

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Los Angeles -- The Enacted Environment of East Los Angeles

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/84x3x9t2>

Journal

Places, 8(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Rojas, James T

Publication Date

1993-04-01

Peer reviewed

The Enacted Environment of East Los Angeles

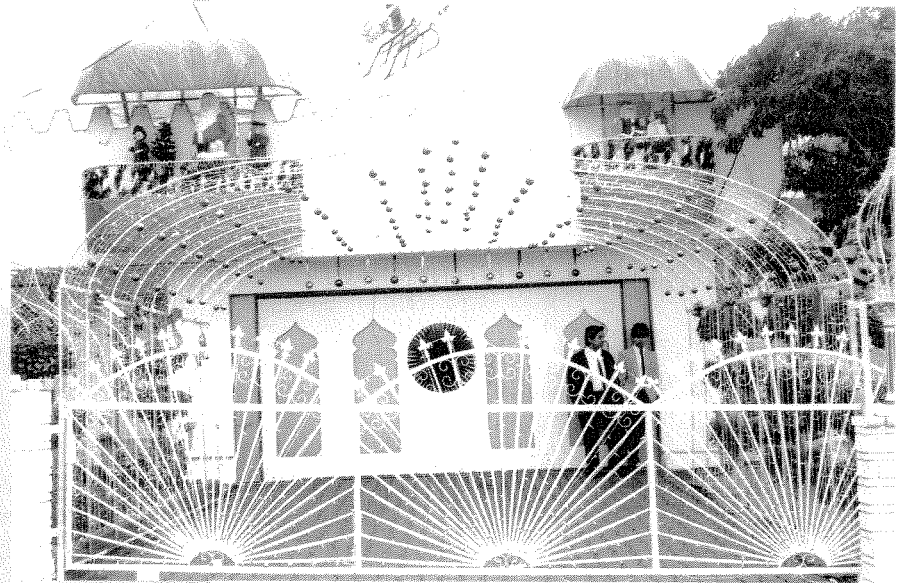
James T. Rojas

One planning report on East Los Angeles found that the area “lacks a physical identity . . . therefore needs a plaza.” Funny they should say that. As everyone in Los Angeles knows, and as visitors can perceive, East L.A. has a very strong identity that is created by the way its Mexican and Mexican-American residents use its spaces. East L.A. is an animated and extroverted environment that confronts the viewer; no space is left unmarked or unused.

By working, playing and “hanging out” in spaces like streets, front yards and driveways, East L.A. residents create a spontaneous, dynamic and animated landscape that is unlike any other in Los Angeles. These spaces, which often isolate residents in other communities, bring the residents of East L.A. together. The identity of the place is created through the culturally related behavior patterns of the residents. It is not built; it is enacted.



Mariachis, murals, yard sales and social fences help activate the environment of East Los Angeles.





Above: Pushcart vendors sell their wares on the street.
Below: Laborers wait for day jobs.



Selling on the Street

Street vendors are one of the most noticeable elements in the East L.A. landscape. They flow in and out of commercial and residential areas and attract crowds wherever they go.

Los Moscos (flies), as they have been called,¹ are day laborers who use the streets to sell their menial labor. From 10 to as many as 50 men station themselves at strategic locations (near hardware stores and major traffic arteries), positioning themselves on the street so they can confront drivers with their eyes. If a driver shows any kind of interest and slightly slows down, he will be swarmed by work-hungry men.

Mariachis (Mexican musicians) walk from bar to bar in their black uniforms and instruments looking for work. They station themselves at one particular corner, where prospective employers go to hire them for events.

“Carriers,” who sell anything they can carry, are the simplest form of vendor because they do not have much overhead. For example, one man carries around a box of tapes while another carries a long pole with wicker baskets of silk flowers hanging from each end.

“Asphalt vendors” stand by strategic freeway off-ramps and on median strips at major intersections. They keep their wares on the ground, in shopping carts, or in plastic bags tied to chain link fences. These vendors approach cars as they stop at intersections and try to sell the occupants a bag of oranges or peanuts for a dollar.

“Pushcart vendors” roam the streets selling exotic fruit cocktails, tamales, ice cream and vegetables. One resident said, “In the morning a man comes around selling bread and vegetables and later in the day different vendors come selling other eatable items.” The pushcart vendors almost look out of place on the suburban streets of East L.A., dodging moving cars as they push their small carts.

“Tent vendors” sell odds and ends from their front lawns and sidewalks, mainly on Saturdays, much like a garage sale. Fences are an important part of this composition because they hold up items and easily delineate the selling space. One boy had sacks of peanuts tied to the fence in front of his house and conducted business from a small table on the sidewalk.

