The Streets of Laredo: Reevaluating the Vernacular Urbanism of Old Nuevo Santander

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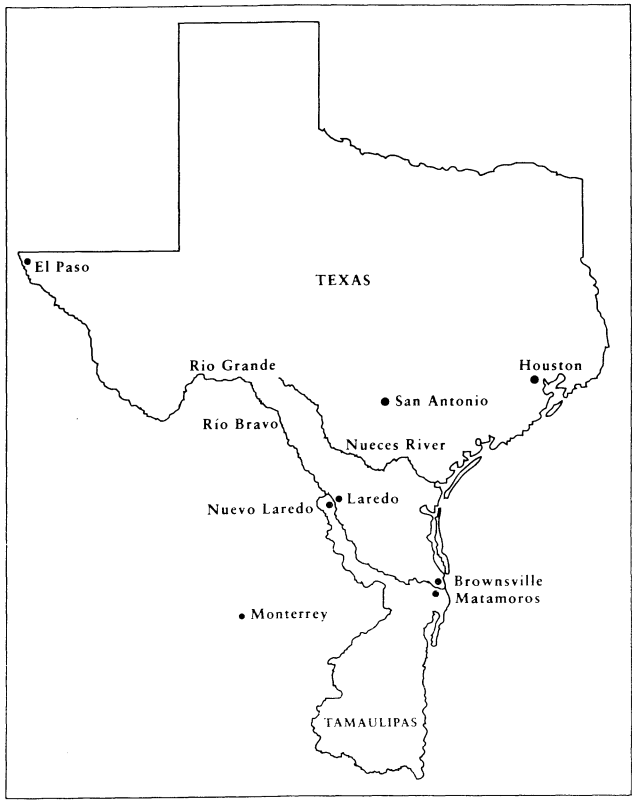
As part of the last Spanish colonization effort in the New World, don José de Escandón, Conde de la Sierra Gorda, coordinated settlement of the Mexican province of Nuevo Santander, which comprised the present Mexican state of Tamaulipas and most of the U.S. state of Texas south of the Nueces River. Of the towns Escandón established in Nuevo Santander in the middle of the 18th century, the five located near the Río Grande (Río Bravo del Norte) ended up on either side of the international border between Mexico and the United States. One of these, Laredo, Texas, is now in the United States. Laredo is defined by its Mexican Creole architecture and urban spatiality. Architecture materially represents community identity in this, the U.S. metropolitan area with the highest percentage of Mexican-American residents.

Between 1749 and 1755 Escandón established twenty towns in the province of Nuevo Santander.[1] These included a string of villages along the Río Grande, the far north edge of settlement: Camargo (1749), Reynosa (1749), Revilla (1750, now called Guerrero Viejo), Mier (1752), and Laredo (1755). In the earliest years of Nuevo Santander, property was held communally by the residents in each settlement. In 1767 a royal commission surveyed town sites and pasturage allotments and distributed titles to private property among settlers. Along the Río Grande, each household received a town lot on which to build a house and a *porción*, a long, narrow, 5,300-acre tract of land with river frontage, on which to raise livestock. This distribution accounts for the predominant regional pattern of Mexican ranchers living in towns and commuting to their rural lands.

Each of the Escandón towns conformed to the town-



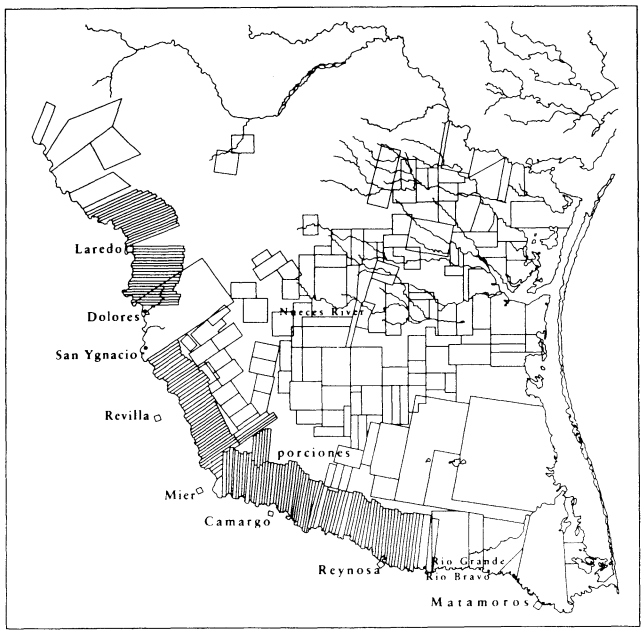


Fig. 1. Map of Texas and Tamaulipas with detail showing the Escandón towns and the *porciones* along the north side of the Río Grande.

