

North of the [Border: Conflict] Within American Cities

Teddy Cruz and his firm Estudio Teddy Cruz have been working along the Mexican border for many years in an attempt to counteract what he views as a trend in new urbanism, the neglect of socio cultural factors. He believes new urbanism only addresses aesthetics, by creating a fake façade of difference without considering the lifestyle of the community. The work of Cruz along the border is currently exclusive to a tangible, national boundary. However, circumstances surrounding and inspiring his work are present in American cities everywhere. Immigrants within our own cities live behind borders of cultural, social and political differences and misunderstandings. Immigration, particularly increasing waves from Latin America have had a major impact on the urbanism of American cities for decades now. The problematic nature of the border phenomenon Cruz attempts to improve in his work applies to a Latin American immigrant population that is increasingly populating other American cities and transforming urban fabric in a ‘grassroots’ type urbanism. Essentially, immigrants are increasingly populating American cities and experiencing problematic situations in which their culture, beliefs and social systems do not adhere to existing neighborhoods, cities, architecture and socio cultural systems. This situation doesn’t present itself as a temporary situation and solutions need to be created in order to find a balance between an emerging immigrant presence throughout American cities and established traditions and cultures. In light of this, is culturally specific architecture meaningful and appropriate in a non-native setting?

According to Teddy Cruz in his *Border Chronicles* of a Vertical Studio at SCI-Arc, he contends that the challenge in architecture has shifted from acts of resistance to notions of hybridization and negotiation. Thus, he notes the necessity to reencounter the city as a physical territory, a journey and a set of experimental episodes with multiple readings. In order to map a city’s multidimensionality, Cruz recommends that one needs to keep an open mind in order to absorb the city’s different narratives and identities. Thus, a city has an identity characterized by multiple stories. To translate these stories

into the identity of a city, one must be able to successfully interpret places and situations. However, Cruz goes on to note that a city is also a living organism, always in tension and transformation as identity itself. Thus, one should not control the perception of a city through a narrative, but rather reveal it, discover it and activate it. This premise is carried throughout his studio at SCI –Arc.

If cities are to be composed of different narratives and identities which in turn become equatable to a living organism, one must question what the components are that constitute an organism. In the case of a city, if these components are to be classified in terms of people and architecture, questions start to arise. Whose history informs these narratives? Whose neighborhood gives a city an identity? As Susan Shearer asks in her article *Latinos In Historic Districts*, “Should neighborhoods and cities evolve and change to reflect the continuum of history and the people who inhabit them?”

Evolution and change are already occurring in American cities. According to Mike Davis in his book *Magical Urbanism*, in 1996, Latinos surpassed African-Americans as the second largest ethno-racial group in New York City. From the mid twentieth century to present, Latino immigration has had both an economic and social impact on cities such as Philadelphia, Miami, Atlanta and Minneapolis. Between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population in Minnesota nearly tripled. In Minneapolis alone, the population expanded from 7900 people to over 30,000. According to the University of Georgia’s Selig Center for Economic Growth, the Hispanic buying power in Minnesota grew more than 500 percent between 1990 and 2003 to 3.1 billion. According to Teddy Cruz, as these populations travel north in search of new opportunities, they inevitably alter and transform the fabric of certain neighborhoods. Furthermore, Cruz notes the tendency of the sociocultural attitudes and sensibilities of the immigrants to affect the use of domestic and public space as well as the natural landscape.

In 2003, a project in San Marcos, CA called Paseo del Oro received the HUD Secretary’s Opportunity and Empowerment award. According to James Andrews, the associate editor of *Planning*, this mixed-income housing and commercial development replaced a dilapidated shopping center in a neighborhood that needed retail services and a city that needed housing for families of modest income. The neighborhood population that was predominantly Hispanic also had a 38% foreign born population. The project

encompasses six acres, containing 23,000 sq feet of retail space and 120 apartments of which 98 were rented at affordable rates. Keeping the nature of the local Hispanic population in mind, the development team created a design that centered around a pedestrian paseo that linked stores, townhouses and apartment buildings throughout the project. A tortilla factory and traditional Latino bakery were among the retail components included in the design. In 2000, the Mission Road Revitalization in which the project is located had a poverty rate of 12.5%. Housing was dilapidated and rampant with vacancy and the old strip commercial center was severely blighted and run down, plagued by criminal and drug activity. Currently, the cost of city services is down in the area, the crime rate has fallen and a waiting list bears the name of hundreds of families who want to move to Paseo del Oro.

