Brick Lane Street Market
A study in urban historical-geographical change

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1. INTRODUCTION

Urban changes appear physically, socially as well as economically; run-down buildings become redeveloped, old factories turn into modern galleries and local food stores become stores for high priced clothing. People continuously move to and from places which means that people in an area change. People with different economies and with different ethnicities can be the majority population in an area during different time periods. How an area is looked upon, which social status it has in relation to the rest of a city can thus change depending on who occupies it.

Cities change all the time; every day and every hour things occur that causes changes in a city; the process is ongoing. An area which once was run-down and characterized by poverty can a few years later be perceived as the trendiest in the city, a place where people travel to buy the hippest clothes and visit the coolest bars. This is something like what has happened to East London. The area was once the place where the famous Jack the Ripper performed his terrible murders. The area was once industrialized and people lived in overcrowded dwellings, many suffering deprivation. East London was also heavily affected by bombing in World War II.

During a process of deindustrialization much of the East End has transformed and is no longer as negatively looked upon as before. Large parts have gone from run-down and relatively poor to hip, cool and expensive. People from all around town, as well as tourists, travel to the East End to experience the atmosphere.

What has caused these enormous changes would be an interesting subject to investigate, how an area can transform so drastically. However, a lot of research has been done before and with the time given for a project like this I have chosen to narrow down my area of interest to only a part of the East End, namely Brick Lane in the borough of Tower Hamlets. Brick Lane is known for various historical waves of immigration, the creative industries and its public Sunday street market. The last of these is my focus in this study.

Urban street markets have existed for centuries in almost every city of the world. Public markets have functioned as a community’s gathering point, the hub of a community. They have been, and still are, places where people buy and sell goods as well as places that give opportunities for people to meet and socialize.\(^1\) The Brick Lane market is a good example of this type of urban market. The market has been an important part of the street and the area for centuries. Even though a lot of social, political and economic changes have occurred in the area during the years, the street market is still important and well-visited.

The market has changed though; it does not look the same as it originally looked, the sellers and buyers are not the same, and nor are the goods sold. The reasons why stallholders sell and customers visit the market are not the same either.

\(^{1}\) Bromley, 2000: 1.
1.1 Purpose and research questions

The aim of this study is to identify some of the most striking historical changes and to try to provide some explanations for them. To this end, the research was initiated with the following questions:

- Who are the stallholders at Brick Lane street market today, and for what reasons; and who were they before and for what reasons?
- What is being sold today at the market, what was sold before, and why?
- Who visits the market today, and for what reasons; and who were the customers before, and for what reasons?
- How and why has the area around the street market changed throughout history?

1.2 Outline

I begin with a method chapter followed by an overview of relevant existing literatures. These previous studies concern markets and market changes, broader urban changes, and Brick Lane itself. There follows an historical and geographical overview of Brick Lane to put the street and market in to a local context. After these chapters comes the essay’s main findings and my discussion of them in relation to my main research questions. I end by summing up my results.

2. METHOD

In order to answer my research questions a combination of material has been used. The primary sources consist of: personal observation and interviews with stallholders at the Brick Lane market; a book about Brick Lane; and a blog. As secondary sources, to get a historical and geographical overview and evidence from previous studies, literature consisting of scholarly articles and information from the local council’s website has been used.

The field study took place on a Sunday in December between 10am-2pm. The day consisted of my personal observations as well as interviews. To find a sample of interviewees I chose to randomly pick stallholders at the market and ask them if they were willing to answer a few questions. By randomly approaching people the range varied from old and young, men and women, those who had been at the market for years and those who were new. The sample also included locals and people from other parts of the city as well as people with foreign backgrounds. Some were more willing to talk while some directed me to someone else who they thought knew the market’s history better. Some did not want to be interviewed because they were busy with work and some rejected the interview because they did not believe they had anything of interest to say.

The range of interviewees with their different backgrounds met with the expectations I had when I planned the trip. I wanted to find people who had been standing there for several years who have seen changes occur. These could give me their opinion to why and how the market has changed, and would be able to answer questions like why they still stand there and if their reasons for standing there, the goods they sell and the people they sell to, have changed. I also wanted to talk to people who are new at the market to see what they think
about Brick Lane, why they chose the market, what they sell and who their customers are. The range of people’s experience of the market would give me a deeper understanding of how the market is today and how it was before and thus be able to answer the research questions.

The interviews proceeded with me introducing myself and the purpose of this essay. I asked the stallholders if I could ask a few questions and if I was allowed to record the conversations. Some did not want to be recorded and I did some notes on paper instead. I had prepared an interview guide with some questions as a support but I wanted to keep the interviews semi-structural in case the interviewees had more to tell. The choice of doing semi-structural interviews was also based on the fact that the interviews were conducted in a public space where there were a lot of surrounding people who could hear the conversations. I wanted the interviewees to feel comfortable talking to me in a more everyday conversational way and not feel like they were being interrogated. I therefore had my interview questions more as a support and let the interviewees speak freely. The choice of method turned out to be suitable as the interviews were short and concise, lasting between five and twenty minutes, and the interviewees were comfortable speaking to me and they added information I was not prepared to ask about.

I spoke to about ten stallholders, but only four interviews were recorded. In hindsight I would have liked to get a larger sample of interviews but to have made that possible I would have had to be there more than once, which was not possible. I have therefore in this essay combined my interviews with interviews made by the anonymous “The gentle author” who writes the blog Spitalfields Life, a blog about today’s and yesterday’s East London. The author has done several interviews with stallholders on Brick Lane market, including a few of the people I have spoken to. Since I am limited in my own interviews, these helped give me a wider perspective when it comes to stallholders’ experiences. I am aware that a blog is not “scientific” but have chosen to believe that it is reliable as the writer has photos and names of the stallholders he or she has spoken to and several of the people I spoke to are included amongst them.

I have also used the book On Brick Lane by Rachael Lichtenstein for a more historical context. Lichtenstein has talked to several people about their memories of Brick Lane Market and these parts of her book have been essential in giving a wider historical perspective.

