# 1

# The Garage Sale as Informal Economy and Transformative Urbanism

Margaret Crawford

On any given weekend, somewhere in the United States, someone is preparing for a garage sale. Collecting and sorting used possessions and unwanted household items from their basements, garages, attics, and closets, they evaluate and price them before displaying them on their lawn, driveway, porch, or front steps. Potential buyers stop to look, just passing by or attracted by flyers posted across the neighborhood or notices on Craigslist or in specialized advertising publications such as the *Pennysaver* (figure 1.1). Inspecting and discussing the goods, buyers come and go. Many will bargain over already low prices. By the end of the day, depending on what hasn't been sold, the seller either repacks the leftover items to return to storage or dumps them in the trash.

This familiar scene is played out thousands of times, weekend after weekend, across the country, according to a rhythm of climate and events. In Southern California, the mild climate and absence of rain make garage sales a year-round activity. In other places, spring cleaning and warm weather mark the beginning of a selling season that ends with autumn rains. In college towns, yard sales cluster at the beginning and end of the academic year. In exceptional circumstances, entire neighborhoods, towns, or even multiple states, such as those along the 630-mile-long Highway 127 corridor (from Michigan to Alabama), hold collective garage sales on designated days each year (DeCaro 2000).

These sales are one of the most ubiquitous yet little-studied dimensions of the informal economy. Although they probably number in the millions each year, no public or private entity has taken the trouble to count them. The few estimates that exist, from the 1980s, claim that nationally there are more than 10 million garage sales every year, generating more than a billion dollars in revenue (Herrmann and Soiffer 1984).[1] Since the numbers of sales rise and fall with the economy, these numbers are almost certainly higher now. In some places, the garage sale


**Figure 1.1**
Sign advertising garage sale. Photo credit: Margaret Crawford.

economy involves enormous numbers of people as buyers and sellers. A 1996 survey in Southern California found that more than half the population had attended a garage sale in the previous year (Curtiss 1992; O'Reilly et al. 1984). Yet, in spite of their pervasive presence, garage sales are economically invisible. Their very ordinariness allows them to exist largely under the radar as a form of commercial exchange that takes place outside of the formal economy and is largely unrecorded by official economic statistics. Sellers are not required to obtain business licenses or pay sales tax, and sales are conducted on an all-cash basis. Although some municipalities attempt to control garage sales by limiting the number of sales per year and requiring permits, these rules are widely disregarded and rarely enforced.

Once examined, however, garage sales challenge a surprising number of economic, social, and spatial conventions. Hidden within ostensibly commercial exchanges are alternative economies: recycling, which allows used objects to acquire a second life, and gifting, a form of generosity that establishes social bonds between strangers. The objects for sale, although often mass-produced commodities, also have social meanings.



They are biographies acquired through use that can be shared between seller and buyer. Held in ordinary settings such as front yards and driveways, the sales invert these areas' usual meanings, making spaces that are normally private extremely public and open to anyone. These reversals of daily life, like carnival customs that turn the world upside down, are officially tolerated and even celebrated when they occur within a limited time period. Once they become more permanent, they threaten the spatial categories that structure American cities. This chapter argues that, once understood, the garage sale has the potential to reshape urban values and urban space.

My own interest in garage sale urbanism began in Los Angeles during the early 1990s, a period of economic recession. Doing research in East Los Angeles, a largely Mexican area, I discovered many creative uses of front yards and driveways to sell both new and used items (Crawford 1994). At the same time, the expanding number of continuous garage sales in affluent Beverly Hills prompted the city to regulate them. This intriguing coincidence suggested that garage sales might have a broad urban and economic significance, leading me to investigate further. Since then, I have attended dozens of garage sales all over Los Angeles and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as a participant-observer and interviewer of both sellers and buyers. The interviews were conducted informally, as casual conversations without set questions. I also held several garage sales myself, a convenient way to conduct fieldwork and get rid of excess household possessions at the same time!

