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Author

Gomes Da Costa, Adriano Dore

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Feeding an Image: The Spatio-Economic Logic of Taco Shops in Merced, California

By Adriano Dore Gomes Da Costa¹

Introduction

The city of Merced is home to individuals of diverse backgrounds all looking to have an impact on the formation of Merced's identity. Food is an integral part of every community and plays a significant role constructing the image of an area. Food allows people to express their culture and reminds them of their past. Merced's food identity reflects the city's diversity. Like any other city, Merced has districts divided and formed based on economic and social status that play a role in shaping the image of an area, particularly areas dealing with food.

The spatial divisions of Merced impact how restaurants have a role in dictating and feeding their consumer base. Merced has a reputation associated with decline and debt. The city ranked ninth on the "50 Worst American Cities to Live In" lists because of prominent levels of poverty and unemployment.² Many associate the north side of Highway 99 with wealth and progress, whereas, the south side is connected to poverty and decline. I theorize that the location of the taco shops in Merced's urban space influences their business and clientele because it is tied to these preconceived notions of poverty and progress.

For about four months, I have explored the city of Merced and found that the locations of the taco shops are interesting with regards to their location in the urban space. Independent research, which includes mapping and observing taco shops, provides the basis for my thesis. I constructed a map of the city of Merced and highlighted the taco shops of the area. The basis of my analysis will focus on four of Merced's popular taco shops. With the locations pinpointed in relation to the rest of the urban space, I theorize two categories of taco shops: attached and standalone shops. The attached shops were either a part of a building or connected to other shops. The standalone shops had no structural connections to other buildings or shops.

In focusing on these two categories, I argue that the taco shops reflect the power businesses have in selecting their customer-base by carefully choosing their location in Merced's urban space. I framed my map around the arguments made in Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City*. According to Solnit, "a map is in its essence and intent an arbitrary selection of information."³ Space is defined by individuals and businesses claiming territories and attributing importance to the given area. In Merced, space is defined by physical borders that impact the formation of an area's food identity. Merced's taco shops reveal that physical location in urban space impacts the image of a given taco shop; this ultimately dictates the type of customer that will do business there and this contributes to the image the taco shop is attempting to portray alongside Merced's reputation.

Mapping Out Taco Shops

The following map focuses on Merced and emphasizes the location of four popular taco shops. The map's northern and southern edges are extended from Yosemite Avenue to Childs

¹ The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

² Thaddeus Miller, "Is Merced really that bad of a place to live? Depends who you ask," *Merced Sun-Star*, June 28, 2017.

³ Rebecca Solnit, Ben Pease, and Shizue Sigel, *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 1.

Avenue, while the western and eastern edges are extended from Highway 59 to Kibby Road. The four shops that are the basis for my research are: Jose’s Taco Shop, El Asadero Taco Shop, Taqueria El Palmar, and Taqueria El Huarache.

