

## four

## Alternative Retail Spaces

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One of the ways in which we might begin to theorize 'the alternative' is in respect of labour processes and the spaces in which work takes place. As other contributors have noted, formal labour markets are fragmenting and becoming more differentiated, which is in turn raising conceptual questions about the meanings of work. Both the spatialities and the temporalities of work are said to be shifting, away from predictable and routinized working hours in large firms, towards much more fragmented, unpredictable and unstable working practices. And what is becoming clear is that analytical oppositions between formal/informal, paid/unpaid, mainstream/alternative work are becoming less and less useful in theorizing emergent labour processes within contemporary western economies.

In this chapter we address such shifting practices and spaces of work, looking particularly at work in the creative industries which have been seen as both emblematic of and in the vanguard of such shifts. Used as a shorthand to describe the convergence between the cultural and arts sectors and the media and information industries, the creative industries have become a potent symbolic territory in the emerging twenty-first-century knowledge economy. The sector includes those activities that have their origin in individual creativity and skill and that have a potential for wealth and job creation (Creative Industries Task Force, 1998). Including such sectors as advertising, design, fashion, film, music, software and multi-media technologies, the creative industries are argued to comprise some of the fastest-growing sectors in the economy and to account for a growing share of employment and output (Creative Industries Task Force, 1998). Their economic significance is underscored by raw quantifications which hint at exponential growth potential and powerful multipliers and spin-offs.<sup>1</sup> Such new independents are, it is argued, a driving force for growth and offer a new model of creative production.<sup>2</sup>

Yet while the cultural industries are increasingly being seen as alternative sources of employment within de-industrializing cities and while encouraging the creative city is beginning to bring together cultural and economic policy at an ever more strategic level (Landry, 2000; O'Connor, 1998; Pratt, 1997; Scott, 1999), little is actually known about how such sectors operate and how they can best be supported.<sup>3</sup> In addition, while there is now an increased sensitivity as to how issues of embeddedness and local networks help to create and sustain cultural milieux (Crewe, 1996; Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998; Grahber, 1993; Granovetter, 1991, 1992a, 1992b; Scott, 1996, 1999), oppositional polarities tend to dominate our conceptual grasp on the workings of such micro and small creative businesses. Those accounts which do exist tend to glamorize and glorify the creative dimensions of work in the cultural industries. This we would argue results from a failure to engage with the more mundane and ordinary aspects of work and to address the varied ways in which work gets done in the creative industries (Garnham, 1990). Attention has typically focused on the creative and aesthetic qualities of the sector rather than looking specifically at the ways in which labour processes are organized at sites involved in the production and consumption of symbolic commodities. So that while the cultural industries have been held up as symbolically significant, little attention has been paid to working practices in which creativity is the enterprise. As a direct result of this failure to address the varied ways in which work gets done in the creative industries, existing accounts have tended to either eulogize or dismiss the sector, oversimplifying complex realities and producing decontextualized accounts. This in turn has resulted in a tendency within current literature to present the cultural industries in terms of binary oppositions – as being either empowering, flexible, creative and fun, or, following the classic small-firm model, as risky, precarious, transitory and economically marginal. Such binaries in turn feed into broader political and policy debates about appropriate forms of work and about the nature and pre-conditions of economic competitiveness in the twenty-first century. All too often debates, particularly by those on the political left, draw unquestioningly on rhetorical overtures towards the knowledge economy, and look to a future dominated by small, creative firms, the new freelancers whose creative capacities are their competitive strengths (see DTI, 1998; Leadbeater, 1999). Within such work there has been, we argue, a reluctance to criticize the creative industries. Yet such uncritical acceptance of the creative work model is, we argue, highly questionable in the absence of any convincing evidence as to its economic, social and cultural

contribution. So in terms of both conceptual accuracy and policy relevance, it is clearly important that we begin to move away from binary oppositions and polarities and to problematize the terms of the debate. This oppositional way of thinking, this either/or mentality, actually serves to lock us into debates about defining the boundaries between creative and conventional work/space, between the alternative and the mainstream, between the inconspicuous but interesting fringes and the ubiquitous but boringly self-evident mainstream. To conceptualize an alternative creative economy as an immutable, unmoving, definable fixed set of places or practices is, ultimately, largely unhelpful. And so what we go on to do in the following chapter is to interrogate critically the creative work model and to question the extent to which the cultural industries can be said to inhabit 'alternative spaces' and work in non-conventional ways.

As a means of opening up such debates we focus here on the working practices of one sub-group of symbolic producers, retro retailers and traders.<sup>4</sup> Retailers and traders, as we have discussed elsewhere, occupy a significant position in relation to the cultural industries more broadly (see Crewe et al., 2003; Gregson and Crewe, 2003). As well as being hitherto unresearched (and therefore of empirical interest), retro traders and retailers are also conceptually significant in that they are extremely ambiguously placed with respect to the creative industries more broadly. This ambiguity, we argue, forms the cornerstone to our understanding of their working practices and, in turn, sheds light on the potential ambivalences and tensions within the working practices of the cultural industries more generally. This ambiguity, as we go on to show, relates to retro retailers' and traders' limited scope for creativity. Unlike other cultural entrepreneurs, such as designers, artists and musicians, whose creativity is (largely) self-authored and self-produced, and whose businesses are built on the commercial application of creativity (Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999: 15), retro retailers' and traders' work rests on the (re)selling of previously commodified goods. Moreover, such commodities were typically located within mainstream fashion during their first cycle of consumption, and thus were neither particularly radical nor rare. In order to understand the craft involved in such enterprises we need to look not towards creative and artistic invention in its narrowest sense, but towards broader notions of tacit and situated knowledge and how this is mobilized through networks, alliances and embedded systems of social interaction. As we go on to show, knowledges and tastes in seeking out, reappropriating and recommodifying outdated fashions provides the basis for the competitive edge of retro exchange, rather than the artistic or creative talent

of traders and retailers *per se*. Thus it is their cultural capital that provides the scope and site for their creativity and not, as with most other people who work in the creative industries, their artistic capacities expressed in self-authored commodities. This in turn suggests that such workers are much closer to, and more firmly embedded within, conventional mainstream retailing circuits than might at first appear. This indeterminate position, between the 'alternative' and 'the mainstream', we believe, may offer some important insights into the (re)creation and destruction of unconventional consumption spaces through unorthodox work practices.

For the purposes of this chapter, retailers are defined as concerned with sourcing, displaying and selling retro fashions and interiors through small (usually) independent shops, while traders operate on a more casual basis on stalls in a market setting such as Portobello in London, through small units such as those at Portobello Green, or in a warehouse setting such as Affleck's Palace in Manchester and Baklash in Nottingham. The geographies of retro trading and retailing offer some important insights into the spatialities of 'alternative' economies – both traders and retailers are typically located in definable cultural quarters within large university towns and cities such as Nottingham's Lace Market, Sheffield's Devonshire Road and Bristol's Park Street. The important point here, however, and the reasoning behind our making distinctions between traders and retailers, is that these 'alternative' spaces are not static and bounded but are constantly evolving in terms of the products which are displayed and the practices by which they are sourced, priced and sold. Subsequently, as we go on to discuss, the self-styled 'alternative' quarters of shops and marketplaces are thus deeply unstable and are constantly under threat from encroachment by more 'mainstream' concerns through ongoing commercial processes of property (re)valorization and gentrification, and through cultural processes of (re)commodification and shifting consumption imperatives. Political endeavours to conventionalize and normalize creative work practices further problematize the cultural and economic position of the creative industries and misunderstand the nature of their competitive success. Transformation and adaptation to an unpredictable and fickle marketplace are, we argue, inevitable defining features of the retro trade and any attempts to pin down and categorize the sector threatens to destroy its meaning and power. This innovativeness and preparedness to seek out change proactively is one of the means by which retro traders and retailers variously mark out their working practices and spaces as distinctive from, and alternative to, an imagined mainstream. In order to try to

