VIETNAMESE AMERICAN PLACE MAKING IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA*

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ABSTRACT. Vietnamese Americans have made places for themselves in Northern Virginia by reconfiguring the geography of the suburban places they inherited, including former high-order central-place nodes. Vietnamese American residences, churches, cemetery plots, and other distinctive ethnic markers are by and large dispersed and rarely noticeable. Their retail districts, however, serve them in multiple material and symbolic ways, not unlike suburban Chinatowns. *Keywords: Northern Virginia, place making, retail districts, suburbs, Vietnamese Americans.*

Suburbs, where most Americans live, are rarely regarded as refuges of American pluralism, and the vast literature on them is largely silent about immigration and ethnicity (Li 1995, 1996; Allen and Turner 1996). Conventional models of immigration and urban geography cluster immigrants in central cities, in response to housing and employment opportunities. William Burgess's 1920s-era concentric-ring model of urban social morphology makes clear the geography that immigrants are said to have shaped. But more recent immigrants are making their own places in the suburbs of America. Los Angeles epitomizes a metropolitan area–wide, multiethnic reworking of suburban landscapes and geographies. Suburban Northern Virginia is also experiencing vibrant ethnic place making. Here immigrants write fresh chapters in the biography of the American suburb, even as they recast their own values, beliefs, norms, and behavior.

Vietnamese Americans in Northern Virginia have undertaken their place making through subtle and not-so-subtle acts of appropriation and accommodation. The landscapes they are shaping reflect their perceptions of suburban opportunities within inherited geographies. They are assuredly not constructing ethnic homelands or culture regions in conventional cultural geographical terms—usually an original shaping of place said to occur with "first effective settlement" (Zelinsky 1973; Conzen 1993).

Instead, Vietnamese Americans are imbuing suburbs with their own novel meanings. Passersby may notice a cluster of Vietnamese stores in a shopping plaza, a zone of Southeast Asian cuisine, a Buddhist temple or Vietnamese Catholic church announced with a distinctive script, or a reserved section of a cemetery. Vietnamese Americans see a vibrant community center, economic enterprise, reflections of tradition, contested interests, and complex social and economic geographies. Place making involves a continual process of shaping identity and expressing social relationships. The Vietnamese American community is itself evolving; nowhere are

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pieces of Vietnam merely relocating wholesale (Hein 1995, 50). In making places Vietnamese Americans are enjoying and directing suburban geographical change.

Vietnamese Americans in Northern Virginia

Vietnamese have come to the United States in a series of distinctive waves, their refugee status distinguishing them and other Indochinese from the larger category of Asian immigrants. The original 1975 refugee wave included highly educated, professional and elite members of the former U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government who fled after the fall of Saigon. Some 40 percent of these immigrants were Catholic—from a base population in Vietnam that was only 10 percent Catholic—and some 20 percent had a university-level education.

"Boat people" were refugees of more modest means who escaped in late 1970s and early 1980s. This second wave was composed especially of Viet Hoa, a highly entrepreneurial, Chinese ethnic minority. In general, more of the second-wave immigrants were males, Buddhists, less affluent, and less educated (Dunning 1989). Still, they maintained strong family ties and kinship networks and adapted quickly to their new American setting, even if they did not necessarily assimilate as quickly as many of the first-wave immigrants did (Desbarats 1986; Yu and Liu 1986; Dunning 1989, 77).

In the 1980s the immigration cohorts began to mirror the demographic characteristics of Vietnam itself (Allen and Turner 1988, 191). By this time, too, many Amerasians were contributing to the immigration stream, though they faced much the same prejudice among Vietnamese Americans as they had faced in Vietnam. Most recently, former political prisoners or reeducation detainees have been arriving. All are participating in place making in Northern Virginia.