“Auto vendors” are a spontaneous sort who drive around to different locations to find the right market. They conduct business from their truck or car by parking on the roadside and setting up shop. Some will set up tents on vacant lots, while others prefer street corners. Some trucks have been converted to elaborate roving bazaars with things attached everywhere.

“Roach coaches,” or food trucks, have long been part of the American vending fabric. In East L.A., these stainless steel trucks

have been redesigned with long windows on the side to serve customers and personalized with names like “Maritita’s.” They have become very popular and follow Mexicans all over the city, from West Side construction sites to *discotecas* in Hollywood.

No Blank Walls

In East L.A., blank wall space has become a tableau for cultural expression for *cholos* (gang members), political groups and shop owners. Very few walls are left untouched by graffiti, store signs, or murals. Even garage doors, fences, sidewalks, benches, buses and freeway signs have become displays of personal expression. All this expression creates a new reality of visual stimulation, “fills in” the landscape and reveals the different sorts of order in a place.

Graffiti, the most prolific form of visual communication, can be found just about everywhere. To the outsider none of these markings make any sense, but to the people that make and read them, they do. *Cholos*, for example, use graffiti as territorial indicators. Most residents do not like graffiti and are constantly painting over it.

Stores and buildings are kinetic because of their flamboyant use of graphics and words. The use of both pictures and words is very common. Certain pictures indicate the type of store. A large pig’s head or jersey cow indicates a butcher shop. Cornucopias indicate vegetable and fruit stands.

Murals, the most celebrated form of public decoration, express many different values. They add an element of public art and local culture to otherwise dull buildings and streets by saluting pedestrians and motorists, and they make otherwise marginal spaces very tolerable. Many buildings are painted from top to bottom, which changes the character of these sometimes rather plain structures.

Religious murals of Our Lady of Guadeloupe are popular because she is the patron saint of Mexico. Murals from the ’70s often express social concerns. However, the most common murals are those commissioned by shop owners for advertisements; these can be whimsical and animated. On one corner, a bar with an aquatic theme is covered with an ocean-blue mural; Neptune’s eyes gaze out with a mischievous look. On another corner, another bar is covered with a mural of a woman in a bathing suit smoking a cigarette and having some fun.

Most murals are painted on the large walls on the side of corner buildings. They “wrap” the commercial activity from a busy street into otherwise quiet streets and forgotten areas. These transitional corner spots are important places. Often, vendors will hang out in these locations, further activating the space.



Pushcart vendors seem out of place in suburban scale East L.A.



Murals adorn a front yard wall.

Props

Props add a layer of architecture to the landscape and help make spaces usable. Props produce a sense of security in a place by acting as territorial markers: they are apparent and aggressive; they can be seen, heard, felt and smelled.

A parked car can become the center of a day's activities just by shifting its location. A pushcart selling ice cream occasions a fleeting moment of social exchange between eager children. A sofa under a tree or on a porch can be a place for residents to wallow away the afternoon. A barbecue pit can generate revenue and be a place to swap neighborhood gossip.

Music is used as a prop because sound can control and define a space. Spanish and disco music are aggressive to some, normal to others. *Mariachis* and car stereos add to the ambiance through their music; each appeals to a different audience. The music adds an extra layer to the landscape.

Many shop owners have replaced the fronts of their stores with glass walls that can be opened during the day; these "opened ends" connect indoor and outdoor spaces. Inexpensive wares, placed in front of the store, serve as a three-dimensional display that adds a tactile quality to the pedestrian experience and advertises what's inside.

Olympic Boulevard, otherwise a no-man's land, has been "pedestrianized" by the use of props. Gas stations have been converted into taco stands by the heavy use of props and only minor changes to the structure. Pumps are replaced with tables and chairs, which make a bold attempt to capture and re-enforce street activity; people can sit here and have direct visual access to the street. Wrought iron sheds are sometimes added in an attempt to enclose some of the seating areas. The thirty-foot sign that advertised the gasoline company now announces the taco stand.

The use of props in both residential and commercial areas creates a connection between the two. Props scale down the landscape to a pedestrian level that contradicts the automobile scale of Los Angeles. Driving on the streets of East L.A. all one sees is a clutter of people, props and vendors. Walking, however, one experiences a rich, tactile landscape that enhances the enacted environment. What might seem like a visual mess from an automobile becomes a personal and vivid experience for the pedestrian.

