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The Spatial Mobility of Urban Street Vending
CHAPTER 7

The Urbanism of Los Angeles Street Vending

Kenny Cupers

Street vending is an omnipresent feature of the urban landscape of Los Angeles. It takes place on the city’s sidewalks, in parks, and at squares, but also at highway intersections, on parking lots, in leftover spaces, and in privately owned spaces like outdoor mall plazas.¹ Large-scale Latin American migration and the economic downturn of the 1980s led many poor, often undocumented immigrants to turn to street vending as a key means of economic survival. Since then, street vending has gained increasing visibility in the city. The majority of the roughly ten to fifteen thousand vendors in Los Angeles are Latina/o migrants selling freshly cut fruits and vegetables, homemade foods, and carbonated drinks on the street, carrying their wares in everything from back pockets and baskets to carts, cars, and trucks (see Figures 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, and 7.4).²

Despite the ubiquity of mobile vending, Los Angeles municipal legislation prohibits it.³ It is one of the few major U.S. cities to impose an outright ban, in contrast to, for example, New York City, where street vending is regulated and half of the estimated twelve thousand vendors are licensed (Street Vendor Project of the Urban Justice Center 2006: 6).⁴ Over the past twenty-five years, this legislation and the accompanying police enforcement of the street vending ban have inspired various forms of protest and political mobilization, public debate, planning proposals, and an experimental program to legalize vending in particular neighborhoods of the city.
In the past, street vendors were often cast as part of a “traditional” or “backward” economy found in the so-called developing world but soon to disappear as labor moved toward full-time, stable, regulated employment in a modern industrialized context. In past decades, however, the persistence and growth of informal activities across the globe have contradicted such projections, not only in developing countries but also in “advanced” postindustrial cities like Los Angeles. Scholars have attributed this development to the relative decline of welfare state regulation and Fordist industrial production, and the emergence of new economic regimes escaping nationally organized regulation. These more flexible regimes are generated by globalizing capital flows, which themselves rely on the informalization and transnationalization of labor (Portes and Sassen 1987; Portes, Castells, and Benton 1989; Sassen 1991, 1998; Roy and Al Sayyad 2004).

Yet, as much as this political economic perspective explains the resurgence of street vending in cities like Los Angeles, it remains silent about its consequences on the ground. While some more recent scholarship has drawn attention to vendors’ political mobilization (Cross 1998; Weber 2001) or creative entrepreneurship (Jones 1988; Balkin 1989; Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward 1990; Kloosterman and Rath 2003; Cross and Morales 2007), the spatiality of street vending has only recently become a focus of research. Coming closest to offering a theoretical framework for understanding street vending as a spatial rather than merely economic or cultural practice is the work of Margaret Crawford, John Kaliski, and John Cross (1999). They cast street vending as a key instance of what they call everyday urbanism.

This notion is fundamentally inspired by the work of French thinkers Henri Lefèbvre and Michel De Certeau. In the immediate postwar decades, Henri Lefèbvre was one of the first to rescue the realm of the everyday from theoretical neglect and dismissal. While he acknowledged everyday life could be victim to the alienating forces of capitalism and bureaucracy, he also presented it as harboring the seeds of change and opening up to the meaningful and the authentic. The authors of Everyday Urbanism view this positive, liberating aspect of the everyday as holding crucial potential for the contemporary city (Crawford et al. 1999). Further borrowing Lefèbvre’s concept of the “production of space,” the authors understand street vending as creative intervention rather than spatial misuse. Street vendors produce new kinds of spaces for themselves and others in the city and in doing so broaden the definition of public space. The authors’ second theoretical underpinning refers to Michel De Certeau’s distinction between strategies (of the strong) and tactics (of the weak). Whereas strategies operate in space—by setting what is “proper” in the
city’s demarcated spaces—tactics operate in time. As such, temporary or ephemeral practices of everyday life like street vending offer a counterweight to the officially sanctioned uses of space.

Ultimately, everyday urbanism is a critique of the formalism that dominates the discipline of architecture and the reductive rationality of urban planning, and the kind of architectural and urban thinking that sustains it. Against both these dominant norms, Crawford et al. set the basic premise that lived experience is more important than physical form in defining the city. They use the term “urbanism” to loosen the ideological grip of these disciplines. Urbanism is not just the construction materials of bricks, concrete, and asphalt, the solid matter of building. It is also more than the knowledge and practice of architects, urban planners, or policy makers. Understood in very loose terms, urbanism is a field that encompasses not only the materiality of the built environment and the knowledge of experts but the multitude of practices, visions, and interventions that make up urban life itself. Such an understanding brings into focus the tensions between the planned and the unplanned city—the realm of experts and the world of everyday practitioners. If, following the authors, we understand the purview of urbanism as framing life in the city in the broadest possible terms, we should also be able to take into account a far wider range of elements, including the temporal qualities of the urban environment and thus also those produced by street vending.