understand retro traders' and retailers' indeterminate and unstable positioning with respect to 'conventional' creative work practices and spaces, we adopt a methodology based on three different ways of reading retro landscapes. First, we analyse traders' discursive constructions of work, looking particularly at how the ambiguities of difference are articulated through work talk.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, we interrogate retro retailers' work biographies and how these have evolved through time and space, looking specifically at questions of flexibility, knowledge, embeddedness and risk. This focus on the employment biographies of retro retailers offers a way in to understanding the spatial and organizational evolution of retro shops and stalls and the creative quarters in which they are located. This focus also enables us to offer a more critical take on the evolution of the creative industries and on the role of small firms within it. We consider in particular how traders navigate their way through the intensifying economic pressures of the marketplace and in so doing attempt to redefine and reinscribe the boundaries between the 'mainstream' and the 'alternative'. Finally, we draw on field notes from our observational work in a range of retro spaces as a means of offering a third 'take' on the spatialities and temporalities of retro retailing.<sup>6</sup> This approach, we argue, has the potential to make two key theoretical interventions. First, it will extend our understandings of both creative work practices and the role of the cultural industries as tools of local economic development and place-making. Secondly, such work may offer insights into temporal reconstructions of the alternative/mainstream border and to our conceptualization of the inherently slippery and unstable spatialities of centres and margins, cores and fringes.

### THE CREATIVE WORK MODEL

In the following discussion we explore the working lives of retro traders in the context of three key conceptual concerns which, together, comprise what might be termed the creative work model of self-employment. We will evaluate the extent to which such concerns lend themselves to a conceptualization of the early stages of retro trading, going on to argue that the creative work model is, however, limited in its ability to account for the more complex picture revealed by the work biographies of those who achieve commercial success as established retailers. First, we address the extent to which creative work is flexible, fluid, free and empowering; secondly, we consider recent claims that creative work is rewarding by virtue of its embeddedness

in social networks which exhibit common communities of practice; and finally, we explore the extent to which retro work specifically, and cultural work more broadly, might be defined as risk-laden and precarious. Taken together, these characteristics have come to symbolize the creative work model, an idealized set of working practices centring around reflexivity, control, imagination and creative freedom which are seen by some as the key components required to meet the challenges of the twenty-first-century knowledge economy (see Burton-Jones, 1999; DTI, 1998, Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999). We conclude by raising some concerns about the ability of the creative industries to maintain their critical commercial edge and argue that the economic and cultural position of retro trading is inherently unstable as it depends on high levels of self-exploitation and on eminently plagiarizable market conditions. While the barriers to entry are low in economic terms, in cultural terms commercial success is an altogether more problematic notion which requires constant innovation and distinction.

***Flexibility, fluidity, freedom, fun***

In a number of accounts the cultural industries, and particularly those based around new technologies in one way or another, including multi-media and internet services, are envisaged as vibrant, imaginative and money-making. Such organizations offer the potential at least for more reflexive, individualistic social identities. They certainly open up new spaces for the creation and display of symbolic cultural capital. At the very least, it is argued, such micro enterprises enable people to search for a more rewarding job for themselves, a job over which they have a degree of control. So that as risk and uncertainty become more endemic, so people become more reflexive and more engaged in participative practice (Lyotard, 1984). This represents a 'new form of individualism whereby people fall back on their own resources to construct their own employment biographies, negotiating the hazards and opportunities in inventive ways' (Allen, 1997: 184). For du Gay, the discursive construction of work-based subjectivity and the new emphasis on creativity in work produces a new kind of worker, one who sees work as gratifying and who 'enjoys the dream of creative satisfaction in work and also the "fantasy of entrepreneurship"' (du Gay, 1993: 178). McRobbie has argued further that cultural workers adopt a creative identity that fuels their ambition and justifies the 'long hours, low pay and even the lack of success (i.e. misunderstood by critics and public alike), and enables them to tolerate,

for example, wages and hours that no employer could reasonably expect'. (McRobbie, 1999: 14). Some, it is argued, find that a trade-off of autonomy against insecurity is more attractive than working for a large, impersonal organization (Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999: 15). And it is undoubtedly true that many of our interviewees explain the rationale for their involvement in creative work in terms of personal fulfilment and freedom. Work is seen by some as a 'labour of love' (Clara, Nottingham); rummaging through markets is described as a creative process (Fiona, Portobello); sourcing is described in terms of committed rummaging (Maggie, Portobello). Such jobs, it is argued, offer personal satisfaction and fulfil particular desires at particular moments in traders' lifeworlds. This desire to find a space to work independently emerged as a powerful theme throughout our interview work and is the classic explanation for self-employment, as Roger (Nottingham) explains:

- L: The thing a lot of people are saying about this work is that the last thing they'd want to do is to work in a big organization with somebody telling them what to do.
- R: It's horrible. Somebody looking over your shoulder all the time. Nah. Elli'd go crazy. She couldn't do it. ... If you want to meet interesting people and not have somebody telling you what to do it's great. Like Elli said when she started, she could never work for someone else. So she started it. ... There's nothing finer than being here for me. I can sit and listen to music all day. I can put any kind of music on I want, from Chet Baker ... I can put Prokofiev on, I can have some punk on. Whatever. I can sit and read. What more can you ask for?

Many retro traders argue that creativity is their key competitive tool and often reveal a social, political or personal commitment to these new forms of working. Sara (Notting Hill) is an interesting example of someone who is committed to a creative vision of self-employment and speaks about her shop as 'my dream', where 'the pleasure is me being surrounded by things that I indulge in. That's the bottom line.' She began doing the markets in the early 1980s when she was a student in need of extra cash, and quickly realized the attractions of self-employment: 'It worked really well. I enjoyed it. I loved it. It's a very addictive thing to do.' Such work is seen as pleasurable, as a means of exercising control over one's life and fulfilling one's creative potential. It is, importantly, acknowledged not to be a particularly lucrative profession, but is one where one can pursue (and fulfil) one's fantasies. Sara (Notting Hill) is again illustrative of this negotiation between money and love:

Work is my passion. I work very hard. I'm here seven days a week, it's a non-stop thing which is not ever going to make me a fortune, so it's essentially about pleasure. And I feel very lucky. I feel blessed that I'm able to do something that I love. ... This is my dream. I'm not somebody that wants to climb rungs of ladders.

Cathy (Portobello) is revealing about the attractions of self-employment. She has a long history in the fashion industry but felt that working for chain stores such as Oasis and Warehouse was sapping her creative spirit:

I've been in this unit about 4 months after a career of about 15 years in mainstream fashion. ... I went travelling for a while because I was so sick of working for suppliers to Warehouse and Oasis. We were just copying the catwalk all the time. It was very restrictive what you could do. It wasn't very imaginative. It was just a question of seeing other designers and copying it. I was a designer but was given such a narrow brief ... I just wasn't enjoying it any more. I wanted to get out and do my own thing. ... Having been in it for so long I just got bored and wanted a break.

She thus gave up her formal designing job, indulged her pleasure for travel, picking up design inspiration on the way, and began doing the markets on Portobello Road. She moved into her shop because her stall was doing so well and 'sold out in three weeks'. She is very clear about the attractions of self-employment, emphasizing the trade-off between money and pleasure:

I've never been happier. To be honest, when I was working before I was earning twice as much working half the time, but I wouldn't swap it for the world. ... I don't want an empire or anything like that. I want to keep it small.

And again Roger (Nottingham) summed up the pleasure of working for oneself in spite of potentially poor financial rewards:

I couldn't work. I can't see why anyone would want to go to work, I'd go crazy. ... But if you want to be a millionaire forget it. ... It's certainly better than working for a living. Money's not everything.