## Garage Sale Economics

In terms of the official economy, the garage sale is a small part of an extensive network of recycling. Unlike the best-known forms of recycling, which transform existing items into forms that can be reused, and which usually involve complex manufacturing processes, garage sales simply recirculate existing goods. They constitute the amateur end of a commercial network of for-profit and nonprofit resellers of clothing, books, and household goods and equipment that range from charity thrift stores like Goodwill, to flea market and swap-meet vendors, to high-end "vintage" and antique stores. Within this system, depending on their perceived value, cast-off items can move up or down a commodity chain that extends from throwaways, one step above garbage, to still functional items, to "collectibles" and valuable antiques. As used items move up the value chain, quality replaces quantity. Out of the millions

of used items sold every year, only a very small number reach these rarefied settings. Nonetheless, the possibility of adding value generates opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurship like that of the Afghan refugees depicted in the novel *The Kite Runner*, who scour suburban California garage sales for items to resell at flea markets.

Unlike garage sales, these diverse outlets all operate in an official commercial context that must conform to state and local requirements for registration and taxation. The state of California, for example, requires even the most casual flea market vendor to register and declare sales (California State Board of Equalization 2010). Swap-meet operators often establish flat rate payments to the city in lieu of taxing individual sellers (Kaliski interview). In recent years, the Internet has offered new outlets for selling used goods. Craigslist functions as digital classified advertisements, accessible to an extremely broad regional audience. On eBay, sellers market individual items, often collected in online "stores" analogous to stalls at a flea market. So far, with the exception of occasional announcements on Craigslist, the Internet has not penetrated the garage sale. Although electronic marketplaces are easily accessible, they still require computers, advance planning, official registration, photographs, and extensive follow-up for sales.

In contrast, the garage sale has few barriers to entry. All you need is a physical space, usually but not always in front of your residence, and goods to sell.[2] It is a strictly amateur enterprise, unlike tag sales (sales of the entire contents of a house) or estate sales, both of which are typically operated by paid dealers. Avoiding the selectivity and ordering involved in higher-level reselling, most garage sales offer a random and heterogeneous collection of items, brought together by the accident of ownership and the owner's decision that they are no longer needed. These objects are offered at low prices, which can become even lower during the sale through bargaining ("haggling" in garage sale parlance) or the seller's desire to get rid of the goods. The sale is usually bound by strict temporal limits, typically a day or a weekend, although some may be quasi-permanent. Although it is modeled after a store, involving advertisements, goods priced and arranged for sale, and payment expected in cash or check, all profits represent a windfall, since the items for sale have already been bought, paid for, and used.[3]

## Commodities or Gifts?

Although the garage sale is explicitly based on commercial transactions, the flexibility of pricing and the nature of the objects produce a continuum between purchasing a commodity and receiving a gift. Here, use value frequently trumps exchange value, or the two are inextricably mixed. The practice of garage sale sellers simply giving away sale items to shoppers is widespread. "Free boxes," filled with items that anyone can take away with no payment expected, are common (Herrmann 1997: 910). In addition, Gretchen Herrmann argues that since garage sale prices are often so low—"giveaway prices"—the items are quasi or partial gifts. In these cases, the payment of money is primarily symbolic, a way of saving face for the buyer by making the transaction formally a commercial exchange rather than a charity handout, allowing the buyer to retain a sense of dignity and not feel indebted. Both parties maintain the commercial facade while actually participating in a gift economy (Herrmann 1997). Spontaneous gifting or lowering prices to nominal amounts often occurs in garage sales, particularly during the last hours of a sale. Typically, these gifts are the result of personal exchanges, such as conversations where shoppers reveal that they need or want specific items.

My fieldwork garnered numerous examples of giveaways or sales at minimal amounts to buyers who expressed a need or a purpose for different items. For example, one seller lowered the price of an entire bolt of fabric to one dollar for a woman who said she wanted to make curtains with it. Conversely, sellers may project these desires on shoppers. As a child, my daughter was the recipient of many unsolicited garage sale gifts, typically offered by the seller with a personal statement such as "I loved this when I was your age" or "you look like you would enjoy this." The age difference eliminated the need for the face-saving fiction of commerce. These gifting practices, unlike those analyzed by anthropologists such as Mauss (1925) or Sahlins (1972), do not require reciprocity; objects are freely given to strangers with no expectation of obligation. Another practice, typical of regular shoppers at garage sales, is to buy items not for themselves but as gifts for friends or family. Such purchases, based both on their evaluation of the worth of various items for sale and their knowledge of what others can use, mix the two economies. Recognizing a bargain, they buy it and then pass it on as a gift to someone they think can use it.