planning model encoded in the Laws of the Indies. Each was centered on a plaza set in an armature of square or rectangular blocks.[2] One 19th-century observer, the Abbé Emanuel Henri Dieudonné Domenech, a French missionary priest who served along the Río Grande in the 1850s, commented on the consistency of the towns' plans. He observed of Mier and Camargo, which he visited in 1852:

> Like all Mexican towns, Mier has its square, in which are situated the church and the principal residences; and from it ramify a number of fine wide streets in different directions...Camargo resembles all the towns of these frontiers. Indeed you would say that they were all built on the same plan by the same architect...[3]

An earlier account by Jean Louis Berlandier, a Swiss botanist who served as a scientific member of the Mexican Boundary Commission headed by General Manuel Mier y Terán between 1827 and 1828, identified the characteristics of the isolated towns of the lower Río Grande in the period between Mexico's independence from Spain (when many names of towns and plazas were changed to memorialize the independence heroes) and the U.S. annexation of the area. Particularly interesting are his observations about their urban layouts:

> Villa de San Agustín de Laredo...was founded on the left (north) bank of the Río Bravo del Norte (Río Grande)...and belongs to the state of Tamaulipas. Its streets are quite wide and have the symmetry which the conquerors have observed in the New World...The houses are not at all remarkable; the majority are thatch-covered huts called *jacales*. They are evenly distributed in blocks of one hundred square *varas*. The presidio offers two plazas without verdure, for the Spaniards rarely think to plant trees.
>
> The city of Revilla, today called Ciudad Guerrero...is situated about two leagues to the west of the Río Bravo, on the northern bank of the Río Salado...The buildings all have one story and are topped by flat roofs. Most are built of clayey limestone, while some are built of sandstone. Their exteriors are clean and well white-washed.
>
> Mier, also called El Cántaro because of its topographical position, is a small *villa* ...The houses are well constructed of sandstone. Most have flat roofs and proclaim a certain ease. The streets are not very well aligned. That *villa* is not dreary.
>
> Villa de Camargo...was founded on the fifth of May 1749...The streets are not very regular, and fewer constructions of stone are to be observed than in the other towns on the banks of the Río Bravo. Several are built of...adobe...[Camargo] has a mission charged with the conversion of the indigenes, but no church nor public edifice. The buildings are much inferior to those of Mier and [Guerrero].[4]