What this points to on first reading, then, is the emergence of a new kind of subject for whom work is understood in terms of individual creativity (du Gay, 1996). This echoes McRobbie's accounts of the new media and culture industries which depend on a fusion of entrepreneurial values with a belief in the creative self (McRobbie, 1998: 83). Certainly, listening to their own accounts of their work



biographies, the creative entrepreneurs whom we interviewed appear committed to holding out for a life which meets their personal aspirations. Their talk emphasizes the desire to make work something more than a mindless drudge and repetitive chore, while acknowledging that their business is unpredictable and prone to transience.

However, while self-fulfilment, freedom and creativity are undeniably important factors in explaining the attraction of such work, we would argue that those traders who become sufficiently financially successful to set up more permanent shop outlets as retro traders begin to show a more ambivalent relation to work and articulate both how the trade is becoming more competitive and how their relationship to their work changes, as we go on to discuss below.

### *Communities of practice, embeddedness and gendered social networks*

The second set of reasons which are cited in the literature to explain the attraction of creative work relate to the ways in which such work is embedded within social networks which strengthen and support what might otherwise be solitary and isolated working practices. And again, on first reading, the importance of informal social networks were seen by many of our traders as an important factor in accounting for job satisfaction. Work becomes a fun, sociable activity where you are surrounded by, and interact with, like-minded friends and colleagues. As one experienced trader argued:

- K: You know lots of people and everyone knows everyone else and what they're doing?
- P: Oh yeah, it is in Bristol, cos we used to do the Canon's Marsh boot sale, we both did, and we didn't know anybody, and we know loads of people now, cos they're all into the 50s, 60s, 70s, or they're interior designers or shop owners, yeah, Canon's Marsh used to be our social life. We just sat around chatting in the afternoon.

Similarly, Elsa (Nottingham), a recent entrant into the trading scene, talks of her workworld as one of an elite, 'knowing' group (including other designers, shop owners and those involved in 'appropriate' club nights) that outsiders (people in the street) wouldn't understand. Sara (Notting Hill) also talks about the sociality of Portobello, where people

come by and say hello. That kind of thing. There was a sharing of ideas. The people who came to buy tuned into your tastes and shaped your tastes. You kind of feed off each other, that kind of thing. That's quite interesting. Quite inspiring. ... I have a lot of friends here and we go out socially. I don't really go out of this area much at all. It's good, it's self-contained, it's got a little nucleus.

This mix of knowingness and social connections as a way of creating a scene is typically fostered on friendship networks and embedded in circuits of social and business networks. It relies on certain communities of practice and knowledge – about where to go, where to meet people, what's in and what's not. Such economies of proximity, where work is carried out in bars, clubs and restaurants as much as in the formal workplace, go a long way towards explaining the attraction of self-generated self-employment. One of the ways that retro traders explain their work is thus by aestheticizing both the place of work and the time of work. For many, the shop becomes a creative space and work-time becomes expansive, the long hours slogging into the night to source, produce or alter goods, or the nights out spent chatting about 'work' becoming glamorized, fun. And this brings about a curious reversal between the world of 'work' and the world of 'home'. Hoschchild explores this emergent world where work becomes 'home' and where work ties replace kin ties, friends replace family. Although Hoschchild's work relates to large American corporations, her exploration of the transposed world of home-work bears remarkable similarity to the accounts told by our retro traders, and gives us some purchase on new rearticulations between work and identity. For Hoschchild, work – not just the substance of it, but the buzzy surface feeling of working life – is for many a source of pleasure. She talks about the overtime hounds who crave extra shifts, the workers who love the job because they can work at Christmas. She talks about a world where work becomes like a surrogate home, a reversed world, a world where people give everything to work. Like our interviewees, Hoschchild's study explores the people who feel that the true centre of their social worlds is work, not the neighbourhood. Where life at work is, frankly, more fun, and where self-satisfaction, well-being, high spirits and work are inextricably linked (Hoschchild, 1997: 41). However, while this is the ideal form of work among our retro retailers, it is often not achieved in practice and is seldom the eventual reality of their working biographies. So far, then, the existing model of creative work seems to describe retro trading practices well. However, as we have argued, such a picture appears limitingly definable, fixed and static, and fails to take into account the complex ways in which such work practices evolve through space and time (see below).

### ***Precariousness and risk***

A final component within emergent literature on creative work, and one which again raises questions about the usefulness and accuracy of

the model, is the suggestion that the creative industries are volatile, transitory and inherently risky. A number of commentators have argued that work is becoming more precarious and less predictable (Allen, 1997; Allen and Henry, 1997; Beck, 1992; du Gay, 1996; Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1994). Beck has discussed the emergence of a risk-laden system of 'flexible, pluralized, decentralized underemployment' (Beck, 1992: 143) which throws up new forms of uncertainty and unpredictability. He argues that 'abnormal work', with its unpredictable and erratic rhythms, is now becoming the norm for increasing numbers of people. Under such circumstances, identities become both fluid and fraught, dislocated and ungrounded in former certainties about 'jobs for life' and full employment. In the specific case of the creative and knowledge industries, it has been argued that we are living on the 'thin air' of knowledge production, application, exploitation and dissemination (Leadbeater, 1999); in a world where we feel more uncertain, stressed and insecure. Other creative sectors are, in contrast, seen as volatile, unpredictable and unstable, falling into the classic small-firm syndrome of under-capitalization and fragility (McRobbie, 1989).

While in much of the literature risk is seen as endemic within micro- and small independents who face new and uncertain markets, unforeseen competition and unknown costs, our study of retro retailers' biographies suggests a rather different take on risk. We would argue that in many cases retro trading is a comparatively risk-free option. The barriers to entry are minimal, as there are few or no training implications and little need for extensive property investments. Commitments in terms of opening hours are limited and can be varied, and sunk costs are negligible (many enter into temporary lease arrangements in otherwise vacant units). In the absence of any alternative 'career' trajectory, the only thing at stake, it seems, is the potential to break one's dreams. This is, in many respects, a low-risk strategy, an alternative form of (often temporary, typically part-time) employment. To illustrate these arguments we again refer to retro traders' work biographies. Many reveal highly flexible opening hours and work seemingly to suit themselves,<sup>7</sup> as Pete explains '[Saturdays] are the only time I'm officially open, but I have been open during the week whenever I've felt like it, for an hour or two, you know'. Cathy (Portobello) argues that 'I love it here. It's great. And also you don't have to open every day of the week. People would like to only open on Fridays and Saturdays down here.' For many, trading evolved out of their own collections; it was rarely part of a career trajectory or business plan and was more often than not the result of luck, chance

or friendship networks. Joan (Affleck's Palace), for example, reveals how she 'did the odd flea market and I just got interested in it'. Vinnie (Bristol) similarly tells how it all started from jumble sales ... when the room was so full of stuff collected through the year going to jumble sales ... we decided to open a little stall'. The important point about such biographies is what they say to us about risk within this particular sector of the creative industries. Specifically, we would argue that this kind of work does not strike us as risky at all – as Max argues, you get a key and you open up. So what this sector offers us is a new take on questions of employment flexibility and risk. It also suggests that we need to look not to questions of precariousness and risk, but to more conventional economic geography questions of rent, rates and commercial investments to understand the emergence (and demise) of creative quarters.

### RECOMMODIFICATION AND THE TEMPORALITIES OF RETRO

Analysing traders' work biographies reveals a markedly shifting temporality as the retro trade has become more competitive in the past 10–15 years. Maintaining a sense of distinctiveness and difference has become increasingly difficult as knowledge becomes more widespread, as the market becomes more crowded, as new forms of commodification challenge consumption preferences and as property (re)valorization becomes a prohibitive force for small independent traders. These trends in turn have marked organizational and spatial implications.