An initial idea for this essay was to combine interviews with stallholders with interviews with a person from Tower Hamlets council and a journalist from a local newspaper. These interviews would have given another point of view but none of the prospective interviewees responded to my communications.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews relevant previous studies of urban markets, urban change, and Brick Lane. These studies do not share the same research topic as mine; however they provide essential reference material.

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3 Lichtenstein, 2008.
3.1 Research on markets

Markets have long played an important role in urban economy and social life. Historically a market served as a center of the community and was essential for a city’s development and survival. They “were seen as a necessary component of sustenance to the city and were "intended to serve bodily needs as the church served spiritual ones".” A market was a place where people from the country met people from the city in order to exchange goods. The market made it possible for people to sell produced goods and buy things they could not produce for themselves. Apart from selling and buying goods, people came to markets to socialize. The marketplace functioned as the center of a community where people met to entertain and where people could exchange ideas. It was not only a certain type of people who could visit a market; markets have a long history in helping different community types come together, both economically and across ethnicity.

However, the function of markets has changed; they are typically no longer important city centers. One explanation is changes in people’s lifestyles. Today people can access food and other supplies more easily with the convenience of supermarkets and the internet. “The food is cheap, easily accessible, and readily available and does not depend on the seasons to grow.” People also prefer doing their shopping indoors now instead of outdoors which make supermarkets attractive. Even though there are advantages with supermarkets, the sense of community and social engagement has been lost. Supermarkets cannot be described as the hub of the city as with public street markets. Markets give people opportunities to enjoy social interaction with each other. The sense of community and social interaction makes a public place safe and vibrant. Street markets sometimes also have another advantage compared to fixed retail outlets and supermarkets, their prices are cheaper.

Even though markets show several advantages compared to supermarkets, the rise of easily accessible stores and supermarkets have made markets lose their main function, to feed the inhabitants of the city. Markets do have other functions for people in cities; they have become a “destination for a tourist experience”. Markets today have also become “a place for ‘foodies’, who seek high quality locally sourced produce, which is ‘specialist’ and expensive.” Farmers markets in cities have become more popular and make it possible for

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6 Mesher, 2009: 1.
7 Ibid: 2.
10 Mesher, 2009: 1.
11 Ibid: 2.
12 Ibid: 5.
13 Ibid: 3.
14 Morales, 2011: 5.
16 Mesher, 2009: 2.
17 Ibid: 1.
18 Ibid: 2.
people who are aware of their health and the environment to buy suitable goods. People’s beliefs are that street markets offer fresh products of farm and animal origin and ethnic food.19

To conclude, the role of street markets as a meeting place and the main place to do one’s everyday shopping is gone but markets play other important roles, two examples are markets as tourist destinations or as healthy and environmentally friendly farmer’s markets.

3.2 Research on urban change
Cities are in constant transformation. As noted in the introduction, people move to and from cities, and buildings get knocked down or built up. These urban changes are caused by several different factors. Some of these factors have been heavily discussed: culture-led urban regeneration and gentrification are two examples with direct relevance to this study and these will now be discussed.

Regeneration is a widely used concept in urban studies and in planning and is often an explanation for urban change. Regeneration is “the redevelopment of cities or areas of cities that have declined industrially, physically and economically.”20 Regeneration strategies to enhance areas in the USA and Western Europe were developed and used in the late 1970s and 1980s. This was a time when urban areas were affected by post-war deindustrialization which had led to poverty, crime and unemployment. 21 Regeneration strategies can look different; one of the keys in regenerating an area is to attract people to it whether it is to live in, work in or visit the area as a tourist. 22 People contribute with money and an increased economy for the affected area which is an important factor in a regeneration process. 23

To attract people to an area one strategy is to “include entertainment facilities, retail outlets, eating and drinking establishments, as well as cultural venues or attractions (e.g. museums, galleries or theatres)”.24 Another strategy is to “include clusters of creative industries (e.g. media, design, technology) and creative individuals and groups.”25 Culture and creative industries thus often play a large part in urban regeneration; regeneration can often be culture-led. In this context, “culture can refer to anything from architecture, heritage buildings and attractions, to the visual and performing arts, festivals and events, to entertainment and leisure complexes, as well as culture as the way of life of people.”26

Creative industries tend to cluster, often in previously run-down areas close to city centers. This is where cultural-led regeneration processes take place. 27 Examples of previously run-down city areas where artists and other creative people have settled down are New York’s Soho and Montmartre in Paris. Barcelona is another example of where a wave of artists arrived and settled in abandoned industrial buildings in the 1990s. The artists lured

21 Ibid.
22 Richards & Wilson, 2006: 12.
23 Ibid.
24 Smith, 2006: 3.
25 Ibid
26 Ibid: 2.
27 Richards & Wilson, 2006: 15.
more artists and they all saw opportunity in renting studio- and living spaces for a cheap price.\footnote{Marti-Costa & Pradel, 2011: 98-105.}

Another concept of urban change, which can be connected to urban regeneration, is gentrification. The term gentrification was first used in the middle of the 1960s to describe changes "in the social structure and housing market of parts of inner London\footnote{Hamnett, 2003: 2401.}"\footnote{Ibid.}. The process of gentrification often occurs in run-down deindustrialized city areas. Buildings in the area redevelop and modernize which leads to an increase in rents. Many tenants in the area cannot afford to pay the higher rents and are thus forced to move elsewhere. This leaves room for people who can afford the rents to move in. Gentrification is thus the out-migration of people with lower social and economic status and the immigration of a wealthier class of people. An entire city area can thus, with new modern buildings and a different type of people, change its status and people from other parts of the city can look at it from a different, more positive perspective.\footnote{Pratt, 2009: 6-8.} Gentrification has advantages and disadvantages. To redevelop and improve physical buildings can have advantages for living standards, but forcing people to leave their homes because of increased rents is a negative consequence of the process.