Despite the fruitfulness of these theoretical propositions, they raise as many questions as they try to answer. To what extent, then, is street vending a form of everyday urbanism? Is it so merely by virtue of its presence as an urban practice in the city? The notion of the everyday is hardly monolithic: what is everyday to some is not to others. So to whom are Los Angeles’ street vendors everyday? And what makes them urbanists? How exactly does street vending in Los Angeles allow us to imagine a kind of urbanism that differs from the dominant one?

This chapter argues that the answers to these questions lie in the specific way street vendors create space in Los Angeles. More than in other U.S. and Latin American cities, street vendors in this “mobile city”—in which the prevailing urban form is expressive of car-based mobility—are also on the move. Unlike the street vending markets in Mexico City or the organized vending spots of New York City, street vending in Los Angeles is at once more precarious and more mobile. Due to law enforcement, and to the dynamics of urban space itself, the space of street vending in Los Angeles exists by virtue of movement. More than any other American city, Los Angeles can be seen as founded on individual (auto)mobility. Street vendors are not only inscribed within this culture but also transform it by offering alternative forms of mobility that remake urban space. What
makes Los Angeles street vending understandable as a specific form of urbanism, rather than just one of many urban practices of contesting the streets of the contemporary city, is vendors’ creativity and ability to move through the city—on foot with their goods, or by car, van, or truck. This kind of concrete urban mobility and the symbolic meanings it entails are the subject of this chapter. Though clearly distinct from vendors’ transnational or socioeconomic mobility, their urban mobility relates directly to both why they are outlawed and how they creatively tackle the constraints of social class, foreignness, and racism.

My analysis is based on a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and historical analysis. In the first part, based on interviews and participant observation, I focus on the street vendors themselves and reveal how they transform the city as they move. Tracing their movements by car and on foot, in and through urban neighborhoods of Los Angeles, particularly East Hollywood and downtown, at different times of the day and on different days of the week allowed me to map the dynamic geography of vending. Next, referring to local newspapers, government documents, the archives of nonprofit organizations, and interviews with government officials and activists, I discuss the regulation of vending and the symbolic meanings of mobility shaping debates about such regulation. These transcend the pragmatic register of ways to make the city work and cut to the core of its identity. Finally, using these same sources, I analyze the efforts to legalize street vending in Los Angeles since the mid 1980s. These efforts demonstrate how Los Angeles street vending became an object of urban planning and intervention.

**The Mobile Space of Street Vending**

Although predominantly of Central and Latin American origin, the vendors of Los Angeles share neither a single race or ethnicity, nor a similar background or social group. Some fled from problems in their home countries; others came to seek economic opportunity. Some arrived yesterday; others have been in the same neighborhood for decades. Some entered the United States officially; others came undocumented. Some have become permanent residents. Others have families waiting for them elsewhere, do not intend to stay, and aim to maintain a deliberate elusiveness: here today but not tomorrow, if things go according to plan. Regardless of effectively expecting to return to their home countries, they live to derive maximal profit from their stay and remain flexible in their personal lives. Still others might initially have been transnational migrants but have subsequently stayed or moved elsewhere within the United States. More than their con-
tribution to a transnational economy through remittances (see Suro et al. 2001), their labor marshals both local and transnational networks of aid, skill, and culture (cf. Hannierz and Smith 2001:101–122). These networks result from concrete spatial strategies and mobile practices in the city.

Latino neighborhoods like Boyle Heights, parts of downtown, and East Hollywood have particularly high concentrations of street vendors. In such dense lower-income immigrant areas, car ownership is less common and the streets are more intensely used by pedestrians. Street vendors not only bank on the existing foot traffic, but also actively contribute to the liveliness of the streets by giving pedestrians a reason to pass by, stop, consume, or chat. Some bus and subway stops become open-air markets during rush hour, when commuters are enticed to buy cheap meals, snacks, and various knickknacks. Vendors in these neighborhoods often live close by and walk to work.

Daisy is one of them. She is a young Honduran woman who sells cut fruit on a busy street corner in the MacArthur Park neighborhood. She explained to me how she came to Los Angeles:

I came illegally to the United States. I have four children in Honduras. I came here out of necessity. I have always been a street vendor. I was given the opportunity to work at this cart so I could make things better for my family, my children. … I like business, and have always been in it since I was small. I worked in the market [in Honduras], and I think I am going to continue it because I like it. … My plan is to build a house, a house in my own country. Then I will go back.