Particular historical reasons led Vietnamese to the United States and certain Vietnamese to Northern Virginia (Andrews and Stopp 1985; Desbarats 1985). Although neither the District of Columbia nor Virginia was historically an important destination for immigrants, Pentagon connections are today highly significant for first-wave refugees from a number of countries to Northern Virginia. Moreover, jobs in a dynamic, suburban-focused metropolitan economy are an immediate explanation for the suburban destinations of these immigrants. Global economic and political change has catapulted the region into the spotlight for recent immigrants, with English now the second language in 25 percent of Northern Virginia households. Chain migration has brought subsequent waves, and immigrants have assimilated quickly, especially if they have local relatives and English-language skills. As recently as 1994 Vietnamese were second only to Salvadorans in the number of immigrants entering the Washington metropolitan region. Now some 50,000 Vietnamese Americans live in the metropolitan area, most of them in Northern Virginia (Sun and Nguyen 1995, 12) (Figure 1).

Suburban Northern Virginia includes within it relict proto-urban places, like Falls Church, settlement of which dates from 1699. Such places have emerged in recent years as nodes for suburban central-place activities as the rapid post–World

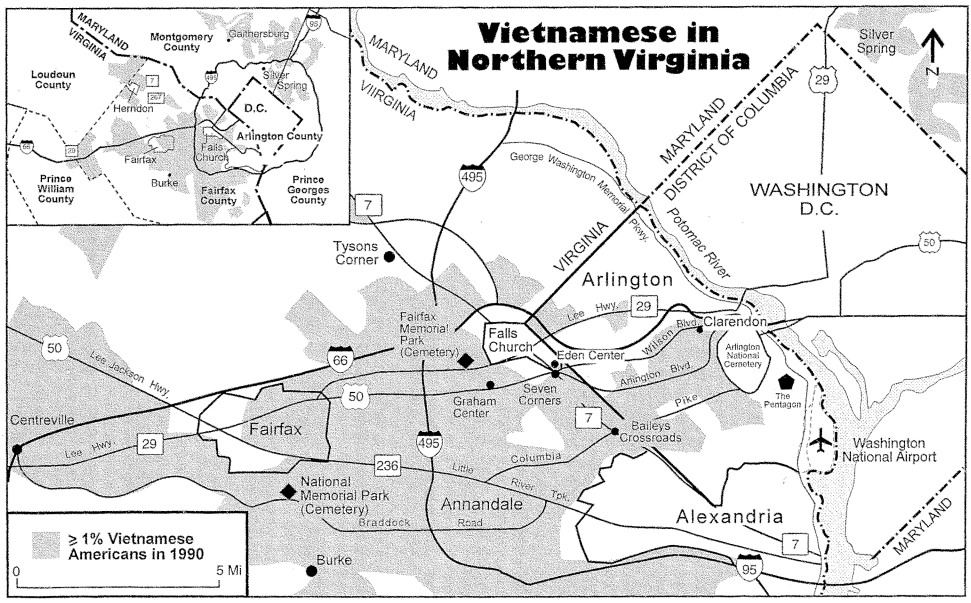

FIG. 1—The Vietnamese presence in Northern Virginia, 1990. *Source:* U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990. (Cartography by Debra Harrweg)

War II suburbanization of Northern Virginia enveloped them. Arlington is the Virginia portion of the original District of Columbia, which the federal government returned to Virginia in 1846 because it was considered too peripheral. Had the District of Columbia retained it, Arlington would be considered the center city, but it is still generally suburban in function. Clarendon, from the 1920s to the 1950s Arlington's commercial center, is part of a streetcar-based retail strip. The 1950s version of Clarendon was automobile-oriented Seven Corners, the development of which led to retail decline in Clarendon. The 1970s version of Seven Corners was Tysons Corner, which led to retail decline in Seven Corners. Each is a different but historically important type of central-place activity node in an emerging suburban landscape.