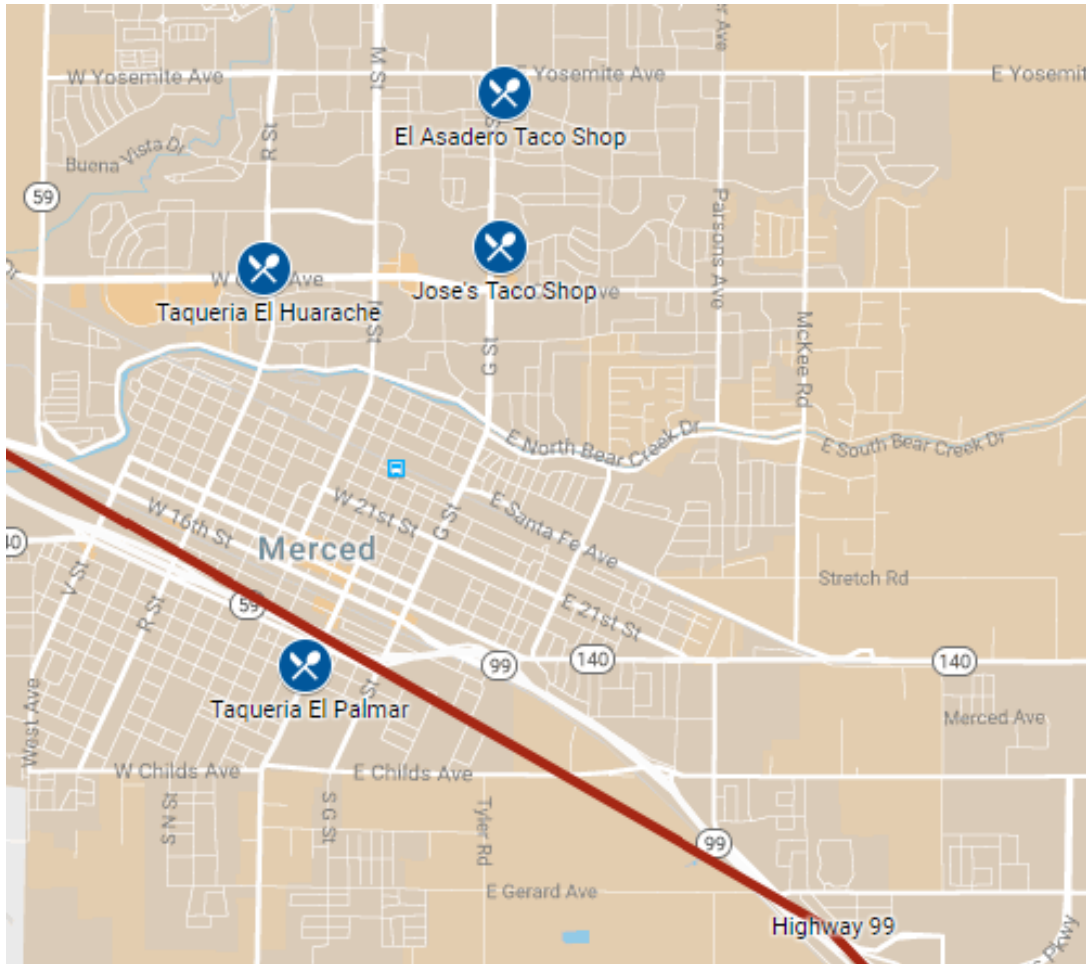


Figure 1: Map of Merced highlighting the four taco shops of my research and Highway 99 ⁴

The attached taco shops in my research are Jose’s Taco Shop and El Asadero Taco Shop. The standalone taco shops in my research are Taqueria El Palmar and Taqueria El Huarache. Besides the taco shops on the map, the major feature of this map is Highway 99. The map places the taco shops in Merced’s urban space for a general understanding of where my research took place.

⁴“Merced, California,” Google Maps, accessed February 13, 2018.

The map below also focuses on Merced, but with an emphasis on poverty levels.

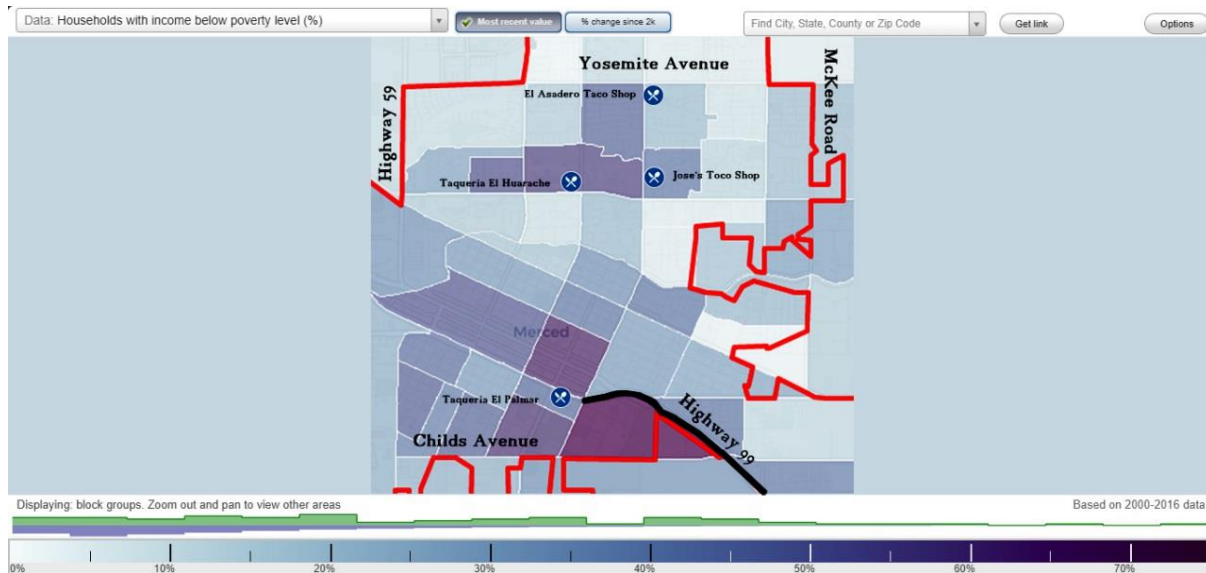


Figure 2: Households with Income Below Poverty Level (%) in Merced, California ⁵

As mentioned, Highway 99 is a significant divider in Merced; being located North of Highway 99 is attributed to higher status and progress, whereas South of Highway 99 is associated with the opposite. With poverty levels measured by City-Data.com, the shading indicates households with income below poverty level in terms of percentages. The deeper shade of purple in a given area reveals a larger percentage below the poverty level. The location, in relation to the poverty level, of a given taco shop plays a key role in the overall image presented to the customers. Ultimately, the image of a business will dictate the type of customers and define the how the restaurant is perceived alongside other urban characteristics in Merced, California.

