

The Architectural Typologies of Latinx Housing Precarity

SILVINA LOPEZ BARRERA

Mississippi State University

Keywords: Latinx Housing; Migrant Labor; Housing Typologies

Housing precarity in the Latinx community has been a persistent problem for decades in the United States. Trailer homes, mobile parks, barrack-like housing on farms, and substandard homes have influenced the experiences of generations of Latinx immigrants in the U.S. While these architectural forms may have been conceived as transient architecture, these housing typologies have become persistent through time and ignored from public debate. This paper explores the history of these precarious housing typologies and their role shaping Latinx spatial practices and lived spaces in rural America. Through spatial justice lenses this paper considers how precarious American housing typologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have historically marginalized the Latinx community obscuring their presence. Using case studies from the 1942 Bracero Program to contemporary Latinx housing in rural Vermont and Mississippi, this paper examines the Latinx lived spaces and housing typologies from a historical perspective. Additionally, it explores the spatial implications and linkages between Latinx labor and housing. When their labor is conducted in remote rural areas and small towns, their presence is obscured often times living and working on the farms and putting up with substandard housing. Research methods include examination of architectural documentation such as historical and contemporary photographs and drawings and in-depth interviews with Latinx immigrants and advocates of the Latinx community. This paper provides an analysis of housing conditions and dwelling structures through history that have been overlooked by researchers and practitioners in architectural fields. Increasing barriers to access to adequate and affordable housing in the Latinx community are interconnected with their immigration status and their limited access to resources, resulting on access to a limited and deteriorating housing stock with unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Finally, this paper offers a deeper understanding on how the labor and immigration context has influenced housing patterns in small towns and rural places.

INTRODUCTION: MIGRANT LABOR AND HOUSING

The U.S long and oppressive history towards Latinx immigrant labor has sustained and continue to sustain many industries in the country. The development and growth of the food industry, the agriculture production, the service industry, and the construction industry, just to name a few, is on the shoulders of immigrant labor. This unjust history and violence on Latinx bodies takes many forms affecting the everyday life of Latinx communities that struggle between the tensions of being an essential labor force and simultaneously remained invisible to society.¹

The oppression and violence are reflected in many aspects of everyday life including housing substandard conditions and the ethnic division of labor. Latinx immigrants are usually assigned lower-paid and more demanding jobs within each industry.² Farm labor is intrinsically connected with housing. The Bracero Program in 1942 was one of the first mass housing experiment of Latinx immigrant workers on farm owner or grower-provided housing with very poor housing conditions.

Since the Bracero program in 1942, farmworkers housing provided by employers on farms has been a typical practice. This practice of owner-provided housing has largely disregarded and dehumanized Latinx workers forcing them to live in poor housing conditions. Furthermore, this practice has reinforced the vulnerability of immigrant worker to be subject constant surveillance by their employers and blurring the boundaries between work and home.³

This paper explores the hidden housing realities of marginalized Latinx immigrants in small towns and the rural American landscape. Using case studies from the 1942 Bracero Program to contemporary Latinx housing in rural Vermont and Mississippi, this paper examines the Latinx lived spaces and housing typologies from a historical perspective. It reveals how the poor dwelling conditions of Latinx communities are intersected with exploitative immigrant labor practices.



Figure 1. Trailer park in rural Mississippi. Photo by author

HOUSING TYPOLOGIES

This section focuses on the manufactured trailer home as one of the typical housing typologies of the Latinx community. Trailer homes have been widely used as a form of employer-provided housing accommodation for farmworkers living in farms and is the predominantly housing typology of Latinx living in small towns and rural areas across the United States.