Vietnamese Americans in Northern Virginia have dispersed westward from Arlington, among the most densely settled refugee destinations in the United States, out along Wilson Boulevard and Columbia Pike toward Falls Church and Annandale, and beyond. By 1984 some 60 percent of Vietnamese Americans lived within three miles of Seven Corners, where Arlington, Fairfax, and Falls Church meet (Andrews 1984). Although Vietnamese Americans have since dispersed even more widely, migration has formed a wedge-shaped sector (Prastein 1990). Less affluent and usually recent immigrants congregate temporarily in well-known garden-apartment complexes, often where owners overlook codes that restrict the number of families in a unit. But most Vietnamese Americans are dispersed within heterogeneous neighborhoods that are not visibly Vietnamese. In 1990 no census tract re-

corded more than 9 percent Vietnamese Americans, but the number of tracts with 1 percent and more is considerable.

A traditional model of ethnic residential concentration does not work for Vietnamese Americans—or for other Asian Americans in metropolitan Washington. Wilbur Zelinsky and Barrett Lee (1993) call such complex distribution *heterolocalism,* by which they mean that physical proximity is increasingly less a prerequisite for ethnic identity and community. Kevin Dunn's (1993) study of Vietnamese Australians in Cabramatta, a suburb of Sydney, revealed a similar pattern, one that recalls also Hmong settlement in California. Ines Miyares (1995) found that, for Hmong, home is relational. Location of houses is less important than location of shopping, which in turn reflects clan associations; the result is a social geography that is not necessarily evident to the casual observer.

Economic success helps account for heterolocalism. Vietnamese Americans, so often discriminated against in hiring but with a strong work ethic, have found niches in all strata of Northern Virginia society, especially in certain characteristic enterprises (Nguyen and Henkin 1982; Rutledge 1992, 81). Among the important employment activities are the provision of retail goods and services, including food wholesaling and restaurants; the sale and repair of jewelry, gold, and silver; appliance, small-engine, and automotive repairs; accounting and bookkeeping; and light manufacturing. Restaurateurs are mostly ethnic Chinese Vietnamese, Viet Hoa, whereas non-Chinese Vietnamese often own jewelry stores (Nhula Tran 1996). Vietnamese retail establishments often hold near monopolies locally on high-quality, imported goods, including specialty produce and silk for Vietnamese dresses. Certain activities, such as nail and hair salons, offer employment for women who find that they must work outside the home. And in Northern Virginia, information-technology companies and local, state, and federal government are increasingly important sources of employment. Vietnamese Americans, in short, have *tran can cu,* a concept that "combines hard work, patience, and tenacity into a relentless drive to survive or be successful" (Rutledge 1992, 45).

Despite some adaptation problems, most Vietnamese Americans have found economic success (Haines 1989). By the mid-1980s first-wave immigrants had a median income equal to that of the U.S. population as a whole (Hein 1995, 135). Many Vietnamese Americans in the 1990s are bicultural, having taken American given names and adopted American popular culture with a Vietnamese flavor. Vietnamese American Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops are becoming more commonplace than Vietnamese American gangs. A Vietnamese American served on the Fairfax County School Board, and Vietnamese American children born in the United States are now entering college—Vietnamese Americans comprise the largest single non-Euroamerican ethnic group at George Mason University. And real estate marketers directly target successful Vietnamese Americans for new home sales in outer suburban rings toward Centreville or Herndon and beyond Dulles International Airport, to the west.

Northern Virginia is not one of Wei Li's "ethnoburbs" (1995, 1996). Li describes an ethnoburb as a cluster of ethnically homogeneous residential areas and business

districts located in suburbs and characterized by a unique spatial form and internal socioeconomic structure. Fueled by globalization of capital and internationalization of flows of commodities, skilled labor, and high-tech and managerial personnel, ethnic groups deliberately set up their own job and consumer markets integrated with the dominant economy. Monterey Park, in California's San Gabriel Valley, is the quintessential ethnoburb.