Her cousin, Gloria, who moved to Los Angeles twelve years ago, has helped Daisy by paying for her trip to the United States, offering her a room in her own house, and giving her this job working at least eight hours a day, six days a week. Gloria explained: “My husband had the initial idea to get the fruit cart, but the work and food preparation is hers. … It helps us to live and pay the rent, that’s it.” Daisy receives a weekly paycheck from her cousin and regularly sends remittances home. Gloria was a food vendor herself for a long time, selling tacos in the same neighborhood. She and her husband recently purchased two stainless steel fruit carts, and besides her cousin she now employs an acquaintance from her church community to operate them. Every day except Sunday, the carts are moved to the same street corner in the MacArthur Park neighborhood. In the evenings her husband picks them up and moves them to a nearby commercially owned commissary where they are stored and cleaned following county health laws.

Although such vending spaces depend on daily rhythm, they seem relatively fixed. Fruit cart vendors like Daisy have reason to change location only when sales decrease, a chance at a better location arises, or police
harassment forces them to move. Police enforcement, which consists of a hefty fine (up to one thousand dollars) and in some cases confiscation of goods or the cart itself, is haphazard. The regime of enforcement is thus a factor in the dynamics of street vending spaces (Muñoz 2008). When crackdowns in targeted areas subside, however, vendors tend to reappear in those very same areas—possibly even on the same spots, if not on the other side of the corner or less than a block away. In this sense, the role of police enforcement in the creation of vending spaces is less consequential than the economic logic of street vending itself.

Other types of vending in dense neighborhoods like those around MacArthur Park do not require a stationary spot at all: vendors simply stay on the move. Ice cream vendors, and all those who are able to carry their wares in bags, walk the sidewalks to maximize contacts with potential customers. Others combine walking with setting up shop, laying down their wares on a blanket. This allows them to relocate to wherever foot traffic is more intense at particular moments of the day, and also to disappear quickly when police show up (see Figure 7.2). Still others follow much the same procedure using shopping carts.

In most of Los Angeles, however, where sidewalk traffic tends to be rather sparse and the majority of potential customers are in cars, different kinds of vending spaces emerge. A “typical street” in Los Angeles may seem more dominated by cars than its New York City counterpart, but this has less to do with car traffic than with what happens alongside it: in Los Angeles, buildings are more often set back from the road and separated by parking lots, which takes animation from the street into the domain of mini-malls, gas stations, and the private realm of the store and the restaurant. In such an environment, where sidewalks are insignificant, street vendors can easily appropriate under-utilized zones and use carts, tables, blankets, and so on to turn them into more animated public spaces. Major road intersections and highway off-ramps, on the other hand, can seem more hostile to such appropriation. They tend to offer plenty of leftover spaces for vendors to occupy: a traffic island or a median strip often suffices to set up shop. Many vendors’ informal employers, who might be relatives and often come from the same social network of immigrants, drop them off in these places. Equipped with bags and baskets of fruit or prepared foods, they find themselves at different intersections every day, trying to sell their wares to drivers stopped in front of traffic lights. They interpret the laws of traffic engineering to create business opportunities and turn transitional moments into spaces of impulse shopping. These spaces are ephemeral in the temporal sense too: vendors are sometimes there for less than an hour—just as long as it takes to sell all their wares. They are then picked up or drive to the next location.
The more fortunate vendors can use a car as infrastructure for their entrepreneurial practices. Some set up shop simply by opening their trunk in a parking spot close to a public park or other recreational area where they are guaranteed potential customers. A couple of basic placards listing the menu of the day can be used to entice passers-by (see Figure 7.5). This strategy, which requires intimate knowledge of the city’s urban rhythms, can be very efficient: vendors can sell a lot in a short amount of time and organize their schedule around other work. They can also close their shop as quickly as it was set up in case of looming police presence. Evenings and nights facilitate yet another rhythm of street vending. Business parking lots offer a second city of abundant space after regular office hours. Vendors, who know the life of the lot and its surveillance, have ample space to set up shop—which can range from a simple grill to a veritable outdoor restaurant (see Figures 7.6 and 7.7). By simply setting up a few tables covered with tablecloths, taking up not more than a couple of empty parking spots, they advertise themselves to passing traffic and turn hostile space into familiar, homely, safe places.

Vendors like these creatively employ the spaces dedicated to the infrastructure of the “mobile city,” subverting the historically defined logic of much of Los Angeles’s public space (see Norton 2008). As such examples illustrate, street vending is not an ephemeral practice in an otherwise unaffected space but instead actively shapes the urban spaces of Los Angeles by generating new kinds of public spaces and producing meaningful cultural landscapes based on the inventive potential of memory (Rojas 1991; Crawford et al. 1999; Muñoz, 2008). Vendors are key agents in the re-familiarization and domestication of Los Angeles’s car-dominated space. But how they do so is perhaps even more important. Street vendors transform urban space primarily by virtue of their mobility: perhaps paradoxically, it is only by being mobile that they are able to transform highway intersections into shops and parking lots into restaurants. They actively produce urban space—often against the unwritten “rules” inscribed in those spaces and under threat of law enforcement—and succeed in doing so because they remain constantly on the move.