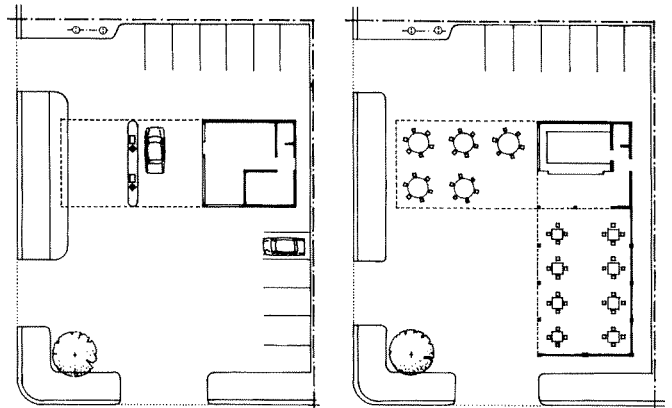
La Yarda: A Personal Expression

Nowhere in the landscape of East L.A. is the Mexican use of space so illuminated and celebrated than in the enclosed front yard. Since many Mexican homes do not have American, sub-



Top and bottom: Gas stations have been turned into pedestrian-oriented restaurants.

Center: How a typical conversion works.





The front yard is a place for personal expression.

urban-style front yards, residents of East L.A. have reinterpreted them. The front yard has become, through use and design, a place for personal expression and for recreating traditional Mexican housing forms.

Houses in East L.A. are sited on their lots just like other suburban American houses, but the enclosure and personalization of front yards has greatly changed their appearance. In fact, the enclosed front yard is such a dominant element that it has altered the physical character of entire neighborhoods as well as residents' behavior patterns.

In a middle-class neighborhood, the appearance of one's front yard is a standard for being accepted into the community. In East L.A., the green, parklike setting that open front yards create in typical American suburbs has been cut up into individual slices that permit a greater range of expressiveness, create visual diversity and allow sociability to take place more readily. The appearance of one's front yard expresses one's individuality; acceptance is based on physical and social contact with neighbors.

Depending on the practical needs of the owner, the use and design of the front yard vary from junk yards to elaborate courtyard gardens reminiscent of Mexico. The maintenance of the front yard varies from house to house; one may be kept up nicely while the next is not. No one is ever penalized for not watering or taking care of his front yard.

In these enclosed front yards, the residents' private worlds unfold. All the sights and sounds from the uncontrollable street have been manipulated and tailored to the needs of the owner. The enclosed front yard acts like a room without a ceiling because of the personalization and sense of security. Things that look like clutter from outside the fences actually are as organized and purposeful as objects in a room.

Most outsiders are not prepared to read front yards and think they are unsightly. But East L.A. residents identify with these front yards because they understand and can read the personalization. Walking down a neighborhood street, one becomes aware of who might be living in each house. Residents might be outside doing something in their front yard, or the objects they leave in the yard might display traces of their lives. Toys speak of children living in a house; lots of cars and auto parts might indicate that teenagers live there. A lack of planting along the fence might indicate a dog runs around the front yard. Intricate gardens, potted plants, small statues and other elements that shelter a house from the street might indicate an elderly person resides there or that the resident is not too involved in street activity.

Fences: A Social Catalyst

One can find fences in many American front yards, of course. But for East L.A. residents, fences are a social catalyst that brings together neighbors and passersby for interaction. Fences break down social and physical barriers by creating a comfortable point between a front yard and sidewalk where people can congregate.

The use of fences in the front yard modifies the approach to the house and moves the threshold from the front door to the front gate (mailboxes, for example, are hung on the fence or front gate rather than near the front door). The enclosed front yard serves as a physical barrier between the private spaces of the home and the public spaces of the street; it acts as a large foyer and becomes an active part of the household.

Stepping into the front yard from the sidewalk, one feels as if one is entering a home. The front gate or entry, sometimes made of wrought iron fencing or even masonry, can be articulated with structural elements such as arches — giving it a sense of being a building that is independent of the actual house.

The enclosed front yard becomes a large, “defendable” threshold, which, in fact, allows for more social interaction to take place. In a typical American home or apartment, which lacks a defendable threshold, there is great pressure to define social interaction because one cannot have a comfortable conversation at a front door or in a hallway. In East L.A., it is perfectly acceptable to have conversations at the front gate and not to invite people into the home.

