

The Role of the Mexican American Community in the Production of Urban Space in Houston, Texas

BARRY ESPINOSA-OROPEZA

Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya

Houston is the fourth largest metropolitan area in the United States. It is also one of the most culturally diverse cities in America. As such, Houston can be presented as a paradigm of the twenty-first century multicultural city in the United States. Yet Houston remains largely understudied¹, in particular, with relation to the way ethnic and cultural minorities participate in the production of its urban space. This research is intended to help fill this gap, focusing in one of the largest ethnic groups in Houston, the Mexican-American population. For this purpose, I conduct a socio-semiotic analysis of one of the oldest Mexican neighborhoods in the city: 'El Segundo Barrio'.

This socio-semiotic approach to spatial analysis follows the work of urban sociologist Mark Gottdiener and architect/geographer Alexandros Lagopoulos.² This approach centers on the link between social and ideological aspects of the production of settlement space with its materiality, its physical form. The first step, then, will be to frame this analysis around the concept of how cultural identity and spatial production relate. Next, a brief explanation of the production of space in Houston will help suggest how this framework encompasses the case of study. Lastly, I will center on the historical presence of the Mexican American population in this city and El Segundo Barrio, tying the above elements to the production of the selected neighborhood.

IDENTITY, STRUCTURATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

One of the first assumptions this paper makes is that ethnocultural identities are relevant to the way

our urban settlements are organized and built, informing how different social groups (in terms of race, culture, ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) relate to space. Yet, among urban researchers there are different views as to how this relation occurs. Some, for example, view it as a cause and effect situation, where social structure is the cause and spatial configuration is the effect. Others believe this spatial configuration to be more the aggregate result of individual decisions. Given the brevity of this paper, and the extensive research already existing, I will not go into detail on these subjects.³ Yet, I would like to comment, if only briefly, on a third viewpoint: that of the production of space as dialectically related to the social structure.⁴

The basic tenant of this point of view is that independent existence apart from social reality, and, at the same time, society is only realized through space. Thus, it is through the creation and use of space—or, in dialectical materialism terms, the production and consumption of space—that social relations of every kind are reproduced and solidified, consolidating the social structure. Two mayor components are involved in this process: *agency* and *structure*.

As *structuration* theory tells us, 'agency' is the capacity of persons to act on their reality, with the power to guide their actions in directions of their choice. Whereas, 'structure' is constituted by the economic, political and cultural framework that is shaped by the collective agreement of this behavior. The continuous reproduction of people's actions filtered through this framework, that is, the *socialization* process, establishes the social structure which, in turn, shapes social conduct and relations.⁵

Social creations, from eating utensils to dialects to political-economic systems, are as well products of this *structuration* process. The same is true about space and the objects that conform our human environments. "[S]patial forms," explains Gottdiener, "are *contingent* products of the dialectical articulation between action and structure."⁶ Each society produces its own space through the interaction of multiple actors and circumstances. Space is thus organized as a series of specific places assigned to determined actions and organizing social life at the same time that it influences the way people sees and thinks about both space and themselves, that is, how they perceive both the exterior reality and their personal and collective identities.

How has this process of socio-spatial production taken place in Houston?

HOUSTON'S URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Texan historian T.R. Ferhenbach has commented on the prevalent Anglo-Saxon ethos that has dominated the relationship of Texans with nature (i.e., space).⁷ According to him, the first Texans came to this territory in search of land to own and exploit for private profit. Thus, in stark contrast with Native Americans or Mexicans in the region, their relation to space was unsentimental and entirely pragmatic. A firm, "often schizophrenic"⁸ belief in private property, along with other adamant ideological traits, like individual worth and self-reliance, *privatism*, small government, and the Anglo superiority, became part of an *ethos* cutting across class, occupation, and religion, that has greatly informed Texas and Houston's urban development throughout the years.⁹

Since its conception Houston's development has been closely tied to the mercantilization of space. It was founded as a real estate venture in 1836 by land entrepreneurs John and Augustus Allen. Its growth has always been contingent on commercial enterprises such as the cotton and timber trade, oil and petrochemical industries, and direct land speculation. From the dredging of the Buffalo Bayou, the construction of the railroad, and the drilling of the oil deposits in East Texas in the early twentieth century, to the *laissez-faire* urbanism of the second half of the century, with its suburban expansion, freeway construction, and overstock of commercial high-rises, urban development in Houston has been mostly the result of the powerful agency of what some have

called a "growth coalition," comprised of state officials and members of the business elite that seek to orient this development towards a better 'business climate'.¹⁰

But, if the production of space in Houston has been indeed largely the result of actions taken by a handful of powerful agents, where does this leave the role of an underprivileged, but large, community like Mexican Americans in this process? Perhaps examining the evolution of a traditional Mexican American neighborhood like El Segundo Barrio might give us an idea.