In their efforts to gain a foothold in the city, spatially and economically, street vendors derive their individual agency from their urban mobility. The everyday movements of Dina, a food vendor and a single mother of four, aptly demonstrate this. During the period I interviewed her, Dina was selling tacos outside a nightclub on weekends and tamales in the evening peak hours on a busy street corner in Koreatown. She explained to me:

A friend of mine works at another night club and she asked me if I wanted to help her make food. She gave me 40 dollars per night for it. Then the owners of that club proposed I work at their other club, independently. … I have
been vending illegally in the street for about eleven years now. ... The truth is that when my children were smaller, it was much more difficult [to support my family]. That is how I got the idea to vend illegally, on the street. ... I worked in a factory before, but could not support my family because the little money I earned there, I had to spend, and there wasn't enough left to pay rent.

She now cooks her street foods at home and works three to four nights a week, when her children are asleep. Some of the female food vendors I spoke with were single mothers who preferred street vending over a regular job like factory work. The flexibility of street vending allows these women to combine child care responsibilities with a viable income (see also Tinker 1987 and the essay by Dunn in this volume).

Vendors thus tend to use their urban mobility strategically. This contrasts with what would seem intuitively germane to street vending and what De Certeau identified as tactical, namely, a second-order, reactive, ad hoc, short-term pursuit in the face of oppression (De Certeau 1980). It is true that most vendors respond flexibly to enforcement. But whereas some migrants might resort to vending in utter destitution and without a conscious plan, many more vendors engage in vending as a creative long-term strategy in organizing their livelihood. Unbounded by the opposition between liberating tactics and oppressive strategies, street vending creates a mobile geography in close relation to various other actors—customers, business owners, police officers, and so on. Vendors’ strategies of moving through the city depend as much on the reigning norms of their environment as on their personal situation and skill set. Movement strategies often are also gendered: male vendors tend to be more mobile, usually carrying their goods in a large bag or selling out of a cart, whereas many women tend to install their wares, often because they sell homemade hot foods requiring quite complicated handling and transportation (compare Figures 7.2, 7.3, and 7.4) (cf. Cornejo 2005).

The capacity to move allows vendors to exploit the temporal rhythms of the city. At noon vendors flock to commercial and industrial areas like the downtown garment district, where low-paid workers need cheap lunch options. During the evening peak they can be found at subway stops and highway intersections where traffic jams form ideal concentrations of potential customers. At night, they work outside bars and nightclubs. And on weekends they cater to the city’s park visitors. Most vendors go back and forth between these multiple sites at different times of the day or the week, trying to increase sales and escape police enforcement. Despite the seeming ephemerality of this practice, vendors cultivate their own patterns of mobility, negotiating between flexibility and routine. They frequent the same sites at specific times of day so that local residents and
customers can get used to them and identify their location as a place to get street food. When sales decrease, or when repeated police harassment forces them to move, they seek out different spots. Such patterns of movement reveal the variety of creative strategies involved in the seemingly unplanned practice of street vending. This creative ability allows vendors not only to survive but to maintain a way of life with an (albeit often limited) range of choice. In this sense, urban mobility is the key means by which vendors shape their position—as migrants, laborers, and citizens—in the city.

Regulation and the Symbolic Meaning of Mobility

The regulation of street vending in Los Angeles is a complex matrix in which power is distributed over a variety of institutions—governmental, nonprofit and private—and administrative levels—city, county, and state (see Figure 7.8). Legislatively, the city government has the most immediate effect on street vending: the Los Angeles Municipal Code prohibits vending in all the city’s public spaces. The state of California legislates street vending insofar as it pertains to public health and safety. It also issues sales permits in order to levy taxes. These do not permit selling on the street, though some vendors assume that it does. This legislative intricacy is only heightened by the complexity of enforcement. Four different governmental bodies are responsible for enforcing laws against illegal vending on public land. In addition, the private security forces of Business Improvement Districts have the power to remove street vendors from both private and public property. The enforcement of anti-vending laws is legitimized in three main ways: street vendors are seen as competing unfairly with local merchants; their food raises health concerns; and they threaten to obstruct what is officially designated as public space.

Despite the seemingly pragmatic nature of these official concerns, the increasing prominence of street vending in Los Angeles from the late 1980s onward aroused public resistance to street commerce far exceeding these practical concerns. In the local press, public health and other concerns were constantly diverted into moral justification. Among government officials as well, wild stories about street foods being prepared in dirty bathrooms and taken out of trash cans continue to circulate and legitimate enforcement. Meanwhile, few studies have examined the concrete effects of street foods on public health, and the one known nutritional study conducted thus far did not report any serious health risks (Taylor et al. 2000). A similar attitude characterizes the local merchants who, rather than monitoring the actual effect of street vending on their own profits,
tend to focus on its “dirtiness” and the way this affects the desired image of their street. Such perceptions can be influenced by minute aesthetic details. In the small private vending program around subway stops, local shopkeepers complained that the umbrellas of Latina/o food vendors around the subway station would tarnish the reputation of the area and demanded that the colorful “Latino-looking” umbrellas be replaced by evenly colored, more corporate-looking ones (see Figure 7.9).