This is not to say that Vietnamese Americans and other immigrants in Northern Virginia lack an internal economy or are not linked to the global economy. It is to say that the ethnoburb concept fails to capture the comparative scale and intensity of the geographical impress of recent immigrants on Northern Virginia. In Northern Virginia non-Vietnamese travel past or through neighborhoods and business districts oblivious to the presence of Vietnamese Americans. And only the watchful non-Vietnamese observe the Korean or Salvadoran presence—also significant in population numbers, relative concentration, and landscape imprint. Thus Northern Virginia lacks the ethnoburb characteristics of Monterey Park, at least as yet. So one must look closely to see evidence of Vietnamese Americans.

Ethnic Markers

Most of Northern Virginia's Vietnamese are from urban Vietnam, unlike another large group of Vietnamese Americans: largely rural immigrants who have carried a market-garden tradition to New Orleans (Airriess and Clawson 1991, 1994). No similar rural place-making or landscape tradition is evident in Northern Virginia. The most visible manifestations of the urban Vietnamese tradition are clusters of retail shops. Some immigrant groups specialize in highly distinctive retail activities, like Korean dry-cleaning establishments, found in virtually every shopping center and plaza in Northern Virginia. In contrast, Vietnamese specialize in a form, their shops commonly congregated in strips of stores that replicate the characteristic small spaces and stalls one might find in a market town in Vietnam or in a shopping district in Saigon (Figure 2). Streetcar strips built in the 1920s and shopping plazas constructed in the 1950s are preadapted to such use. Restaurants, having become important cultural commodification symbols in American mass-consumption society, are the most apparent retail activity. Even so, many Vietnamese retail outlets are not visibly Vietnamese. This is especially true of service stations and automobile-repair shops, which a Vietnamese American may own but in which non-Vietnamese employees deal with the public.

Residential neighborhoods, I have noted, are not visibly Vietnamese either, though many Vietnamese Americans favor real estate agents or housing consultants who are trained to interpret *feng shui* to identify salubrious sites and orientations and to harmonize environmental relationships. House interiors, in contrast, reflect strongly the accommodation of Vietnamese material culture tradition to American building form and furnishings. Catholic or Buddhist shrines and less sectarian decorative objects—many recently imported from Vietnam—share living-room space with leather sofas and large-screen television sets, video cassette recorders,

FIG. 2—A market town in Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam, in the winter of 1970. (Photograph by the author)

and astonishingly sophisticated amplification systems. Likewise, rice cookers share kitchen counter space with microwave ovens and electric can openers.

Churches, always important gathering places for refugees, reveal where Vietnamese Americans first congregated in the suburbs (Rutledge 1992, 50). Buddhist temples are in rented spaces in industrial or office complexes and thus remain invisible to most Northern Virginians. Now, however, in Fauquier County, in the horse-fancying outliers of Washington's sprawling metropolitan area, a Vietnamese Buddhist meditation center has opened, despite substantial local opposition. Catholic congregations have reconstituted the national Catholic parishes of earlier immigrant periods; nationality-based parishes with ethnic priests are overlapping geographically with more Euroamerican diocesan parishes. Father Nhi Tran founded his "personal parish," as he identified it (1996), in 1975 at the Holy Martyrs of Vietnam Catholic Church in Arlington. The parish is an important space, and the church an important congregation, for the social network of Vietnamese Americans in Northern Virginia.

Suburban cemeteries are not well studied, and the place of ethnicity in suburban cemeteries is true terra incognita, largely because suburban cemeteries are nondenominational, commercial enterprises. In Northern Virginia, however, some cemeteries cater specifically to Asian Americans by accommodating traditional burial practices (Lucas 1995; Vo 1996). A Vietnamese American church purchased space in Fairfax Memorial Park, where it has reserved plots for Vietnamese Americans. The