The social interaction one experiences in the enclosed front yard is neither as demanding nor as intimate as that which takes place in a house. Since this space is public, the interaction is very casual, like being in an outdoor cafe where one could stare off for a few seconds and not offend one’s companions. In the front yard, one is always aware of cars and people going by on the street. Collectively, the enclosed front yards in these neighborhoods create a very intimate atmosphere. The fences along the street break up the lawn space of each home, and the street becomes more urban than suburban in character because the fence reflects the personality of each resident. The street can now function like a plaza, and every resident can participate in the public street from the protection of his private yard.

East L.A. Vernacular

In Los Angeles, the city of suburban dream homes where architectural freedom runs rampant, the small housescapes of East L.A. seem inconsequential compared to houses designed by architects like Greene and Greene, Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler and Frank Gehry.



Social interaction takes places at the front gate.



But the small, modern houses in East L.A. are distinctive because they were built by non-architects. They have evolved into what I call “East L.A. vernacular” because the combination of design and usage (people, props and physical form) is unique to this area. The houses are customized and personal; every change, no matter how small, has meaning and purpose. The colors, building materials and personal items used to embellish houses, fences and front yards offer a public face to the street.

Shy American-style homes are transformed to an extroverted form that sets the stage for the enacted environment. Each house communicates with others. People, fences and porches help extend household activities to the street. Instead of hiding behind a lawn and shrubs, suddenly each house comes forward, staking its claim to the pavement. The neighborhood feels filled in, physically and socially. The sidewalk and street feel more controlled because the household reaches right to these public areas.

The typical Mexican courtyard house and household extends itself to all four sides of the lot and is designed with a patio or courtyard in the center; this form accommodates the warm weather and reflects Spanish precedents. Because most rooms face the patio, it becomes a central point into which the flow of the household radiates. Similarly, in East L.A., the house is defined by the property line rather than the floor plan or exterior walls; the front yard and fence are integral parts of the household.

In the typical American house plan, rooms are arranged in a strong linear sequence that depends on their degree of publicness, from the front living room (public) to the back bedroom (private). But in the Mexican household, as one Mexican put it, “Most rooms are not private because many times rooms have been attached to each other as the family grows, regardless of their adjacency to other rooms. Many times one has to go through one bedroom to get to others. Many people also keep their doors open to the patio because of the hot weather.”

American house plans seek to protect individual privacy through the arrangement of rooms; the typical Mexican house plan tries to keep the family separate from the general public. In East L.A., the front yard and porch can be considered semi-private rather than semi-public because the space flows out of the home to the porch, front yard and fence.

Driveways are an important feature that allows for many ephemeral uses — parking cars, children playing, barbecuing, or partying. In most cases, the driveway runs the full length of the lot on one side. The garage is placed in the back yard, rather than at the front of the house. Most houses have easy access to the driveway through a side door. The importance of



Fences and thresholds help extend household space to the street.





The space of the house reaches out to the property line and is defined by fences.



East L.A. vernacular is a form of empowerment.

the driveway increases as additional houses are built on the lot over time; the driveway serves as an outdoor hallway along which residents walk between their houses and the street.

In many American neighborhoods the use and importance of front porches has declined for various reasons, and most new homes are built without them. In East L.A., front porches have gained a new importance because many residents use them, and because they help connect the enacted front yard to the house. The porch is often decorated with personal and useful items, such as potted plants, bird cages and furniture.

Learning from the Enacted Environment

Modern structures neatly package and organize people in comprehensible arrangements of space; life is hidden behind facades. Recently, architects and urban designers have realized that the presence of people can add a rich texture to the often banal urban and suburban landscape, and they have responded by introducing street furniture, plants and vendors in the design of public spaces.

The resulting settings look like they could sustain the street life of East L.A., but there is a basic difference. In those settings, the use of props is planned and the space controls the user, rather than the user controlling the space. The enacted environment of East L.A. is not planned; the props and vendors reflect the nature of the people. The enacted environment is made up of individual actions that are ephemeral but nevertheless part of a persistent process.

People have always criticized the Mexicans of East L.A. for being nonpolitical because they do not vote. The word “politics” comes from the Greek word *polis*, or city. There are two kinds of politics in the world, theoretical and practical. Theoretical politics are the politics of politicians, who discuss how people should live their lives. Practical politics is the way we conduct our everyday lives and express our existence.

By examining the enacted environment of East L.A., one becomes aware of the politics of everyday life. The residents have created a life in their environment that says something about themselves. They may not have political control, at least in theoretical terms, but I would argue that the residents have empowered themselves through the way they use their front yards and their streets.

Note

1. Bruce Kelley, “El Mosco,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine* (18 March 1990), 11.