#### *Property revalorization*

First, there is the problem of property revalorization as formerly marginal spaces undergo economic regeneration and become more desirable and popular. Part of the initial attraction of de-industrializing urban spaces for many retro traders and – subsequently – retailers was their affordable down-at-heelness. Cathy (Portobello) explains the ease of entry into self-employment as a fashion designer which the designer units at Portobello Green offer:

- L: Is it fairly low start-up costs here?  
C: It is, yeah, it's really great. I wouldn't have had the confidence to do it otherwise. Here it's only a notch or two up from doing the markets. You can afford to make a few mistakes. Take a few risks. It's excellent, it's really good. I definitely wouldn't have had the nerve to go straight into a big shop myself with the rates they charge there, and

**86** ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC SPACES

you're often tied in for a long time. But here it's ... not much of a commitment ... and you don't have to open every day of the week.

Bureaucratic arrangements and economic tie-in clauses rarely figure in emergent creative quarters, and the ease of market entry and exit typify such spaces. In the case of retro trading in a market setting, the barriers to entry are minimal and risk really isn't an issue. In the case of Portobello Market, for example, the market structure of low rent and direct contact with customers, designers and cultural entrepreneurs enables costs to be kept low and personal investment and risk to be minimal. Similarly, the low rents and ease of exit at Afflecks Palace in Manchester make it a good seed-bed for new small firms, a launch-pad as Leanne the manager there argues, a starting-off point for local design talent. Leanne and her partner John further enable entry into this marketplace by adopting a nurturing attitude towards new stallholders, helping with the design of creative interiors within Afflecks Palace and guiding new entrants through the more complex bureaucracy of business start-ups, including tax advice and business management. Max, a former Afflecks Palace trader and now a successful and high profile retailer, endorsed this relatively risk-free view of the space:

It's quite a good way of starting a business because it's one old warehouse and multi tenanted, and if they like your face and what you do and they think you can add to the mix of the place, then you can have a unit, and there's a single weekly payment which covers rent, rates, electricity and everything which makes life quite easy and means you don't have to take a lease and get involved with solicitors and all this kind of thing. ... [It's] quite a good system, certainly for starting out.

However, and as we go on to discuss below, the popularization of creative quarters ultimately leads to an increased commercial interest in such areas and to spiralling property prices which threaten to push out the original creative pioneers. Max explains this process in the specific case of Manchester's Northern Quarter:

What happens in regeneration areas in towns and cities ... particularly in this area of Manchester ... they tend to be occupied by creative industries. You get a gap basically. The Arndale Centre left this area vacated, so you've got a lot of experimental businesses and artists [moving in] until eventually there's enough critical mass for other people to start getting interested. And what happened there was that Afflecks Palace was one of the earliest businesses actually, and then people like me [who] start there, move out of it and open up other places [which] promote[s] the area. You start attracting more people which keeps you going and that starts expanding and then eventually people's rents get assessed

and people start going out of business. It's a fantastic spiral but it's what happens. You either don't do anything and stay at the bottom of the dereliction pile or you do something and just adapt and move on. ... [It's] the landlords who are most greedy and the ones who cause the problem.

Leanne, the manager at Afflecks Palace in Manchester, also discusses the problems of urban regeneration. She describes how the Northern Quarter area was a largely derelict zone of seedy sex shops and pawnbrokers following the relocation of the Arndale Centre in Manchester,<sup>8</sup> and tells how she and her partner battled with an initially hostile local authority who wanted to close Afflecks down. But as formerly derelict or down-at-heel areas become more popular, so rents and rates are pushed up in the classic urban story of gentrification, as Max (Manchester) reveals:

The lease thing can be a bloody nightmare, especially when you get your rent reviews and the rents go up and life has changed and moved on. That's happened here you see [Café Pop]. We opened here about 5 or 6 years ago and [now] they want to treble [the rent] which of course puts everybody out of a job. But it's what happens you see in regeneration areas.

Here, then, we have to look towards far more conventional urban geography explanations about property rental values to understand the origins (and demise) of creative retail quarters such as Camden and Portobello in London, the Lace Market in Nottingham and Manchester's Northern Quarter.

### ***Sourcing scarcity***

Secondly, as the market becomes more crowded, sourcing original goods becomes increasingly difficult. The problem is that genuine articles are becoming more and more scarce, and more and more expensive. As Sara (Notting Hill) argues:

- L: Has sourcing become more difficult recently?  
S: Much more so. Things are becoming incredibly scarce. It's getting harder all the time because of a sheer lack of things. We just don't see much vintage around these days. As the years go on the condition gets worse and the challenge gets harder.

Max (Manchester) also acknowledges the sheer hard work involved in sourcing retro commodities:

I do very little on the buying side now, I more or less stopped about a year ago. ... I've had the most bizarre channels. There is no good place

to buy it. Car boot sales are not a good place to buy it. You traipse round seven car boot sales in the pouring rain for 6 hours and maybe you'll buy three or four things. It's an endless filtering process so you get very little. Antique shops tend to know nothing about anything whatsoever. Junk shops and charity shops, you get very little in the way of quality. ... It takes forever basically.

The difficulties in sourcing original items and the inability to predict supply or to match supply with demand are the reasons Max (Manchester) cites for his current disillusionment with retro retailing:

In a nutshell, the reason it doesn't work as a business is that it's terribly time consuming to get the stuff; it doesn't really work as a retail business anyway because people come in and want specific things and you haven't got it and you can't tell them when you're going to get it.

These difficulties, then, lie at the heart of the current dilemma facing retro retailing, and give rise to a sense of nostalgia about when the trade was easier. First, certain retro retailers reveal nostalgia for an earlier, and possibly idealized, time when retro stock was apparently plentiful and when the market was uncrowded. As Sam (Nottingham) commented:

I'd go and buy the most incredible things ... it's nice to buy '60s things because its one of the last things around you can buy relatively cheaply, easily ... it's all different, abstract, good quality ... at the time there were very few other people doing that. ... That was in 1989; there was another shop in Manchester and maybe two or three in London doing post-war stuff.

Similarly, other retailers talked nostalgically of a time when retro trading wasn't about big business but was about being part of an innovative, knowledgeable scene that was setting the trends for the alternative market: 'my business was about doing things different' (Max, Manchester). Finally, there was a lament for when youth (particularly student) culture was about looking alternative: 'schoolkids just want to look like everyone else today. ... I despair' (Roger, Nottingham); 'that generation now at University ... wanting ... Calvin Klein' (Tom, Bristol).

***Situated knowledge, tacit skill: distinction, taste and the problems of staying ahead***

Thirdly, and partly in order to counter the difficulties of sourcing good-quality items discussed above, retro traders and retailers depend

on a repertoire of knowledges about the retro trade. Analysis of traders' biographies in turn reveals both the importance of situated knowledge in ensuring commercial distinctiveness and the difficulties in renewing and sustaining such knowledges over time. In certain senses a reliance on the competitive tools of situated knowledge and tacit skill, which are innate, instinctive and not easily learnt, is one of the ways in which our interviewees made sense of their work biographies. A number of our interviewees have a long history in fashion and many have moved across into retro trading and retailing from other creative sectors such as music or art. Sara (Notting Hill) trained as an art historian and was 'always interested in the visual, aesthetic, creative side of things'. Similarly, Max (Manchester) has a long-standing interest and involvement in design, revealing how he

Started originally 11 years ago in Afflecks Palace down the street ... and I had a small shop; actually I was a design student originally and I became interested in the social history of the twentieth century related to products, quite a high brow interest. I started a few years ago, collecting icons of their day, design icons. It was an obscure thing to be doing at the time and it expanded and became a bit of an obsession. And I couldn't really think how I would be gainfully employed either, being a student, so I decided perhaps I could make a living out of buying and selling design items, second-hand goods basically.

Again, Sam (Nottingham) began in a band and supported himself by doing markets. He was always, he argues, 'interested in design and clothes and things, that kind of thing'. Pete (Manchester) had been to Art College and began a stall in Afflecks Palace, Elsa (Nottingham) trained as a designer and worked in the clothing business for some years before setting up her retro business, Matt (Portobello) is a trained architect with a sideline interest in retro and antiques.