In East London, urban change in the form of cultural-led urban regeneration and gentrification has occurred and is still taking place. The area has, like in several other cities in Europe and other parts of the world, gone from industrial, poor and run-down to deindustrialized and hip and trendy. The process started in the late 20th century when artists occupied old, disused industrial buildings. The artists brought other artists to the area, buildings were renovated, rents increased and some artists could no longer afford to live there. Other creative people working in media businesses in today’s digitalized world that had a higher income moved in instead. East London has a lot of art galleries, night clubs and trendy boutiques that people from all around the city visit.\footnote{Ali, 2004.}

\subsection*{3.3 Research on Brick Lane}
Several studies about the street and the area Brick Lane have been done; these are mostly focused on the different immigrant waves which have occurred in the area. Scientific research about the creative industries at Brick Lane has also been done. Brick Lane has furthermore been a popular subject in popular culture, in newspaper articles, books and films as well as in blogs and other media forms. Monica Ali’s, \textit{Brick Lane}\footnote{Lichtenstein, 2008.} is an example of a novel about Brick Lane, it has also have been filmed. \textit{On Brick Lane}\footnote{Lichtenstein, 2008.} by Rachel Lichtenstein and the blog Spitalfields Life\footnote{Spitalfields Life, http://spitalfieldslife.com.} are some examples which I will come back to later in this essay. In order to understand the area in which the street market in this essay lies, some of the research made will be discussed here. This research does not focus on the Brick Lane street market, but other parts of the street and the area.
The different waves of immigration that have affected Brick Lane have brought a lot of changes to the area. The Huguenots, Jews and recently the Bengali society have all made an imprint on the environment. The Huguenots and the Jewish society brought the clothing and fabric industry to the area. These immigrant waves have also coloured the area with their traditions, their language and religion as well as different type of food sold at the market and in stores.

The most recent big wave of immigration, creating an ethnic cluster, is the Bangladeshi community in the 1970s. The community started out by working in cafés and restaurants or in local garment industries. Today you can see clear traces of first generation immigration. Street signs at Brick Lane are texted in both English and Bengali and the street is famous for the many traditional curry restaurants. The area has also been awarded a “Curry capital of the year”-award and is often called Curry Lane or Banglatown.

Apart from the impact of the different ethnical communities, waves of creative industries have also had their effects on the area of Brick Lane. The creative industries came to Brick Lane during a culture-led regeneration process which included a type of gentrification. After several industries closed in the area causing empty buildings, a wave of artists who were searching for cheap studio spaces moved in. More artists followed and as the society modernized with computer-aided creative industries, people with more profitable artistic qualities took over the original artists’ place. These new people could afford higher rents and a new wave of gentrification took place. It is these people who are one of the main factors to why the area has been redeveloped over the years. The Brick Lane area has kept its creativity but its form has changed from a traditional creativity to a more entrepreneurial form. The creative people of today, all affected by the digitized society, consist of web designers, computer engineers, art directors and music producers among others.

Another part of the regeneration process is rebuilding of factories into exhibition spaces, bars or offices, the old Truman Brewery is an example of that. The Rich Mix-center is another example of the process; it is a building which consists of a theatre, a cinema and a café. Rich Mix was built to attract visitors to the area. What is important to notice is that even though the area has been improved in many ways, it is still one of the poorest in London.

Despite both featuring strongly in the Brick Lane area, the Bangladeshi and creative communities seldom meet.

36 Ibid.
40 Ibid: 499.
41 Ibid: 503.
42 Ibid: 499.
43 Ibid.
46 Mavrommatis, 2006: 508.
area, like Brick Lane, does not necessarily guarantee that the spatial proximity of multicultural stranger will enter into one’s life.47 Brick Lane today is divided; the south side is the home of the immigrant society whilst the north and middle parts are occupied by the creative industries, the vintage stores and the trendy night clubs. The lifestyles of the different types of people separate and that is a reason why they never or seldom meet.

4. HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

To make it easier for the reader to understand what and where Brick Lane market is this section will put it in to a historical and geographical context. I will begin by showing two maps before I give a short historical overview.

Figure. 1. This map above shows Brick Lane (in a circle, which I have drawn) relative to other parts of London with The City of London with the business district in West and Hackney with the Hoxton/Shoreditch area in the North.


Figure. 2. This map to the left shows the street Brick Lane. The circle, which I have drawn, shows where the market area is.


Brick Lane is, apart from being just a street, also the name of the area around the street. In this essay the name Brick Lane will refer to both the street and the area. The street as well as the area around it lies in the borough of Tower Hamlets in London’s East End. The borough bounds to the boroughs City of London to the west and Hackney to the north. City of London, or often referred to as just the City, “is a world leader in international finance and business services.”48 Hackney is an area similar to Tower Hamlets in terms of its historical evolution. Tower Hamlets has “more street markets, more festivals and more resident artists than any other London borough.”49 It is an exciting area with all types of people and activities.

The large amount of street markets in Tower Hamlets, including Brick Lane market, could be explained by the fact that there is not a traditional shopping street where the recognized store chains are. The markets function as a place for shopping for the local people as well as a tourist destination.50 Brick Lane market is one of the oldest in the area. It “developed during the 18th century for farmers selling their livestock and produce outside the city boundary.”51 The history of Brick Lane though starts all the way back in the sixteenth century, when the street was a field path in the countryside outside of the city. The Brick Lane we know of today did not start to evolve until the middle of the seventeenth century.61

50 Ibid: 51.
century when the street became connected to the city. The market has always been a place to buy and sell and to socialize with friends and strangers.

As previously discussed, Brick Lane is known for its many waves of immigration which all have brought its distinct character and culture to the area. From the 1680s a group of Protestant Huguenot refugees arrived to the area from France. The Huguenots started out with what the area is known for: fabric and clothing making. The next wave of immigrants was the Jewish community, around the seventeenth century and onwards. They also made a living in making fabric and clothes. Around the 1930s, before the outbreak of World War II, the Jewish society found their way to other parts of London, leaving room for the next wave of immigrants, the Bangladeshi community, which partly came because serving in the merchant navy. The Bengali took over the Jewish tailoring businesses or started their own shops or curry restaurants. Trails of the different communities can be seen all around the street and area. One can see an example when looking at today’s Muslim mosque, the Jamme Masjid, which has previously been both a Synagogue and a Protestant church. The building has worked as a religious meeting place for all the different communities in the area with their different religions.