These types of symbolic meanings of street vending have predominated in the often edgy debates reported in the local press over the past decades. Some opponents have considered street vending a sign of backwardness and an element of the so-called Third World, with which their city should have nothing in common. In an opinion piece about street vending, a high-level policy official contended that “some parts of the city are like a Third World country” and that street vending was a sign that “the quality of life is eroding at a rapid pace.” Many residents have perceived street vendors as dirty, not only because of the trash their customers leave behind but also because roaming vendors are seen to negatively affect the “neighborhood feel.” Others have pointed out that street vendors, as strangers with improper cultural backgrounds, make a desirable civic order impossible: “We’re getting to be a Third World country. It’s nasty. It’s not clean. … They set up outside like a fruit market. They’re selling pillows on a stick. They’re going door-to-door selling tamales. It’s disgusting.” This view of vendors as an invasive element is reflected in official discourse as well. Bureaucrats and police have often compared street vendors to a spreading disease: “We are approaching a crisis situation here, and like cancer, it spreads. If you don’t eradicate it, it’s going to consume you.”

Such negative public perception goes far beyond pragmatic concerns with public health, safety, or urban traffic. It also transcends the politico-economic view of taxation as based on landed property; thus both prejudice against vendors and the interests of shopkeepers derive from the same cause. Vendors’ mobility is understood as an undesirable elusiveness, and discussion about street vending often reflects deep-seated anxiety about the clean and the unclean. White middle-class public perception tends to categorize street vending as dirty, unclean, and disorderly—in short, “out of place”—and align it with failure to establish a certain civic order.

As evinced by existing analyses of spatial mobility in the city (e.g., Wallkowitz 1992), such an order implies the question of who can or is allowed to move. In this case, however, vendors’ mobility refers to more than their physical movements. It also carries symbolic meanings. And these soon
came to be related to the desired urban image for Los Angeles. Responding to the emerging debate about street vending in the early 1990s, one newspaper report expressed this relationship by evoking mobile vending as an essential part of the dynamism of street life, and because of this, as a logically contested issue in Los Angeles:

Is the city destined to be an urban, polyglot capital of the Third World, nurturing a crazy quilt of hundreds of cultures bringing their habits to its streets? Or can it somehow again become a staunch bastion of suburban values, including the separation of house and mall—a haven from colder, more crowded cities?... The question, it seems, is whether Los Angeles is a city like any other, where people meet to buy and sell on the streets, or, rather, some kind of non-city, somehow different, somehow better.16

The report thus suggested that the dominant symbolic meanings attached to the practice of street vending in Los Angeles were anathema to suburban domesticity, security, and stability—in other words, to things in place.

Opponents of street vending thus cast it as “out of place” in Los Angeles. Nonetheless, rather than a self-evident sign of the “Latin Americanization” of the United States, as Davis (2000) sees it, or an element in the creation of tight Latino neighborhoods and communities, following Rojas (1991), street vending is neither a simply indigenous nor a purely “foreign” cultural practice. Some immigrant vendors, before arriving in the United States, were indeed lifelong street vendors, but many others in Los Angeles had no previous experience with it and become vendors on the streets of Los Angeles only through contact with other vendors. Rather than being “out of place,” then, street vending in Los Angeles is perhaps foremost a local invention resulting from transnational and urban mobility.

Since its exponential growth at the beginning of the twentieth century, Los Angeles has sought to be portrayed as the sunny, clean alternative to the “problem cities” of the industrial northeast (Findlay 1992: 268–276; Hise 2004: 545–547). This desire has informed fiction as well as realities of Los Angeles, producing a particular liking of the suburban ideal and an anxiousness about urban density and associated problems. It also underlies the establishment in the 1930s of a particularly intolerant law, still valid today, against street vending, which is widely regarded as a visible sign of such undesired urbanity. In this way, Los Angeles—the symbolic endpoint of America’s westward development, founded upon the myth of movement as progress and modernity—became the only major U.S. city to outlaw the mobile practice of street vending. Street vending has evoked intense public debate in Los Angeles around questions such as “should there be street vending in our city?” and “what kind of place is a city full of
street vendors, and do we want to live in it?” Rather than pragmatic questions of governance, the prohibition of street vending revolves around the symbolic meanings of mobility and the very identity of the city.