Attached Taco Shops

The two attached taco shops that I am focusing on are Jose's Taco Shop and El Asadero. Both are located along G Street, north of Highway 99. Being in a good area of town and offering practicality to the customers is the major aspect in all business. As demonstrated in Figure 2, the attached taco shops are in wealthier areas. This allows for these two taco shops to appear as if when one chooses this establishment over another, one is presenting an image of higher status for themselves. When it comes to location, class matters. This feeds into the notion that wealthy customers eat at these establishments, tip more, and have the potential to spend more money because they have that luxury.

Jose's Taco Shop is in a little conglomeration with two other stores. It is located across from Merced High School and down the street from Olive Avenue and the Bear Creek shopping center. Jose's Taco Shop's location enables it to experience lots of walking traffic because it is in front of a high school and secondly it has residential apartments and homes right behind it. Daniel Burnham in his *Plan of Chicago* had such an observation in that streets, avenues and parkways,

⁵ "Households with income below poverty level (%) in Merced, California," City-Data.com, accessed February 13, 2018.

should be wide enough to provide two broad parallel roadways: one to be used by those who wish to visit the shops, hotels, or theatres, and the other for the passage of those who do not care to stop on their way through the city. Between these roadways should be a broad sidewalk, and the walk next to the buildings also should be very broad."⁶

The idea is that when planning a location, store or even a city, if you have a large enough space for people to walk around, find the location, and feel safe, people will go.

The location of Jose's Taco Shop allows for it to receive a wide variety of customers. Jose's Taco Shop is not only in a more affluent area of town but is also in one of the more practical locations for a business. As mentioned, Jose's Taco Shop is located near a high school and shopping center; ultimately, this taco shop uses its image and location to accumulate even more wealth. I argue that a practical customer, an individual that chooses a taco shop because of its location in urban space, will see Jose's Taco Shop as a viable option. This customer will go there because the shop is close to their school, job, or home. Because the location of Jose's Taco Shop in Merced's urban space can bring in a large amount of people, this strengthens the notion that being located in the "good part of town" benefits a taco shop's image.

El Asadero is in a strip mall at the crossroad of two major streets: Yosemite Avenue and G Street. It has the advantage of being in the same general area as Raley's and other upscale shops. El Asadero is the closest taco shop to UC Merced and Merced Junior College. In exploring this area, I noticed that this strip mall location offered more traffic other than the taco shops located closer to the Merced Mall. Many students, faculty, and wealthier people head to this strip mall making for the appearance of a good clientele for El Asadero.

Because El Asadero is in a wealthier sector of town and presents an image to reflect this notion, word soon spreads around Merced. In talking about work, Solnit states, "A friend or family member tells you there is work here. They pull you in, and you pull in the next guy... it's a thread that winds onto itself."⁷ Although Solnit is speaking in regard to work, the same logic can be applied to food. Once word spreads that El Asadero is a good taco shop located an upscale and safe area, individuals are more likely to keep going there. El Asadero is a prime example of a taco shop where its location is a major asset in its business.

Jose's Taco Shop and El Asadero benefit from being in the more affluent sectors of Merced, California. These taco shops can afford to reside in an upscale neighborhood and this translates into receiving wealthier customers. In observing these establishments, many of the customers were college students who are more likely to be able to spend more than local residents who fall below the poverty line. The strip mall taco shops in my research are using the appearance of the urban space around them to segregate themselves from other taco shops to be presented in a stronger regard in connection to Merced's overall image.

Standalone Taco Shops

The two standalone taco shops I will be focusing on are Taqueria El Huarache and Taqueria El Palmar. In comparison to the attached taco shops, these shops have a different foot print in Merced's urban space. It is interesting to note that, as demonstrated in Figure 2, Taqueria El Huarache is located north of Highway 99, whereas, Taqueria El Palmar is located south of Highway 99. However, both taco shops are in sectors of Merced with higher levels of poverty.

⁶ Daniel Burnham, *Plan of Chicago* (Chicago: Commercial Club of Chicago, 1909), 100

⁷ Solnit, *Infinite City*, 95.

This connection plagues both locations with being tied to notions of lower status. Because of this, I observed that these locations did not receive the same type of customers as the attached taco shops received. I argue that the physical space these shops reside inadvertently ties these shops to the negative reputation of Merced.