## History of the Garage Sale

In contrast to many informal practices that are modern versions of age-old activities, garage sales are a recent invention. Before the 1960s, used items, particularly clothing "hand-me-downs," were passed on through kinship and friendship networks. Other items were donated to

charitable organizations that held rummage sales to raise funds. The origin of the garage sale lies at the intersection of two contradictory economic dynamics. During the affluent 1960s, people began to acquire far more possessions than in previous times, eventually accumulating enough items to start divesting themselves of some of them. As the name garage or yard sale suggests, this was closely associated with the suburban single-family house, where the garage serves as a repository of unused items, and the front yard is rarely used. Similarly, the types of goods sold represent the consumption patterns of middle-class suburban households, the kind of mass-produced items bought in increasing quantities beginning in the late 1950s. If the prosperity of the 1960s created the goods and habits of consumption, the economic crisis of the 1970s produced the incentive to sell them. As the incomes and purchasing power of households declined, the number of garage sales increased. Reduced spending power affected both sellers, who realized additional money for their unused possessions, as well as buyers, who were able to purchase goods for much less than their original cost.

During the 1960s, in a changed cultural context, used objects also acquired a cult value. As some young people attempted to live off the leftovers of consumer society, they valorized concepts of recycling and reuse. No longer expressive of poverty or charity, used items acquired new and positive associations. In the 1970s, as the economy contracted and the counterculture aged, these concepts filtered down into the society at large. Greater ecological awareness as well as an increasing aesthetic appreciation of "vintage" and retro styles accompanied a generalized loss of faith in progress, with its promise of an infinitely expanding economy and profusion of new and better products. Similarly, the spread of a camp sensibility, previously confined to gay subcultures, produced a new appreciation for a wide array of kitsch products. Aficionados revalorized many categories of used items, including clothing (such as Hawaiian shirts) or household items (such as Fiestaware). These selected items became collectibles, creating a secondary market for garage sale purchases. Even the readymades and junk incorporated into sculpture and collages in 1960s art supported this new ethos of recycling (Herrmann and Soiffer 1984). By the 1980s, the garage sale was an established part of mainstream American life.

## Representing

In spite of such widespread acceptance, garage sales rarely appear in literature and art. When they do, they are largely represented in reductive



terms, as convenient symbols of loss and abjection. In Terry MacMillan's novel *Waiting to Exhale*, the betrayed wife scatters her husband's expensive and valued possessions on the lawn, selling them for insultingly low prices. One of Raymond Carver's most famous short stories, "Why Don't You Dance," describes a disconcerting encounter between a single man, who places all of his furniture and household goods on the front lawn, and a young couple interested in buying them. Carver's minimalist prose does not reveal the background or the outcome of this exchange, but compellingly conveys the bleakness and desperation contained in apparently ordinary circumstances. In contrast, photographers focus on objects rather than people. Adam Bartos's book *Garage Sale* (which includes the text of Carver's story) employs detailed close-ups that transform the random juxtapositions of objects for sale into surreal collages. Karen Geiger's photographs of Los Angeles garage sales focus on the unexpected beauty of carefully arranged items disposed in a wide variety of front yards, illuminating the diversity of the city.

The artist who has explored the garage sale most fully is the installation and performance artist Martha Rosler. The garage sale functions as a key theme in her work, beginning with her original *Monumental Garage Sale* of 1973, for which she installed a complete garage sale, with the typical array of secondhand goods, records, books, clothes, toys, costume jewelry, and personal letters and mementos in an art gallery at University of California, San Diego, allowing visitors to actually purchase the items. Since then, Rosler has staged other garage sales, the most recent at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In each city, she solicits used items from the public and the museum. Advertised as both a garage sale and an art event, it exists on two levels: one questions the art object by bringing the everyday into the "art" space of the gallery; the other highlights the multiple and contradictory meanings contained in such an ordinary event.

