Burgers for Britain: A Cultural Geography of McDonald’s UK

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The geography of food has recently come out of the pantry.
—Richard Pillsbury, No Foreign Food.

ABSTRACT. McDonald’s restaurants, which are often described as a unilateral symbol of American imperialism, have been a presence in British high streets since the 1970s. In fact, the official company history says that McDonald’s does not modify its way of doing business to adapt to foreign cultures, but changes local cultures to meet its own needs. How successful has this approach been in Britain, which has a “special relationship” with the United States? Using a variety of sources, this study examines the material landscape of McDonald’s, first in the United States and then in the United Kingdom. This paper summarizes the growth and development of the company from the 1970s to the early twenty-first century, and then focuses on the exteriors, interiors and restaurant menus of McDonald’s UK. The creation of a two-tiered system of restaurant exteriors and interiors is discussed. Although the chain now has over a thousand outlets in Britain and is a familiar part of the British downtown streetscape, it is still strongly identified with the Americanization of Britain.

INTRODUCTION

Tourists walking up London’s Charing Cross Road in summer 2003 could see a book with a familiar logo prominently displayed in a Muslim bookshop window. The cover of this book, Globalization, Americanization and the British Muslim Identity, showed children in Muslim dress standing across from a McDonald’s restaurant. The children were part of a black and white photograph, but the McDonald’s sign was in color, drawing the reader’s eye toward its
well known red and gold design (Ameli 2002). Today McDonald's is an easily invoked metaphor for America's expanding global influence (see for example Kincheloe 2002 and Schlosser 2002). The terms "McWorld" and "McDonaldization" express this Americanization of global culture (Barber 2001; Inglehart and Baker 2002; Ritzer 2000; Ritzer 2002). Since 1986, The Economist has published an annual "Big Mac Index" based on the theory of purchasing power parity.

This interest in McDonald's reflects the company's global reach. By 2001 McDonald's total sales reached $40 billion, with 28,700 outlets in 120 countries (The Times, February 1, 2001). Globalization, however, does not mean complete homogenization. While McDonald's has been described as "erasing the differences between this place and that place" (Smart 1994, 172), if one looks more closely, it is clear that the famous golden arches represent different things in different places.¹

Despite all of these interpretations, one common theme is the challenge posed by McDonald's and by other multinationals to national and cultural identity, a topic that is also a popular research area in cultural geography today (see for example Mitchell 2000). As Don Mitchell suggests, nation, nationalism, and cultural identity are never anywhere fixed but are always contested (Mitchell 2000). Indeed, the proliferation of American-based fast food restaurants outside the United States has a multitude of effects, far too many to discuss in one brief paper. The focus here is upon the development, growth and diffusion of McDonald's restaurants in the United Kingdom, and the material culture created by McDonald's as exemplified in its buildings and menus. Structures are traditionally used in cultural geography to decipher cultural trends and patterns, and recently food and its consumption have also been a source of study (see for example Bell and Valentine 1997), including studies on the cultural landscapes of food. Why focus upon McDonald's UK? First, because American culture itself, according to Zelinsky, is derived "in all essentials from that of Northwest Europe and most particularly, of Great Britain" (Zelinsky 1992, 5). For much of American history, large sections of the American elite and middle classes have copied or modified British styles in literature, domestic architecture, men's fashion, and garden design (see for example Tunnard and Reed 1955; Furnas 1969). But these derivations as Zelinsky calls them, were obviously not just one-sided. Especially since the end of World War II (see for example Marling and Kittel 1993 and Ameli 2002) Americanization, as exemplified by
McDonald's, has been seen as an influence on British national identity. McDonald's, which has helped to transform, according to Eric Schlosser, the diet and the "landscape, economy, workforce, and popular culture of the United States" (Schlosser 2002, 3), is also altering those things in Great Britain, the former mother country. Finally, the author has been visiting Britain since 1967 and feels it is important to document the increasing use of American products in the last 35 years, and the proliferation of American-based fast food restaurants, here exemplified by McDonald's, as part of the British material landscape. This paper examines two main topics: the company's American and British growth and development and the creation of McDonald's culture in Britain, with emphases on social spaces, restaurant design and menus. The degree to which different food categories and types of food are offered in the United Kingdom compared the United States will be discussed as an example of the way the menu has been specifically altered to appeal to the British market, as will a production failure that carried cultural overtones.