Others have developed situated knowledges not through formal training in the cultural industries, but rather through long-standing family or personal histories of buying and collecting second-hand commodities. Clara has a long family history in antiques and remembers how she used to go to auctions and fairs with her mother, looking for Victorian lace and linen. Others, such as Elli, have worn second-hand clothes for 20 years and have developed an eye for sourcing commodities which will sell. Elli's partner, Roger, tells us 'don't ask me how she knows, she just does. ... She's got an eye for it. It's just a knack. You've either got it or you haven't. You can't teach somebody'. Similarly, Pete (Manchester) reveals how the knowledge to spot the next trend is an unteachable skill:



Once something becomes valuable, you don't see it ... that's the fascinating thing, seeing what's going to be the next big seller ... it's not predictable. Something can be laughed at and then two years later everyone wants it.

And Tom (Bristol) argues that 'it was interesting to see how some people understood it [retro] straight away and other people, however hard you tried, never actually grasped the concept'.

This, then, is perceived to be an instinctual talent, a gut-feeling, a sixth sense about what future likely trends will be. It is inherent knowledge but, crucially, knowledge that can be shared and appreciated between different retro retailers. It is a set of knowledges that depend on being immersed in a creative scene where emergent trends can be both identified and shaped. As Sara (Notting Hill) explains: 'I get a lot of inspiration from the clothes coming through the shop. ... You kind of feed off each other, that kind of thing.' In part, then, such situated knowledge is deeply geographical, grounded in particular places at particular times and emerging through the activities of groups of people who become identified as pioneering, innovative, in touch with fast-paced shifts of fashion and style. Such geographically situated knowledge goes some way towards explaining the success of second-hand and retro trading such as Portobello Market where designer-traders such as Toni talk about how easy it is to spot trends just as they are about to take off. Without this, she argues, designing would be impossible. Such insider knowledges, the metaphorical nudges and winks between accomplices and the silent, hidden references and codes, create a kind of secret language of distinction (Bourdieu, 1993) which confirms a complicity between the taste-makers and excludes the layperson who is always somehow bound to miss the point. Sam (Nottingham) is interesting here when he discusses how he sells industrial designer ware which many people don't know about:

Things designed by Olivetti or Braun, that kind of thing. A few people do know about it but your average Joe doesn't ... to most people it would be like an old typewriter, old calculator, old phone, whereas certain people know what it once was.

Bourdieu explains how the new taste-makers expect images and representations designed for their consumption to require the play of specific codes and competences. Here we see the importance of distinction through second-hand consumption, where innate knowledge and cultural capital enable entry into a secret style world where

there's a wealth of knowledge, but it is knowledge which can't be learnt or taught. And such situated knowledges are one of the means by which people carve out a niche for themselves in an industry in which making ones name so often relies on marking oneself out as different from the mainstream or dominant form of organization.

But the difficulty with relying on tacit knowledge as a competitive strength is that aesthetic and stylistic shifts mean that knowledge is constantly under review, is constantly in flux and is thus elusive and difficult to stabilise. And so the business of retro retailing in fraught with difficulty as it depends on eminently plagiarizable notions of quality, distinction and taste. To stay ahead of the game in an ever more competitive style arena requires very specific forms of knowledge and skill which depend on the definition of difference, a project which is becoming increasingly difficult – and within which one's position as 'alternative' retailer becomes increasingly ambiguous – due to the recent commodification of retro, as we go on to discuss now.

***Retro recommodification: reappropriation, assimilation  
and the erosion of 'the alternative'***

As the mainstream adopts retro style through the sale of new fashions based on copies of originals, retro traders and retailers face damaging competition from more conventional retail spaces. As we have already argued, the present, problematic negotiation between sourcing and selling original goods while staying in business and fending off mainstream copycats prompts a high degree of nostalgic talk about when these tensions were perceived as being not so apparent. Most of the traders we interviewed began trading in the early 1980s. One significant theme in our interviewees' descriptions of the time is that in the 1980s traders and shoppers were both part of an alternative, elitist scene, in which commodities were traded and consumed according to the then appropriate values of vintage, authenticity, difference and individualism, and which took place in appropriate alternative consumption spaces. Camden, Portobello Road, Afflecks Palace and Park Street in Bristol all became significant alternative shopping spaces for retro in the early 1980s. In the 1990s, we saw more of an assimilation of retro into mainstream culture as the 'alternative' tastes of this elite and knowing group trickle down to wider groups. Possibly this is part of an inevitable cycle whereby what was once an alternative, anti-good taste, anti-high fashion statement becomes assimilated into mainstream culture. So as the alternative traders of the 1980s become

more established, and more mainstream, the boundaries between retro and the high street become blurred. The final stage of the cycle is when this trend becomes so widespread that mainstream retailers cash in on it. Thus retro has now become a dominant fashion story on both the catwalks and the high street, and the cycles of reappropriation are speeding up and spreading out, such that both the 1970s and the 1980s became dominant style motifs during the late 1990s. We would argue that for retailers of retro, this simulation of the past, this reproduction of the authentic by the high street lies at the heart of their current dilemma as they see their businesses being ruined by 'inappropriate expansion'. The organic scene should be allowed to develop at its own pace argued one interviewee, not be forced by media attention and popularity, 'the whole thing has gone a bit topsy turvy ... people are [cynical], and that's what spoils it' (Sam, Nottingham). Repro-retro is, argues Sam,

not the thing. It's just doing kind of reinventions of it. The design quality, the quality of the products is poor and doesn't last; it's got quite a short lifespan, hence it's cheap. And I think the quality of the design is poor and usually I can see what makes a watered down version and the lines aren't quite right and the colours aren't quite right. ... They're all imitations ... so I'm a bit snobby about it and don't rate that kind of stuff at all actually.

Original traders thus become disenchanted and disillusioned about this trend, given that this is precisely what they set out to avoid. Max (Manchester) goes on to argue that,

Once everything becomes mainstream you've already lost it. Manufacturers are manufacturing bad versions of originals which completely devalues the original item ... and that's very much what's happened now really; everything's become a mish-mash of fifties, sixties and seventies in a nasty kind of retro.

Echoing Max, another interviewee discusses at length how such expansions of the 'alternative' marketplace, in this case Camden, has 'diluted' the whole experience, making it touristy – and impossible to get 'real' bargains (Sam, Nottingham). The market 'has changed' argues Sam, 'it gradually just got bigger and bigger. It's difficult to do and actually make it worth doing, especially nowadays.' In contrast to the somewhat idealized accounts of the traders 'feeding off each other' discussed above, this increased media and popular interest in creative quarters such as Notting Hill, Camden, Nottingham's Lace Market and Manchester's Northern Quarter is seen by retailers as forcing them to re-evaluate and reassess their trading strategies. Max

(Manchester) argues, for example, that you either have to either ignore market pressures and stay true to your ideals, or move with the scene and adapt accordingly,

You either go, 'Fuck it!', [if you are doing something unfashionable] and carry on regardless, which is what I've always done, or you endlessly adapt and change if you can do. I mean basically if you can just add more and then keep moving with the time as it were, which is just hot on your tail, and keep adding more things. It all comes back [into fashion] at various points. ... There's a revival of everything in the end, I kind of wish there wasn't now, I think it might be time to move forward.

