

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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Mi Casa: Snapshots of Life in an Other L.A.

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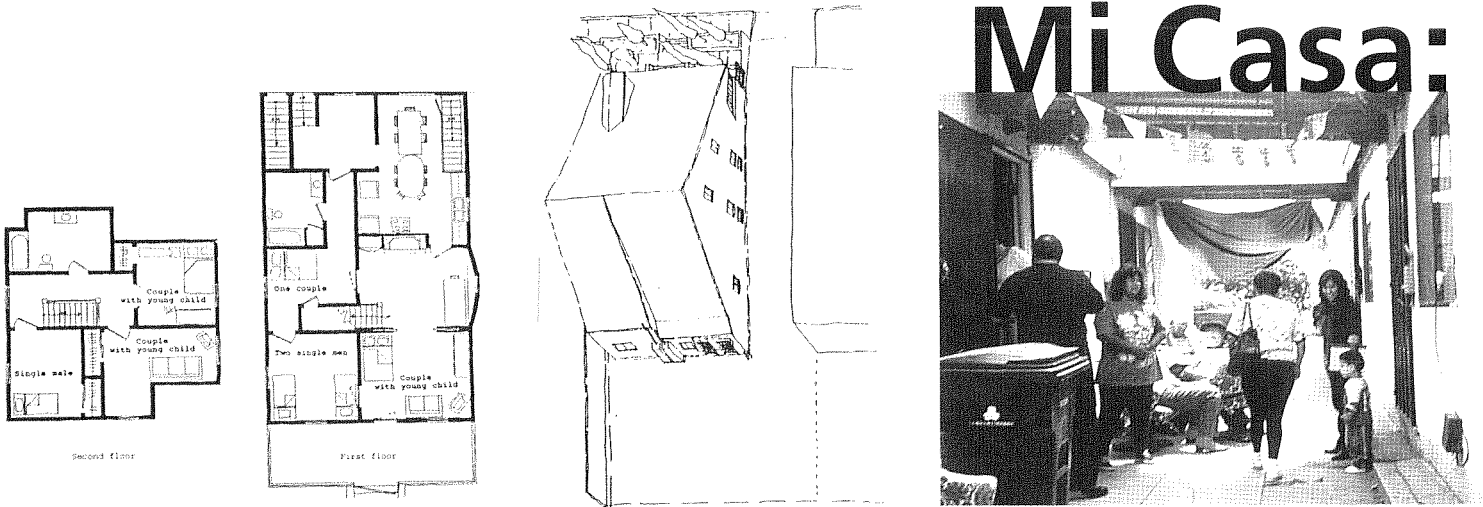
### Author

Gamez, Jose Luis

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Plans and rendering: The house occupied by several immigrant families from Puebla. Photos: A range of activities that occur in the space of the driveway. Courtesy José Luis Gámez.

Moving east from downtown across the Los Angeles River, one encounters a Latino “second city” whose residents share a “more ‘classical’ way of living in the city based on gregarious, communitarian uses of markets, boulevards [and] parks.”<sup>1</sup> East Side communities like Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles have served as centers of Mexican and Mexican-American social life in Southern California since the early 1900s. Today, the presence of successive generations of Mexican descendents and the influence of continued immigration have helped to shape and tailor the urban landscape to reflect the cultural preferences of these groups. Here, public spaces like streets, sidewalks, yards and parking lots bristle with activity — in contrast to the almost nonexistent and often regulated public life of many West Side communities.

But while these areas have developed into established working-class neighborhoods, many Latino newcomers still struggle to find a place for themselves in Los Angeles. Often they can only find low-wage work, or jobs in the informal economy, leaving them with little money. Moreover, their regional, ideological and cultural backgrounds often differ from those of previous gener-

ations. They are more likely to come from beyond northern Mexico, even from Central or South America; more likely to identify with their pre-Columbian, rather than Spanish, heritage; but less tied to the politics of the capitalist, corporate state. Lacking the financial resources and the extensive social and spatial networks available to more established immigrant and resident groups, these newer immigrant groups find their access to the city limited in many ways. They are forced to appropriate and reconfigure space through social action rather than physical construction.

In one case, several immigrant households from Puebla, Mexico, have transformed the space of a single-family house into multiple social settings. The three-level building (a two-story house with a basement), once divided into two apartments, is now home to eight households. Bedrooms and living rooms, which once served specific functions, now constitute the entire private space for a household, while kitchen areas serve as shared public spaces for all the residents. Entry is now through the rear of the house, as the original front door leads to a space (the former living room) that is now occupied by an individual household.

# Snapshots of Life in an Other L.A.



As each room has become a home unto itself, the house's parking area has taken on multiple functions with varying degrees of publicness and privateness. Here, the men of the house unwind after work, sometimes operating an informal auto repair yard, and children play. On occasion, the parking area serves as a festival site, a location for *pueblo* parties and wedding festivities, making it seem as if the *zocalo* has immigrated as well. The residents have established an insurgent public realm in what might otherwise be regarded simply as a domestic space.

As immigrants with few resources or services at their disposal, these residents remain within a loop centered more on Puebla than on Los Angeles. They rarely utilize the public spaces of the city; their most traversed paths are those leading to places of employment or shopping. This is due, in part, to economic constraints (eating out or going to a club is out of the question) and, in part, to a lack of connection to the social life of East Los Angeles. Since this group constitutes a new "family" of immigrants, its social ties are contained, for the most part, within the walls of the house. Ties that reach beyond the house generally lead back to Mexico; these families socialize pri-

marily with others from the Puebla region in insurgent public realms like the parking area of the house.

This place, therefore, resembles a point in what Roger Rouse calls a "transnational migrant circuit," a social network linking this house, several similar places around Los Angeles and the Puebla region, which have become so closely interconnected that "they have come to constitute a single community spread across a variety of sites."<sup>2</sup>

Many factors contribute to these households' social situation — including low-wage work, narrowly defined legal notions of citizenship that force people to occupy spaces provisionally, and limited access to existing social resources. Yet they have not been rendered powerless; with these adaptive spatial tactics, they have begun to mitigate the oppressive circumstances of their daily lives.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, they have reprogrammed the rationalized, modern, single-use approach to space with activities tied to specific times, histories and cultures.

## Notes

1. Mike Davis, "Chinatown Revisited? The Internationalization of Downtown Los Angeles," in David Reid, ed., *Sex, Death and God in L.A.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 36.
2. James Rojas, "The Enacted Environment: The Creation of Place by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in East Los Angeles," Masters Thesis, Department of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991.
3. Roger Rouse, "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism," *Diaspora* 1:1 (Spring 1991), 8-23.
4. Michael deCerteau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).