An audiotape that ran during a Rosler installation asked, "What is the value of a thing? What makes me want it? I paid money for these things—is there a chance to recuperate some of my investment by selling them to you? . . . Why not give it all away? . . . [A quote from Marx:] 'A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing . . . in it the social character of a person's labor . . .' She wonders, is it sacrilege to sell the shoes her baby wore? . . . She wonders . . . Will you judge me by the things I am selling?" (Rosler 1999). In a subsequent interview, Rosler described the multiple "masquerades" sellers and buyers

can assume: "homeowner as recycler, as idiot, as predator, as business-wise householder, as neighbor, as parent of rapidly growing children, as empty nester simplifying the home. The buyer is not a sucker but a smart deal maker, a connoisseur with secret knowledge, a neighbor helping out" (Rosler 2002).

## The Social Life of the Garage Sale

Rosler's installations underline the garage sale's paradoxical nature: these are public events that take place in private, social events masquerading as a commercial activity as well as its opposite. They simultaneously celebrate and undermine consumption, and are economic exchanges where meaning and significance change hands along with used goods. However, Rosler's transposition of the garage sale from the front yard to the art gallery, if necessary to challenge the conventions of the art world, eliminates a central constituent of its meaning: the domestic setting. Taking place in a garage, driveway, carport, front yard, or porch,[4] whether of the single-family house or of an apartment complex, the sale is located in the private space of the individual, the family, or the household. Yet for the duration of the sale, this private space becomes public. Although organized by a private individual, garage sales are public events, open to all. Flyers posted around the neighborhood, notices on Craigslist, or newspaper ads announcing the sale constitute an open invitation for anyone to attend, testifying to their public nature. Interaction between strangers or partial strangers is an accepted part of the event; in the numerous accounts of garage sales I found, none mentioned anyone being turned away. It is likely that the sale's presumption of commercial exchange mandates, at the very least, politeness. Although social markers such as gender, race, and ethnicity clearly affect transactions, these social distinctions are muted by what Herrmann (1997: 920) identifies as a "garage sale ethos" that includes a generalized friendliness and an overall egalitarian style of exchange.

Such public uses can temporarily transform urban space. In many places, garage sale shopping mixes classes, races, and ethnicities in surprising ways, often crossing the prevailing boundaries of residential segregation. There is evidence that poor people often travel to affluent areas to find garage sales, believing that the quality of the merchandise offered there is higher and the seller's need to make a profit lower than in their own neighborhood (Herrmann 1996, 2006a). In dispersed, car-oriented cities like Los Angeles, shoppers often drive long distances to search for sales. Taking advantage of this, some well-located neighborhoods have established themselves as the equivalent of garage sale strips or malls, with multiple individual sales lining the streets, a magnet for bargain hunters from across the city. These "chance encounters" produce a casual form of social mixing, bringing people together who would rarely meet under normal circumstances.



The sellers' residence as the site of the sale imbues the sellers and their goods with a personal quality. The sellers' place in society is approximately identified by the size, location, and appearance of their house. This specific location establishes their legitimacy, which extends to the provenance of the goods for sale, making them more acceptable to buyers. Domestic qualities pervade the sale, turning interactions between strangers into a form of hospitality, with the seller as host or hostess and the buyer as guest. This makes interaction far more intimate and friendly than in conventional shopping. Mixing the commercial and domestic alters the function and meaning of the front lawn or driveway, transforming it into a liminal space. For a few hours or days, the sale inverts the usual meaning of the house, making what was the private space of the front lawn into a site of public display for items that recently resided in the most private places of the house, the insides of closets and drawers or basements and attics. Arranged on the lawn or driveway, they become available to be inspected or bought by any passing stranger. In many respects, this is an everyday version of "defamiliarization," the same modernist artistic strategy used by Martha Rosler in her garage sales. Presenting something common in an unfamiliar way, the garage sale renders it strange and thus open to new interpretations. At the same time, the objects create what I call "refamiliarization," a process that domesticates spaces like the front lawn that are usually empty and largely symbolic.