According to Tina Bucuvalas in her article, *The Cubanization of Miami's Cultural Heritage*, the demographic balance has shifted radically in Miami during the last 40 years due to an unprecedented influx of immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America. Between 1959 and 1980, over 650,000 Cubans fled to exile in Miami. In 1980, hundreds of thousands of Haitians, Nicaraguans, Jamaicans, Columbians, and others from Caribbean and Latin American nations streamed into the area. A 1990 census revealed that 49% of Dade County was Hispanic. According to Bucuvalas, Miami was a small, relaxed resort city with a blend of residents primarily from the Northeast, South and the Midwest 40 years ago. Today, it has been transformed into one of the most cosmopolitan and multilingual cities in the hemisphere. With a Spanish speaking majority, Miami is often characterized as one of the most influential Latin American cities in Dade County. Bucuvalas notes that today, Latinos have established new homes and businesses, and in doing so, they created powerful commercial institutions with links to Latin American and Caribbean countries. Even though they are integrated into the American economic mainstream now, many have not abandoned the traditions that make their folk life unique. Many elements of Latin American architectural construction, material, styles and environments are now common in Miami. Moreover, a wide variety of other traditional cultural elements are integrated into Latino districts.

This 'Latino Invasion', coined by Anna Holtzman in her article in *Architecture* during March of 2004, is starting to gain recognition. Efforts made by immigrants to appropriate space and preserve cultural heritage is being studied and formulated into academic theory known as Latino New Urbanism. Proponents of LNU note that tendencies fundamental to the movement are quite similar to that of New Urbanism. However, Latino New Urbanism tends to capitalize on Latino's propensity for compact living, active occupation of public space, multigenerational households, integrating health agendas(local clinics), displaying cultural heritage(murals), use of communal transportation nodes and gregarious/communitarian use of interstitial space deemed unusable by American jurisdictions. As in New Urbanism, LNU values the presence of pedestrian-oriented downtowns and town center oriented public space.

Critics of Latino New Urbanism contend that it reflects cultural stereotypes rather than the complexity of the Latino community. Opponents say that the substantial diversity comprising the Latino Demographic is too vast. Mexicans, Brazilians, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans can all be classified as poor, rich, immigrant or native. Thus, critics note the difficulty in trying to recognize this abundance of complexity. Some go so far as to say there is no formal relationship between any single ethnic bloc and urban form. Stephanos Polyzoides, a cofounder of the Congress for New Urbanism, defines Latino appropriation of urban space as a struggle of dirt poor, underprivileged, hardworking, family-based group of people trying to survive in the margins of an American neighborhood. He notes that Latinos live where they do because they have no choice. Another notable New Urbanist, Andres Duany, supports this notion as well. Duany states that it is virtuous and ecologically wonderful that Latinos high densities and use public transportation, but they can't help it.

The emphasis in LNU is not to romanticize the barrio though. It is fundamental to the movement to identify positive characteristics of Latino neighborhoods that can be used to fuel future development. In doing so, design will try to aim toward more sustainable approaches that better reflect the Latino culture. The core element of LNU is family formation and the cultural dynamics that play a role in the development of community. According to Elizabeth Lunday in her article *Ethni-City*, these cultural

preferences will result in a dense, urban fabric with an active street life and diversity in human activity and patterns of interaction.

It seems that whether culturally specific architecture's appropriateness in a non-native setting is actually being determined rather than contemplated in American cities. As in Miami, the presence of a migrant population and culture is so strong that urban design and architecture are now characterized by their Latin American Influence. Academic circles are now studying the effects of the 'grassroots' type urbanism that is slowly transforming the nature of neighborhood and city design in many notable cities. Neighborhood revitalization and economic stimulation are bi-products of culturally specific design and influence as seen in San Marcos, California. A more appropriate question in contemporary society would address how to find a sensible balance between existing and migrant cultural needs and beliefs. Therefore, the question would not be whether or not culturally specific architecture is appropriate, but rather how to mitigate conflict and eliminate borders in attempt to foster what Teddy Cruz describes in the city as a living organism.

Carlos Fuentes, a famous Latin American literary historian is quoted in Teddy Cruz's *Border Chronicles* regarding the nature of what he deems a Utopian city. To Fuentes, this would be a place of connections, not of separations; of readings, not of categorizations. According to Fuentes,

One does not ask for generic affiliations but for a dialogue, not for one language but for many languages at odds with one another, not for unity of style but for heteroglossia, not for monologic but for dialogic imagination. A cultural space which cares little about formal classifications, but much about vitality and connection, for culture itself perishes in purity and isolation.

Essentially, the United States was founded as a nation of immigrants that appropriated space in complete neglect of an established culture. Since then, newer immigrant populations have essentially adapted to an established culture and history in a much more respectful manner and continue to do so. Therefore, culturally specific architecture is meaningful and appropriate in a non-native setting and will continue to be in the U.S. throughout time. Culture clearly affects urban form and it always has. It seems natural to create culturally specific architecture. People simply aren't going to be happy in space

they have no connection to. America was constructed in a manner that was specific to cultural traditions settlers brought from thousands of miles away. Throughout history, the Irish came and changed Boston, the Norwegians shaped Minneapolis and the Chinese created an impact in San Francisco. Culturally specific architecture is being created in non-native settings, it always has been and it always will be.

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