Manufactured mobile homes or trailer homes have been long used as a housing solution in the U.S. and they have performed different functions responding to pressing social and economic needs.⁴ Since WWII the production of manufactured housing has become a vital component of the housing stock for low-income and middle-income population in the U.S.⁵

Through history, trailer homes have been perceived as a temporary housing solution for households with the expectation of moving into a traditional housing as the ultimate and permanent goal. However, history has proved this perception of temporary solution is only a perception and living in trailer homes has become a permanent housing solution for low-income households and those who experience barriers to homeownership to conventional housing like the Latinx immigrant community. Throughout the twentieth century, low-income households became the main population living in rural trailer parks.⁶

In rural areas, trailer homes can be dispersed withing small towns' fabrics or can also be grouped in trailer park communities. Trailer Park communities can be found in different configurations across the U.S. (see figure 1). Salamon and Mactavish⁷ describe different trailer parks configurations according to different types of ownership arrangements. One of the most typical arrangements is where the inhabitants own the trailer homes and lease the land to place their homes. Another type of arrangement is when tenants rent both trailer homes and land from trailer park landlords. This is usually the most vulnerable situation for vulnerable populations such as low-income immigrant communities that must endure housing

instability. In these cases, the stock of rental trailer homes tends to be comprised of old and unmaintained units negatively affecting the health and everyday life of the inhabitants.

As Keller explains, employer provide farmworkers housing not only blurs the boundaries between work and home but increases the oppressive surveillance of Latinx farmworkers. These trailer homes are usually run-down, sometimes lack of access to potable or heated water, lack of heating and insulation, and have issues with the building envelop and pest infestations. Furthermore, trailer homes in farms are intentionally concealed from the public view of roads usually placed away from the road and behind other buildings.⁸ This contributes to the invisibility of Latinx farmworkers, and their housing and labor conditions and deepens their isolation from society.⁹

In 1955 the industry started to manufacture mobile homes at a width of 10 ft., making this wider units unable to be transported by personal vehicles.¹⁰ This limitation of the mobility of mobile homes contributed to the shift of mobile homes being transient housing solutions into permanent housing solutions, influencing the current problems of this type of housing.

Singlewide and doublewide manufactured mobile homes are the two types of trailer homes. Since the 1980s-decade, floorplan dimensions of a singlewide trailer range from 12ft to 18ft in width and from 40ft to 80ft in length; and doublewide dimensions range from 20ft to 36ft in width and from 32ft to 80ft in length. The doublewide mobile homes are transported to their permanent sites as singlewide units.

The Singlewide is the most common type in precarious contexts as they tend to be older units and in disrepair quality. During fieldwork, it was observed that older units which are usually rundown have smaller width dimensions ranging from 10ft to 12ft. The singlewide trailer home typology has a linear floorplan with rooms organized in a single file (see figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Trailer Park in a small town in Mississippi. Photo by author

Although these housing typologies have very limited possibilities to be transformed or the have rooms added by the users, tenants adapt their lived spaces to address their housing needs. Figure 4 shows how a Latinx tenant in Mississippi added a partition to their trailer home to accommodate family members who had to leave their previous home due to the detention and deportation of the breadwinner of the family.

METHODOLOGY

Research methods include examination of architectural documentation such as historical and contemporary photographs and drawings and in-depth interviews with Latinx immigrants and Latinx activists.

Using purposive snowball sampling strategy, we identified key actors and Latinx community members experiencing immigration and housing challenges.¹¹ Architecture fieldwork documentation includes onsite observational methods, sketches, and photographs. Additionally, secondary sources are used to complement data collected from the interviews as well as architectural documentation.

THE BRACERO PROGRAM: BARRACK-LIKE HOUSING, TENTS, AND MAKESHIFT HOUSING

In 1942, the “Bracero Program” was established through the “Mexican Farm Labor Program” an executive order that allowed to recruit and hire temporary Mexican laborers to work in the U.S agriculture and railroad system. The program based on short-term contracts took advantage of cheap labor and exploitative labor conditions. Throughout the program more the four million immigrant workers were hired on short-term contracts and prompted documented and undocumented immigration from Mexico.

The program ended in 1964, on its 22 years of existence there were a series of laws and protocols that established the temporary labor conditions, the prevailing wages, and the provision of housing for worker. Despite agreement protocols between the U.S and Mexico, Braceros experienced discrimination, had

to pay extra for housing, and faced health risks from the exposure to toxic chemicals.¹² The word Braceros comes from the Spanish word brazos that means arms and it refers to the hard work done by laborers with their arms and hands. This type of intensive labor was needed in agriculture after WWII and in present days it continues to be extensively carried by Latinx immigrant farmworkers in the U.S.

