

CHAPTER ONE

Cultural Factors Shaping Housing at the U.S.-Mexico Border



Any brief overview of the demographic and economic forces propelling growth in the U.S.-Mexico border region around the city of Tecate reveals that this is a region that is under tremendous pressure of change. The editor of *El Bordo*, *Retos de Frontera*, a website where numerous scholarly articles are presented by academics and investigators, (Ungerleider Kepler, undated), describes the rationale for this effort as follows: “*Creemos que existe una gran necesidad, aquí en la frontera norte de nuestra nación, de estudios y trabajos serios de investigación que puedan esclarecer y/o cuestionar la compleja realidad socio-económica y política que estamos viviendo. Por tanto, lo que pretendemos es fomentar la discusión, el debate y el diálogo en torno a los problemas que nos conciernen como académicos y fronterizos.*” (We believe that a major necessity exists, here on the northern border of our nation, for studies and serious works of investigation that are able to clarify and/or question the complete socio-economic and political reality [in which] we are living. Certainly, what we propose is to foment discussion, debate, and dialogue regarding the problems that concern us as academics and inhabitants of the border).

There are implications of these changes for the quality of housing and the quality of life enjoyed by residents in the U.S.-Mexico border and a window of opportunity to set in place regulation, guidelines, incentives and assistance to protect what a city such as Tecate enjoys currently. There are additional forces related to culture, identity, a sense of belonging, and ownership as well as security which also have great implication for the kind of housing individuals, families and communities chose to live in and build. Some of these are explored here with a view to determining their importance and implications in building sustainable housing.



Figure 3: Community Stakeholders of El Rincon - Needing Sustainable Housing

Figure 4: El Rincon Children Walk to School on an unpaved road by the Tecate River

Figure 5: Women of El Rincon Discuss Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs

IDENTITY

The cultural identity of the Mexicans continues to be discussed some 500 years after the Spanish conquest. The question is very much alive in the border region, where most of the population arrived as recently as the 1950s. This is particularly true of the population in the western states of Baja California, Sonora and Chihuahua. Local culture and traditions in this region consist largely of a mix of several cultures brought by the new immigrants to this region. The result is often in contradiction to the rest of Mexico's accepted, traditional culture. Nonetheless, as Maria Socorro Tabuenca, a writer from Ciudad Juárez, states, even when "Mexicans embody multiple

identities—individual, regional, and national ones [...] that does not make them less Mexican." (Ruiz 1998, p. 101). Specifically in the border area, the mix of cultures is a phenomenon which is intensified both by the proximity of this region to the United States and the great distance of the region from the country's 'historic cultural core'—Mexico City. In the border region, "Mexicans interact with another's way of life and, sooner or later, invariably adopt aspects of its values and aspirations" (Ruiz, 1998, p. 104). This factor is reinforced by the fact that most migrant newcomers bring with them the a desire to improve their lives and this is sometimes interpreted as needing to leave behind everything they

are and believe in, and adopting and adhering to a foreign culture and lifestyle.

For most residents of the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border region, particularly those who have spent a continuous period of time in the border region, their new communities provide them with new tight social interactions which are a source of economic and social support. "In many ways, border communities feel closer to their cross-border neighbors than to Washington or Mexico City, or even to their state capitals." (Hernández 1992). This sense of belonging, even when for some their time in the border region is temporary, has conferred a specific regional identity to these communities. It is one where people feel bound together as they face problems and share aspirations and achievements.

NORTHERN CULTURE

For the Mexican population in general people in the western states of the country are perceived as "raw" and there is a prejudiced perception that they lack in cultural and intellectual capacity. This prejudice applies even more strongly to the U.S.-Mexico border cities, which central Mexicans are reputed to describe as a place with nothing to see and nothing to do.

"All you have in Ciudad Juárez, —a person from Central Mexico tells a native of that city— is El Paso. Chilangos, Mexicans from Mexico City, talk of the tijuano, the cultural shock that meets them upon arriving in Tijuana, a city so at variance with others in the republic" (Ruiz, 1998, p. 101). Given that Tijuana was some time ago known as the "sin city" of California, and is now crowded with a migrant population from a wide array of cultural backgrounds, some temporarily in the city trying to cross the border into the United States, others trying to find a job in the maquiladoras, it is no surprise that a unique culture has arisen in the city, one that is reflective of the U.S.-Mexico border region. It is a common perception of people who live in distant places in the Mexican republic, and even for some citizens of Baja California, the state in which Tijuana is located, that Tijuana is a different place, one they don't identify with.