Today’s Brick Lane is, besides from the immigrant societies, known for its students, artists and City workers. They started arriving during the deindustrialization in the late twentieth century. Brick Lane is famous for its “hip” people, the cool bars, clubs, coffee shops and graffiti as well as the unique vintage fashion.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As discussed in the methodology section I did a day of fieldwork at Brick Lane on the first Sunday in December. It was a cold and sunny morning and the people circling the area were still few. Some shops and restaurants had not yet opened. The observation began at Aldgate East station, at the south end of Brick Lane. The southern part of the lane consists mostly of Indian and Bengali restaurants, shops selling groceries, clothing and fabrics and a few shops selling flight tickets and where you can exchange money. It is clear that the immigrant society has made their imprint on the area. The services available fit the needs of people with foreign backgrounds when trying to obtain a home environment in a new area.

Walking up the lane the concentration of people increased a bit. I passed the Jamme Masjid mosque with its diverse religious history and the old Brewery which today works as a Sunday market hall. The windows of the old Truman Brewery were steamy from the cooking.

inside at the food stalls and the smells reached me all the way out on the street. I continued walking to reach the public street market. The clock was around ten in the morning and a lot of stallholders had not yet unpacked their goods, which surprised me because I have read that the market starts early in the morning. People, visitors as well as stallholders, looked like they were in a good mood, though cold from the winter weather. Stallholders and visitors chatted with each other while the stallholders were unpacking and selling. The chatting made the market seem more than just a place to sell and buy goods, it also seemed like a place where people meet to socialize.

5.1 Brick Lane today

5.1.1 The retail offer

Every Sunday between 8am and 4pm the traffic shuts down on Brick Lane and the street turns into a big street market. Going north the market starts at the crossing Brick Lane/Buxton Street passing the old Truman Brewery and the railway. Between that crossing and until one has passed a railway bridge next to Grimsby street, the market consist mostly of food stalls. After Grimsby Street and up to the crossing Brick Lane/Bethnal Green Road the market expands and here there are stalls with everything from fruit to antique furniture to gemstones and groceries. Here one can also find homemade jewelry, mobile phone accessories and new and second hand clothes and shoes. Every stall is unique and there is something for all sorts of demands. This part of the market, the part which lies on Brick Lane is neat. The stalls are placed in order next to the pavements on both sides of the street, leaving room for pedestrians to occupy the street. The goods sold are ordered in rows or in arranged piles and they are clean. The clothing one finds here are mostly new fashion clothes or pricey vintage, even though there is some cheap second hand clothing and messy piles of used shoes as well.

The street market diverges from Brick Lane and continues a bit on the side streets Slater Street and Bacon Street and on the two big parking lots between the both streets. The part of the market which is on the parking lots I experience as cheaper and not as neat and clean as out on Brick Lane. Here one can find bargains like dirty, rusty tools, used computers, second hand clothing, household goods, stationaries, spare electric parts and much more. The stalls are many on these relatively small parking lots and they are not in straight rows as on Brick Lane; one can walk around in circles and still see new things hidden in a corner.

Every stall is unique at the Brick Lane market but I would say that clothing, food, electronics and kitchen tools are the most dominant goods sold. Around three-quarters of the goods sold are one of these types of goods whereas the other quarter consists of unique stalls selling homemade jewelry, soaps, books, antique furniture, bicycles and other bric-a-brac.

5.1.2 The customers

When studying the people at the market, one sees why the goods vary. The people who populate the area are different and are there for different reasons. There are national and international tourists who are there to visit Brick Lane market as it is described in the guide books. There are young and hip Londoners who are looking for unique fashion. There are city workers from the business area around Liverpool Street Station who pass by to eat lunch at one of the food stalls or at a curry restaurant. There are locals looking for bargains; some
cheese or ham, vegetables, a packet of napkins or a new dress. Young and old are represented, as well as people from different economic standards. People who are dressed in the latest fashion, who wear vintage clothing from the 1940s, and people who uniquely mixes styles, are all at the market – as well as everyday people in their sweat pants or business people in their suits. There are clearly several reasons to why people might walk around the market. The only thing one can be sure of is that there is not just one type of people at Brick Lane Market. As one of my interviewees said: “Brick Lane is a very multicultural and exciting place where, you know, all different cultures meet. Here you can find, you know, so many mixes, like you know, between Indians, English, Spanish, Italians, it depends.”

My research indicates that different parts of the market attract different types of people. At the main street of the market where, as previously mentioned, things are neater and a bit more expensive, one finds the most tourists. Perhaps the reason is that tourists cannot find their way to the side streets. The market is advertised as a Brick Lane market and people might not realize that the market continues further off the street. The reason might also be that tourists do not dare to diverge from the main road or that the goods sold do not attract tourists. On the main road we also find the young and fashionable. They might work in one of the creative industries in the area or be there to have a nice day out or to find a unique piece of clothing.

Where the market diverges from Brick Lane one sees fewer tourists and more, I would say locals. Many of the sellers and buyers are probably Bangladeshis, because 30% of the inhabitants in the area are from Bangladesh. This part is also more crowded with people. Since this part of the market is cheaper and consists more of necessities like kitchen appliances and tools, the people here might be locals who are shopping for home supplies for a cheap price rather than finding something unique or experiencing the market as a tourist destination.