One of the international agreements of the Bracero program was to provide temporary housing for laborers. At the beginning of the program the braceros were accommodated in existing facilities on farms. In 1943, the agency Farm Production Council (FPC) was created to provide housing for farmworkers. The FPC helped growers or farm owners, whose concerns was to maximize profits while minimally comply with regulations, to build their housing camps. The FPC distributed tents and supplies and provided services to growers that help them maintain the camps.¹³

The assumption was that Braceros workers were all male and the provided housing was set to accommodate large numbers of temporary male workers in the form of bunkhouses or barrack style housing, tents, and shacks or makeshift dwelling structures. The lack of privacy in these accommodations enforced extreme levels of exposure where toilet rooms were shared and multiple toilets were placed in one room without any partitions. On the other hand, braceros experienced social isolation because camps were located far away from towns, and they depended on grower’s transportation to go to the towns.¹⁴

Paradoxically, 80 years after the inception of the Bracero program when we study the housing conditions of Latinx farmworkers in the U.S, nowadays we observe similar housing conditions for farm owner-provided housing. One could argue that almost a century later, the exploitative labor and the precarious housing conditions of Latinx farmworker are not only like the Braceros’ ones but they have worsened. The case studies in Vermont and Mississippi aim to shed some light on these oppressive housing conditions that are intrinsically related to job precarity and human right abuses.



Figure 3. Singlewide trailer home from the 1970's. Photo by author

VERMONT DAIRY FARMWORKERS: RUNDOWN TRAILER HOMES AND BARRACK-LIKE HOUSING

In Vermont, Latinx farmworkers both documented and undocumented are an essential part of the dairy industry.¹⁵ This immigrant farmworker community face numerous challenges including worker's rights abuses and human rights abuses. They usually live in owner-provided housing in the farms with no transportation experiencing extreme isolation and intense employer surveillance. Like the Bracero workers, their lack of basic freedoms and marginalization is further exacerbated by their housing conditions. The organization Migrant Justice, that advocates for immigrant rights to fair working conditions and housing, has tirelessly reported and called out countless cases of poor housing conditions in Vermont dairy farms.¹⁶

The singlewide housing typology has been widely used across the U.S in many industries. Singlewide type of trailer home is usually used for farmworkers living in farms and once is placed on a site it is rarely moved to another site becoming a permanent structure. Latinx farmworkers often times live in overcrowding conditions and have to put up with dilapidated trailers in some cases with pest infestations, without potable water, sewage backing up issues, leaking roofs, and no heating to endure the extreme Vermont winters.¹⁷

In addition to trailer homes, migrant workers in Vermont also live in barns and other agricultural buildings such as storage buildings and garages. As the organization Migrant Justice reports on overcrowding and poor housing conditions of migrant workers:

"On one half they still keep the tractors, and on the other half is where we live' ... The six farmworkers shared four bedrooms between them and built furniture out of materials they found on the farm. One worker slept on an overturned concrete basin, originally used as the cows' drinking trough. Facundo built his bed by laying a mattress on a few layers of plywood." Migrant Justice¹⁸

Like in the Braceros' camps, the trailer homes and housing accommodations in barns and farm buildings are usually intended to be occupied by male farmworkers contributing to bias against female farmworkers and family life, reinforcing isolation and lack of community life.¹⁹ The substandard housing conditions directly impact Latinx farmworkers health, the overall wellbeing of the community, and their opportunities to integrate and be included in the American social fabric.

MISSISSIPPI CHICKEN-PLANT WORKERS: TRAILER

PARKS AND DILAPIDATED HOMES

During recent decades, rural communities in Mississippi have received immigrants from Latin America to work on chicken plants.²⁰ The hurdles to access to safe and secure housing in the Latinx community are interconnected with their immigration status and their limited access to resources. On August 9th 2019, the U.S. Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) conducted the largest single-state immigration enforcement operation in U.S. history. These massive raids were conducted in chicken plants in six small towns in rural Mississippi where 680 Latinx immigrants were arrested.

These raids significantly impacted six small rural communities located near Jackson (MS)²¹ and had devastating impacts in the Latinx community exposing their struggles to access housing and other injustices they endure on their everyday life. In Mississippi the Latinx community is limited to a housing stock that is deteriorated with unsafe and unhealthy conditions.