"...the way of life on the border compared to lifestyles in other parts of the republic is a world apart. True, proponents of this view admit that the most learned did not migrate north; rather, it was the restless and audacious, eager to strike out on their own. As one local writer explains, border society amalgamates cultural roots carried by migrants from all over the republic. The northern way of life evolved on the margins of the cultural imperialism of "Tenochtitlán," mother of Mexico City snobism, imitating neither the Yankee model nor others. The configuration of northern society rests on the integration of and receptivity to Mexican regional variations, modified by daily contact with a neighboring country." (Ruiz, 1998, p. 102).

It is useful to analyze this perception considering that Tijuana is growing continuously in the direction of the city of Tecate. This is not only a physical reality but also, possibly, a social and cultural reality. If culture is defined as the sum of activities and behaviors which characterize a group or organization, then border culture does exist, but it is indeed at variance with the general culture of Mexico further to the south. It might be described as an "in-between" culture of recent formation. People from the border regions are seen as "Americanized" Mexicans. They are blamed for carrying on a foreign way of thinking, an American way of living, which tends to be more individualized and less focused on social issues, and which goes opposite to the ideals of the rest of the country. "Precisely because of that, for a majority of Mexicans the defense of the national culture starts at the border" (Ruiz, 1998, p. 101).

In contrast, the perception of the locals, who are long-standing residents of the border region, is that "southerners, the recently arrived, are the most prone to fall in love with American consumerism" (Ruiz, 1998, p. 102). The population in the border communities which have been settled for a longer time are characterized as modern, hard working and willing to take greater risks than other Mexicans. "They are more ambitious and believe that hard work and frugality pay off" (Ruiz, 1998, p. 102). Mexicans have an

attraction for the northern border of the country.

Years ago it was because of, and for, tourism. Now it is because of the potential for work and an increased income, especially through work in the maquiladoras.

MAQUILADORAS AND THE TRANSITIONAL DWELLING

In Mexico the manufacturing industry for export production, also known as maquiladoras or la maquila, has been perceived to be highly profitable. It has been seen as conferring great economic growth and benefit for the communities where it locates. International companies have selected border towns to establish their industries due to the advantages of location near the border with the U.S. which significantly reduces transportation, communication and installation costs, and for other incentives provided for industries by the Mexican government. But even when maquiladoras bring many advantages, especially in regions where no other option for economic development seem to be available, their economic success is sustained as a result of salary scales that hardly surpass the legal minimum wage. This is revealed in economic indicators for border cities like Tijuana which reveal relatively high poverty levels and precariousness or insecurity which do not correspond to and are at odds with the higher level of economic activity and industrial development in the region (Canales, 1999). While Tijuana has one of the most active and dynamic economies in the country, this is not reflected in the quality of life enjoyed by the majority of its population.

According to Ruiz Vargas and Aceves Calderón, “even though (Tijuana) was characterized as a zone of opportunities and the required access point towards the American dream”, nowadays it “presents poverty indices lower than those of other large cities in the country, inequity and social decline have begun to transform its urban physiognomy, especially in the last two decades”. In spite of this, Tijuana is still an attractive magnet for Mexicans of the south who migrate to Tijuana and other similar border cities, looking to improve their lives, at least economically. This attraction has had an impact not just on the city but on the surrounding region too.

This impact and effect is noticeable in Tecate where we perceive a greater marginality than expected relative to the size of the town. Though the presence of “misery belts” as they have been described in the literature is a recurrent phenomenon in proximity to the large cities in Mexico, it is not so observable in smaller towns, where a more sustainable development is obtained almost organically due to the relatively slower, more natural scale of growth. Similar “misery belts” surround other maquila-towns along the border, such as Mexicali, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, etc; to the point that it has been suggested that maquila industries require this type of development in order to sustain themselves. In their essay, *Pobreza y Desigualdad Social en Tijuana*, Ruiz Vargas and Aceves Calderón state four factors which, from their perspective, contribute to generating situations of poverty and inequity in this region:

1. Income levels and their relationship with labor, inflationary levels and cost of living.
2. Income distribution which demonstrates an inequity in the concentration of wealth.
3. Quality and form (construction) of dwellings and infrastructure problems.
4. The presence of human settlements in risk zones and natural hazards due to an unplanned and exclusionary urban growth, which usually coincides with low-income populations.