**The Growth and Development of McDonald's in the United States and the United Kingdom**

The geography of food became a particularly palatable research topic in the late 1990s as the subject for several books, including Richard Pillsbury's *No Foreign Food: The American Diet in Time and Place* in 1998, and John Jakle's and Keith Sculle's *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age*, published in 1999. These authors discuss the history and development both of chain restaurants and of fast food. Richard Pillsbury credits Frederick Harvey and his Harvey Houses with popularizing the close connection between quickly served meals and late nineteenth century express train travel, which had a rigid insistence on time tables and schedules. Harvey Houses were also first to use central purchasing of all foodstuffs and to oversee delivery to all units (Pillsbury 1998).

But the Harvey Houses and their competitors featured an extensive menu selection, without a focus on the now ubiquitous hamburger and fries. The first chain restaurant to focus upon hamburgers was probably White Castle, which opened in Wichita, Kansas in 1916. There the owner ground the meat in front of his customers, served fresh hamburgers at a nickel each, and encouraged take out. By 1931 there were 131 White Castle units
in operation and with their small, white "castle-like" structures, they presented a uniform visual image as well as advertising standardization in their products. White Castle's early imitator, White Towers, also projected an impression of cleanliness and speedy service (Hirshorn and Izenour 1979). White Castle also engaged in the first burger marketing campaign and started the important association of children with fast food burger restaurants, encouraging them to enjoy "beef cookies."

Twenty years later Richard and "Mac" McDonald incorporated many early fast food ideas into what would become the most successful fast food chain to date. The McDonald brothers designed a take-out restaurant with a very limited and standardized menu. When Ray Kroc took over in 1955, the chain became so efficient that gross income spent on wages was reduced from the 35% to 40% typical of American restaurants of the time to 17% (see for example Langdon 1986). Employment of young, part-time workers was also emphasized. The McDonald's corporation was also innovative in its approach to food preparation. Today the fast food labor process combines contemporary computer technology with its traditional emphasis on "Taylorism," a process which systematically separates the mental from the manual work component (Fantasia 1995). This promotes the appeal of a fast food restaurant as a place where food preparation takes place as part of the consumer's visual field, not "backstage" as in traditional restaurants. Customers waiting for their orders watch the food being moved from one place to another, often in packaged form. As a result, "the visual emphasis rests on the efficiency of the process rather than on the food, which is essentially only viewed when it is unwrapped" (Fantasia 1995, 227).

The rise in popularity of McDonald's during the 1950s and 1960s was tied to the changing American lifestyle of the post-war, "baby boom" period. American fertility rates rose rapidly, as families of three or more children became the norm. All facets of society contributed to the baby boom, which was encouraged by rising per capita income in the 1950s. With inexpensive government loans available for new homes and the prices of the automobiles now within the reach of many Americans, suburbs spread out around most American cities (Jakle and Sculle 1999). Drive-in restaurants, particularly chain restaurants such as McDonald's, which began as a take-out restaurant, quickly followed. According to Love, Ray Kroc targeted the suburbs for development because of McDonald's orientation to the family market (Love 1995).
Drive-ins were often located on the expanding commercial strips commonly found between the cities and the suburbs. The relationship between socioeconomic structure and spatial structure was clearly elucidated on the strip (Ford 1994). Many types of strip businesses were especially popular with families that contained small children, as well as with teenagers and young adults, two segments of society that would always be important to McDonald’s. A family in their car or cars full of young people could eat quickly and cheaply in a casual, efficient setting. Strip architecture was often flamboyantly designed to catch the attention of such a mobile market. One building vied with the next for attention, and none tried to form part of a coherent whole (Ford 1994). This is the context in which McDonald’s developed in the United States, and as the company moved away from the commercial strip, it maintained this strip mentality. It also continued the use of the restaurant structure as a form of advertising. This attitude would bring McDonald’s into conflict with more established communities without strip developments, usually but not always in inner city locations, both at home and abroad.

By 1965 McDonald’s restaurants were found in many of the new American suburbs, particularly those of larger cities, supporting the classic diffusion model which says that diffusion may be based on the population of the area to be served (Carstensen 1995). The company continued to choose restaurant sites, preferably near suburban shopping centers, and tended to avoid inner city locations until the 1970s.

The first restaurants outside the continental United States were opened in 1967 in Canada and Puerto Rico. McDonald’s established its International Division in 1969. McDonald’s selected the Netherlands for its initial European market, and sited the first outlets in suburban locations, similar to the American ones of the time, eliminated the Quarter Pounder and added some Dutch foods. These policies, according to Love, “added up to a long term disaster” (1995, 418). After this, the company realized that the main European markets then were in the central cities, which, according to Love “had not deteriorated as they had in America, and the suburbs were devoid of commercial development” (1995, 418).