"...Our community live in what we called the "trailas"... many of these houses are dangerous environments for the health, especially on drink water...there are issues of lead contamination..." (Community organizer)

The immigration raids amplified several problems within the community including access to safe and secure housing. The Latinx community experience housing instability because of loss of employment and lack of access to resources. As a community organizer explains housing insecurity of the Latinx community after the immigration raids:

"...You have folks that have been here for eighteen years that have been paying... and when they weren't able to make some of their rentas... what they had to do is leave their apartments, and go live in somebody's bedroom..." (Latinx activist) Translation by author.

In addition to precarious housing conditions, in order to be able to pay rent, Latinx families experience overcrowding living conditions with multiple families sharing one house.

"...there have been some people who have been forced to leave their towns and to find safer housing... but what they do is they will go from one house to another in the same town..." (Latinx activist) Translation by author.

Like in other areas of the country, a great number of the members of Latinx community live in mobile homes in trailer parks in Mississippi. Sometimes two or three families share a housing unit to offset the cost of rent and other expenses.

"...so if you talked to some people, they'll tell you, we stay with "la señora Maria Blah blah" where each family has

a room and pays three-hundred, four-hundred dollars..." (Latinx activist) Translation by author.

These overcrowded housing conditions impacts nearly every aspect from human life, children education and school, personal relationships, and health which was deeply impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the early stages of the pandemic, the Latinx community was the first community affected in Mississippi. Despite of their immigration status, their jobs were declared essential, and they had to continue go to work and endure overcrowding conditions at home.

"...that was terrible during COVID. They were getting sick and when you had four families living in one house, everybody got sick. So it was, we had a lot of hotspots..." (Latinx activist) Translation by author.

Undocumented Latinx immigrants are not eligible for any benefits of any housing assistance or subsidized programs. This ineligibility of benefits is especially important when their job precarity is threatened like it was the case of the immigration raids that left hundreds of families on the verge of evictions in several small towns in Mississippi. This reality gives them very limited options and are forced to rent dilapidated properties enduring substandard housing conditions. Because of the housing demand by Latinx renters, landlords can make profit from dilapidated housing exposing inhabitants to serious environmental and health risks.²²

CONCLUSION

This paper underscores increasing spatial justice discourse into the way precarious housing conditions influence the lived spaces of Latinx immigrant communities and their experiences in small communities and towns across the United States. It brings attention to the consequences of the 'out of sight, out of mind' approach to housing issues and its interconnections with exploitative labor practices that affect immigrant communities.

Immigration status and labor conditions directly impact lived spaces and poor housing conditions of Latinx communities. Dilapidated trailer homes and barrack-like housing in farms and small towns are part of the everyday life of Latinx immigrants impacting their health and overall wellbeing. Trailer homes have been widely used as a form of employer-provided housing accommodation for farmworkers living and working in farms and is predominantly the housing typology used by Latinx living and working in small towns and rural areas across the United States.

The problematic farm owner-provided housing accentuates the surveillance and control on Latinx bodies as well as their isolation by living and working in remote rural areas. This further increases the 'visibility-invisibility' dichotomy of Latinx

immigrants. They are highly visible to their employer and are in constant surveillance because they work and live in the same place; and at the same time they are invisible to society, the abuses they experience, and their existence are highly obscured from the public view.²³

Finally, this study reveals housing injustices and barriers the Latinx community have been experiencing for more than 80 years to access to adequate housing conditions. Although there are studies from the fields of community development and the social sciences, the topic of housing precarity in the Latinx community still remains largely absent from public debate and architectural discourse. As Latinx lived spaces and experiences continued to be marginalized, this paper informs future architectural research and advocates for innovative and inclusive ways that architectural research, education, and practice could contribute to the well-being of vulnerable and disenfranchised Latinx communities.

