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## Places

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## Plaza, Parque, Colonia

Salem, N.M., one of the newest Mexican-American settlements in the U.S., is typical of half a dozen similar communities in the Mesilla Valley of the Rio Grande, which runs north from El Paso and the border with Mexico.

Salem is a *colonia*, a hardscrabble place that is home to Mexicans who gained legalized residence or citizenship under the amnesty provided by the 1986 Immigration Reform Act. *Colonias* generally are unincorporated, lack most basic services and are full of cheaply built shacks and used trailers that do not meet building codes.

Residents find employment picking and processing the chiles, long-grain cotton and pecans that are the main crops of this region — work from which they earn, on average, less than \$7,000 a year. Most work in fields and factories around Hatch (a town about five miles away), south to Las Cruces, and west to Deming, about 60 miles away.

No matter what a worker's circumstances, a home in a *colonia* like Salem represents a great step towards permanence in his life. Those unable to afford homes may commute every day from El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, more than an hour away via Interstate 10, or live under the bridges that cross the

arroyos or the Rio Grande. Only the luckiest find a place to live in the FmHA-sponsored housing in Hatch. A house in a *colonia* usually represents a worker's second capital investment; the first is an automobile. The cheapest trailer costs \$2,500.

Salem is not a place that has been won easily. It was platted some 25 years ago and the first resident moved in about 13 years ago. The streets are narrow and all but two are unpaved. There is only one shop, a video store.

Salem, N.M.

Photos courtesy E. K. Willis.



The land was not subdivided thoughtfully. Lots and streets were laid out without regard to the presence of *arroyos*, or five-foot-deep channels that carry flood waters about once a year. Some residents have built masonry walls across the gullies, others have filled in their share of the *arroyos* to flatten out their properties.

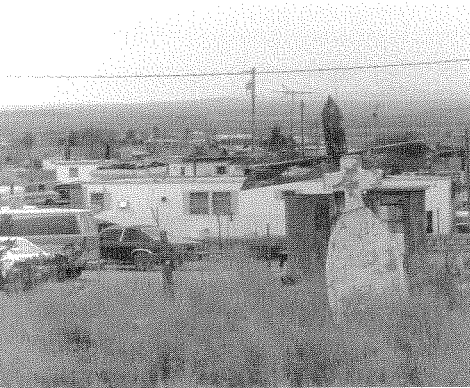
About three years ago, the Catholic Diocese of Las Cruces began to organize Salem's residents and help them identify priorities for improving their community. Diocese social workers thought the residents would be most interested in improving their working conditions. But the residents' first priority was bringing natural gas service. Without it, they depended on jerry-rigged systems of gas tanks and plastic tubing for cooking and heating — an extremely dangerous set-up. A year

after residents started work on this issue, the natural gas utility agreed to run service from a trunk line that runs under the state highway nearby.

The residents' second priority was naming the streets and installing traffic control signs at intersections. This was important not only for preventing accidents, but also for helping emergency vehicles find their way around the *colonia*. Although residents wanted to name the streets themselves, they discovered that the streets had been given names like Independence Street when they were platted, and those names were kept.

The third priority was a park. Last year, a local state legislator won an appropriation of \$100,000 to buy land and start building the park. All the lots in Salem have been sold, so the park will be built on a nine-acre, state-owned site at the edge of the community.

Last fall, community members began discussing the park among themselves, with organizers and with land-



Left: Typical housing in Salem.  
Below: The site for Salem's park.



scape architect Joni Gutierrez. The residents wanted the park to include a *placita*, a traditional town square, and raised the idea of building a chapel.

To Carlos Corral, a diocesan organizer who grew up in a *colonia* next to the town of Anthony on the New Mexico-Texas border, this made perfect sense. Many of the residents in *colonias* like Salem were raised in Mexico, or their parents in larger cities, in settlements called *ejidos* that have grown up at the edge of older Mexican cities and are similar in many ways to the *colonias*. Many of the *ejidos* have *placitas*, small public spaces that front a *capella*, or chapel, but are not lined with the civic and commercial buildings that eventually came to surround plazas. "Every town in Mexico has its *placita*. You go there to eat, to relax. When we ask the people in Salem, I bet they'd like to build a little *kiosco*," Corral said.

The residents have other ideas for the park, as well, including space for baseball and soccer fields, basketball

courts, a community center and a fire station. To Gutierrez, who designs parks for the city of Las Cruces (some 40 miles away), this is no surprise. She has learned that while the memory of traditional plazas and *placitas* lives on, many Mexican-Americans also seek the same recreational facilities that can be found in typical "American" neighborhood parks.

This blurring of cultural borders is evident even in Salem, an outpost that is, nevertheless, on the cutting edge of Mexican-American life. The park design evokes the timeless relationship between *placitas* and Mexican community life, and it demonstrates the openness to adaption, the possibility for evolution that has enabled this type of space to endure for centuries.

— Todd W. Bressi

The Salem subdivision and sketch plan of the new park. Map, drawing courtesy Joni Gutierrez.