Expansion of McDonald’s in Britain

Britain was the last untapped major market for McDonald’s in western Europe. McDonald’s even opened restaurants in West
Germany before Britain. Possible explanations for this relatively late entry were high British property and beef prices. Another explanation is the tradition of McDonald’s as a drive-in restaurant (see Jakle 1995), a form unknown in 1970s Britain. British car ownership figures were still comparatively low by American standards in that decade.

Drive-in restaurants may have been unknown in 1970s Britain, but Kentucky Fried Chicken had already introduced the British public to American fast food. Short order hamburger restaurants were also familiar to the British. Wimpy’s, the country’s largest restaurant chain in the mid 1970s, sold hamburgers and chips (french fries) in a coffee shop setting, very much like the Howard Johnson chain in the United States. While children accompanied their parents to Wimpy’s, they were not given special services (unlike Howard Johnson’s, where this author fondly remembers the 1960s children’s menus). Dining out in Britain at this time, especially at dinner, was mainly a middle class adult experience that involved quiet surroundings, a leisurely meal, and attentive service. McDonald’s was to change this, widening the market and encouraging families from all walks of life to eat out breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Imported American food has been recognized as part of the “American cultural invasion” by the British. As Marling and Kittle said in 1993, “in business, architecture, and retailing, in the food, clothing and service industries and in entertainment and culture, America is a detectable force in this country” (1993, 7).

McDonald’s opened its first UK restaurant in Woolwich, a London suburb, in October of 1974 (Fig. 1). For the first overseas restaurants, McDonald’s imported many items from home, including much of the machinery to run the restaurants. Such machinery was expensive, and restaurants were located on prime sites with a guaranteed flow of customers. These locations would increase McDonald’s visibility in the community which, as will be discussed later, sometimes had unintended negative results. Due to McDonald’s strict product control guidelines, food was imported from outside the United Kingdom at first: “British beef, but the onions have to come from one area in California, the cheese from West Germany, the fish from Denmark, with potatoes from Canada,” reported The Times on August 15, 1974. The tone here expresses the British press’ surprise at food imports, since all of these products were available in Britain. With hindsight, this negative criticism was important. The implication was that in the (America-based) company eyes local foods and local machinery were not good
Fig. 1. Poster now on display in the first McDonald’s to open in the United Kingdom. Photo by author.

enough, and underscored the feeling among some that, despite the overt efforts of McDonald’s UK to portray themselves as part of the local community, company policy preferred to import essential parts of restaurant operation from “back home.” Typically, this import strategy was discontinued for economic rather than for political or cultural reasons. The cost of English production was driven up by an estimated 35% (Love 1986).

As McDonald’s UK established its own food suppliers and its own distribution infrastructure in Britain, it became a classic example of vertical integration. French fries for McDonald’s in Europe, for example, come from a plant in Germany built with company funds. Buns and syrup are produced for the United Kingdom by plants located there, established as a joint venture
between McDonald’s and English and American operating partners (Love 1995).

During the 1970s, all McDonald’s restaurants in Britain were company owned (no franchises) and located in city center locations on the high streets (main shopping streets) of London and its suburbs. Forty-four outlets were built in the first six years, despite the fact that the first decade was not a profitable one. The Woolwich store, grossing $300,000 in its first year was averaging half the gross of American outlets and its losses were over $150,000. Overall, McDonald’s lost $10 million in its first five years in the United Kingdom (Love 1986).

To increase business, McDonald’s began advertising on movie screens within a year of the 1974 Woolwich restaurant opening. More successful advertising campaigns began the next year on television, focusing at the time on the local London market. In 1976, McDonald’s began to build outlets in London’s West End, which is the focus for entertainment, tourism, and shopping in London. The outlets there, according to Love (1986), were immediately profitable. In the 1970s only one British television network, ITV, carried commercial advertising. Back in America, McDonald’s had also been a television advertising pioneer (Love 1986).

McDonald’s expanded out of the London television viewing area to larger Midlands cities in the early 1980s, focusing first on Birmingham (Britain’s second largest city) and on Manchester (Fig. 2). This expansion happened just as two other America-based burger chains, Burger King and Wendy’s, entered the UK market. Robert Rhea, first managing director of McDonald’s UK, said in 1984 that he planned to locate a McDonald’s “in any community capable of supporting one” (Sunday Times, August 12, 1984). McDonald’s opened 30 to 40 outlets a year in Britain, most of them company-owned, from the mid 1980s to the early 1990s. In the 1980s, outlets were opened first in Wales, at cities such as Wrexham and Cardiff, and then in Scotland, at Glasgow and Edinburgh. The pace of expansion quickened during the 1990s. In 1991, for example, there were 400 restaurants in Britain and the first opened in Northern Ireland (McDonald’s Education Service, 1998). Just six years later the number of outlets had more than doubled to 846. While continuing to expand in urban locations, the company opened its first drive-through restaurants sited in suburban locations in 1986. The first McDonald’s opened in a motorway service area in 1995 (McDonald’s Education Service, 1998). By the
decade's end, McDonald's claimed 78% of the British burger chain market (see Table 1).