## Sellers and Buyers

Both strange and familiar, the domestic setting structures highly personal interactions between buyers and sellers. The motives of both sellers and buyers are extremely varied. Although it would be easier and in many cases more financially remunerative to donate cast-offs to a charitable organization for a tax deduction, sellers often choose to have a garage sale because they want to see where their possessions are going (Herrmann 1997). A man clearing out items from his earlier years said, "it will be fun to see the people who get the things and can actually use

them" (Herrmann 1997: 919). Sellers offer their no-longer-needed possessions for sale for different reasons. As MacMillan and Carver suggest, this can be a significant moment in the passage of lives, such as death, divorce, children leaving home, or moving. But the most common reason is housecleaning, getting rid of unwanted and unneeded possessions, whose accumulation has become a very real problem for millions of middle-class American families (Leu 2012).[5] The proliferation of inexpensive goods from China in recent years has added to domestic inventories. Cleaning usually occurs in regular cycles, accounting for the intensity of sales during the spring season. Others hold garage sales for the revenue, including people who have a pressing need for money as the result of the loss of a job or pressing bills. The number of garage sales increases significantly in times of economic recession and in regions undergoing economic crises. In rural areas, poor people often use sales to supplement the income of marginal occupations. At the far end of the continuum is the perpetual garage sale, held so often that it is necessary to replenish it with new or used merchandise. A largely commercial enterprise, it is more like a domestic store than an occasional event (Herrmann and Soiffer 1984).

Most buyers are looking for bargains, useful or interesting items at low prices. The large cost differential between a new item purchased in a store and a used one bought at a garage sale produces considerable savings for people who want or need to economize, particularly on items like children's clothing and household goods. In some cases this is driven by economic necessity, a helpful survival strategy for low-income households. Others are driven by political or ecological ideologies or cultural styles that reject mainstream consumerism for recycling. Students and other young mobile populations use garage sales as a low-cost method of furnishing temporary households, often reselling their household items at another garage sale before moving again.

Not all bargain hunters shop from necessity; many middle-class and even upper-class people frequent garage sales for entertainment and what one magazine called "the joy of cheap finds," the pleasure of discovering unexpected and, occasionally, valuable items. For some, garage sale shopping is a hobby or even an obsession.[6] Every weekend, Rocky Behr, the owner of the Pasadena shop The Folk Tree, wakes up early to visit garage sales. Her professional eye has located amazing finds, for example a two-dollar pot worth 1,000 dollars, but she acknowledges that "the hunt" itself is what lures her (Behr 2008: 4; Gregson and Crewe 2003). Her purchases are eclectic, whatever catches her eye, but collectors also



haunt garage sales in search of specialized items. Some of these represent highly personal tastes (their own or their friends'). Others are actively engaged in the expanding marketplace of collectibles, where the value of each item has been established by collectibles guides or eBay.

Many sellers and buyers fit traditional gender roles, although this is changing. The fact that an estimated two-thirds of both sellers and buyers are women is not surprising, since both selling and buying are extensions of traditional female domestic roles (Herrmann 1996).[7] Since women manage the household, and often its budget, they also make most of its purchases, becoming experts in the quality, condition, and price of goods to sell or buy. For the seller, cleaning, folding, and arranging of goods for sale is an extension of housework and home decoration. Even sellers interested in profits can be seen as part of the traditional female labor market of part-time employment and supplemental income (Landman 2003). For the buyer, bargain hunting is an extension of household shopping. Much garage sale sociability has female overtones, structured by chatting and informal discussion.

Gender roles identify some categories of shoppers. "Sailers," savvy buyers who frequent garage sales as a hobby, are women. They establish friendships and create social networks with other regular shoppers. "Early birds," the first to show up at sales, are almost always men. Also knowledgeable shoppers, they seek out garage sale finds as professional restorers or resellers. Unlike the sailers, they are all business and drive hard bargains. Younger people, especially couples, less invested in gendered roles, tend to participate together on a more equal basis. In cities like Los Angeles, entire immigrant families often shop together. The children are available to try on clothes, and their English language skills help their parents to bargain and buy.