cemetery uses conventional brass markers flush with the ground for easy maintenance, but it also has a mausoleum. Vietnamese Americans use both forms of burial and decorate graves with prayer sticks, ashes of burned paper money to help the deceased pay for their trip to heaven, and food in a rice bowl or in the form of the deceased's favorite fruit. Buddhist and Catholic Vietnamese are buried at National Memorial Park in grave sites selected and oriented in accordance with feng shui. A small Asian section, opened in 1993, has a formal entrance gate, granite benches to keep people from walking on the heads of the deceased, and prices that increase with the gentle elevation. Proximity of the section to a noisy highway is disturbing, so National Memorial Park recently opened a secluded new Asian Cultural Cemetery section located between its Jewish and Islamic sections. A large pagoda-style gate, a Korean and Vietnamese War Memorial, and *bong boon* characterize this section. *Bong boon* is a Korean term for a raised grave site, which keeps people and equipment off graves and allows families to trim the grass and manicure the graves (Pae 1994; Vo 1996).

Given the long-standing diversity of the United States, there is, of course, no such thing as a truly non-American ethnic landscape. Instead, there are ethnic markers, including many compromises with preexisting forms—temples in office buildings, commercial, nonsectarian cemetery plots—or manipulations of preadapted forms, like shopping plazas. Christopher Airriess (1996), reactivating John K. Wright's concept of "geopiety," argues that Vietnamese American religious artifacts in the New Orleans landscape offer material familiarity while also linking a spiritually important past place with the present. These Vietnamese Americans have, in other words, "confronted a pre-formed, predetermined set of rules, a settlement code already locked solidly into the ground and one they could modify [visibly] only in the more trivial of details" (Zelinsky 1990, 33). So patterns of land use and landscape are not easily evident. Still, Vietnamese Americans are reshaping the Northern Virginia suburbs in remarkable ways. They have undertaken place making and created a familiar sense of place by inhabiting this landscape and elaborating on it.

Place Making

It is in forming retail districts that Vietnamese Americans are most effective at place making. Throughout Southeast Asia, and in Ho Chi Minh City today, petty retail enterprises reveal a remarkable persistence, despite stark changes in economic conditions (Freeman 1996). These retail activities favor small stalls arranged along shopping streets to form shopping districts, a pattern that Vietnamese Americans have replicated. In Northern Virginia the two most dominant sites are former retail centers that lost their luster with the development of distant, modern shopping centers accessible from beltway interstate highways. Clarendon was already Arlington's downtown when Arlington became one of the few places in the nation to experience suburban growth in the 1930s and 1940s, and it was still thriving in the 1950s, when new suburban shopping centers first drew shoppers away. In pre–interstate highway days Seven Corners was the point of greatest accessibility in Northern Virginia: Its

namesake shopping center was Washington's largest when it opened in 1953. These districts of 1920s streetcar retail strips and 1950s shopping plazas, respectively, have low rents, require only limited sales, and can attract customers from considerable distances; and they reside in a former high-order retail corridor that itself has been displaced by Interstate 66 (Figure 1). These sites also have in common long strips of modular retail spaces that Vietnamese Americans easily transform into ethnic commercial districts imitative of market districts in Vietnamese towns and cities. Central-place succession in the suburbs has served Vietnamese American place making well.

Clarendon was depressed by the early 1970s; the first Vietnamese store appeared in 1972; and the area became Washington's Little Saigon in the late 1970s (Andrews 1984, 72). Its low rents and available space—and the disarray that was part and parcel of Washington's Metrorail subway construction—were perfect for Vietnamese refugees in search of inexpensive retail space for dry goods, tailoring, bridal shops, jewelry shops, and beauty salons. Although never the center of a Vietnamese American residential neighborhood, the assorted retail shops gave Clarendon a singularly Asian feel for about a decade, simultaneously bringing economic vitality to it. Indeed, by the early 1980s Vietnamese Americans had transformed Clarendon into the hub of the East Coast Vietnamese American community. After Metrorail opened in 1979, however, rents in Clarendon increased. Displacement of Vietnamese Americans began, and so did the search for new locations in which to concentrate their retail activities. Ironically, thanks to economic fits and starts, much of Clarendon's replacement construction has yet to be built. The area has retained those Vietnamese restaurants that cater to non-Vietnamese and has attracted a mix of other ethnic retail activities (Figure 3).