**McDonald's Culture and the British**

McDonald's is more than a simple purveyor of food. It is, as Watson recently observed "a saturated symbol for everything that
environmentalists, protectionists, and anti-capitalist activists find objectionable about American culture” (Watson 2002, 352). The “Golden Arches” have become an icon of global homogenization of both landscapes and culinary tastes that are identified with the “American way of life” (Ritzer 1993; Azaryahu 1999). McDonald’s, moreover, is often identified with a cultural hegemony which disregards local popular culture and conventions (Azaryahu 1999). McDonald’s has established a sense of place that is recognized world wide, in doing so other, older notions of identity and belonging may be challenged (Bell and Valentine 1997).

McDonald’s culture then, say two British writers “is not so much a burger, more a way of life” (Marling and Kittel 1993, 83). Marling and Kittel discuss, for example, what they see as two disturbing results of the growing numbers of McDonald’s outlets in Britain: first, the increasing homogenization of the business facades along the commercial streets of the country, as local traditions are lost to standardization, and corporate philosophies which they believe are debasing to both the customers and to the counter staff.

McDonald’s UK has met with other forms of criticism. The obesity epidemic which is so evident in the United States has spread to Britain, and fast food restaurants are often given the blame for it. The numbers of British fast food restaurants roughly doubled between 1984 and 1993, as did the obesity rate among adults (Schlosser 2002, 242). According to Schlosser, author of
Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal, not only do the British now eat more fast food than any other nation in Western Europe, they also have the highest obesity rate.

McLibel, published in Britain in 1997, is a history of the McDonald's libel case against two Greenpeace activists. Its author, an environmental journalist, discusses the McDonald's culture created by the company as one in which "image was, and is all, and the image must be single, homogeneous" (Vidal 1997, 37). Since Vidal includes a discussion of some of the cultural conflicts between the McDonald's company and the British culture or cultures, his work is relevant here. An anti-McDonald's website was also established in Britain in 1997, based around the "McLibel Case" (www.mcs spotlight.org) which claims to have received over five million "hits" since its inception. Perhaps the most damning critique of McDonald's in Britain came in 1994, as a result of a company-sponsored survey. British customers reported that they regarded the America-based chain as loud, brash, complacent, uncaring, insensitive, insincere, suspicious, disciplinarian, and arrogant. McDonald's professed itself "horrified" at these results (The Times, October 28, 1994).

RESTORENT EXTERIORS

The extent to which the McDonald's company has reacted to these criticisms will be considered in a general discussion of the "material culture" of McDonald's UK. The exteriors and interiors are tangible manifestations of corporate culture, and a discussion of them is therefore appropriate in the context of this paper. In this section, the context of the changing exteriors and interiors of the restaurants themselves, will be discussed, and then followed by a comparison of current British and American menus.

John Jakle, in his 1995 essay "Roadside Restaurants," considers Howard Johnson's roadside coffee shops to be the first American restaurant chain designed for visibility, instant recognition, and brand identity. Early McDonald's restaurants featured cherry red and white paneled exterior walls outlined in yellow neon parabolic arches, which were easily visible at night. Throughout the 1950s, American chain restaurant operators moved toward highly visible "image buildings" (Langdon 1986). A model of a 1950s McDonald's drive-in restaurant, complete with neon, is on display at the Tower of London outlet.
By the late 1960s the bright little boxes with their modernist design became passé in the eyes of McDonald's management, and the exteriors were replaced with brown brick and plate glass facades, topped by mansard shingle roofs. These changes were a response to several developments, particularly to the need to remodel older restaurants, a growing sensitivity to the criticism of roadside franchises as garish strip enterprises, and the need to appeal to McDonald's broadened clientele base (Helphand 1983; Jakle 1982). The change also made visible the marketing shift of emphasis in the U.S. McDonald's from take-out to sit-down meals. With the move to England Robert Rhea, the first managing director, found himself remodeling store fronts in downtown locations. McDonald's restaurants in the United States were originally take-out only, and were little detached boxes often sited on the commercial strip. These gave way to drive-through restaurants in a variety of suburban locations. In England the early restaurants were located in the middle of other high street buildings, often in pedestrian zones, with no through traffic.