MEXICAN AMERICANS IN HOUSTON AND EL SEGUNDO BARRIO

Historian Arnoldo De Leon has pointed out the presence of Mexicans in Houston right from the start, when Mexican soldiers taken prisoner after their defeat in the Texas War of Independence labored along African American slaves in the dredging of the Buffalo Bayou and the clearing of the swamps that gave place to the Allen Brothers' real estate enterprise.¹¹ Yet, up until the turn of the last century Houston was practically a biracial town, composed of Anglos and African Americans.

According to the population census of 1850, there were only eighteen Mexicans living in a city of thousands already. Some fifty years later, as the city started to boom with the discovery of the oil fields of East Texas in 1901, many more Mexicans, among other immigrants, began to flock into town in order to procure the labor needs of this growth. Other push factors, like the Mexican Revolution of 1910 that riddled town and country with violence, contributed to the increasing numbers of families from all social classes moving to Houston. From there on, the Mexican community would keep growing apace, despite constant discrimination, and even forced deportations of both foreign and US-born members during the tough years of the Great Depression, and by 1930, the Mexican community comprised several thousand members.

One of the first established Mexican neighborhoods in Houston was that of 'El Segundo Barrio', a latinized term for the Second Ward, one of the six former political districts of the city. Bounded by the Buffalo Bayou to the north, the railroad tracks to the east and south, and the suburban neighborhood of Mag-

nolia Park to the west, this *barrio* extended about one mile east of downtown.

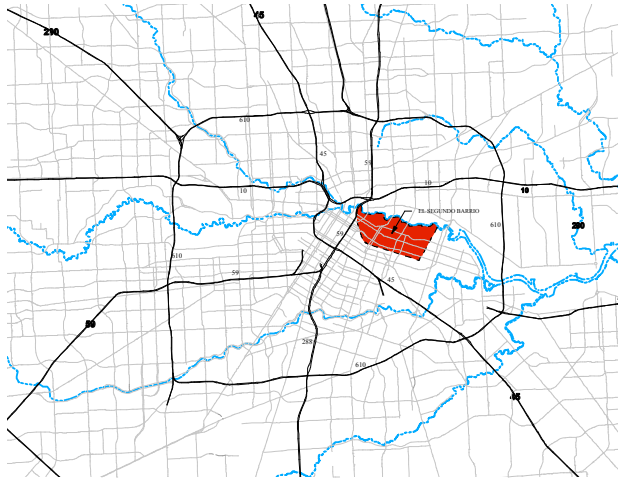


Figure 1. Location of El Segundo Barrio.

Its first inhabitants were those workers and their families that dredged the river; built the port; packed and shipped the cotton bales; and laid the railroad tracks that composed Houston's mercantile infrastructure. Mostly poor and unskilled, they settled near their workplaces, some living in discarded train containers, while others lived in *jacales*, precarious, makeshift shacks located on the river banks.

With the city booming, and a growing demand for cheap labor by oil companies and factories locating along the channel, more and more members of this social group began to establish in this area, and begun shaping an incipient community. Soon, a considerable social structure based on religious institutions, social clubs, and informal local networks began to take shape; for example, the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe established in 1912, or the Mexico Bello social club. Middle and upper class Mexican families helped consolidate these institutions at the same time that a process of acculturation began to take place within the community. Yet, for all of this, most of the Mexican population was still living under harsh conditions, something that will reflect on the barrio's built environment, showing few, if any, significant material signs of a cultural appropriation of its urban space.

This does not mean that there weren't interventions that demarcated this area as an ethnic en-



Figure 2. Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.

clave. Businesses advertised in Spanish, and the small but active better-off classes made efforts to establish a Mexican presence in the larger society, with gestures such as the donation of the land for Hidalgo Park and its bandstand. But, neither this nor other relevant buildings like that of the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe portray an aesthetic one can easily relate in particular to a Mexican American sensibility. And, as the urban development of the neighborhood continued, building warehouses and industrial yards, privatizing as much space as possible, the dominance of other agents became apparent.