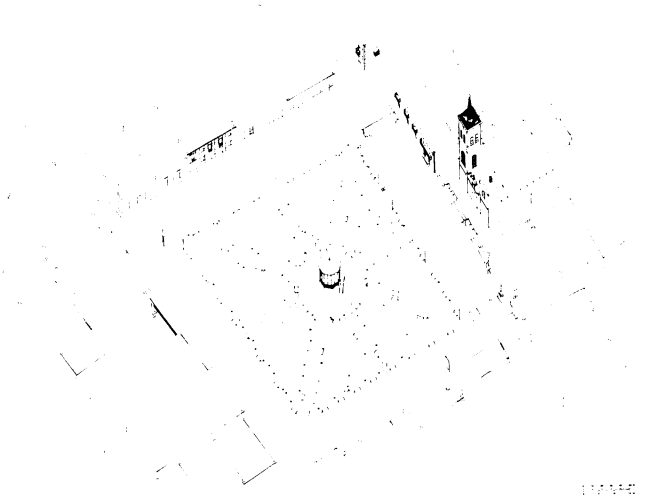


Fig. 2. Ciudad Mier, Tamaulipas: Plaza Juárez. 1995

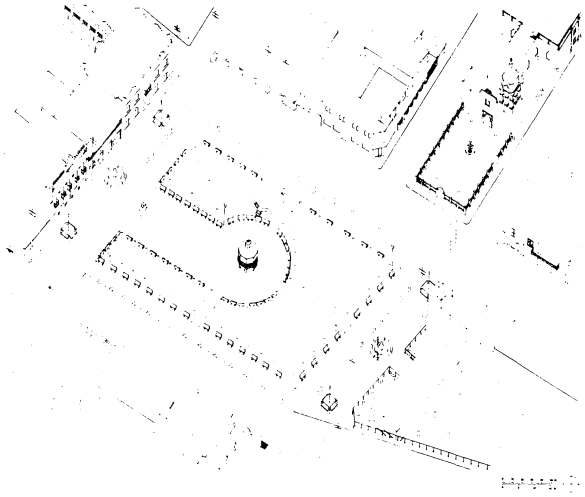


Fig. 3. Camargo, Tamaulipas: Plaza Hidalgo. 1995

In addition to the five Escandón towns, a sixth town was founded in 1784 by ranchers from Camargo and Reynosa seeking larger tracts of grazing land. This town, named Matamoros in 1821, lay 25 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico. Because of its proximity to the Gulf, Matamoros became a port city in the 1810s. In the 1820s it rapidly outgrew the older upriver settlements. The town plan of Matamoros, laid out in 1814, conformed to the Laws of the Indies model.[5] The Abbé Domenech wrote of Matamoros in the early 1850s:

> [The Plaza-Major of Matamoros] is a perfect square, embellished with a garden in the center, and encompassed with a double range of large Chinese lilacs forming a pleasing promenade. The western [sic; eastern] side of this square is formed by the church, a modern edifice, vast in its proportions, but representing nothing remarkable in structure. Opposite the church are the buildings and offices of the *Ayuntamiento* [the city government]. The houses, like those of the

other two sides of the square, are simple in their architecture, of red brick, two stories high, and furnished with an iron balcony. The roofs are flat, forming a terrace which serves as a place for drying clothes [rather] than for family gathering. Behind the houses are gardens more or less extensive...The streets are wide and at right angles...[6]

Despite growth and change, the towns still resemble the descriptions of Berlandier and Domenech. This identity is secured by their town plans and architecture. The plaza-centered grid of the Laws of the Indies and the Mexican Creole building typology of linear, cellular buildings constructed parallel to the street, ringing interior patios, produce a simple but substantial hierarchy of urban spaces: the plaza, the street walled with continuous building, and the private domestic sphere of the patio. The 18th-century spatiality of these towns is secured by consistent dimensions: streets 10 *varas* in width (approximately 30 feet). Although Camargo, Mier, and what is now called Guerrero Viejo remain predominantly one-story towns, and although Reynosa retains little of its pre-20th-century building stock, these 18th-century attributes give the Escandón towns and Matamoros a sense of strongly formed urban space and, in cultural terms, a strongly felt sense of community.

The case of Laredo, Texas, illustrates the strong-form urban characteristics of this vernacular town type and the vernacular buildings that give it spatial definition. Laredo was the smallest and most isolated of Escandón's Río Grande towns. It was the only town on the left (north) bank of the river. Thus, following the Mexican-U.S. War of 1846-48 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo establishing the Río Grande as the international boundary between Mexico and the United States, Laredo became U.S. territory. A U.S. military map of 1855 shows the townsite as a grid of 20 blocks.