McDonald's #1, in Woolwich, south London, was visited by the author in the summers of 1999 and 2004. Like the other buildings on Powis Street, the main or high street of Woolwich which runs out of the market square, it is a two story structure (Fig. 3). The restaurant is sited in the middle of Powis Street, which is a pedestrian zone, and is located across from a branch of Marks and Spencer's, Britain's largest department store. The ground floor has large plate glass windows with planters outside. Although Ray Kroc is credited with the introduction of planters (Love 1986), they are also a common feature in English pubs. The exterior of the floor above is decorated with a series of plastic abstract panels, reminiscent of attempts to update American main streets in the 1960s and 1970s. A large pole illustrated with important dates in the history of the company is found on the upper floor, a reminder that this is "McDonald's #1." McDonald's is not always able to renovate exteriors extensively. As of 1999, outlets were located in 123 conservation areas and in 28 listed buildings in the United Kingdom. There, McDonald's exteriors are controlled by British law and their logos and other advertisements are subdued by American standards.

The company does not hesitate to site restaurants in contested locations. In Richmond-on-Thames for example, in the face of considerable local opposition, a McDonald's went into a listed building that had been a restaurant since the 1870s. The timber
frontage of the building was retained, but McDonald's still had its new site (Fig. 4). The best known case of an English community fighting and eventually losing the battle over the placement of a McDonald’s is that of the wealthy north London suburb of Hampstead. Local opposition was called the “burger-off” campaign (Marling and Kittel 1993). In the United States, McDonald’s and other fast food chains are often located on the main commercial areas of the gentrified neighborhoods that also serve as good transportation routes to downtown (Brooklyn Heights in New York City and the DuPont Circle area in Washington DC are good examples of this). In the Hampstead case, in the early 1980s, local groups temporarily fought off an attempt to convert a closed
Fig. 4. McDonald's overcame local opposition to occupy this site in Richmond-on-Thames. Photo by author.

Woolworth’s into a McDonald’s. But the battle was not won, for in 1993 a much smaller and more subdued McDonald’s opened there, only 150 square meters in size, seating 40, compared to an average outlet size of 600 square meters.

In negotiating with certain British communities over the facade type that will appear on their high streets, the McDonald’s corporation is continuing a pattern begun in the United States. There, in the 1970s for example:

In communities that refused to accept a standard McDonald’s the company offered a choice of “Country French”, “English Tudor”, “Mediterranean”, “Village Depot” and a dozen other stock facade alternatives, all of them like three dimensional wall paper painted onto the standard mansard-roofed building. Generally, opposition had to be persistent before McDonald’s would make a more meaningful response to a community’s yearning for distinctiveness or to existing local architectural conditions (Langdon 1986, 150).

In Ann Arbor, Michigan, 5,000 people signed a petition opposing McDonald’s plan to raze an old house of “moderate historical importance” on the edge of the University of Michigan
campus and construct a standard McDonald's on the site. The company then hired a local firm to design an imaginative brick building which featured a stained glass rose window, soon dubbed "St. Mac's" by the community (Langdon 1986).

Recently half of the French McDonald's have been upgraded in an effort to compete with increasing competition from fast baguette outlets. There the restaurants have hardwood floors, armchairs, unpainted brick walls and feature TVs with music videos. Espresso and brioche are also offered (Leung The Wall Street Journal, August 30, 2002). Some of the materials made in the new French outlets even originate in France, in an effort by McDonald's there to rebrand itself as purely French.

While selected outlets in Britain receive a subdued treatment which (almost) acts as a camouflage and blends the building into its surroundings, this is true of certain urban outlets only. Outside the inner city areas in Britain, the popular new freestanding outlet for the 1990s was termed the "E195." This is a prefabricated building that usually seats fifty people, and is similar to American McDonald's restaurants. The E195 model is delivered to the site in five sections and then bolted together so that the entire building project, from site clearance to the first hamburger served, may be accomplished in as little as nine days. The term itself refers to Europe and 195 square meters.