Inevitably, the customer mix varies between stallholders. Some of the stallholders sell goods mostly to tourists and some mostly to local people. A woman selling homemade jewelry told me: “I’ve got a lot of locals, but I would say, most of them are tourists because it is a touristic market so you got new people every Sunday, which is great.” The woman told me that during summertime a lot of tourists come to her and buys earrings decorated with fruits, but during wintertime the customers varies as does her jewelry. Another stallholder, a man selling gemstones, had a different opinion on who is buying from him: “my best customers would be local people, but tourists come by too, you know customers change”.

He continued by saying that he has regulars who build up a collection of stones and then come back six months later to expand their collection. At a stall at Bacon Street I talked to a man who sold groceries. He told me that the market used to be a man’s market, a market where sellers and buyers were all men. He told me this while pointing out at his customers, who at this point were all men. He said that most of his customers are men and many have visited his stall regularly for 40 years.

57 Woman selling homemade jewelry.
58 Tower Hamlets, 2011.
59 Woman selling homemade jewelry.
60 Man selling stones.
Overall, who the customers are seems to vary depending on what is sold, who is selling, and which part of the market one looks at. The part where the man referred to was a “man’s market” I saw approximately 80 percent men; on the main street the customers were mostly tourists; whilst on the parking lots the customers where mostly locals. The stalls which sold clothes, mobile phone accessories and small souvenir items attracted mostly tourists whilst stalls that sold groceries, cook ware, electrics and other household products were mostly visited by locals. What one can say is that the market welcomes all regardless of age, gender, economic or social status or ethnicity. Different parts of the market attract different types of people.

5.1.3 The sellers
As with the customers of Brick Lane Market, the stallholders vary from one another: from people who are “born British” to those who are first, second or third generation immigrants; from locals to people from different parts of the city and from outside of London as well as newly arrived people from different parts of the world.

And as with the reasons why customers visit the market, the reasons people sell goods at the market also vary. Some of the stallholders said they were trading on Sundays to get an extra income besides their ordinary work. “This is just a hobby,” 61 one woman told me. She had a fulltime job besides selling her homemade jewelry at the market and did it just for fun, as a hobby. Another stallholder, a man selling food, said that “I still get a living and that’s the only reason I’m here.” 62 He had been a fulltime market trader for over 40 years and Brick Lane was one of several markets he held a stall at. Market trading fulltime was something that several other stallholders were doing. Some had started selling sporadically and gradually increased their selling until market trading had become a fulltime job. Some had started trading as young and later taken over their parent’s stall, “I enjoy the lifestyle because I’ve done it all my life.” 63 Seemingly, market trading in some cases generates enough money to earn one’s living; in others it is an extra job to earn spare money.

Amongst the stallholders I spoke to during the day of field work there were those who had been there for over 40 years, for 10 years, a couple of years and just a few months. The veterans said that they knew nothing else and would continue trading as long as they could. The new traders liked the market and had no plans to quit selling.

It was possible to tentatively observe some patterns in the types of goods sold by different groups of sellers. Amongst the people I spoke to the men who had been there the longest sold food, fruits or household goods. This type of product is not something that goes out of fashion and is something that any type of person is likely to buy. These sellers were also those who said they had had repeat customers for many years.

Those appearing to hail from an Eastern European or Asian background were disproportionately common sellers of imported clothing or stocks of mobile phone accessories or CDs. Several people who looked like they were in their 30s or younger sold unique goods

61 Woman selling homemade jewelry.
62 Man selling food.
like vintage clothing, jewelry or – in the case of one man I spoke to – a collection of gemstones. At the part of the market which I found less neat and where the customers seemed like they were locals doing their everyday shopping, the stallholders also seemed local, many from the Bangladeshi community.

In short, stallholders at Brick Lane market are as unique as their customers, and the reasons why people sell goods at Brick Lane market also vary greatly. What they sell – and to whom – depends on what they want to accomplish; whether they want to be a market trader fulltime, earn some extra money, or do it just for fun, as a hobby.

5.2 Key dimensions of historical change

Today, the market’s size, its customers, its sellers and the goods that are being sold are not the same as historically. Over time the market has changed over and over again. The customers have varied as well as the sellers. In this section I investigate how the market has changed and what the reasons are that have caused these changes during different periods.

5.2.1 The retail offer

“For centuries Brick Lane Market has provided a means for the poor of East London to make a living.” Sellers and buyers have for a long time gathered at the market to exchange goods and socialize. The different waves of immigrants might reveal the most obvious changes in the market: “It used to be French people here, French Huguenots, and then it was all Jewish, and there is basically Bengali, so the different types of cultures have different fruits, they eat different and they have different cultures.” The market adjusts to the people and their demands.

To start with the market was a Saturday market but after the wave of Jewish immigrants came to the area starting in the 1880s, their religion and cultural traditions influenced matters. The market became a Sunday market because of restrictions on working on the Sabbath. The Jews brought food and other traditional goods to the market; dishes like boiled meat puddings and pea soup, kosher goods and bagels were all sold. At this time, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the market was “as much a meeting place as a place to shop, and was frequented entirely by local people.” It could take hours to walk through the market as there were always neighbors and friends one could talk to.

The influence of the Jewish society continued up to the middle of the 1950s. However, the people in the area had been heavily affected by the Second World War and a lot of people had evacuated and left. Some Jews who could not afford to evacuate were left in the heavily damaged area where a lot of houses were bombed. At this time the market a place where the poor could come and buy cheap goods. The market seemed like a very important part of the society during this period; “When I first came here, that was a bomb site, that was a bomb

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64 Lichtenstein, 2008: 299.
65 Man selling fruit and vegetables.
66 Lichtenstein, 2008: 300.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid: 300-301.
70 Ibid: 301.
site, everywhere was a bomb site. [...] and all this was markets because where you’ve got a little bit of space here, they fill up with markets, in here you see there is a block of empty lands so they put a market on it.” Poverty reigned, buildings were destroyed and homes were damaged; it was not a happy era for the people of Brick Lane and that reflected upon the market; “It was all bombed and there were hundreds of stalls there on a Sunday, lots of second-hand ladies’ clothes stalls in not very vivid colours, everything seemed to be grey in those days.” The market was dominated by stolen and second hand furniture, clothes, household goods and jewelry.