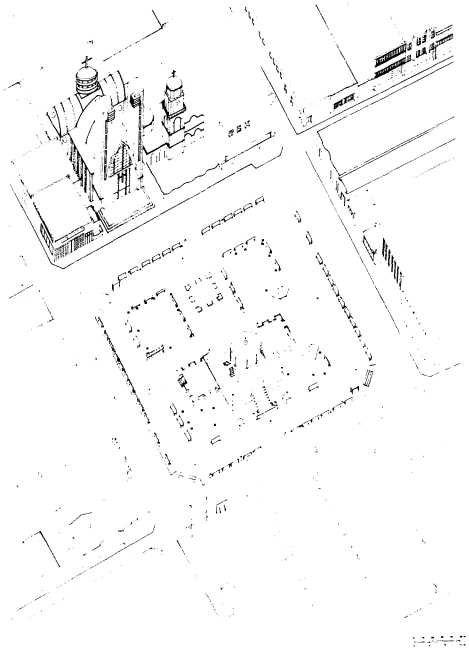


Fig. 4. Reynosa, Tamaulipas: Plaza Hidalgo. 1995

At the end of the Mexican War, new companion towns were developed on the U.S. side of the Río Grande opposite the established towns. The town plan of Brownsville, across from Matamoros, was an undifferentiated grid of blocks. Those of Río Grande City, near Camargo, and Roma, near Mier, adhered to the "Broad Street" model, which had a regional precedent in Texas' capital city, Austin. Not only did these towns lack plazas, their spatial dimensions were quite different. Their typical streets ranged from 40 to 60 feet in width, in some cases more than twice as wide as those of the 18th-century towns. In 1847, U.S. occupiers constituted the cross-river suburb of Laredo as the autonomous town of Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. In contrast to the new U.S. towns Nuevo Laredo reproduced the spatial model of its parent. Its central north-south streets are aligned with those of Laredo, Texas.

What is remarkable about Laredo, Texas, is that the expansion of the townsite through the 1870s conserved its 18th-century Mexican Creole spatiality. Laredo's historic preservation officer, Nina Nixon-Méndez, is in the process of documenting the career of the man responsible for this, S. M. Jarvis, a surveyor and Laredo's Reconstruction-era mayor. Research has yet to disclose Jarvis's motivations for regularizing and expanding the Mexican town plan of Laredo. But his creation of a sequence of new plazas in 1869 and his preservation of the 28-foot street width of the original *villa* meant that the historic center of Laredo retains a distinctive spatial feeling that is almost unique in Texas.[7]

During the 19th century, the Mexican Creole spatiality of Laredo's town plan was reinforced by its architecture. The town's historic spatial center is the Plaza San Agustín. On the east side of the plaza is the parish church, San Agustín de Laredo. The parish was accorded this site in the assignment of town lots in 1767. The present church, built between 1872 and 1877, replaced an earlier church built between 1774 and 1788. Ringing the plaza were the one-story stone houses of established families. The Casa García, on the south side of the plaza, built in stages between the mid 1830s and the early 1860s and now a historic house museum, and the Benavides and Leyendecker houses, built on the west side of the plaza in the 1870s, exemplify this pattern. Indicative of Laredo's continued isolation and small population during the 1850s, '60s, and '70s were the compact houses built by elite ranching families near the plaza, such as the plastered stone house of the Ramón family, one block from the plaza, and the Casa González, which is of composite stone and brick construction with later brick additions.[8] Because streets are only 28 feet wide, the street walls of these one-story houses produce a strong sense of urban spatial enclosure. The two-story street fronts of the grandest houses, such as the Casa Ortiz of 1872, contain and direct urban space, reinforcing urban spatial conventions. Such houses were capable of achieving complex internal spatial configurations. At the Casa Ortiz, a *zaguán*—an enclosed driveway—connects the