INTERIORS

McDonald's #1 in Woolwich originally had expensive interiors, with brass railings, mirrored walls, and travertine marble facades (see Love 1986). Robert Rhea hired a full time decorator who included limed oak and plasticized fabric in some of the early designs. Despite these efforts, when the Woolwich branch opened in 1974 its expensive interiors were ignored by the English press and the restaurant was described as "decorated in the brightly immaculate American tile, plastic and chrome style, with giant colour photographs on the walls showing Americans of all ages and colours happily devouring the products of their favourite huge corporation" (The Times, November 27, 1974). In one sentence, the words "immaculate," "corporation," "American" (twice!), and "devouring" appear, which do not seem to connote a quiet, civilized meal. Also, there is no indication that Rhea's expensive interiors were acknowledged as such, or recognized in a way the company would have wanted, note instead the word "plastic."
The difference in perception of the interior design between the managers of the America-based restaurant chain and the reporter for *The Times* is clear. Rhea had spent far in excess of the usual budget (see Love 1986) in an attempt to make his new restaurant as attractive, according to his own ideas, as possible. These attempts were ignored and/or made fun of by the reporter, who used stereotypes about Americans to describe the restaurant’s interiors. From the day McDonald’s #1 opened in Woolwich, the company was laden with social and cultural meanings by at least some of the British, associations that have continued to the present day.

There were two distinctive types of interiors by the twenty-first century. The smaller number, or “First Class” interiors, are “sympathetic to the site” and are located in conservation areas, listed buildings, or in areas where the local community, usually a wealthy one, mounted opposition to the new outlet. “Standard” outlets are all the rest. Again, the Hampstead branch is a good example of the “First Class” type. A small, single story building in fashionable black, this branch contains terrazzo rather than vinyl floors, a plaster rather than a typical American-style suspended ceiling, and timber veneered paneling with marquetry inlays. There is no plastic seating, the chairs are freestanding Italian café chairs and the tables are granite topped (Fig. 5). As with the outlet in central Salisbury, an important cathedral town, and the outlet in the university town of Cambridge, there are specially commissioned paintings prominently displayed, which depict local rural scenes. Here then, is an example of a McDonald’s UK attempting in these particular units to identify not just with a customer who is comfortable in a “First Class” setting, but also trying to identify in some way with the local (English in this case) countryside. The interiors of the “Standard” outlets are not as upmarket. Italian café chairs are replaced with banks of plastic booth seating and large advertising posters replace the specially commissioned views (Fig. 6).

McDonald’s UK, like its American parent counterpart, has been particularly successful in marketing to children and young people. Ray Kroc had always considered children (well controlled by their parents) as an important component of the McDonald’s market (Jakle and Sculle 1999).

As early as 1983 the British press commented on the success of the company with children:

The chain practically eats children. Britain seems full of middle class parents protesting that they only go to McDonald’s
Fig. 5. The "first-class" interior in the McDonald's in Hampstead. Photo by author.

because the kids drag them there. Two year olds are seen climbing out of push chairs to pull their mothers in (The Times, October 17, 1983).

McDonald's is popular with older children as well. Almost half of its market is between the ages of 16 and 24. To these young people McDonald's provides a familiar, inexpensive, safe, clean (toilets and baby changing facilities are provided) place to eat, sometimes away from parents. As on a double-decker bus, the teenagers can go upstairs (in the city center branches) and escape the eye of authority. In the freestanding outlets away from the city the alcoves inside and the picnic tables outside serve the same purpose.

The interior of McDonald's can also be seen to help foster a different culture from the high street or from the busy road just
outside the restaurant doors. One writer has called McDonald's a theme park, since it is a food chain with its own clown and cartoon characters, with rides in "playlands" and tie-ins to celebrities and well known toys (Barber 1995). Going into a McDonald's, says anthropologist Conrad Kottak, "we can tell from our surroundings that we are in a sequestered place, somehow apart from the messiness of the world outside" (1983, 54). In the case of a McDonald's abroad, one could carry this idea further, "since it is a place," says Kottak, "where only Americans can feel completely at home" (1983, 54). In an article entitled "Going to McDonald's in Leiden: Reflections on the Concept of Self and Society in the Netherlands," Peter Stephenson says that there is a "kind of instant emigration that occurs the moment one walks through the doors, where Dutch rules don't apply and where there are few adults to enforce any that might" (1989, 240). Interviewing teenagers in France, Fantasia (1995) found that they appreciated the self-service, with minimal adult contact. Others enjoyed the "American" atmosphere, described as the noise, the bright colors, and the uniforms of the staff (Fantasia 1995). Fantasia also maintains that the use of play areas, a colorful, casual atmosphere, and large,
oversize posters are designed deliberately not just to appeal to children but to the child-like and casual nature of adults as well (Fantasia 1995).