Legalizing as Immobilizing

Over the past decades, vendors, activists, and government officials have attempted to legalize vending and provide alternatives to outright prohibition and continuing police enforcement. These efforts began in the mid 1980s, when the number of street vendors in Los Angeles rose dramatically. After local business owners complained that “the problem with vendors was getting totally out of hand,” police began enforcing an existing 1930s law against street vending. Violent crackdowns and harsh citations led a group of vendors to found the nonprofit Asociación de Vendedores Ambulantes or Street Vendors Association in 1988. Through legal assistance and with the help of other nonprofits, this organization first worked to stop police harassment but soon broadened its political ambitions to legalize street vending everywhere in Los Angeles. After negotiations with the city government in 1989, the organization succeeded in getting an official task force appointed to study street vending. Over the following year this task force developed a proposal for regulating vending in Los Angeles. Its basic principle was the confinement of vending into designated districts where street vending was prominent. This principle of confinement, so I argue, was central to its ultimate failure.

After several years of debate, activism, and official negotiation, the Los Angeles City Council approved what was called the Sidewalk Vending Ordinance on 4 January 1994. This ordinance established a two-year pilot program aimed at legalizing street vending in eight “special vending districts.” An Sidewalk Vending Administration was designed to guide this process and to protect vendors against police enforcement of the ban during the transition toward legal vending. Vendors, however, continued to be harassed as police forces intensified their crackdowns in the period immediately following the passage of the new ordinance. Meanwhile, a number of the program’s key advocates who had been actively involved in the formation of the task force left the City Council, and city government support for street vending dwindled. Also at this time, an internal division tore apart the Street Vendors Association, resulting in multiple lawsuits and a painful period of confusion and inactivity within the vendors’ ranks. This combination of difficulties impeded the success of all but one proposal for a vending district—the one in the MacArthur Park area—whose establishment took another four years.
Finally, in June 1999, seventeen purpose-built carts rolled out on the streets facing MacArthur Park. The district was funded by the city’s Community Development Department and managed by an independent nonprofit organization, the Institute for Urban Research and Development (IURD). The Community Development Department, which had funded the initiative with a five-year grant, had envisioned the program as becoming self-sustaining. However, high maintenance and administration costs prevented the program from achieving this goal, and in 2005 the IURD was forced to put an end to Los Angeles’s first legal vending district. Since then, the participating vendors have been searching for alternative ways to make a living. Most have continued to vend on the city’s streets, returning again to illegal status. Good intentions thus produced the most unfortunate results: because the 1994 Sidewalk Vending Ordinance endorsed a stricter enforcement of illegal vending outside the official districts, vendors today are subject to more harassment than ever before.

Why did legalization ultimately fail? Many possible reasons have been suggested: resistance from fixed-location business owners, the simple fact of an existing law that resolutely outlaws street vending, the division within the ranks of the vendors’ political organization, the city government’s short-lived political support for vending, and so on. Weber (2001) has pointed to the atypical structure of vendors’ political mobilization, its lack of transparency and participatory decision-making, and the race/ethnicity and class tensions. Another explanation, suggested by the comparison with day laborers (Valenzuela 2001), is the simply competitive nature of street vending, which directs vendors against each other instead of collectively toward a common goal. Another argument arises in comparison with street vendors in Mexico City, who have very successfully organized politically (Cross 1998). Whereas the latter are legal citizens in Mexico City, many Latina/o vendors in Los Angeles are undocumented migrants whose position in the city is more precarious. Such differences could explain the absence of proposals for vending areas after the 1994 ordinance or the lack of funding for vending programs.

But the most compelling explanation for the eventual failure to legalize vending in Los Angeles may lie in the proposal’s basic principle. The idea of solving the problems of the informal economy by formalizing it was translated spatially into a strategy of containment with the Sidewalk Vending Program, operated by assigning vendors to designated, controlled areas within the city. At MacArthur Park, the vending area was limited to a small section of the neighborhood. The vendors were stationed alongside two of the park’s edges. They were not allowed to vend on other streets or in the park, once their predominant places of business. This was partly
a matter of public land use. The Community Development Department, which actually ran the vending program, only had jurisdiction over the pavement adjacent to the park. The Department of Recreation and Parks managed the park itself and had proposed charging the vendors a fixed daily rate to use it. The Community Development Department rejected the proposal, forcing vendors to stay on the sidewalk, where they had a hard time attracting customers. This diminished not only the individual profits of the vendors but also the popularity and viability of the program as a whole. The curbing of the flexibility and mobility that characterize street vending was thus a central reason for the program’s failure to become economically self-sustaining.