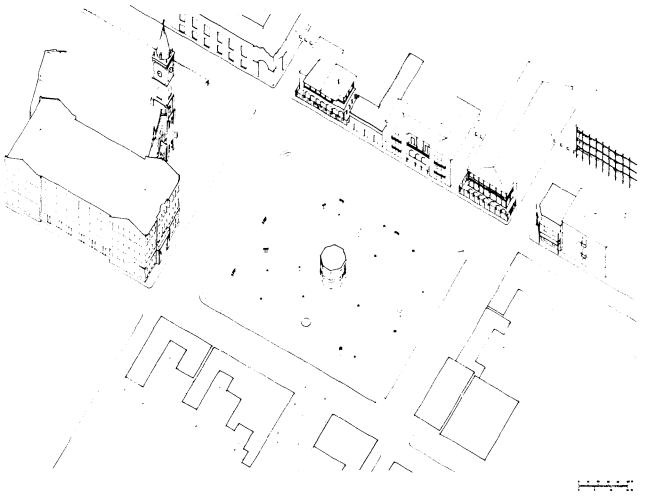


Fig. 5. Laredo, Texas: Plaza San Agustín. 1995

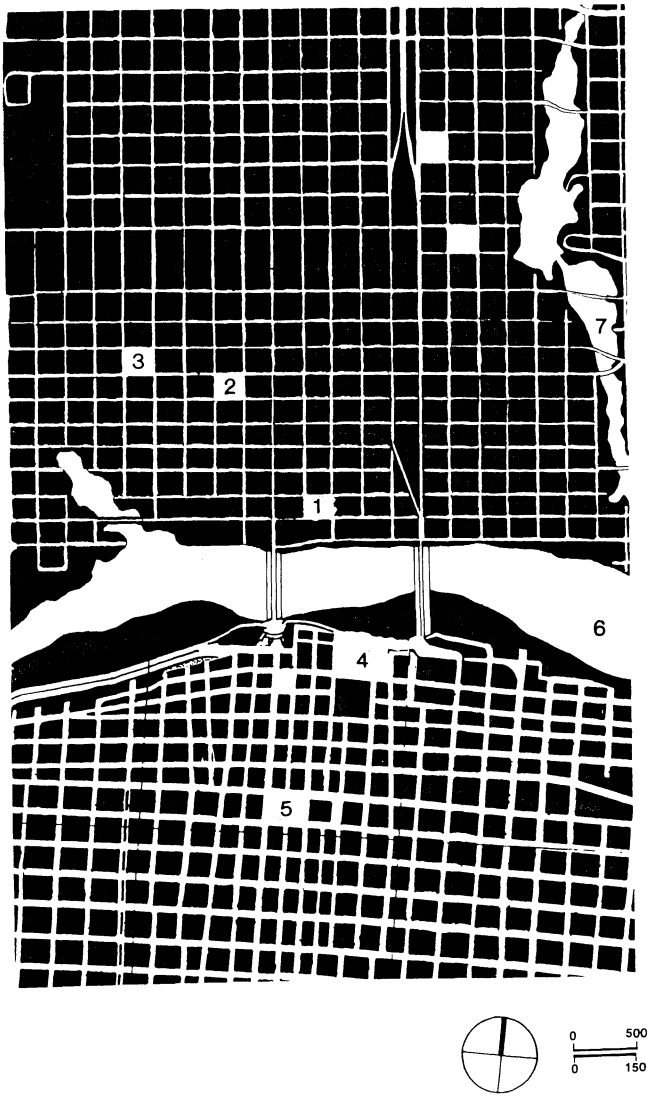


Fig. 6. Partial map of Laredo, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas separated by the Río Grande. Legend: 1. Plaza San Agustín, 2. Jarvis Plaza, 3. Saint Peter's Park, 4. Plaza Juárez, 5. Plaza Hidalgo, 6. Río Grande, 7. Arroyo Zacate.

street to an internal patio. Because the Casa Ortiz backs onto the Río Grande, its patio steps down via brick-walled terraces to the river bank.

The 19th-century Creole suburbs of Laredo, such as the Barrio del Ranchero, which represents an eastward extension of the original townsite, reinforced this sense of urban spatiality with small, free-standing houses, which were typical of rural ranches as well as lower-income town neighborhoods. After the turn of the 20th century, the Creole courtyard house type tended to be preserved in commercial buildings, such as the Casa Varela in El Ranchero. Elite Mexican families registered the prestige of Anglo-American patterns by building free-standing houses with encircling galleries, such as the Benavides-Varela House. However, in the Barrio del Ranchero, narrow street widths and the proximity of building fronts to the street maintain the distinctive experience of Creole urban spatiality, even when buildings are freestanding and non-Creole types are present.[9]

The conventions of Mexican urban spatiality required that buildings "line" streets, important buildings "face" plazas, and permitted the relative prestige of a neighborhood to be deduced from its degree of spatial coherence. Narrow street widths give the most coherent neighborhoods a feeling of room-like urbanity. In these respects, Laredo feels very much like Camargo and Mier, as well as Matamoros, which exhibits a considerable number of two-story houses comparable to the Casa Ortiz. An urban echo of Laredo is San Ygnacio, Texas, 30 miles downriver, which was converted from a ranch headquarters into a proper town by the laying out of a plaza and street grid. Even more poignant in terms of externalizing the constituents of Laredo's Creole urban spatiality is Villanueva de Camargo, Tamaulipas, developed in the early 1850s to replace the lower-lying (and flood-prone) Camargo, only to be abandoned, leaving its sandstone houses as shells spatially outlining two sides of a voided plaza.[10]