FOOD AT MCDONALD'S: A UK/US COMPARISON

Food serves as a useful symbol for conveying social, cultural, and moral messages (Bell and Valentine 1997). “Like a language, food articulates notions of inclusion and exclusion, of national pride and xenophobia,” say Bell and Valentine (1997, 168). Hamburgers, soft drinks, and french fries are now ubiquitous with American culture, but they are relatively recent introductions to the American diet, popularized by the previously mentioned owner of the White Castle restaurant chain. French fries, or their more thickly cut cousins “chips” or “pommes frites,” seem to have developed independently in several countries, but Richard Pillsbury points out their widespread consumption in the United States was dependent upon the development of efficient deep fat fryers in the 1920s (1998, 179).

Although burgers and fries may have been invented elsewhere, McDonald’s can be credited with the homogenization of taste in American fast food, especially with giving hamburgers preeminence over other entrées. The early McDonald’s television advertising in the UK stressed the difference, as perceived by the McDonald’s company, between its products and those generally offered at English pubs and restaurants. Crisp fries made from russet potatoes that were especially imported were promoted, as were “triple thick shakes,” a very different product from the thin and overly sweetened products the author drank at Wimpy’s in the 1970s.

At a cursory glance, both from the posters on the plate glass windows advertising the food and from the menu displayed inside over the counter, there would appear to be very little difference between the food offered in the American and in the British branches. Standardization in menu selection has always been promoted, and it is a characteristic that customers take for granted. The most expensive items, the variations on types of hamburgers, are identical in name and appearance. The differences begin with the non-beef sandwiches. Here the variations are mainly name changes, the use of the term “fish fingers,” which is common in British English but unknown in American English, and different names of the chicken sandwiches. The most significant menu
differences in the “entrée” category overall are in the more health conscious items. A “Vegetable Deluxe” burger is offered at present in Britain (versions of this have failed in the U.S.) and two kinds of large salads are sold in the U.S., which are not offered in Britain. Menu differences are most apparent in the less expensive items that are not as closely identified with the restaurant itself, especially desserts. Restaurants in both countries offer sundaes, which were originally an American invention, but now familiar to the British. But the British branches also offer a traditional vanilla British ice cream cone containing a Cadbury flake (a stick of chocolate stuck into the ice cream) as well. Differences are most pronounced in the pastry category, where the British can purchase three kinds of “donuts” (a dessert popularized in the United States) which are not for sale at the American McDonald’s, where customers can buy apple bran muffins, danishes, or cinnamon rolls instead.

Menu differences have sometimes been attributed to a difference in local beverage tastes: wine in France, beer in Germany, and tea in England are added to the colas offered on the menu back in the United States (Helpland 1978). Menu differences are sometimes not as obvious as they seem—beer is on the menu at German McDonald’s because many of the sites belong to German breweries, which insisted on that menu addition (Love 1995). The company makes other similar adjustments elsewhere such as in Holland, where mayonnaise is substituted for ketchup as an accompaniment with french fries. The short-term special offer sandwiches are usually not produced in Britain. But one consequence of McDonald’s domination of the fast food market in Britain, according to the authors of American Affair: The Americanization of Britain, is the growing emphasis on quantity rather than quality of what is produced (Marling and Kittel 1993).

This is ironic because one of the most important problems that the earliest McDonald’s faced in Britain in the 1970s was that of the smaller portions they were then offering compared to the “pub grub” at the time (Love 1995). As has been mentioned, the author found the quality of McDonald’s food better than that of Wimpy’s, its main British rival in the 1970s. Now, the situation seems to be reversed, with the general improvement of food overall in British restaurants, and the introduction of larger and larger portions in American-style fast food there.

In the Britain of the 1990s the term “ethical eating” was evoked as part of a “counter cultural milieu which could be seen as a form of community without propinquity, animal welfare, health, anti-
consumerism, ecology and world hunger come together” (Bell and Valentine 1997, 109). In the late 1990s British beef was banned throughout the European Union and fell into general disrepute. In such an atmosphere it is not surprising that vegetarianism has become even more common and that McDonald’s products in Britain have less salt and fat than those sold in the United States.

Although vegetarian burgers have failed in the U.S. McDonald’s, one of McDonald’s most spectacular production failures happened in Britain. This failure can be seen not only as a failure to understand the desires of its primary market, largely for burgers and fries, but also as a lack of understanding of a food product that is tied to British identity. In 1994 McDonald’s test marketed the “McPloughman” in Britain. A “ploughman’s lunch” is a very traditional British lunch that consists of bread, cheese (British, of course, usually cheddar) and a pickle (also cured in the British style). An attempt to tie the America-based company to such a traditional British product was a “McFlop.” The company admitted that the British counter crew were embarrassed both by the concept and by the name itself.