## The Language of Things

The variability of price and profit makes garage sales one of the few places in our society where bargaining is normal and even expected. According to scholars like Richard Sennett, bargaining shapes our experiences of public life. Sennett (1974) argues that the replacement of bargaining with fixed prices in retail shops in mid-nineteenth-century Paris marked the end of an important form of face-to-face sociability. Instead of an active participant in shopping, the buyer became a passive consumer, transforming public behavior into private contemplation. This, Sennett believed, opened the door for a form of commodity fetishism

that stimulated buyers to invest objects with personal meanings beyond their utility.[8] Following Sennett's logic, the garage sale not only reinstates bargaining but also makes personal meanings an inescapable part of the exchange of goods, investing with significance even the mass-produced products he considers to be inherently devoid of meaning (Sennett 1974).

The sale of garage sale items is qualitatively different from a normal exchange of goods for money, far more laden with meaning beyond the use value of secondhand goods. Used objects come with meanings attached to them in various ways, but during the process of exchange buyers and sellers also construct additional meanings. As anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1984) points out, things have social lives. Through use, personal possessions acquire biographies that transform anonymous and interchangeable commodities into unique items. In addition to physical signs of wear (nicks, stains, or scratches) that evoke the original owner, they also transmit emotional associations or a sense of subtle contagion imbued with the identity of their owner (Herrmann 1997). Each time they change hands, they become "singularized" again (Herrmann 1997: 919; Kopytoff 1984). With their purchases, buyers take away something of the previous owners. In a garage sale, these meanings are specific, attached to a particular individual or household.

Sellers add to these meanings in the conversational exchanges that typically accompany negotiations and sales, passing personal memories and associations along with their goods. Sellers often personalize items by mentioning "these were my daughter's favorite pants" or "I bought this fabric to make curtains but never got around to it." These stories link buyers and sellers by establishing a shared past for the object being sold. Buyers often respond by assuring the sellers that these meanings will be appreciated, and the object treated with care. They may also add to the object's biography by telling the seller what they plan to do with it. Later, buyers may include these meanings in the stories that describe their purchases, adding additional chapters to the items' biographies. Furnishing information can also be a form of bargaining, in which the buyer exchanges the story for a lower price. There are many accounts of sellers lowering prices or giving away goods when offered a personal explanation or appreciation (Selvin 1996).

## Planning For and Against the Garage Sale

Planners have already recognized the usefulness of the sociability generated by garage sales by adopting them as a "community-building" technique, with the goal of increasing "social capital." They organize block, street, or entire neighborhood garage sales with the explicit purpose of connecting neighbors through a common endeavor. Residents share the set-up and advertising expenses, and often a portion of the receipts is devoted to neighborhood projects or local charities (Herrmann 2006a).[9] Some city governments also encourage garage sales to eliminate the amount of solid waste generated by residents (Herrmann 2006b). Planners' positive assessment of the garage sale depends on its frequency. They consider a garage sale held once or twice a year a wholesome event but quickly perceive more frequent sales as "blight," an ominous but elusive term describing a visual condition predictive of urban decline. Most threatening are sales held so regularly that they become off-the-books retail stores, with a garage often used as a warehouse and sales room.



The visual chaos produced by the garage sale furnishes the ostensible reason for many of the planners' objections. In skiing, the term "yard sale" indicates a particularly messy fall, strewing legs, arms, and skis all over the place. In some places this perceived chaos has led to restrictions that limit the number of garage sales to no more than two a year and require city permits. The sponsor of one New Jersey ordinance asserted that such regulations protect the town's aesthetics and keep tacky flea markets out of residential neighborhoods (Chen 1995). The blurring of categories that are supposed to be separate, such as residential and commercial uses, alarms planners and officials, since it undermines the basic principles of land use and real estate. Even garage sale enthusiasts often draw a line between sales organized to eliminate excess possessions and those for serious commerce.