From their initial retail setting in Clarendon, Vietnamese Americans dispersed westward to retail settings in the Seven Corners and Baileys Crossroads areas of eastern Fairfax County and as far west as Herndon (leapfrogging Tysons Corner) and Centreville, in western Fairfax County. The Seven Corners area, in particular the Plaza Seven Shopping Center (Eden Center), has the largest concentration of retail activities.

Such Vietnamese shopping plazas near major thoroughfares and well located for a dispersed or heterolocal population, like the Plaza Seven Shopping Center, are becoming commonplace in suburbs, especially in California's Orange County (Lou 1989, 105; Rutledge 1992, 81). The same phenomenon appears in Richardson (Dallas) and Houston, Texas. Graham Center, on Arlington Boulevard in Fairfax County, is a second-order Vietnamese American shopping plaza district. Other small clusters occur throughout central Fairfax County. Dong Ok Lee (1995, 192) notes this dualistic pattern of growth among Korean Americans in Los Angeles—"increased concentration in Koreatown and deconcentration toward a broader local area" simultaneously—and it echoes the experience of Vietnamese Americans in San Jose, California, where similar revitalization of former high-order central-place nodes took place (Lou 1989).

FIG. 3—Clarendon, a Little Saigon in the early 1980s and now a place for non-Vietnamese to frequent Vietnamese restaurants, like the ever-popular Queen Bee. (Photograph by the author)

EDEN CENTER

At a distance there is nothing unusual about Plaza Seven, or Eden Center as it is commonly known to Vietnamese Americans. It is an archetypal shopping plaza, created in an L-shape with ample parking in front, a grocery-store anchor, and in more recent years an adjacent Ames Department Store and stand-alone tire dealership. In 1984 the former Giant grocery store was converted into a 20,000-square-foot arcade or minimall, which is the structure that formally carries the name Eden Shopping Center (Figure 4).

A closer look reveals that Eden Center and the larger Plaza Seven Shopping Center in effect replicate a small Vietnamese marketing town or urban market district (Figure 5). Actually, Khu Eden and Khu Rex were 1960s shopping districts in Saigon. Any number of restaurant and shop names from Saigon and elsewhere in the former Republic of Vietnam have been reanimated in Northern Virginia, as have their counterparts in Southern California, Houston, and New Orleans.

What makes Eden Center popular among Vietnamese Americans is its particular mix of activities and its Vietnamese costuming. It serves as a neighborhood center for a widely dispersed, automobile-based community to satisfy daily, weekly, or more occasional central-place needs. Eden Center is now the most important central place for Vietnamese goods and services on the East Coast. Some foods and many dry goods are available elsewhere, but many of the products available at Eden Center are found nowhere else in the eastern United States. Thousands of shoppers

FIG. 4—Eden Center, formerly the grocery-store anchor for the Plaza Seven Shopping Center, as it looked in the summer of 1994. (Photograph by the author)

FIG. 5—The Plaza Seven Shopping Center, an archetypal L-shaped shopping plaza, in the spring of 1996. (Photograph by the author)

enjoy its eclectic variety of jewelry stores, pastry shops, and restaurants. They buy ginseng tea, fish sauce, *pho* (Vietnamese noodle soup), and ornate silk for traditional *ao dai* dresses. The Eden Center arcade offers coffee shops, pool halls, books on Vietnamese life and culture, audiotapes, videotapes, and compact discs—and even karaoke. Express communications and travel services offer quick connections to Saigon, as it is still called in Eden Center, and to other locations in Vietnam. Outdoor vendors sell mint leaves, sugarcane drinks, and fresh durians, longans, and other fruits. Signs are in Vietnamese, arcade music is Vietnamese, and the clientele is almost solely Vietnamese.