These factors, especially the third and fourth, are present in most border cities and are ones that planners and architects are increasingly attentive to in the Southwest region of the U.S. (Teddy Cruz, 2006, Gidwitz, 2006, Necessity Housing, 2006). Some border cities do not have a comprehensive plan for development, and, when they do, the implementation is not supported, or falls behind the impact and consequences of accelerated demographic growth. A decisive factor is also the perception of the inhabitants as well as of the authorities that these settlements are only temporary habitation. Settlements along the border are supposed to be transitory and are treated as such,

even when the length of stay in them becomes extended as a consequence of particular circumstances. This is one of the reasons why such settlements are poorly constructed, their level of maintenance is low, and minimum living conditions are hardly attained.

The literature indicates that the migrants think of their “real” home as the one that was left behind and think of the dwellings in the border city merely as transitional lodging—its sole function being to satisfy the basic need of protection from the environment. Often the maquiladoras provide basic services such as showers to keep their workers content and healthy. This has the effect of developing worker dependency on the work place for meeting basic services. It ties the worker to the place of employment and acts as a deterrent to workers making improvements to their dwellings.

In terms of architectural identity, migrants are portrayed in the literature as longing for the home left behind, dreaming of going back, sure that real life is waiting back home. Even though that usually does not happen, this sensibility can be perceived to be reflected in their mode of housing construction. Over the period that migrants establish a new life in the border, changes in their housing, observed through time, might be construed to reflect their changing sensibility to place. Starting with housing constructed of cardboard which might be improved with the addition of wooden pallets and then a few bricks, the house will consist of one multiuse room. A sheet metal or galvanized iron roof may be added. No glazed windows will yet be in place. Rather, the openings in the walls for a door and window will be covered by pieces of cloth or cardboard. With time, and if legality of tenure and land occupancy is obtained, the construction will evolve to more permanent, better quality materials. Connections to electrical services will be established. Usually water and sewer are the last services to which access is obtained, preceding the construction of paved access alleys and roads.

According to researcher Eloy Méndez (Méndez, 2003) an urbanist from Colegio de Sonora in

Hermosillo, the neighborhoods in these newly formed cities consist of dwellings which are constructed in ways that eliminate people’s sense of belonging to place. This disassociation is expressed in the generic morphology and use of the spaces in these neighborhoods which erase any cultural identity and create an urban fabric which is incapable of affirming itself as a place, and a dwelling dispossessed of the facility to make sense. Méndez asserts that this brief and transient occupation promotes the denial of place. In his paper, whose title in translation is “Physical and social space in the Mexico-USA border region”, Méndez states that the social nature of the migrant living in the border cities promotes the establishment of fragile spaces, rapidly changing signs, polyvalent symbolic identifications, and volatile morphologies. These scenarios are based in local communication codes based on conventions subtracted from their original places. The self-constructed neighborhoods materialize and make tangible the occupant’s possibilities (of activities, aspirations, representations, of being); they are erected as the result of the repetition of a series of activities in the same site, which will continue to be repeated indefinitely. In these terms, the dwelling becomes an anonymous recipient lacking of any significance. Coincidentally, in the interviews that Méndez carried out, he finds that the border residents perceive the regional architecture as temporary, transient, improvised, out of time and place, and without identity.

Méndez later argues that the identity of the house in the border settlements expresses the consciousness of the ephemeral passing. Always present in the memory or the migrant is the closeness to the other country (U.S.) and the place of origin. Even when there is a desire to give a Mexican identity to their dwellings, imported materials and building procedures are clearly incorporated in these structures. This is especially true in Tijuana where the acquisition of pieces of and sometimes even complete dwellings, usually from San Diego, is frequently observed. What has been termed a “filtering” process from north of the U.S.-Mexico border to south of materials, construction types, recycled materials and modules of housing manufactured and

otherwise is apparent. Cruz (2006) states “Two completely different urbanisms expressing two different attitudes toward the city have grown up in reaction to the phenomenon of the border. If San Diego is emblematic of the segregation and control epitomized by the master-planned communities that define its sprawl, Tijuana’s urbanism, evolved as a collection of informal, nomadic settlements or barrios that encroach on San Diego’s periphery.” He notes the Tijuana speculator who travels to San Diego to buy up little bungalows that have been slated for demolition to make space for new condominium projects. The houses are loaded onto trailers and travel to Tijuana. He says, “For days, one can see houses, just like cars and pedestrians, waiting in line to cross the border.”