The real object of reform in the Sidewalk Vending Program was not street vending as an urban practice itself, but its symbolic meanings. The IURD related the vending program explicitly to its campaign to “clean up” MacArthur Park. By casting Latina/o vending as a unique cultural experience for tourists and new visitors to the park, street vendors became instrumental in the effort to rid the park of crime. This campaign’s success was proven by police reports of reduced rates of crime during the operation of the vending district. The program essentially aimed to radically invert the dominant cultural meanings associated with street vending: no longer dirty, disorderly, and themselves part of the perceived problem of urban criminality, street vendors now came to be seen as positive agents in removing the park from the city’s mental geography of danger. They became positive forces of social control—what Jane Jacobs called “eyes on the street”—as well as cultural ambassadors displaying a selective otherness, a cultural image stripped of its connotations with backwardness and enriched by a sense of authenticity. Rather than the normative assumption that this kind of practice does not belong in a contemporary city, street vending could now be seen as a valuable cultural experience to be consumed in designated locales.

Although this strategy revalorized street vending, it did not increase vendors’ agency in concrete ways. Planning efforts to legalize, regulate, or otherwise govern mobile vending have thus far been focused on restricting vendors’ mobility, both concretely, by limiting their physical movements within a perimeter, and symbolically, by attaching them to a clearly defined place in the city as ambassadors of “local culture.” Legalizing therefore ultimately meant immobilizing the vendors, thereby cutting short their ability to create economically successful vending spaces. Some vendors, like Dina, operated for a while in the legal vending district and enjoyed the safety it offered them, but they now have returned to illegality, vending in multiple locations all over the city. By aiming to settle a practice that is inherently mobile, the planning project that resulted from
calls for legalization ultimately neglected its core quality, namely, the capacity to move freely.

Conclusion

Street vending allows for an alternative understanding of the city in which the primary rationale is neither urban identity nor place but rather urban mobility. Instead of simply introducing a mobile element into an otherwise defined urban landscape, Los Angeles’s vendors demonstrate how practices of mobility actually shape urban space. Every day, street vendors transform Los Angeles’s often car-dominated spaces into new worlds of taste and consumption. They do not just respond or simply adjust, but also actively contribute to the “mobile city.” In often unassuming ways, they transform it by shifting its urban spaces away from car-dominated efficient movement and toward the bodily movements of street interaction. Street vending in Los Angeles is more than just one of many contested practices in the contemporary city. It amounts to a specific form of urbanism in which mobility constitutes the main source of agency and, consequently, the main “site” of contestation and intervention.

In helping to shape the identity of Los Angeles, street vending has posed questions about how the city ought to be. So far, the resultant planning efforts have led only to denial of the very logic of this urban practice. Vendors’ creative ability to move in the city has produced a kind of space for which the conventional tools of architecture and urban planning are inadequate. Street vending in Los Angeles to date has been governed by unadapted preexisting legislation, haphazard techniques of control, and often harsh forms of enforcement. Attempts to regulate it have forced vendors into particular urban roles and been unsuccessful thus far. Because of this failure, street vending should be able to inspire a next generation of activists, planners, and community organizers to rethink their professional toolbox. More flexible and mobile scenarios need to be developed to give vendors their “right to mobility” by following the essential logic of street vending itself rather than trying to restrict it. Street vending in Los Angeles, more than in any other American city, challenges us to rethink not only the box of what constitutes urbanism, but also its toolbox.

This kind of innovation might already be at work in the surge of a new type of street vending in recent years. Young Los Angeles chefs have caught on to street vending as a way of reaching new customers and are flocking to social networking tools like Twitter to promote themselves. These vendors cater to an entirely different kind of public, often serving upscale treats—organic ice cream or fusions of Korean barbecue and Mex-
ican tacos—but they might have the potential to change the negative perceptions of vending that currently predominate in Los Angeles. Likewise, the arrival of New York’s Vendy Awards—a yearly awards event for street food—in Los Angeles in 2010 is another occasion promising to lift some of the stigma that tends to categorize Latino food vending as dirty or poor. Though some have argued that such upscaling of street vending threatens to push more precarious vendors out of the trade, the arrival of these trendy chefs will not likely outweigh the estimated ten thousand Latina/o vendors providing cheap meals to Los Angeles’s low-income workforce. Instead of co-opting the low, these highbrow trends may well have the opposite effect: they could positively change the symbolic meanings of street vending by distancing it from associations with poverty or even crime. Whatever the outcome of these new trends—which is up for academic study in the years to come—street vending in Los Angeles should prompt not only a new way of thinking about the city, but also novel means to change it.

Images

Figure 7.1. Typical food vending cart in East Los Angeles. These carts often comply with county health regulations, and the vendors experience less harassment from police in comparison with those who sell from boxes or blankets. Because of the relatively large investment involved in owning and managing these carts, many of the vendors are informal wage laborers employed by the cart owners.
Figure 7.2. Female food vendor near an elementary school in the MacArthur Park neighborhood. Vendors like this woman tend to sell in very limited time slots according to the school timetable. Such vendors are able to complement their regular household tasks with these flexible mini-enterprises because they involve minimal preparation and investment.

