East(^a)</th>
<th>East w/o JCH(^b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total occupied households</td>
<td>7260</td>
<td>6253</td>
<td>10651</td>
<td>9301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black householder</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White householder</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income(^c)</td>
<td>$25,780</td>
<td>$29,861</td>
<td>$34,765</td>
<td>$38,545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeowners</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median home value(^c)</td>
<td>$69,000</td>
<td>$76,000</td>
<td>$93,170</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median rent(^c)</td>
<td>$474</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>$451</td>
<td>$585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-year college or more(^d)</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent mobile (5 yrs)(^e)</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

\(^a\) Davidson County census tracts to the North and West of Gallatin include: 119, 118, 113, 110.01, 126. Gallatin Census Tracts include: 112, 114, 117. Census tracts to the South and East of Gallatin include 111, 115, 116, 120, 121, 122, 123, and 124.

\(^b\) Census Tract #124 is mostly, but not exclusively made up the public housing project, James Cayce Homes. There are 1350 households in this census tract and only 68 of which are homeowners. Interestingly the median house value in this tract is $177,100, considerably higher than the rest of the areas South and East of Gallatin, and also indicating that being near this Housing project does not necessarily lower property values, although it is still likely that most resident near James Casey homes are renters not owners.

\(^c\) Median values for household income, home value, and rent, represent the weighted median values of the census tracts that make up the category.

\(^d\) Calculated for residents over 25 years of age.

\(^e\) Calculated for all residents over 5 years of age.