



the World on Roosevelt Avenue

THE borough of Queens in New York City is the most diverse county in the United States, and Roosevelt Avenue its most diverse street. It transects some of New York's most ethnically diverse zip codes, and exemplifies the immigrant city within its narrow corridor.

Roosevelt Avenue provides a physical space wherein people from a staggering variety of backgrounds work out the daily rituals and routines of social interaction. It is a great cosmopolitan street and an important site for examining how the design of the public realm frames interactions across boundaries of culture, language and nativity.

Roosevelt Avenue presents a superlative framework for the conduct of daily life. With its canopy of train tracks and steel girders, this street is a five mile-long room for strolling, shopping, gathering, gawking, hawking and talking. It channels a staggering variety of people beneath the 7 train, focusing their needs, desires, moods and idiosyncrasies and organising the clamour into a daily routine.

More than anything, Roosevelt Avenue is a commercial corridor. The largest clusters of shops pop up beneath the stations of the 7 train such as Woodside, 74th/Broadway, 82nd/Jackson Heights, Junction Boulevard, Flushing – 12 of the train's 21 stations connect passengers to Roosevelt Avenue. Thousands of small businesses line either side of the street and spill over at the intersections. There are unique storefronts, like the quilting shop, or the Tagalog-language tax office, or the headquarters of the Catholic Veterans of Foreign Wars. And there are hundreds of variations on themes, from *tacquerias* and dry cleaners to discount household shops, furniture stores, diners, florists, grocers, electronics and music stores, clothiers and restaurants serving varied national cuisines.

The street begins its life at the triple intersection of Queens Boulevard, Greenpoint Avenue and 49th Street in Sunnyside, a leafy neighbourhood of recent immigrants from Russia, Eastern Europe, Turkey and the Balkan states. The street then passes through Woodside with its tall apartment buildings and densely packed rows of shops triangulated around Roosevelt and Woodside Avenues and 64th Street.

Passing beneath the 69th Street Station and crossing over the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway viaduct, Roosevelt Avenue enters Jackson Heights and Elmhurst, two of the most dense and diverse neighbourhoods of Queens, with tens of thousands of cooperative apartments and densely packed row houses. Along this stretch of Roosevelt businesses, service agencies, street pamphleteers and vendors cater to people from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Tibet, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Ecuador, Columbia, El Salvador, Panama, Peru, Argentina and Mexico.

The intersection of Roosevelt and 74th Street is the epicentre for a virtual collision of cultures. Stretching north from Roosevelt on 73rd through 75th streets, immigrant families from India, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh have opened scores of restaurants, sweet shops, jewellery stores, cloth and clothing shops, groceries, music-video emporia and a Bollywood theatre.

Intersecting these South Asian commercial streets, Roosevelt Avenue supports a variety of businesses operated by Mexicans, Ecuadorans, Hondurans, El Salvadorans and Columbians. These worlds overlap at the intersections, and blend along the blocks: Latino families frequent the Indian clothing and jewellery shops; South Asian parties pack tables at Mexican restaurants. English here is a *lingua franca* – a trade language that knits together intersecting street and commercial cultures.

Transitioning from Jackson Heights to Corona, the commercial scene grows predominantly Mexican with the attendant street life, car-modification culture – bakeries, *tacquerias*, fruit vendors and shops blaring Bachata from tinny loudspeakers to entice customers.

Finally, passing alongside Shea Stadium and crossing over Flushing Creek, Roosevelt Avenue enters Flushing, Queens, a neighbourhood that boasts one of the largest populations of Taiwanese and Koreans in the United States. As Roosevelt enters Flushing, it climbs a steep grade up to College Point Boulevard and simultaneously separates from the 7 train, which descends into a subterranean tunnel. Roosevelt persists for ten more blocks until it terminates at Northern Boulevard on the border of Flushing and Murray Hill.

The phenomenal ethnic diversity of this corridor is an unintended consequence of the haphazard urbanism of middle Queens. Rapidly built up from the 1920s through the 1980s amid the expansion of American car culture, the borough presents a confusing jumble of grid systems, block shapes, housing styles, land uses and street forms. Moreover, what Queens lacks in grand public spaces it more than makes up in the cheap, flexible architecture of commercial opportunity. Low-rise commercial blocks, strip malls, small shops and gas stations dominate the borough, providing infinitely fungible space for the establishment of ever-changing storefronts. Matching this variation, residential options come bundled in a full gamut of types – from small tightly packed single family and duplex homes to large apartment buildings, garden city co-ops, new condos and tracts of cape cod and ranch houses. It is precisely this relatively affordable commercial and residential variety that has attracted large waves of new immigrants to Queens since 1965. And Roosevelt Avenue, while not designed with them in mind, provides a landscape flexible enough to absorb thousands of families from around the world with each passing year.

Within this make-do framework of Roosevelt Avenue, daily users have fashioned a robust, cosmopolitan design laboratory. The multitude of quotidian actions along this street unfolds within a densely packed world of working and middle class families of diverse ethnicities, national origins and faiths. Despite their differences, the people that live in the neighbourhoods use Roosevelt Avenue as a supply chain for their households, as a public site of leisure and promenading, and as a conduit to the wider urban setting. Indeed, there is much to learn from the universe of interlaced yet subtle choices, selections and social relationships that unfold in the context of everyday urbanism on a bustling city street. □