Figure 7.3. *Paletero* or Popsicle vendor around MacArthur Park. Vendors like this one complement their regular income by renting carts from *paleterías* (commercial Popsicle vending facilities) on weekends and holidays.
Figure 7.4. A cluster of female food vendors in Koreatown, selling homemade foods such as tamales, tacos, yucca, pastels (meat pies), and atol de elote (hot corn drink). Such vendors can be found in densely populated neighborhoods of Los Angeles, especially at peak commuting hours.

Figure 7.5. A women selling from her car. Vendors like her are most often found near the city’s parks and recreation areas, where large crowds of potential customers gather on weekends.
Figure 7.6. A street food vending location before operation at the corner of Beau- dry and Second Street, downtown Los Angeles.

Figure 7.7. The same corner at night, when vendors have transformed the desolate parking lot into an open-air restaurant.
Figure 7.8. Map of the institutions involved with the practice of street vending in Los Angeles. The main levels of government are city, county, and state. Legislation, enforcement, and advocacy for street vendors are distributed among a variety of governmental, nonprofit, and private institutions.
Figure 7.9. Food vendor at the subway station at Santa Monica Avenue and Western Avenue. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority of Los Angeles has established a private program for vendors on its own property. Its vendors are carefully selected, pay monthly rent, and are subject to many additional requirements. Note the aesthetic and symbolic role of the green umbrellas, which contrast with those of many illegal vendors (e.g., those in Figure 7.4).

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Notes

1. The research for this chapter was in large part made possible by a research project under the direction of Margaret Crawford at Harvard University in 2005 and is very much indebted to her intellectual framework. I would like to thank Margaret and the many, often anonymous street vendors, who generously gave me their time for interviews and informal conversations. This essay was written in 2006–2007 and subsequently revised for this volume.
2. The exact number of vendors is unknown, and official documentation is lacking. Estimates range between 5,000 and 20,000 (Los Angeles Times Archives; La Asociación de Vendedores Ambulantes [Street Vendors Association] Records n.d.).

3. The Los Angeles municipal code (LAMC, 42.00 B) prohibits street vending except in very limited circumstances: on private property with the owner's permission and a conditional use permit; or in the case of motorized vehicles such as catering trucks, in conformance with legislation of the state of California. This municipal law was amended by the 1994 Sidewalk Vending Ordinance, as explained further in the chapter. First Amendment vending (which excludes food, drinks, and the other articles generally sold on the streets of Los Angeles) is theoretically exempt from this municipal legislation but rarely takes place outside of the officially designated zone on the boardwalk at Venice Beach.

4. See.

5. An early exception was James Rojas's (1991) study of East Los Angeles, which included an analysis of the way street vendors occupied and created a “sense of place” in their neighborhoods. Lorena Muñoz's dissertation about street vending in Los Angeles (2008) uses a cultural landscape approach to examine how street vendors create a “sense of place” in particular neighborhoods of Los Angeles.


7. This understanding of urbanism has a tradition of its own going back—at least in the American context—to intellectuals like Louis Wirth, Kevin Lynch, and Jane Jacobs.

8. My disciplinary background is in architectural history and urban studies. The main part of the fieldwork for this project took place in June–August 2005, with many additional but shorter visits in subsequent years. During this fieldwork period, my main methods were participant observation and interviews with both street vendors and spokespersons for the various institutions involved. I was able to interview most of the street vendors after building a relation of trust; others were selected through established contacts with nonprofit organizations such as the Institute for Urban Research and Development (Mama's Hot Tamales Café; Sandi Romero, director). The historical analysis is based on these interviews, the Los Angeles Times archive (period covered: 1985–2006), various other local newspapers, and the archive of the Street Vendors Association, which contains minutes, correspondence, flyers, testimony, reports, articles, clippings, and other materials created or collected by the Street Vendors Association during the 1980s and 1990s.

9. Its amendment, the 1994 Sidewalk Vending Ordinance, allows vending only in special districts yet to be established (see next section).

10. State legislation pertains to the California Health and Safety Code, which is enforced by Los Angeles County.

11. These are the Los Angeles Police Department; the Los Angeles County Health Department, which enforces the state health and safety rules; the City of Los Angeles Building and Safety Department; and finally the Street Use Department of the City of Los Angeles.
12. This program, explained further below, is run by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.


20. Anyone would in principle be able to propose such a district, but it would have to be supported by a petition signed by 20 percent of the area’s merchants and residents. Conversely, merchants and residents could veto the formation of such a district with a similar petition.


22. See the Asociación’s archives and Weber (2001).


Bibliography


La Asociación de Vendedores Ambulantes (Street Vendors Association) Records. N.d. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles CA.


Los Angeles Municipal Code. Section 42.00. Los Angeles, CA.