**Conclusion**

What have McDonald’s burgers brought to Britain? The economic and environmental consequences are complex, and beyond the scope of this paper. While the cultural consequences are also complex, at least two broad consequences can be discussed here. First, McDonald’s has helped change the British dining experience. Inexpensive meals and snacks, of a consistent quality, are readily available at over a thousand outlets in Britain. Restaurant hours are very long, and include Sundays, which support the expanded Sunday shopping hours in many British cities. Often McDonald’s has the longest open hours of any shop or restaurant on a downtown street, and is therefore the most visible local business, with its lights glowing in the dark British winter. As discussed earlier, children and teenagers are especially welcomed, and can often create their own social spaces in individual restaurants. “Take-away” dining, which was well known in Britain at fish and chip and ethnic restaurants, has expanded and, as in the United States, has changed the meaning of a family meal, especially in urban locations (see also Bell and Valentine 1997).

McDonald’s presence in Britain for the last quarter century has also had another, more profound consequence. The company has
played an important role in what has been called by many the Americanization of Britain (see for example Marling and Kittel 1993; Ameli 2002). This refers to a particular form of Americanization of course, one in which large scale capitalism influences such things as the type of restaurant design located on the high streets. The food sold at McDonald’s is regarded often as unhealthy, company business practices—especially the employment of young, part-time nonunion workers—are criticized, and it is often accused of trying to eliminate local foods (see for example McLibel 1997).

Back in America, critics have pointed out that the growing fast food culture of the United States is forcing a homogenous diet on that population, with Americans consuming 50% more chicken and beef in 1976 than they had in 1960, mainly because fast food restaurants focused on only those two meats. The fruits and vegetables that Americans ate were often those sold in fast food restaurants, which have restricted menus (Pillsbury 1990; Hogan 1997).

McDonald’s offers a few versions of local food on its menus, such as the ones in Britain discussed earlier. It also encourages the appeal of the popular American culture by offering a version of that culture in its thousand UK outlets. Other restaurants focused on what were, 25 years ago, essentially foreign foods in Britain also base part of their appeal on their “differentness,” but in McDonald’s there are also other consequences.

Because McDonald’s is symbolic of the world’s remaining superpower, which has a culture that regards itself as particularly superior to any other in the world, and which also has a propensity for proselytization (Zelinsky 1992), the presence of McDonald’s in Britain can be interpreted as an “imperial” one. Some may view the restaurants themselves as little red and gold islands that act as “growth poles” of American culture, expanding relentlessly across the British commercial landscape. While McDonald’s now has outlets in 120 countries, its presence in Britain, with its shared history, language and “special relationship” to the United States is especially problematic, at least to those concerned with the effects of globalization.

McDonald’s has now been a common presence in Britain, especially in larger urban areas, for over 23 years. One English journalist said recently that “Britons under the age of 35 are part of the McDonald’s generation” (The Times, March 24, 2001). McDonald’s UK, although still commonly considered as an export of Americana, is also part of the contemporary British national popular culture, and as the dominant burger chain in Britain, is
arguably at or near the core, rather than on the margins, of that culture. The Queen, in an effort to promote a more populist monarchy, visited the staff at a McDonald's in 1998. If food, as Bell and Valentine argue (1997), articulates notions of inclusion and exclusion, then the acceptance of much of the British public of McDonald's in their local communities indicates an acceptance, or at least an acquiescence, of many of McDonald's policies that may influence other cultural and social changes in Britain as well.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Fantasia 1995 for a discussion of McDonald's and the French; Stephenson 1989 for a discussion of McDonald's and the Dutch; and Azaryahu 1999 for a discussion of McDonald's and the Israelis.

2. For a detailed history of White Castle, see David Hogan's recent book, Selling 'em by the Sack: White Castle and the Creation of American Food.

3. According to Schlosser (2002), 2000 and 2001 were a milestone in the fast food industry, as profits fell for the first time throughout the fast food industry. During the 1990s, while McDonald's opened new restaurants abroad, it was not gaining many customers in the United States, and an attempt to reach out to the adult market with a new sandwich failed in the United States. An article in The Times dated November 9, 2002 for example, discussed closing outlets and cutting back jobs at McDonald's outlets in the UK.

4. In Britain a conservation area refers to a natural or man-made site that has been deemed of such inherent value by the national government that it has been given protected status. There are three grades of listed buildings. They have varying degrees of protection from alteration, although they are not necessarily protected through the use of public funds.

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