In 1881-82, Laredo obtained the first railroad line to connect the United States and Mexico. Between 1880 and 1890, its population expanded over 300 percent—from 3,811 to 11,763. In ten years Laredo went from being the most isolated of the towns of the lower Río Grande to the biggest and most economically important. This was made apparent in the colonization of the Creole town plan by mainstream patterns of Anglo-American urban spatiality after 1880. A new Market House was built in 1885 as the seat of city government. The Market House was built *in* Market Square, not facing it. Along Iturbide Street and the three streets bracketing Market Square—Flores, Lincoln, and Hidalgo—an Anglo-American style "downtown" business district developed.[11] In the early 20th century, new public and commercial buildings—such as the Anglo-Palladian style Federal Building of 1907 and Laredo's tallest building, the 12-story Hamilton Hotel of 1928—did frame Jarvis Plaza in a spatially authoritative way. However, the hotel treated the square as a spatial foreground to offset its stature, an opportunistic approach typical of 20th-century Anglo-American urbanism.

The tracks of the Texas-Mexican Railway and the International & Great Northern Railway were routed along the northern and western edges of S. M. Jarvis's expanded townsite in the early 1880s. They produced not only a specialized corridor of railroad-oriented construction, but, indirectly, a spacious new district on the axis of Matamoros Street, west of Jarvis Plaza. This neighborhood began to be developed in the 1880s as the elite Anglo-American neighborhood of Laredo, following the "garden district" pattern of free-standing, villa type houses typical of Southern towns since the 1820s. The street grid remained but east-west streets were widened to 60 feet. In place of a plaza, a block in the middle of the district became a public playground, now called St. Peter's Park, which none of the houses or the church around it addressed architecturally. The distinctive urban spatiality of Mexican Laredo is absent in the West End. South of the West End is the Barrio Cuatro (Fourth Ward). Architecturally, ethnically, and socio-economically, it was the west-side equivalent of the Barrio del Ranchero. Although the Barrio Cuatro was developed slightly later than the West End, its east-west streets maintained the Creole dimensions of old Laredo. By the end of the 19th century, urban spatiality in Laredo mirrored a Mexican-American/ Anglo-American division that in the middle of the century had been completely foreign.[12]

In 1888 a syndicate of investors building Laredo's streetcar system platted the Heights, an immense town extension scheme east of Arroyo Zacate, at the extreme edge of the Barrio del Ranchero. Development of the Heights during the first half of the 20th century was complemented by an expansion of the Jarvis grid north of Victoria Street. Both sectors feel monotonous in comparison to the historic neighborhoods of pre-railroad Laredo, even though both sectors possess important civic institutions and concentrations of distinctive architecture.[13]

Overlaid on these grids are subsequent patterns of spatial organization, represented by the San Bernardo Avenue highway of the 1940s and '50s, and its successor, Interstate 35, which in the late 1970s was slammed through the center of the city to serve a second international bridge. Interstate 35 subsumed Jarvis's Plaza de la Nória within its median and now separates the Barrio del Ranchero from the Plaza San Agustín and downtown. Laredo's major shopping mall, Mall del Norte, was constructed along Interstate 35 well north of the Heights in 1977. Inverting the spatial order of Plaza San Agustín, Mall del Norte incorporates in one of its lease spaces the parish of St. John Neumann Catholic Community.

The dissolution of urban spatial conventions visible as one moves from the historic center of Laredo north and east to the city's periphery can be seen in its Mexican counterparts, although there are distinct differences. Because Camargo and Mier are five to ten miles south of the Río Grande, and because their companion border towns, Río Grande City and Roma, are not important economic centers, they have remained intact as small towns. Both present a succession of plazas lined up at intervals of several blocks along their main streets. Both retain much of their 19th-century architectural fabric. Matamoros and Nuevo Laredo also possess a series of plazas; those of Nuevo Laredo line up neatly along its main street, Avenida Guerrero.