In the 1960s the first wave of Bengali people had arrived and the people at the market were amongst mix of Jews, Bengali and people from other communities. The market seemed more alive and colorful than a few years earlier, one of my interviewees told me with excitement: “all this was haven, it was a place to come, it was a day out.”

The same man, the man on Bacon Street whom I talked to, told me: “This street here was filled up with all the food traders, this was designated just for those. This was designated for food only; every stall in this road had to be food. But also, if you had anything stolen in the East End of London you would find it in this street, because they used to all come here and sell all the stolen jewelry.” Food and stolen property seemed to be the goods sold, at least at the part of the market at Bacon Street. Even though the economy was better and people were different, stolen property was still common.

Apart from food and stolen property the market was also an animal market. From the 1950s to the 1970s “caged birds, puppies, live rats, goats, snakes, gerbils, kittens, monkeys and even lions were for sale in the pet market.” People came to the market just for the sake of looking at the animals and they seemed amazed about the fact that there were exotic living creatures at the market. “I saw a lion, they walked past my stall with a lion cub, this is the truth!” said a man to me and before we ended our conversation he said again, “the lion cub, it’s a true story!”

The animal market shut down in the 1980s after the animal welfare charity, The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), received thousands of complaints about it. Subsequently, “an intensive period of building began.” At the same time as the creative industries spread in the area, former bombsites were built upon and houses turned into designer shops. The massive building program had consequences for the market as well: “The market shrank, there was nowhere left for it to go.” The rents for stalls increased

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71 Man selling food.  
72 Lichtenstein, 2008: 301.  
73 Ibid.  
74 Ibid: 306.  
75 Man selling food.  
76 Ibid.  
77 Lichtenstein, 2008: 306.  
78 Man selling food.  
79 Ibid.  
81 Ibid: 8.  
82 Ibid.  
83 Ibid.
as did rents for local businesses, dwellings and studios in the Truman Brewery. New shops opened up and started selling expensive vintage clothing – clothes that one previously could buy at the street market for a much cheaper price. ‘Cafés that had served market traders and brewery workers their early-morning fry-up for decades transformed into ‘lounge rooms’ selling peppermint tea in small pink glasses.’ The creative industries started to take over and were transforming things that previously were very much associated with the market: “Now the yuppies are moving in, the younger generation. They’ve opened a lot of shops and they are for the young people.”

The market did not necessarily seem safe, either, in the late twentieth century. A man I talked to at the market said to me: “When I first moved to London, maybe ten years ago, the general area was a bit more sketchier, I remember ones there was a prostitute offering me her services right on the street at two in the afternoon, that was when I first moved to London, ten years ago. You won’t ever see that these days anymore.”

Until recently the goods sold met the everyday needs for the people of the area. There was food, kitchenware and furniture as well as clothes and even pets. The goods reflected the demands of the customers and the customers were mostly locals. There are goods for locals looking for everyday products, youngsters looking for unique fashion, and tourists searching for a souvenir to bring back home.

5.2.2 The customers

The nature of the customers coming to Brick Lane market to buy goods has also varied over time. Having once been a place only visited by locals, the market today is frequented by all sorts of people – locals, tourists and people from all around the city.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s Brick Lane market was “as much a meeting place as a place to shop, and was frequented entirely by local people.” As noted in the previous section, one could walk for hours at the market and there were always neighbors and friends one could gossip with. The customers were mainly locals, primarily Jewish, and essentially they all knew one another, or at least they had mutual acquaintances.

From the middle of the twentieth century and onwards the customer base became more mixed. There were locals as well as people from other places who frequented the market. The local people during that time were Jewish as well as Bengali.

The reasons why people have visited the market have varied. From being the main place to do one’s shopping as well as the gathering point for the local community the market is today no longer such a multi-purpose focal point. Before people went to the market to be entertained; today there are so many other places people can go to for that reason. The growth of supermarkets is another reason why customers’ reasons for going to Brick Lane market are

84 Lichtenstein, 2008: 8
86 Ibid.
87 Man selling food.
88 Man selling stones.
89 Lichtenstein, 2008: 300.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid: 300-306.
different today. People do not have to do their shopping at Brick Lane; it is just another option for them.

The customers have changed, from being only locals doing their weekly shopping and meeting neighbors and friends, to a mixture of all sorts of people with different reasons to come.

5.2.3 The sellers
As with the customers, so too the sellers have varied. From being only locals vending at the market, today there are people from all around the city that come to sell their goods there.

The dominance of the market by local sellers lasted up to the middle of the twentieth century. At this point, many of the traders had just returned from war when they began to trade. The most significant subsequent influence was the wave of Bengali immigrants in the 1960s. From this point the market traders were not only Jewish, but also Bengali.

The man I spoke to who had been trading for over 40 years explained how the relationship between stallholders had changed: “Years ago, market traders, we used to be allies with each other, but because life’s changed people have become very self-centered, I come here, I do my work, I don’t wanna be friends, life changes and you know, there’s no camaraderie anymore.” Before, the market was more than a place to sell and buy; it was a place to socialize. But according to this man, it is no longer this way. The market traders come just to sell their goods and then go home to their lives, whilst before market trading was a large part of a stallholder’s life. It was at the market people met; the market was the hub of the society.

Today, according to one man, stallholders are not that busy as they were some time ago: “I used to be busy all day long, serving people all day long, you know, you couldn’t stop and talk, I couldn’t stop and talk to you like this years ago, it’s changed. It’s how life changes, it’s not just the market, it’s how life, everything changes.”

Another man, who had held his stall for 45 years, also argued that the market was not like it had been before; that the customers do not have as much money as they previously had. He said that he is not selling as much as he was before. Access seems to be an important issue:

“Parking is such a big thing, parking, parking, parking, you ask anybody about shopping today and the first thing they will say is parking, you can’t park around here. I have customer sometimes they say, I ask, where have you been, oh, Bob, last time we come here we brought home a parking ticket, it’s not worth coming.”