Even housing consisted (and still does) mainly of single-family bungalows built originally for a working class Anglo population. Thus, it does not depart significantly from working class neighborhoods in the city—like the Fourth Ward—except perhaps for some displays of color, or minor decoration elements in their facades and front yards.

Beginning in the 1960s, largely due to changes in US immigration policy¹², Houston's demography would experience a radical change, receiving large numbers of immigrants from all over the world, but specially from Mexico and Latin America. For Houston's urban space, this explosion would mean that the Mexican population would spill out of the old enclaves and, along with other ethnic groups, diversify several other city neighborhoods previously homogenous. White flight to the suburbs would contribute to this diversification. Still, old Mexican neighborhoods like El Segundo Barrio would keep growing due to local reproduction and the constant



Figure 3. Typical neighborhood housing.

influx of new immigrants.

This influx of new immigrants, and a rediscovered pride in their Mexican heritage that gave rise to the Chicanismo movement took roots in the community, resulting in new material cultural expressions in El Segundo Barrio. Following the tradition of the great muralists of the early twentieth century, some artists began to paint the blank walls of factories in the neighborhood, as a mean of expressing the Mexican American experience in Houston. Also, the bonanza of the oil boom of the seventies reached even this community and more businesses catering to the local community featuring Mexican vernacular motifs began to appear. In the eighties, this even translated to the construction of new “ethnic places” like the thematic mall of El Mercado del Sol or Guadalupe Plaza. Yet, more than a true expression of the Mexican American agency in the production of their urban environment, some have viewed these as attempts by real estate entrepreneurs to market the new multicultural sensibility of the time.¹³

Nevertheless, this was short lived. The deindustrialization of the seventies and eighties resulted in the massive closing of the factories located in the neighborhood, deteriorating the physical and social condition of this community. The murals began to fade, many people became unemployed, and the ambitious real estate experiments of ethnic thematization failed.¹⁴ Closed factory buildings, broken windows, and empty lots populated the area, adding to the physical segregation of the neighborhood

from the rest of the city. With urban development moving away towards the northern and western parts of town—and the elevated highway US 59 in the way of the neighborhood and this growth—the community was further separated, physical and psychologically.



Figure 4. Clockwise from top left, fragment of Leo Taguma’s “Rebirth of Our Nationality” mural; Guadalupe Plaza; “Los Corrales” restaurant; a dead end street closed off by the railroad tracks between the neighborhood and US 59.

To this date, the situation of El Segundo Barrio has changed little; small local businesses display modest signs of vernacular reference, but some studies suggest these are done mostly for marketing purposes and not as a way of cultural appropriation¹⁵; new shopping malls also exploit these features to appeal to the local demographics. Yet, the muralist movement has revived, and organizations like the East End Chamber of Commerce have taken the place of the socially oriented, betteroff Mexican Americans of yesteryear, pushing for urban regeneration projects in order to attract investment in the area.

Nevertheless, results of the latest census show recurring trends that cast a shadow over these actions. For example, even though Houston is the fourth city in terms of Hispanics owning their business, the latest census data shows a wealth gap between them and Anglos of 1 to 18¹⁶, and the median household income in El Segundo Barrio of \$27,886 is only slightly more than the \$51,888 overall city median.¹⁷ These numbers question the idea that the neighborhood will not be gentrified by

these regeneration efforts and the local population not dispersed when it cannot longer afford the higher property values.

CONCLUSION

The lecture of the spatial configuration of El Segundo Barrio through a socio-semiotic analysis provides a picture of the role Mexican Americans have played in the production of Houston's urban space. Structural factors and local circumstances have affected this group's agency in this process, even in a long-standing neighborhood as El Segundo Barrio. There is no telling if the space of this neighborhood might indeed be different or not, given the little input its inhabitants have had in shaping it. The scarcity of signs of a differential space shaped according to the cultural identity of its inhabitants, and the physical segregation of the community point to an agency limited by uneven social relations.