Matamoros, Nuevo Laredo, and Reynosa are important economic centers. All have experienced explosive growth since the 1940s and now have populations in excess of 250,000. As in Laredo, Texas, the plaza-centered urbanism of the 19th century was abandoned by the early 20th century, so that urban expansion after 1940 occurred without the systematic provision of public open space. Because higher densities and more intensive land use than are customary in the U.S. occur in Mexico, and because urban street rights-of-way tend not to be as wide, the Mexican cities are not as spatially vacuous as 20th-century Laredo. But their lack of open space and of focal public architecture means that they are no less monotonous. Guerrero Viejo is the anomaly. The 200-year-old town was depopulated in 1953 to permit the reservoir of Falcón Dam to partially inundate the town site. Today, Guerrero's remaining 19th-century stone houses are

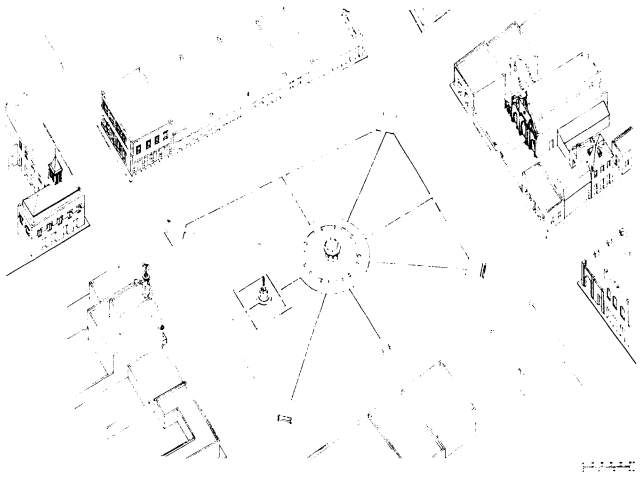


Fig. 7. Guerrero Viejo (Revilla), Tamaulipas: Plaza Vicente Guerrero. 1995

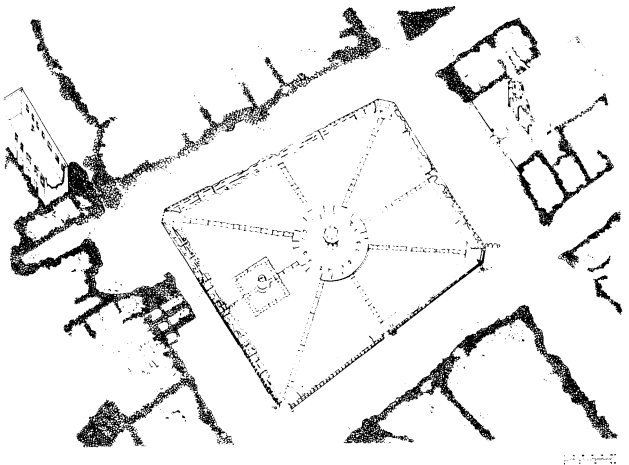


Fig. 8. Guerrero Viejo (Revilla), Tamaulipas: Plaza Vicente Guerrero. c.1950 (reconstructed from photographs before the flooding)

occupied by squatters, who live there without public services or public institutions, authentically replicating the conditions that prevailed along the Rio Grande in the 18th century.

The town plans of Laredo, Reynosa, Matamoros, and Nuevo Laredo have proved quite resilient. They absorb urban traffic, including buses, 18-wheel trucks, and parking. The scale of streets and buildings and the frequency of plazas in the central sectors make walking a realistic alternative to driving. Pedestrian activity is intense, even in Laredo, Texas, so that the historic cores, especially the plazas, are lively.

Like the more celebrated French Quarter of New Orleans or Santa Fe, the historic center of Laredo spatially preserves the imprint of Spanish colonial urbanism. From a late 20th-century perspective, it offers valuable object lessons on the organization of urban space. It demonstrates the value of the plaza as an outdoor civic room, and how a sequence of plazas connected by 18th-century-scaled streets shape urban space that is dense, varied and eventful. The preservation and continued occupation of Laredo's Mexican Creole building types demonstrate that it is possible to conceive of the house as an urban building component, without sacrificing privacy or amenity, and to conceive of residential design as urban design.