The same man offered the following gloomy summary of the seller’s current lot: “But slowly it’s like a cancer, less stalls, less customers and over a period of years, and years and years it’s

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92 Lichtenstein, 2008: 300-301.
93 Ibid.
95 Man selling food.
96 Bromley, 2000: 1.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
like, it’s like when the city washes against the rocks, it’s a slow decline but after a certain time you see what happened and that’s what happened with this market.”  

### 5.3 Explaining the market’s transformations

Based upon my background reading on markets, urban change in East London and Brick Lane, and upon my empirical investigation of Brick Lane market I argue that there are three main explanations for the historical changes identified above: changes in the local milieu; wider social economic changes; and council policies and legislation. It is not possible to entirely disentangle these causes from one another; they are connected in complex ways. There are also certainly more reasons why the market has changed than the ones I will discuss here; urban changes are ongoing processes caused by several complex factors. Nevertheless, these three factors appear to have been especially significant and thus merit emphasis.

#### 5.3.1 Changes in the local milieu

Changes in the Brick Lane vicinity have brought direct changes to the market. Who the local people are decides to a large extent who the sellers and buyers are, as well as what is sold. As previously noted, different people have different demands, as the man I spoke to said: “It used to be French people here, French Huguenots, and then it was all Jewish, and there is basically Bengali, so the different types of cultures have different fruits, they eat different and they have different cultures.”

For over 300 years different waves of immigrants have settled in Brick Lane and they have each brought their traditions and religion to the area. The French Huguenots, the Jews and recently the Bengali are some of communities that stand out the most. The different communities have, for example, caused changes in how buildings are used, the religious building Jamme Masjid being an outstanding example. Other buildings have had several functions depending on who uses them. Buildings have served as garment factories, curry restaurants, grocery stores and bagel shops, always depending on what needs people have. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Brick Lane has many shops that sell flight tickets to Bangladesh, while the local grocery stores sell products with vegetables and spices that the Bengali community uses. The community creates a sort of home environment in this new place.

Shops and buildings are not the only things that the immigrant communities have transformed. The traditions and habits of these communities result in changes in the Brick Lane market as well. What is sold at the market depends on what people want to buy; otherwise there is no point in selling them. When the Jews were the majority population, kosher food was sold. Today, when they are a minority population, this type of food can no longer be found.

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99 Man selling food.
100 Man selling fruit and vegetables.
The influx of the creative industries, and with them creative and cultural people, has also contributed to changes in the area. These people brought another type of lifestyle than the immigrant societies. The old brewery was no longer a brewery but a place for studios, galleries, bars and coffee shops. Other buildings turned into night clubs, while stores that previously sold leather, for example, became shops for expensive vintage clothing – clothing that one previously could buy cheaply at the market.\textsuperscript{103}

Such people have also attracted tourists and people from other parts of London to the area. Indeed, people working in the creative industries on Brick Lane may themselves live in other parts of the city. People come to experience clubs and bars, to see a gallery opening or visit a vintage boutique. The Sunday market is itself a reason why people come to Brick Lane. At the market one can find something unique, or just experience the atmosphere as it is described in the guide books. Since these different types of people come to the market and for different reasons, the goods sold must meet their demands. That is a reason why today there are not only “necessary” goods, such as food and household products, but also arguably “unnecessary” goods like an expensive vintage dress and mobile phone accessories.

To conclude, the market has changed as the local milieu has changed. Perhaps the key influences in this respect have been the various immigrant communities and the creative industries/classes. The majority population has clearly changed during different time periods and thus the customers, the sellers and the goods sold at the market have varied. Different types of people have different demands and that is a significant reason for the market changing.

5.3.2 Wider social economic changes

The above explanations concern changes that have been relatively specific to the Brick Lane area (although of course other places have experienced similar, if not identical, processes of transformation). Alongside these, however, we must consider more generic processes of historical change that have also impacted on the market and its social and economic characteristics.

Deindustrialization, from the middle of the twentieth century, is one obvious such process. Deindustrialization occurred across large parts of the western world in the post-war period, with major implications for previously industrialized urban regions. Brick Lane was one such area, although clearly not alone.

The deindustrialization process started in Brick Lane after the Second World War. Buildings had been destroyed and many people were poor. During this time industries shut down and people were increasingly unemployed. Many of those from the industrial sector, who could afford to, left the area. Previous industrial buildings were deserted and later became homes and work spaces for a new group of people, including the aforementioned creative and cultural classes, and others working in the ascendant service sector. As mentioned above, buildings were also modernized and turned into galleries and clubs, suiting the needs of this new type of people.

The process of deindustrialization, and the accompanying processes of culture-led regeneration and gentrification, have influenced the area and the market in many ways, one of

\textsuperscript{103} Lichtenstein, 2008: 9.
them being the arrival of tourists. As noted in the section on urban change, to attract people is one of the keys in regenerating an area. People bring money and money can help out in the process. To attract people to an area, rebuilding to fit people’s requests is essential. Tourists are attracted to points of interest, like museums, galleries and also markets. Investing in these type of interests have thus led to more people, especially more tourists, coming to the Brick Lane market. The rise of tourism also ties in to growing globalization in the late twentieth century.

In addition, and as discussed in the section about markets, the wider rise of supermarkets and the internet have made it easy for people to access everything they need in one place. People are also more likely to want to do their shopping indoors than outdoors. Supermarkets are a global phenomenon and they have led to a decline in the role street markets have had, as the hub of a community and as an important part of people’s everyday life.

To summarize, local changes in the Brick Lane vicinity have occurred alongside – and of course are often closely connected to – wider social and economic changes that have had implications for many areas in many cities in the world. And these latter changes have had a direct effect on how Brick Lane market has evolved.