But these more permanent sales are not without redemptive social and economic aspects (figure 1.2). For example, artist Leda Ramos's MFA thesis described her mother's garage store in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Echo Park. After exhausting all of her used garage sale items, her mother, a native of El Salvador, started buying wholesale clothing in the downtown garment district and reselling it to other Salvadorian women from her garage. Her "store" offered credit, transactions in Spanish, and interaction with other women, and became an important social space in the neighborhood (Ramos 1993). Not too far away, another local woman held regular garage sales in her tiny front yard to augment her income. She kept a permanent accumulation of used clothing in her house, welcoming anyone who knew her, including garage sale regulars, to stop by, look, and buy at any time. Familiar with her ongoing

**Figure 1.2**
Garage store in Hollywood, California. Photo credit: Margaret Crawford.

sale, neighbors, friends, and acquaintances would donate their old clothes to her to sell. She specialized in children's clothing, a useful product in a poor but populous neighborhood.

If the one-time garage sale offers a kind of temporary heterotopia, the permanent garage sale serves as a bottom-up challenge to the functional segregation that characterizes American suburbs and cities. By bringing commercial activities into the domestic environment, garage sales break down the rigid barriers between the home and the neighborhood. These illegal sale variants often make imaginative use of the single-family house, showing that the concept of "mixed use" is not the sole property of the architects and urban designers who have popularized it. Professionally designed mixed-use buildings for middle-class users, ground-floor retail with apartments above or live/work lofts with space for studios or offices, are expensive and require zoning and code changes. In comparison, the garage sale store costs almost nothing and offers extremely flexible spaces (Bowden 2009; International Council of Shopping Centers 2006). Such small-scale informal businesses offer an easier and potentially more creative way of introducing new and mixed uses into neighborhoods without vacant land, new construction, or high-



income buyers. As suburbs densify, legalizing garage stores and businesses could provide a flexible way to transform the stock of single-family houses and add complexity and opportunity to single-use residential neighborhoods. In a volatile real estate market, they offer residents in danger of foreclosure part-time opportunities to supplement incomes, opportunities particularly adaptable to women's household roles (Bawden Davis 1998; Curtiss 1992).

This analysis suggests that planners need to rethink their attitudes toward garage sales and other informal practices. Rather than seeing them as a problem of order to be controlled with regulation, they might regard them as positive additions to the planner's toolkit. Produced by collective wisdom, the dynamics of the garage sales, once recognized and understood, has the potential to improve and expand, in both functional and symbolic ways, ordinary urban and suburban spaces.

## Notes

1. This is Gretchen Herrmann's estimate, made in 1984.

2. A small but recognized category of garage sellers, called "squatters," conduct sales in highly trafficked areas not on their own property (Wikipedia 2010).

3. This chapter is indebted to the pioneering work of anthropologist Gretchen M. Herrmann, the only serious scholar of garage sales. In a series of articles she has analyzed and theorized the garage sale from a remarkable range of different perspectives. In particular, see Herrmann (1997).

4. A recent development has been the "stoop sale" held in denser urban neighborhoods such as Manhattan and Brooklyn, often by young people who grew up with garage sales in the suburbs (New York Times 2009).

5. A multiyear ethnographic study of 32 middle-class families in Los Angeles revealed that controlling excessive clutter had become a serious problem in many households (Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2013).

6. Every observer of garage sales has drawn attention to the surprising numbers of regular shoppers or "intensive participation" buyers. One even characterized the sales as potentially addictive in nature (Olmsted 1991).

7. Herrmann (1996) estimates that two-thirds of both sellers and buyers are women, a figure backed up by my own fieldwork.

8. This understanding of commodity fetishism is somewhat different from Marx's use of it to describe the worker's alienation from the product of his labor.

9. Herrmann describes "planned" sales in Ithaca, New York, organized by non-profit community organizations. I encountered several of these in 2004 in low-income neighborhoods in Boston. See also Dylla (1987).

## References


Bawden Davis, Julie. 1998. "Cash In Your Clutter." *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, K1.

Behr, Rocky. 2008. "This and That." *Las Noticias* 89:4.