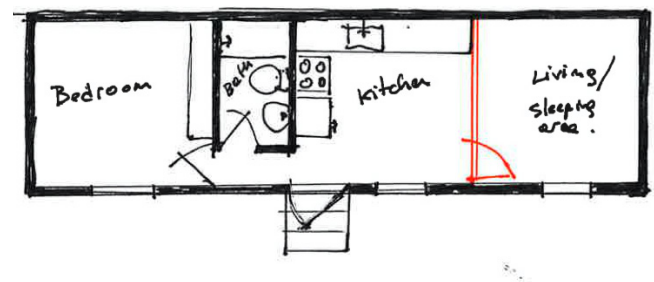


Figure 4. Sketch based on interviews and field work. Sketch by author

ENDNOTES

1. See: Mares, Teresa M. 2019. *Life on the Other Border: Farmworkers and Food Justice in Vermont*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 29-54; Licona, Adela C., and Marta Maria Maldonado. 2014. "The Social Production of Latin@ Visibilities and Invisibilities: Geographies of Power in Small Town America." *Antipode* 46 (2): 517-536.
2. Keller, Julie C. 2019. *Milking in the Shadows: Migrants and Mobility in America's Dairyland*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 82-84.
3. See: Mitchell, Don. 2012. "La Casa de Esclavos Modernos: Exposing the Architecture of Exploitation." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 71 (4): 451-461; Keller, Julie C. 2019; Lopez Barrera, Silvina, and Erin Sassin. 2021. "Centro Cultural Movil: Critical Service Learning and Design with Latinx Farmworkers." In *Public Space/Contested Space: Imagination and Occupation*, by Kevin D. Murphy and Sally O'Driscoll, 78-93. New York: Routledge.
4. Sullivan, Esther. 2018. *Manufactured Insecurity: Mobile Home Parks and American's Tenuous Right to Place*. Oakland: University of California Press, 31-52.
5. McAlester, Virginia Savage. 2013. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. United States: Alfred A. Knopf, 148-155.
6. Salamon, Sonya, and Katherine Mactavish. 2017. *Singlewide: Chasing the America Dream in a Rural Trailer Park*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1-12.
7. Idem.
8. Keller, Julie C. 2019.
9. See: Radel, Claudia, Birgit Schmook, and Susannah McCandless. 2010. "Environment, Transnational Labor Migration, and Gender: Case Studies from Southern Yucatán, Mexico and Vermont, USA." *Population and Environment* 32: 177-197; Mares, Teresa M. 2019; Lopez Barrera, Silvina, and Erin Sassin. 2021.
10. Sullivan, Esther. 2018.
11. Esterberg, K. 2002. *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston: McGraw Hill; Neuman, W.L. 2003. *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. New York: Allyn and Bacon.
12. Library of Congress. n.d. *A Latinx Resource Guide: Civil Rights Cases and Events in the United States*. Accessed October 16, 2022. <https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/bracero-program>.
13. Mitchell, Don. 2012.
14. Mitchell, Don. 2012; Mares, Teresa M. 2019.
15. Baker, Daniel. 2013. "Latino Dairy Workers in Vermont." 2013 Series | Communities & Banking, Spring: 5-7.
16. See: Migrant Justice. 2021. 02 07. Accessed 10 17, 2022. <https://migrantjustice.net/hannaford-housing>; Radel, Schmook and McCandless. 2010; Flores, Yolanda. 2017. "Latino farmworker activism in Vermont: Migrant Justice/Justicia Migrante." *Lat Stud* 15: 516-521; Mares, Teresa M. 2019; Lopez Barrera and Sassin. 2021.
17. Idem.
18. Migrant Justice. 2021. 02 07. Accessed 10 17, 2022. <https://migrantjustice.net/hannaford-housing>
19. Radel, Schmook and McCandless. 2010; Mitchell, Don. 2012.
20. Stuesse, Angela. 2016. *Scratching Out a Living: Latinos, Race, and Work on the Deep South*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.
21. Affected towns by immigration raids in Mississippi: Bay Springs, Carthage, Canton, Morton, Pelahatchie and Sebastopol.
22. Lopez Barrera, Silvina, and Diego Thompson. 2022. "Housing Insecurity and Latinx Community Resilience in Small Towns in Mississippi." *Proceedings of the ARCC-EAAE Architectural Research Centers Consortium International Conference*.
23. See: Mitchell, Don. 1996. *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers in the California Landscape*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Licona, Adela C., and Marta Maria Maldonado. 2014; Mares, Teresa M. 2019; Keller, Julie C. 2019; Thompson, Diego. 2021. "Building and transforming collective agency and collective identity to address Latinx farmworkers' needs and challenges in rural Vermont." *Agriculture and Human Values* 38 (4): 129-143.