Eden Center is also a refuge. It serves for Northern Virginia the same social function as the community gardens of Versailles do for New Orleans (Airriess and Clawson 1991, 1994). Spending Sunday afternoons at Eden Center has become an important Vietnamese American family custom. Many patrons are veterans of the war and of postwar reeducation camps, and the yellow-with-red striped flag of the former Republic of Vietnam flies boldly alongside the Stars and Stripes. It is also a gang hangout: Youths congregate in coffee shops, pho restaurants, and billiard parlors. In large measure Eden Center is a Vietnam-like haven in the United States, a place where Vietnamese Americans can relish being Vietnamese.

In this respect, Eden Center is also a suburban shopping-plaza version of Chinatown, with both positive and negative connotations. It is an exotic place to shop, but its sensationalized gang activity also gives it notoriety. Some theft, gambling, and fighting take place—one-third of all calls for police assistance in Falls Church come from Plaza Seven—though much of the actual harm caused by gangs occurs elsewhere.

As Kay Anderson noted for Vancouver, Chinatowns reflect a non-Chinese concept of ethnicity and codify differences between dominant and immigrant societies (Anderson 1987). An urban Chinatown reflects ideologies of marginality and separation in non-Chinese eyes, despite place making by Chinese themselves. Indeed, non-Asians are rarely aware of Eden Center's existence, and of those who are, few have ever ventured into it.

Students of mine who grew up in Falls Church, Arlington, or elsewhere in eastern Fairfax County have heard of Eden Center, and some are aware of gang activity in it, but until I take them there, few have known how to approach it. To speak of Eden Center as a suburban Chinatown, then, is to suggest a Euroamerican view in which boundaries are employed to highlight segregation. In fact, Eden Center is only part—albeit a highly central and important part—of a highly integrated, labyrinthine, and well-networked Vietnamese American social and economic geography in Northern Virginia and the East Coast.

In time, Eden Center became too much of a good thing. Diners lined up for tables. The parking lot was often full, so drivers would follow shoppers as they left the stores, hoping to inherit their parking spaces. Hoang Yen, who sold silk, complained that "Every time customers come here, they say parking is the worst." Her sales were down, she noted, and her rent was up (Nguyen 1996b). And security remained a

problem. As a result, Falls Church, within whose jurisdiction Eden Center lies, sought an opportunity to increase its tax base, especially to pay for the higher level of police services provided. Then Plaza Seven owner Norman Ebenstein of Boca Raton, Florida, moved to renovate and enlarge Eden Center. In a recent interview he noted, "In the past, we were unable to satisfy all the demands for store space. We always intended that if at some time business warranted it, we would expand the center" (Nguyen 1996a).

Ebenstein's plan was to build a 32,400-square-foot addition to the plaza—to be called Saigon Center—which would more than double the size of Eden Center; to give all of Plaza Seven, including Eden Center, a major facelift; to expand the parking area; and to enhance security. The one-floor Saigon Center mall was to have space for up to forty-eight new retail establishments. A clock tower modeled on a Saigon original was to adorn the old Eden Center, and the entire complex was to have a new, Asian-style entrance gate (Hoang 1996). Unstated, but easily inferred from the renovation plans, was that the commodification of Vietnamese American culture in Northern Virginia was intended to expand tourism and novelty shopping—and thus to enhance the exchange value of the property.

Falls Church planning and development officials reviewed Ebenstein's plan in the summer of 1995 and gave preliminary approval in October of that year, despite some opposition. Owners of existing stores complained about the higher rents and opposed the redevelopment. Many of them signed a form letter addressed to the Falls Church City Planning Board, in which they expressed their concerns about security, parking, duplication of businesses, and the irresponsibility of the landlord in terms of upkeep during the previous dozen years. They called for the improvement of current structures before the construction of new ones.