Yet as a model for new urban development Laredo is problematic. The spatial standards embedded in real estate formulas for commercial and residential development in the U.S. conflict with the intimate spatiality and architectural boundedness of the streets of Laredo. Their socioeconomic diversity and mixed use are at odds with market preferences for demographic segregation and market segmentation. The conflict between the Mexican Creole town model and current real estate formulas is not based on flaws in the town model but the rigid prescriptions of the development models. Efforts were made in the 1980s to adopt a "New Urbanism" approach based on the Laredo model for an ambitious real estate development at the edge of the Heights. The plan was well intentioned. But it deformed the historic model as market formulas were applied. Had it been built, it would have probably resulted in a style-themed town center surrounded by conventional suburban development.[14]

The streets of Laredo demonstrate in a very compelling way how material construction can spatially engender a sense of community. As such they challenge the suburban patterns of spatial organization that dominate and fragment contemporary cities.

NOTES

[1] Gilbert R. Cruz, *Let There Be Towns*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1988, pp. 81-89.

[2] Cruz, pp. 96-99.

[3] Abbé Domenech, *Missionary Adventures in Texas and Mexico*, London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1858, pp. 272 and 277.

[4] Jean Louis Berlandier, *Journey to Mexico During the Years 1826 to 1834*, vol. 1, Austin: Texas State Historical Association and the Center for Studies in Texas History, pp. 262-263, 428-430, 583, and 590.

[5] Eliseo Paredes, "Across the Río: A History of Matamoros by Eliseo Paredes," in Don Clifford and Rita Krausse, editors, A Blast From the Past, volume 1, Brownsville: Brownsville Historical Association, 1996, pp. 50 and 52.

[6] Domenech, p. 253.

[7] Nina Nixon-Méndez, "The Development of a City Preservation Plan Based on the Historical Analysis of Urban Settlement Patterns in Laredo, Texas," unpublished paper, 1996, pp. 3-4.

[8] Fr. Robert E. Wright, OMI, "The Parish of San Agustín, Laredo, 1760-1857," in Angel Sepúlveda Brown and Gloria Villa Cadena, San Agustín Parish of Laredo Marriage Book I, privately printed, 1989, pp. 3, 5-7, and 10; Mario L. Sánchez, editor, A Shared Experience, Austin: Los Caminos del Río and the Texas Historical Commission, 1994, pp. 85-87; Helen Simons and Cathryn A. Hoyt, editors, Hispanic Texas: A Historical Guide, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992, pp. 222-224; and Gloria Z. Canseco, "The Ramón Family in Laredo, 1755-1916," unpublished paper, 1989, pp. 3, 15, 46, 51, and 57.

[9] John W. Clark, Jr., and Ana María Juárez, Urban Archeology: A Cultural History of a Mexican-American Barrio in Laredo, Webb County, Texas, volume 1, Austin: Texas State Department of Highways and Urban Transportation, 1986, pp. 138-159.

[10] Sánchez, pp. 90, 130-131; Simons and Hoyt, pp. 263-265.

[11] Jerry Thompson, Laredo, A Pictorial History, Norfolk/Virginia Beach: The Donning Company Publishers, 1986, pp. 23-29.

[12] Nixon-Méndez, pp. 8-9.

[13] Simons and Hoyt, p. 225; and "Perspective Map of the City of Laredo, Texas, 1892," in John W. Reps, Cities on Stone, Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1976, plate 48.

[14] "Paul Young Ranch," Progressive Architecture, 69(January 1988), pp. 132-133; and Joel Warren Barna, "A Contemporary Synthesis Augurs a Future Unity," Texas Architect, 39(January-February 1989), pp. 37-41.

[15] Measured drawings of the border plazas are by the following University of Houston College of Architecture students: Linda Porras, Adrian Hernandez, Louis Bruno, Stephen Cochran, Monica Milder, Christopher Ruebush, Roseanne Ramos, Philip LeBlanc, Rodolfo Fabre, Emmet McGlohn, Abdidladid Ismail, Karno Nguyen, and Stephen Hyde.