Bowden, Marilyn. 2009. "Live Work Condos Offer Dual-Purpose Space." *MSN Real Estate*. http://realestate.msn.com/article.aspx?cp-documentid=13108477 (retrieved July 14, 2012).

California State Board of Equalization. 2010. "Operators of Swap Meets, Flea Markets, or Special Events." Publication 111, California State Board of Equalization. http://www.boe.ca.gov/formspubs/pub111/.

Chen, David W. 1995. "The Garage Sale: Loud and Tacky, or Suburban Imperative?" *New York Times*, September 3, NY Region.

Crawford, Margaret. 1994. "Mi casa es su casa: The Politics of Everyday Life in East Los Angeles." *Assemblage* 24:12–19.

Curtiss, Aaron. 1992. "Ubiquitous Garage Sales—Big Business, Big Problem." *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, A1.

DeCaro, Frank. 2000. "The Mt. Everest of Yard Sales." *New York Times*, August 31, D1.

Dylla, Doug. 1987. "Collective Bargaining: How to Organize a Neighborhood Yard Sale." *Grapevine* (Ithaca, NY), August 13, 9.

Gregson, Nicky, and Louise Crewe. 2003. *Second-hand Cultures*. New York: Berg.

Herrmann, Gretchen M. 1996. "Women's Exchange in the U.S. Garage Sale." *Gender and Society* 10:703–728.

Herrmann, Gretchen M. 1997. "Gift or Commodity: What Changes Hands in the U.S. Garage Sale?" *American Ethnologist* 24 (4):910–930.

Herrmann, Gretchen M. 2006a. "Garage Sales Make Good Neighbors: Building Community through Neighborhood Sales." *Human Organization* 65 (2):181–191.

Herrmann, Gretchen M. 2006b. "Special Money: Ithaca Hours and Garage Sales." *Ethnology* 45 (2):125–141.

Herrmann, Gretchen M., and Stephen M. Soiffer. 1984. "For Fun and Profit: An Analysis of the American Garage Sale." *Urban Life* 12 (4):397–421.

International Council of Shopping Centers. 2006. "What Exactly Is Mixed-Use?" International Council of Shopping Centers, New York. http://www.brokersedgeonline.com/uploads/Mixed_use_Development_Definition.pdf.

Kopytoff, Igor. 1984. "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process." In Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things*, 64–91. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Landman, Ruth H. 2003. "Washington's Yard Sales: Women's Work, but Not for the Money." *City and Society* 15 (1):45–49.





Leu, Melissa. 2012. "Clutter and Other Family Problems of the 21st Century." *Los Angeles Times*, July 20.

Mauss, Marcel. 1925. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: Norton.

New York Times. 2009. "In a Recession, There's Still Sidewalk Chic." *New York Times*, May 17, D6.

Ochs, Elinor, and Tamar Kremer-Sadlik, eds. 2013. *Fast-Forward Family: Home, Work and Relationships in Middle-Class America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Olmsted, A. D. 1991. "Collecting: Leisure, Investment or Obsession?" *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 6:287–290.

O'Reilly, Lynn, Margaret Rucker, R. Flint Hughes, Marge Gorang, and Suzanne Hand. 1984. "The Relationship of Psychological and Situational Variables to Usage of a Second-Order Marketing System." *Academy of Marketing Science* 12 (3):53–76.

Ramos, Leda M. 1993. "In La Garage." MFA thesis, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1993.

Rosler, Martha. 1999. "Traveling Garage Sale." In *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Rosler, Martha. 2002. "Artist Questionnaire: 21 Responses." *October* 100:12.

Sahlins, Marshall. 1972. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In Marshall Sahlins, ed., *Stone Age Economics*, 185–276. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Selvin, Molly. 1996. "Saying Goodbye to the Stuff of which Memories Are Made." *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, B1.

Sennett, Richard. 1974. *The Fall of Public Man*. New York: Knopf.

Wikipedia. 2010. "Garage Sales." Wikimedia Foundation Inc., December 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garage_sale (retrieved September 5, 2011).


## Interviews


Kaliski, John, May 2010.