Others acknowledge their early naivety and accept that their early impressions of the retro world have, in many instances, been tempered by less aesthetic and more commercial concerns. Sam's biography (Nottingham), for example, reveals this shift through time and space as experiential learning takes over from early enthusiasm and idealism. Sam began trading at Short Farm Market in London in the late 1980s, sourcing from car boot sales and amassing large amounts of stock in his house. His work narrative describes the market then as very underdeveloped and himself as one of only a few relatively successful traders. He then moved on to the provinces, and set up formal shops in creative quarters in Manchester and Nottingham in the early 1990s. His first shop was in the edge-of-town student quarter of Forest Road in Nottingham, a 'relatively cheap location'. He then opened a shop in Nottingham's Lace Market, and again underscores the importance of economic rent in defining alternative quarters: 'we don't have a lot of choice when it comes to paying rent. We need a lot of space and city centre rents are astronomical.' He currently owns and manages three shops in Nottingham's Lace Market, the most recent of which is a large, conspicuous and highly stylized interiors shop on a major thoroughfare adjacent to the newly constructed and high profile Nottingham Arena. It would be difficult to imagine a less alternative location and store space, and Max is well aware of how market changes have forced such spatial and organizational shifts towards more formalized and conventional trading patterns. For retailers, then, mainstream assimilation is seen as inevitable, even if it is initially undesirable.

### ALTERNATIVE SPACES?

We turn now to arguments about the spatialities of retro retailing and its relation to 'the alternative'. The sense of chain store encroachment

into formerly unique areas discussed above was also reinforced throughout our observation work. Nottingham's Lace Market now has the ubiquitous chains Café Rouge, Lloyds and Café Metro, cities such as Brighton are becoming disappointingly mainstream and Covent Garden is more of a tourist attraction than a market-space:

Brighton was a bit of a disappointment. [It's] become a victim of its own success: as more trendy young Londoners move here, the place becomes more of a London suburb-by-the-sea. Certainly it didn't have many decent second-hand clothes shops [just] expensive 'designer seconds' shops. The whole thing has become more 'professional' so now we have either designer or vintage, a general professionalizing process that happens as second-hand stalls gain a reputation. (KB notes, 11 September 1998, Brighton)

[I] got the distinct impression that this shop was now on the fashion tourist trail of London. I couldn't help but be pretty disappointed overall. I couldn't help but feel that I was on some sort of prescribed alternative shopping tour, and that these fashion-guide stickers [displayed on windows of shops featured in Guide] codified this. (NG notes, 17 August 1998, Covent Garden)

The place was mad with pre-Carnival hysteria although most of the activity seemed to come from European tourists clutching London A-Z's and searching for antiques stalls (all of which were of course closed until Friday). And while there was a real buzz to the Notting Hill area, much of it was coming from the new and outrageously expensive designer boutiques rather than from second-hand or vintage shop. (LC notes, 24 August 2000, Portobello)

Sara (Notting Hill) also talks about the pressures towards mainstream conformity and explains how Portobello is becoming so much more commercialized following the launch of the film *Notting Hill* (1999) Starring Julia Robe and Hugh Grant:

- L: Have you noticed the area changing from when you first started doing the markets?
- S: The markets changed a lot, and I don't think particularly for the better unfortunately. It's more commercialized and touristy which is a shame because it was somewhere that was always renowned for having character and new ideas.
- L: How has it changed? Is it since the film?
- S: Yes, very much so. I curse the day that film was made. It's a real shame. It's brought the wrong sort of people, the wrong sort of money injected into the area and its ousting out a lot of people. Rates are going up so small businesses can't survive. All the chains are coming in. It's just defying the whole point. It's hideous. Absolutely hideous, with Starbucks and Café Rouge.

She does, however, feel that the long fashion history which Portobello has and its reputation for design inspiration will remain, and that media attention will soon move on to the next up-and-coming place:

- L: Do you think that Portobello can maintain its sense of vibrancy?  
S: I don't think it will ever go. Portobello's been here too long. Its roots are too deep, but its being chipped away at, definitely, which is sad.

So for those like Sara and Cathy in Notting Hill and Max in Nottingham's Lace Market, whose work is immersed in an area with a long-standing fashion tradition, there is a sense of optimism and they have successfully made the transition from irregular market stall-selling to retailing from more permanent, more commercialized shops in more conventional locations. Others, who are in less fortunate locations or who were perhaps less prepared to compromise, have suffered the vagaries of volatile competition and have adapted to ongoing pressures towards mainstream conformity in a range of different ways. Some, such as Clara (Nottingham), have moved back historically and retreated into more vintage and antique commodities. She argues that she could not survive by selling 1970s stuff alone, and that diversification of her product range is absolutely vital. She has, for example, just bought thousands of pairs of 1940s and 1950s stockings which are proving to be enormous sellers. Others, such as Si in Covent Garden, attempt to head off intensifying competition and to play conventional retailers at their own game by introducing new ranges into his formerly exclusive retro store. Mass participation and the mainstreaming of retro serves to push high investor, creative-led traders away into something more knowing and discerning, but their creative edge is constantly under attack. A final group of traders have moved on (into new jobs, new sectors, new lives) and closed down. As Max (Manchester) reveals:

I'm getting out of it now, I don't want to do it anymore. I'm selling my own collection, hopefully to a gallery or museum so it becomes a public collection. I've done so much I think I've lost the plot now!

Our field observations also revealed the large amounts of work which go on behind the scenes: Cathy (Portobello) spends her days at the back of the shop sewing/embellishing/ironing stock unless she has a customer in; Roger, Elli, Clara and Elsa (Nottingham) all sew, alter, clean and iron commodities prior to their sale; Clara (Nottingham) scours the obit columns and trails off on (often unfruitful) sourcing journeys to people's houses; while Fiona (Portobello)

spends her week washing and cleaning stock, ironing and pricing everything up, getting up at 5am to load the van, and is currently designing and redecorating the interior of a new shop. And so while the typically articulated 'ideal' trading situation involves a shared, organically evolving set of values and ideals, which spin out of mutual connections and contacts and are shored up by an identification of retro retailing as an alternative and more fulfilling way of working, this is in many senses an overly romanticized vision of second-hand trading which belies the hard work, boredom and commercial crises which typify creative work and which begin to erode the ragged imaginary boundary between conventional and alternative work. Ultimately, it seems, this kind of creative work can become just as tiring and dull as jobs in more conventional sectors of the economy, and what begins as a route into a self-fulfilling work world ultimately becomes tiresome and too much like hard work, as Max (Manchester) explains:

I've lost interest and it's all a bit shoddy now. I'm rather tired of it all. It's all really old hat to me. ... I still go to antique fairs and get really excited about one or two things but it's just not there as much as it was, and I certainly don't want to make a living out of it anymore, it's too difficult.

Again, our observation work was suggestive of long hours spent sitting at a till in an empty shop waiting for non-existent customers:

Mainly this afternoon I'm struck by how bloody DULL it must be to run a stall. In fact, given the image of the place and the general assumption about such jobs – working for yourself, doing something creative and alternative, not doing a 9–5 job, being able to dress/do what you like. The cold reality is it is very, very boring most of the time. I hear one woman when asked if she's enjoyed her time off: 'I was bored! I didn't think I could be more bored than sitting here all day but I was!' (KB notes, 21–22 January 1999, Afflecks Palace)

And again,

Once again (as in Afflecks) [I] am forcibly struck by the contrast of how people speak about working in this environment (creative, exciting, doing your own thing) and the utter tedium of the reality of sitting at your unit, bitching with the person next door, also slumped over the till, waiting for the students to get up and come in. (KB notes, 19 February 1999, The Forum, Sheffield)

Different traders and retailers are, we argue, producing these spaces in very different ways and their understandings of, and investments in,

particular decades are used to construct a range of spaces of second-hand exchange which all, in various ways, sit uncomfortably alongside an imagined mainstream 'other'. Many shops, for example, become almost personal galleries or exhibition spaces, reflecting their owners' aesthetic ideals, displaying commodities which they have either designed, made or selected, and constructed to attract a particular clientele. Sara (Notting Hill) is a clear example of this tendency:

It's about beautiful things. Eclectic beautiful things that are there for style, cut, quality of fabric. It's really appealing to anybody who wants to tune into beautiful things and is looking for something a bit different. Like me. That's what I seek when I go shopping. So it's providing the aesthetic beauty, presented well.