5.3.3 Council policies and legislation
There are governmental policies and legislation for virtually every aspect of society, markets included. To operate a market stall at Brick Lane, as well as at the other street markets in the borough, one needs a street trading license. The license can be applied for at the council’s Market Service. There are two types of licenses – temporary and permanent – and they are popular to get hold of so it can take some time to secure them.¹⁰⁴

It is clear that the council’s rules are more strictly applied today than they were in the past. As we have seen, stolen goods were, at one point, extremely common. But they are less so today:

“Legislation changes things, because years ago in the markets we used to get, they used to bend the rules. Legislation- they stopped people bending the rules. If you get a man like that, he disappear, people get, oh, where’s he, where’s he, oh we liked him, he was fine and he was this, but he wasn’t completely legitimate. All those people started disappearing when the rules was getting tougher.”¹⁰⁵

This is not to suggest that all sellers – and their goods – are entirely legitimate today. There are those who do not have a license but lay out a blanket on the pavement and sell their goods. I do know that the council once in a while checks stallholders’ licenses in an attempt to prevent people from selling illegally.

Then, of course, there is the animal sales issue. The market was historically partly an animal market which was very popular and well-visited. But since animal rights’ campaigners

¹⁰⁵ Man selling food.
organized protests, the legislation for selling animals at the market changed. One interviewee reflected: “And then the animals, it’s just takes a little bit out of it. It’s like sucking the life out of something, you know. And uh, it changes.”

Finally, the council appears to have reshaped the market’s life in other, non-legislation-related ways:

“For what I know, this used to be a quite dangerous area, where there were, you know, Jack the Ripper and these things. So I think it has improved because the Council has started to see that so many people have started to come here for markets so they have started to invest in the local area, so I think it has improved.”

Seemingly, with new improvements of buildings and security in the area, it has become a safer place to be.

To summarize, with council policies and legislation and with new improvements of buildings and security, the market has become safer and the presence of illegal activities has declined.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to identify some of the most striking historical changes and to try to provide some explanations for them. The following questions were used:

- Who are the stallholders at Brick Lane street market today, and for what reasons; and who were they before and for what reasons?
- Who visits the market today, and for what reasons; and who were the customers before, and for what reasons?
- What is being sold today at the market, what was sold before, and why?
- How and why has the area around the street market changed throughout history?

Who the stallholders are, and the reasons why they sell goods at the market, have varied during the years. Stallholders were initially locals only and gradually they have become locals as well as people from other parts of the city. Who the local people are has varied as people have moved to and from Brick Lane. Waves of immigrants have a long history in settling in Brick Lane, and more recently, artists and other people from the creative industries have populated the area. The reasons why people sell goods at the market have also varied. To start with, stallholders sold to make a living. Today, people still sell to earn a living, but also to get an extra income or just for fun, as a hobby.

Customers at the market have come and gone. The market has gone from being frequented entirely by locals, to today, when locals meet people from other parts of the city as well as tourists. The reasons why customers come to Brick Lane market have varied from

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107 Man selling food.
108 Woman selling homemade jewelry.
mainly coming to buy essential goods, to today, when there are several different reasons why people visit the market. Local people might search for everyday goods, as they did historically, while tourists come to experience the market as they have heard or read about it. Customers also come in search of something unique, like a vintage dress.

What is being sold at the market has always reflected who the customers are and their demands. As the customers have varied, so have the goods. Historically the goods sold were things that would facilitate one’s everyday life; there was food, household goods, furniture and bicycle tires etc. During different time periods, depending on peoples’ traditions, goods have also changed, as in the example of Jews wanting to buy kosher food.

Today, when customers vary from locals to tourists, the goods sold also vary to a larger extent. Locals search for cheap goods to enhance their everyday life, goods similar to what was sold historically; while tourists search for a souvenir they can bring back home. There are also those who search for a product that no one else has. The goods have thus varied, from essential to “unnecessary”. By essential I mean food, tools or cookware and by “unnecessary” I mean something like an expensive piece of clothing or a mobile phone accessory.

The goods are more varied today than they were before, but they still reflect customer demands. The goods vary because the customers vary. The customers at the market are there for different reasons; they search for different things, which means that the market’s supply must meet their varied demands.

The Brick Lane area has changed as people have migrated to and from it. During different time periods, waves of people with different ethnicities and different social and economic status have been the main population. The immigrant waves of the Huguenots, the Jews and recently the Bengali have each influenced the area. The waves of the different creative communities, the traditional and the digitalized, have also had their part in the transformations. A great example of how big an influence people have on their environment is how the different religions have led to one building being a Christian church, a synagogue as well as a mosque over time. Another example is how the different creative people have transformed run-down buildings to clubs, studios and galleries.

The changes in the area are partly consequences of wider social economic changes. The global deindustrialization process created opportunities for people from the service sector to house the deserted industrial buildings in Brick Lane. A culture-led regeneration process was hence started. A gentrification process started when new buildings were built and existing buildings were modernized. This led to a wealthier class of people moving in and those who could not afford increased rents to move out.

As a result of the global deindustrialization process, changes on a regional level have occurred, changes in the Brick Lane area. The latter have led to changes on a local level, which are changes in the street market. This is an interesting observation; that changes on a global level can lead to large changes on a local level.

The identification of the most striking historical changes of the Brick Lane market, and the explanations for them, are based on the interviews I did on one day with the people available that day and the reading I have done. The results are to a large extent my interpretations of how and why the market has changed; I have thus, when stating my results, generalized the transformations of the market. There are obviously several other explanations
which I have not considered. However, as I said initially in the section where I stated my explanations, these explanations are the ones that stand out most and are thus worth emphasizing.

The historical information I have given in this essay has been taken from a limited stock of literature and interviews. If I were to re-do this essay, I would endeavor to identify more stallholders to interview and also more historical literature. However, considering the lack of extensive historical information, I believe that I have likely captured the most outstanding historical market changes and the main explanations for them.

To conclude this essay, the Brick Lane Sunday street market is a reflection of the area around it, as well as it reflects global changes. As noted in the introduction section, urban changes are ongoing processes. Brick Lane market will doubtless continue to evolve as the world we live in changes and the area around it does.
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