The real issue, of course, was fear of higher rents, a lesson learned from redevelopment in Clarendon; and, indeed, rents in Eden Center did increase during 1995 in anticipation of the renovation. As An Trong Hua of the Eden Business Association argued, "Not too many people can make it here," strongly intimating that merchants might move on to create a new Vietnamese American shopping center somewhere else (Nguyen 1996b). They were also fearful of competition from the expanded center's new shops and those elsewhere in Northern Virginia. On the other side of the issue, Falls Church city officials received an anonymous letter that purported to represent a large number of underpaid Plaza Seven shop and restaurant employees. Employers had created an opportunity for low-skilled and poorly spoken immigrant refugees to find work, albeit at low wages and with comparatively poor working conditions (Gold 1994). Employees, therefore, very much favored redevelopment and the accompanying prospect of more jobs and higher wages.

The owner and the municipality prevailed. Final approval and ground breaking took place in March 1996, and construction was to be completed in early 1997 (Hoang 1996). The owner's leasing agents had already speculated that the new Plaza Seven Shopping Center would become the largest Vietnamese shopping district in

the United States, topping any in the Little Saigon area along Bolsa Avenue in Orange County, California (Nguyen 1996a). Indeed, it "makes the community look stronger when you have something larger. The community will look richer and stronger," argued Minh Nguyen, a janitor in nearby Reston (Nguyen 1996a). As Dunn (1993, 239) observed of Sydney's suburb Cabramatta, shopping-center clusters of Vietnamese activity in a burgeoning commercial district invariably lead to perception of a greater spatial concentration of Vietnamese than actually exits.

Eden Center, then, has developed a kind of epiphoric function: It is more important and less tangible than itself (Tuan 1978, 70). It has become invested with all sorts of social and cultural meaning. For Vietnamese Americans, it is the cultural heart of a suburban-oriented, metropolitan community. For Norman Ebenstein, the presence of Vietnamese Americans is serendipitous, rewarding an otherwise unpresupposing real estate investment. For the City of Falls Church, Eden Center is an opportunity to develop and increase the tax base from a piece of land tucked into an awkward space on the city's periphery that had developed into more trouble than it was worth, in part due to gang activity. For employees in existing shops and restaurants, it promises an opportunity for better jobs and better wages. Only for successful Vietnamese American owners of existing shops and restaurants does it appear problematic, and time will tell whether Eden Center produces its own demise. Finally, the center symbolizes the important role that new immigrants play in the suburbanization of the United States. For despite its similar form, borrowed name, and imported ornamentation, Eden Center is not a Vietnamese transplant but a reflection of what Vietnamese Americans have done with the American suburban landscape they have come to occupy.

Vietnamese America

Becoming American means shaping America, literally and figuratively, materially and socially, as Vietnamese Americans are doing in Northern Virginia. Eden Center is a highly visible place for Asians in Northern Virginia and along the entire East Coast. Like many places in an American landscape rich with meaning, however, it is invisible to the untutored. Residences and ethnic markers dispersed through the suburban landscape mean that most residents are scarcely aware that Vietnamese Americans have configured a labyrinthine geography for themselves in the American suburbs and that they are contributing to American place making. Thus we must view this landscape not as deviant from American norms but as a source for understanding how we become American—all of us, constantly—by reinventing ourselves and our spaces and places (Hayden 1995). Landscape involves a continual shaping of social identity and expressing of social relations. It can be argued—indeed, celebrated—that Vietnamese Americans have become important actors in the suburbanization process, reinventing themselves as Americans and reconfiguring the spaces and places they have inherited. Beneath the veneer of elements unfamiliar to most of us, through which we must look closely to see, are places that serve immigrant communities in multiple material and symbolic ways. Like other American

frontiers in other generations, suburbs are now the geographical spaces in which Americans of all sorts of origins are creating America.

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