Similarly, Elsa (Nottingham) would prefer to sell to people like her – the knowing who appreciate her clothes and understand what she's about. This is about creating a buyer–seller relationship which goes beyond the dynamics of exchange and which contains facets of the gift relation in that commodities are carefully selected and displayed to appeal to particular kinds of consumer. Elli (at Baklash in Nottingham) presents her shop as a creative space quite literally by using its interior walls as display space for young local artists.

Extending this, these and other such stores endeavour to mark themselves out as different from conventional retailing through the employment of distinctive spatial tactics. In the case of a market setting such as Camden, Covent Garden and Portobello, such strategies are comparatively easy given the nature of the sites, which are temporary and outdoors, and thus by definition different from conventional retail spaces. Our observation work describes the busy and boundary-less area of Camden:

Lots of skinny trendies wandering up and down and 'Being Seen'. The shops leading up to the market itself are set out like market stalls – they are open-fronted, with loud music playing, stuff hung up at the front and displayed on the pavement so it's not always easy to say where one shop ends and next door begins, some shops become a different shop in the basement. So shops' boundaries are creatively blurred here, and also the boundaries between the market and the shops ... shops and stalls are places where people socialize, and nearby cafés. The whole place seems full of people just being seen, customers socializing with shop staff, shop staff meeting in cafés. (KB notes, 14–15 August 1998, Camden)

Other require a certain geographical knowledge on the part of consumers – simply locating certain retro shops in off-the-beaten-track places can be difficult, again as our observation work again revealed:



## 98 ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC SPACES

It's [down] a sort of alleyway. You'd miss it if you didn't know it was there. It's closed on Mondays, unless there's a Carwash<sup>9</sup> that night, when it stays open. (LC notes, 13 August 1998, Nottingham)

And other retail spaces employ spatial tactics of disorder and confusion in order to differentiate themselves from formal, first-cycle spaces. This, coupled with the adoption of stall-like units which emulate a market setting, characterize Afflecks Palace in Manchester:

Afflecks Palace is both cavernous and structurally complex. The interior seems to be creatively illusionist, and the boundaries, borders, entrances and exits are all very ill-defined. The stalls themselves blend and blur into one another and thoroughfares are rarely evident. This is a profoundly social place. There was no sense of surveillance, either by security people, cameras or even unit owners/workers (in fact it was often difficult to tell customers from workers). (LC notes, 31 July 1998, Afflecks Palace)

The sense of disorder (chaotic displays, indeterminate boundaries between units) hit me. ... This is a place where you could quite literally lose yourself. ... I never quite knew which floor I was on, how to find the stairs, which unit I was in. ... This all seems to be part and parcel of the Afflecks Palace 'alternative' shopping experience where the rules of the game seem to be to break the rules of conventional consumption in terms of spatial layout, range of goods, price, rummagability. ... Here we see a space for fun, for irony, for kitsch, for lingering and loitering and seeking and sorting.<sup>10</sup> (LC notes, 31 July 1998)

This is very unlike conventional first-cycle retail stores such as Marks & Spencer and BHS<sup>11</sup> (and intentionally so, we would argue), which have highlighted walkways to steer the customer through the store and maximize exposure to the goods, and where the entrances, exits and pay-points are all illuminated. Clearly, then, the aim at Afflecks is to engineer a shopping space that breaks the rules of conventional spaces in terms of layout, fixtures, fittings, boundaries and product mix. Afflecks Palace seems to be consciously trying to undermine all of these consumption conventions. It is place to stop, to look and to (quite literally) lose oneself. In addition, there is a high degree of turnover in the units and one of the continual tasks is to replace stallholders. This is a highly regulated practice with stringent selection criteria, including an interview with potential traders, which are designed to screen out the types of stall Leanne doesn't think are appropriate here. The organization of space is thus stage managed and orchestrated in order to achieve an appropriate clientele and product mix. Leanne uses notions of exclusivity and practices of inclusion and exclusion to represent, and hence constitute, this space in particular

ways, as a space of distinction and differentiation from the mainstream. But, paradoxically, our reading of Afflecks Palace was that it is remarkably homogeneous and uniform, and fits around a particular nexus between fashion and music which characterizes the Manchester scene. It seems to be firmly grounded in street and club wear and those involved in Afflecks are both part of this scene and also are instrumental in (re)producing it. It has, moreover, emerged as a tourist site in recent years:

Afflecks Palace is celebrated, fêted as a tourist attraction; emblematic of trendy Manchester – and indeed when we were in Café Pop later there were a couple with a tourist map out on the table, obviously ‘doing the sites’ in a way very reminiscent of the marketing of Beatledom in Liverpool. It struck me that there was a LOT of this going on – people come to AP to consume it as a spectacle, just as much as they come to buy. (NG notes, 30 November 1998)

So again we see how the production of Afflecks and its representation as alternative is beset with contradictions. On the one hand it markets itself as alternative, yet it also parades itself as a model of alternative shopping and a tourist attraction. So it is, in a sense, being constructed as prescriptive, which is precisely what the alternative would normally constitute itself against. This, it seems to us, is a deeply problematic and ultimately unsustainable notion of the alternative.

Other retro retail stores have developed as playful, temporary, fun and excessive incursions, stimulated, in large part, by developments in the music and club scenes.<sup>12</sup> These retro spaces are constructed much more closely in accordance with the dictates of the market and are much more formalized, much easier to read and tend to be dominated by items for which demand is high and turnover rapid (1970s shirts, flares, flight bags, and so on). The Forum in Sheffield is a good example of a space which has tried to emulate a market-type setting but which has ultimately failed to offer much that is different either spatially or in terms of product mix and display:

All in all it's rather predictable. Nothing really outrageous or different. It really does seem to me to offer a pre-packaged, pre-selected range of student-oriented gear and not much else. All in all, a little bit of a disappointment. (LC notes, 18 August 1998, The Forum, Sheffield)

In many ways such spaces are scarcely different from first-cycle, formal retail spaces and the practices, constructs and ideals of formal retailing are thus the primary producers of these spaces: profitability matters and they are a long way away from the artistic design-led

imperatives of the others. Most significantly of all, we would argue, is that the balance between such spaces has shifted yet further with the intensification of the commodification of retro.<sup>13</sup>

These varied spatialities are, it seems to us, a profoundly ambiguous and ultimately unsustainable notion of the alternative: while such retail spaces are constructed as alternatives to the high street, their practices, commodities and social relations of exchange and consumption seem remarkably mainstream and straight. Alternative retail spaces are bounded, contained and construct themselves as alternative, but are refracted through and against the world of the high street and seemingly cannot escape it. And so as property developers and media journalists move into an area, rental values increase and creative kudos is lost.<sup>14</sup> And as the mainstream encroaches into formerly alternative spaces, so formerly distinctive retail arenas lose their aesthetic and creative edge. Mainstream assimilation is, as we have argued, undesirable but inevitable. And there will thus always be limits to the ability of alternative retailing to be radical and transgressive.

## CONCLUSIONS

There are three broad sets of conclusions which we want now to draw out from the above discussion. The first relates to retro trading and to a set of arguments about creative work, its aesthetic and economic attributes, and its radical potential. The second relates to a critique of existing literature on creative work which is static and bounded in that it fails to take into account the shifting temporalities and spatialities of creative work. The final set of conclusions relates to retro retailing and to questions of assimilation, commodification and the problematics of boundary construction.

