

A Reflection on “Altered Space”

I originally set out to answer this question: how does food act to reduce, maintain, or increase distance between the self and the other? My plan was to take the abstract ideas and literary puzzles that our class has been working with over the semester and apply them to something concrete: Nashville restaurants. I set out with the intention of interviewing restaurant owners and employees to ask whether or not they thought the food they serve helps promote cultural understanding and if so, how. Through photography and conversations, I hoped to shed some light on the way food functions as a means of reinforcing or deconstructing otherness.

As my work progressed, I slowly moved away from food itself and began to realize that restaurants functioned not only through the meals they serve but also through the *physical space that they offer* (I consequently changed my project title). People constructed these businesses from the ground up and had to find a way to make an entire culture—an entire world—fit into an area that spans a few hundred square feet. By offering a space in which the self—the “American”—becomes the other, restaurants invert hierarchy, turning the majority into the minority, the familiar into the unfamiliar. Thus, they enable an atmosphere in which to conform is to open oneself up to something new and to begin the process of cultural understanding. This act is achieved through conversations carried out over meals, not only with a friend or family member but also with the creators of the restaurant space—the employees and the owners. I expand on these ideas on the “Reflections” page of my website, which I created as a space in which I could display my photography, along with take-away commentary from my various interviews.

One of my disappointments over the course of this project was that I was unable to visit as many restaurants as I had planned. On one hand, I feel as though this limited my perspective. For example, it would have been great to be able to interview members of other restaurants that represent other cultures (i.e. Korean or Japanese), as well as restaurants that operate at a different price point or cater to a different demographic. I was also very interested in businesses that adopted a cultural fusion approach, which has disparate implications for customer experiences and perceptions of certain cultures. On the other hand, I am grateful to have had more time to speak to and get to know the people that I did at the two restaurants that I did visit.

I also found that photography in a very public yet very intimate space like a restaurant was more difficult than I anticipated. I often felt intrusive, so in that sense, I also limited myself in the photos I would take. In the beginning, I tried taking photos in color, but I found that they did not capture the message that I was trying to get across. Switching to black and white enabled me to highlight aspects of people apart from their skin colors (i.e. expressions, emotions, movements).

Furthermore, I wanted the website to reflect my concepts about space. Thus, I made the layout relatively simple, always drawing the viewer’s attention to the photographs. I debated between letting the photos fill the screen and keeping them in a gallery format. In the end, I chose the gallery to act as a reminder that the space created by restaurants is limited and that it takes effort and time to transfer the elements of culture learned in a restaurant when practicing cultural understanding in the rest of one’s life.

<http://soniaajmera.wix.com/alteredspace>