Taqueria El Huarache is located on R Street and is surrounded by businesses and residential areas. I observed this taco shop as more of a destination than anything else. Located by other businesses some of its business tended to come from surrounding employees. This is interesting because Taqueria El Huarache is located near Jose's Taco Shops and El Rodondo, which is a section of town where many college students live. However, the segregation of wealth of its urban space controls the type of customer it will receive on a given day. Josh Sides mentions disparities in wealth in *L.A. City Limits* when he discusses the growth of black neighborhoods after the Second World War. According to Sides, "The neighborhoods formed as black communities because of the lack of other housing options for them, so they all unwillingly self-segregated because that's the only place they could live."⁸ This applies to food as well. The prices of food inadvertently segregate customers based on disposable income. The taco shops who can afford to reside in an upscale neighborhood will do so while those without the means will be forced to locate themselves in less expensive areas.

Taqueria El Palmar is very different from all the other taco shops I have talked about. All the other taco shops are on the north side of Highway 99. Whereas, Taqueria El Palmar is not located near the colleges, schools, government buildings, residential neighborhoods or the town center. The south side is the industrial district, meaning those who live there are people who cannot afford the more expensive real estate of the non-industrial district. According to Burnham, "it is also apparent that suburban towns should be connected with one another in the best manner."⁹ Being located south of Highway 99 leaves Taqueria El Palmar an outlier that is not connected to the other taco shops. This impacts the level of business it can receive and the image of Taqueria El Palmar ultimately gets tied directly to this preconceived notion of decline.

In observing Taqueria El Palmar, I noticed it received little to no student traffic or "wealthy" clients. This is because it is located by itself, far away from UC Merced, away from the upscale neighborhoods and shopping traffic. Any customer could say Taqueria El Palmar has the best food in the world, but this word-of-mouth would need to spread across differing communities. Whereas the attached taco shops are in upscale communities, Taqueria El Palmar is an example of a blighted community. Blighted neighborhoods mean blighted lives – like the bad boy in school who requires so much of the teacher's attention – throw a heavy burden on public agencies at the expense of the rest of the community.¹⁰ It will take a long time for the word to spread from one community to the other, since these communities are separated by tracks, roads, house prices, distance, location, and wealth. This leaves the experience that Taqueria El Palmar can offer to potential customers to go unnoticed because its location and surroundings does not present the progressive image we see with the attached shops.

Taqueria El Huarache and Taqueria El Palmar are greatly impacted by their urban surroundings. Both taco shops are in areas concentrated in high levels of poverty and because of this, the image they project is molded by that notion. Being in poorer sectors hinders these shops

⁸Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 93-97.

⁹ Burnham, *Plan of Chicago*, 38.

¹⁰ Dawn Mabalon, *Little Manila is in the Heart: The Making of the Filipina/o American Community in Stockton, California* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 278.

from receiving wealthier customers because of the connections individuals make with appearance and quality. Taqueria El Huarache and Taqueria El Palmar are more likely to be visited by loyal customers, those who go to these taco shops regardless of its location in Merced's urban space. However, it is difficult for these shops to move beyond these loyal customers because it is difficult to for a business to disconnect itself from its physical surroundings.

Conclusion

In analyzing four major taco shops in Merced, I have found that the urban divisions within the spatio-economic space of the city have a profound impact on the appearance of the taco shops. The food identity of each taco shop is formed based on the urban characteristics of their surroundings. In observing the attached shops, Jose's Taco Shop and El Asadero, I found that their positioning in Merced's wealthier sector benefitted their overall image in building a strong customer base. They use this connection to the wealthier sector to strengthen their overall image; the attached taco shops realize that individuals tie the appearance of wealth to better quality, so this benefits their business overall. In observing the standalone taco shops, Taqueria El Huarache and Taqueria El Palmar, I found that their locations in Merced's poorer sectors presents a different overall image in comparison to the attached shops. Being in areas with higher concentrations of poverty, ties these taco shops to notions of poverty and individuals associate the appearance of poverty in a business to poorer quality.

The urban characteristics of Merced are crucial in understanding the divides in the city, but more importantly, the impact urban surroundings have on the businesses. Location and appearance are important because individuals make connections and choices based on what a business can appear to offer. Regardless of the quality of the food, individuals are more likely to frequent a taco shop located in a more appealing area because it contributes to the notion that appearance translates into better quality. Because of this, urban characteristics allow for the attached taco shops to bring in a variety of customers, whereas the standalone taco shops are more likely to rely on loyal customers to compete financially. Although urban space should be considered when choosing where to eat, individuals need to be wary that only taking appearance and location into consideration feeds into an image that strengthens the divides within Merced through food.

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