The alternative explanation to this, as Michael Burayidi, tongue-in-cheek, would put it, is that, it is not the "coercion, lack of representation, or the muzzling of voices of non-dominant sociocultural groups,"¹⁸ the reason why there is no significant diversity in the space of our cities, but that planners (and I would add, architects, too) have actually done a good job in creating a consensus among different sociocultural groups of what this space should be like. An explanation hard to believe.

One last remark would be to highlight the relation between space and the construction of identity. Identity is formed always in relation with the Other, which is to say, identity is formed only through difference. These interactions take place in space, everyday, through our interactions and decisions of what is appropriate, who belongs and who doesn't; and space playing an important role in how these encounters occur. Reason why, in the multicultural space of our contemporary cities, the right to the city—to space—and the right to difference are two sides of the same coin.

ENDNOTES

1 This comment has been made at least twice, first in 1988 by Joe Feagin (*Free Enterprise City: Houston in Political-Economic Perspective*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988, 2), and lately, by Stephen Klineberg, well known for his annual surveys of Houston, in his 2010 TEDxTalks presentation (TEDxTalks, "TEDxHouston — Stephen Klineberg," TED Conferences,

LLC, June 12, 2010, <http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TEDxHouston-Stephen-Klineberg> [accessed August 22, 2011]).

2 See, Mark Gottdiener and Alexandros Lagopoulos, eds., *The City and the Sign. An Introduction to Urban Semiotics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Alexandros Lagopoulos, *Meaning and Geography: The Social Conception of the Region in Northern Greece* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992).

3 For a review on these perspectives, see, for example, Mark Gottdiener and Ray Hutchison, *The new urban sociology*, 3rd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2006).

4 This view is generally informed by the production of space theory as conceived by French sociologist/philosopher Henri Lefebvre, and developed later by Mark Gottdiener and others. See, for example, Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1991). Lefebvre has a considerable bibliography on the subject, but this book, first published in 1974 in France as *Production de l'espace*, is probably his most influential.

5 See, Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (n.p.: University of California Press, 1986); Anthony Giddens and Mitchell Duneier, *Introduction to Sociology*, 3rd. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

6 Mark Gottdiener, *The Social Production of Urban Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 199.

7 T.R. Ferhenbach, *The Seven Keys to Texas* (New York: e-reads, 2003).

8 Ibid., 38.

9 Ibid.

10 The view of an urban development centered on private profits, and a public government subservient to private interests is shared by many, from architectural historians and urban sociologists to public policy scholars. See, for example: Joe Feagin, *Free Enterprise City: Houston in Political-Economic Perspective* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Robert D. Thomas and Richard W. Murray, *Progrowth Politics: Change and Governance in Houston* (Berkeley: IGS Press, University of California, 1991); Stephen Fox, *Houston Architectural Guide*, 2nd. ed. (Houston: The American Institute of Architects/Houston Chapter, 1999).

11 Arnoldo De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001).

12 Specifically, the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 that abolished the National Origins Formula that favored immigration from Western and Northern European countries.

13 See, Jan Lin, "Ethnic Places, Postmodernism, and Urban Change in Houston," *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4 [Autumn, 1995]: 629-647.

14 The exception being Harrisburg Plaza; then again, there is nothing really impressive of a conventional supermarket decorated with tiled roofs and stucco towers being successful by providing wares that the community wants and needs, regardless of its formal language.

15 See, Phil Wood and Charles Landry, *The Intercultural City: Planning for Diversity Advantage* (London: Earthscan, 2008), 160-1, 257.

16 Rakesh Kochhar, Richard Fry, and Paul Taylor, "Wealth Gap Rise to Record Highs Between, Whites,

Blacks, Hispanics: Twenty-to-One," Pew Research Center, released July 26, 2011, <http://pewsocialtrends.org/2011/07/26/wealth-gaps-rise-to-record-highs-between-whites-blacks-hispanics/3/#fnref-8618-10> (accessed August 22, 2011).

17 Comparison made between the Houston Urban Area and the Second Ward Super Neighborhood based on U.S. Census Bureau, "2005-2009 American Community Survey," <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/> (accessed August 17, 2011) and City of Houston, "Super Neighborhood Demographic and Income Profile," http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/SN/SN_Demog_2009-2014/63_Second_Ward.pdf (accessed August 17, 2011).

18 Michael Burayidi, "Urban Planning as a Multicultural Canon," in *Urban Planning in a Multicultural Society*, ed. Michael Burayidi (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 1.