First, then, we argue that new working practices within retro retailing are, in certain senses, challenging many of the conventional wisdoms about self-employed work as fragmented, risky and precarious. What our research is suggesting is the possibility of pursuing creative, knowledge-led and satisfying work strategies, whose potential transience and limited scope for commercial gain are mediated by notions of sociality, trust and friendship alliances. Yet alongside this, our work points to a work-world which offers limited scope for commercial gain, can be boring and lonely, and is more often than not unpredictable and precarious – all qualities which we might more commonly equate with the conventional model of self-employment. More particularly, we argue that the economic and cultural position

of retro trading is inherently unstable as it depends on high levels of self-exploitation and on eminently plagiarizable market conditions. While the barriers to entry are low in economic terms, in cultural terms commercial success is an altogether more problematic notion which requires constant innovation and distinction. Retro trading specifically, and the creative industries more broadly, seem to us to be a perfect example of where the economic and the cultural meet head-on and collide. And while in overtly cultural terms such sectors appear to offer a potentially more radical set of work options (where cultural attributes are prioritized and valorized), in narrowly economic terms such work practices seem neither alternative nor empowering. At the bottom line, retro traders, no matter how progressive, distinctive and pioneering their work plans may be, ultimately need to make enough money to stay in business and this, above all else, governs their market position, stability, permanence and positioning *vis-à-vis* the 'mainstream'. The all too common spatial outcome is to move up (into more mainstream commercial worlds), to move on (into more marginal and unpredictable spaces) or to move out of the retro trade altogether. The traditional model of small firms comes back to haunt us: transitory, precarious and economically marginal commercial success, it would seem, still relies on making profits through volume sales and low labour costs. And while such work may not be risky in the conventionally economic sense of the word, it is culturally an enormously risky undertaking, when what is at stake is one's taste, style, distinction and commercial credibility. The 'alternative' is, it would seem, but a temporary, imaginary space – as soon as it is definable, it is lost. The working practices of retro trading are hardly revolutionary; the spaces in which creative work occurs are even less so.

Secondly, our work is also significant in offering a new take on theorizations of creative work. Existing literature on creative work refers, we argue, primarily to those working at the less stable and more transient 'trading' end of the spectrum<sup>15</sup>. Such work focuses typically on new entrants to creative work and represents their employment experiences as both idealistic and static. And this focus is important in terms of what it has to say about work practices and (what it doesn't have to say) about career trajectories. Such work is predominantly cross-sectional in approach and offers a snapshot of creative workers at a particular moment in time and space. But what it does not do is to consider the ways in which workers' 'career' paths evolve and change, in many cases shifting from a transient market trading space to more formalized shops in more commercialized spaces. It is only by

adopting a longitudinal approach, as we have done here, that we can really begin to interrogate the unstable and shifting boundaries between alternative and mainstream worlds (as imagined and practised). Only then, we argue, might it be possible to understand the shifting spatialities of creative work practices.

Finally, our work raises some serious questions about the ability of retro retailing to be transgressive, resistant, distinctive and critical, when it is so often incorporated into the mainstream, where it is reappropriated and subsumed, its meanings transformed and its power diluted. More specifically, our work raises some questions about the ability of retro retailing to survive, with high street chains threatening to plagiarize its imagination and creativity in a frantic copycat race. And what our work reveals is the disillusionment felt by retro retailers when business goes mainstream, thus making it much more difficult to position themselves as the creative, alternative other. The 'alternative', it seems, is constantly under attack from the nimble emulation of the 'mainstream'. And so it seems that the problem with notions of the alternative grounded in fashion discourse is that retro retailing is the very site of this creative dilemma. At the heart of the dilemma is the convergence between economic and symbolic capital. When creativity sells, its incorporation into the mainstream becomes seemingly inevitable, and in so doing it loses its creative potential, its alternative distinctiveness, its symbolic power.

### Notes

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- 1 The cultural industries, it is argued, are growing at almost twice the rate of the national economy, generate revenues of £50 billion per year, employ 982,000 people and generate an estimated value-added of some £25 billion and have export-earnings of £6.9 billion (Creative Industries Task Force, quoted in Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999: 10–11).
- 2 The creative industries sector is, not surprisingly, highly differentiated in both sectoral and organizational terms, and includes sole-trader operations working from home to large multinational organizations such as Time Warner. For our purposes here, we are restricting our analysis to small and micro businesses which operate

independently in organizational terms. We are not interested in large multinational corporations.

- 3 The key sectoral exception is the music industry which has been the focus of some important theoretical and empirical research in recent years. See, for example, Brindley (2000); Frith (1992); Hennion (1989); Leyshon, Matless and Revill (1999); Scott (1999).
- 4 The material on which this chapter draws was obtained through interviews with 21 retro retailers specializing in clothing and/or interiors and artefacts located in a range of designated 'alternative' trading sites in UK cities (Nottingham, Manchester, Bristol and London). The traders include some who have been in the business for many years and new entrants; include both men and women; and include some working on market stalls and some in more permanent trading situations working out of shops. These interviews were then supplemented by detailed observational work in key retro sites such as Manchester's Affleck's Palace, Nottingham's Baklash and London's Portobello Market in Notting Hill.
- 5 See Crewe, Brooks and Gregson (2003) for a fuller exposition of the unstable imaginative geographies of the alternative as revealed in retro retailer's discourses.
- 6 It is important to note here that we are not in any sense suggesting that our field notes are 'telling the truth' about the trade, nor are they being offered as a definitive version of what is going on here. Rather, we suggest that they offer another way of reading the spaces of retro trading, one which is of course deeply dependent on our own positionality as 'outsiders'. We were, in the majority of cases, 'unknowing' observers. And this positionality (as middle-class, white women academics) had some important impacts in terms of access to information. Two black interviewees in Notting Hill denied us access to information, arguing that we were in some way taking information from them to pursue our own careers while offering nothing back in return. This problem was compounded by the presence of a journalist from a fashion magazine who was also trying to secure access to information from retro shops in Notting Hill on the same day. One shop owner refused to talk to us, arguing that he'd already done three magazine interviews that day and was really more interested in making a sale than talking to journalists. This further endorses the problems facing creative quarters as media popularization threatens to undermine their distinctiveness, as we go on to discuss in below. On other occasions our lack of knowledge about the spaces we were studying actually enhanced our access to information as we were seen as academics who were clearly 'outside' the industry and therefore did not pose any commercial threat.
- 7 Our frequent and repeated visits to a number of (closed) retro retail shops confirmed these flexible opening arrangements. The pattern of opening revealed little by way of routine or predictability. Fridays and

- Saturdays were the only guaranteed days of opening for many traders.
- 8 The Arndale Centre is a large city-centre mall in Manchester that was relocated away from Oldham Street in Manchester's Northern Quarter to the city centre, thus leaving a large tract of semi-derelict and vacant land.
  - 9 A Carwash is a 1970s theme disco club night where punters dress up in 1970s clothes and dance to 1970s and 1980s disco music.
  - 10 It is worth noting here that certain formal retail spaces, such as Top Shop, are themselves adopting a more chaotic, rummagey spatial layout, emulating market-like spaces in order to re-inject some interest and fun back into predictable high street consumption.
  - 11 Two large UK fashion chains.
  - 12 Fannie's Attic, Daphne's Handbag, Helter Skelter and Full Circle in Nottingham; Freshman's in Sheffield; The Girl Can't Help It and One of a Kind in London are all examples of this tendency.
  - 13 See Gregson, Brooks and Crewe (2000) for a fuller exposition of the commodification of retro.
  - 14 Witness, for example, the media frenzy surrounding Portobello and Notting Hill following the release of the film *Nothing Hill*, which has arguably pushed a formerly economically marginal yet culturally vibrant district towards mainstream, tourist-led conformity, as happened with Covent Garden in the early 1980s and Camden in the late 1980s. Recent media coverage of Hoxton and Spitalfields in the East End of London is counterposing Hoxton (hip and happening) against Notting Hill (tired and passé), again reinforcing the dangers of boundary definition and of oppositional arguments about the alternative (see, for example, Rickey, 2000).
  - 15 We are referring here to work by, for example, Purvis (1999), who has looked at new, young pop fashion designers (1999) and McRobbie who has looked at market stallholders and young designers.

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