

UC Davis

UC Davis Previously Published Works

Title

Review: Latino Placemaking and Planning: Cultural Resilience and Strategies for Reurbanization by Jesus J. Lara

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/98d8n249>

Journal

Journal of Planning Education and Research, 40(4)

ISSN

0739-456X

Author

Barajas, Jesus M

Publication Date

2020-12-01

DOI

10.1177/0739456x19833758

Peer reviewed

Lara, Jesus J. 2018. *Latino Placemaking and Planning: Cultural Resilience and Strategies for Reurbanization*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press. 162 pp. ISBN 978-0-8165-3709-9

Reviewed by: Jesus M. Barajas, *University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign* for *Journal of Planning Education and Research*

Nearly 59 million Latinos live in the United States, one-third of whom are immigrants. While no longer the fastest growing immigrant group, they still make up a significant proportion of both the newly-arrived and the long-tenured. They tend to be young, employed, driven to homeownership, and, despite some popular narratives, have ample income to spend on consumer goods. Latino immigrants are moving to places they have never moved to before; to be sure, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles remain popular places to go, but many newcomers settle instead in other cities like Indianapolis or Columbus where the distinctive sights, sounds, and smells of Latino neighborhoods are more novel. In the context of these demographic changes, Jesus J. Lara asks in *Latino Placemaking and Planning* how Latinos have transformed their neighborhoods and what lessons can be learned for other places where revitalization has been slower to come by.

To answer these questions, Lara writes both broadly and deeply on Latinos in the United States and their contributions to neighborhood change. The book begins by establishing the spatial and sociodemographic story of Latinos in the United States. The general trends of immigration and demographic change ring familiar. Foreign-born Latinos are deconcentrating from traditional sites of immigration and settling in both smaller cities and suburbs, which leads to increasing proportions of US-born Latinos too. How substantial has this growth been? Quite: In three of every ten counties in the US, the Latino population at least doubled between 2000 and 2010. Such dynamic shifts in demographics and residential location show that Latinos form a powerful economic and political force that employers, marketers, and political leaders across the country must court if they want to stay relevant. This background chapter does not explicitly connect these population trends to distinctive Latino reurbanization strategies, but it clearly creates a case for why culturally-relevant placemaking activities have broad applicability.

The literature review ties together theories and descriptions of placemaking and Latino Urbanism. Bottom-up, organic planning and organizing is how people make place; top-down, professional planning can too often stand in the way. That is, when people take initiative in shaping their neighborhoods the way that works and matters for them, they feel more ownership and thus become more deeply

attached to their communities. Lara writes that “successful placemaking practices pay close attention to ways in which the physical, social, ecological, cultural, and even spiritual qualities of place are intimately defined” (p. 31). Latino Urbanism is an umbrella term for describing how these practices play out in Latino communities. Latino Urbanism creates compact and walkable environments and active public spaces, qualities that give them a passing resemblance to other forms of compact development such as New Urbanism or transit-oriented development (TOD). But whereas New Urbanism and TODs center on place, Latino Urbanism encompasses a different historical context. Latinos have had to overcome discriminatory and segregating practices by appropriating and reappropriating space through entrepreneurial business development and inclusive community engagement. Another key tenet of Latino Urbanism is that cultural elements and social networks are the backbone of place, which draws to mind the broader sociological literature on immigrant patterns of settlement.

The heart of *Latino Placemaking and Planning* consists of case studies that provide evidence of the positive role Latinos have had in remaking places—particularly those that have transformed from vacant, declining neighborhoods into vibrant centers of community and commerce. Readers are taken to five commercial corridors in Phoenix, Detroit, Indianapolis, and Columbus, all focal points of Latino life in these cities, though otherwise varied in their built environment and demographic composition. Each of these case studies is conducted in a similar manner: Lara analyzes Latino population change in each corridor and city for their potential effects on communities; he assesses the local conditions through variables of density, accessibility, safety, retail, and capacity-building elements; and he reviews the economic trends and impacts in each corridor. The goal is to develop a set of principles that seeks to improve the social, cultural, and economic sustainability of Latino neighborhoods. Statistics in each case study are descriptive, focused on population and an accounting of the number and variety of Latino businesses and social service agencies in each corridor. Informal interviews with business owners about their perceptions of their neighborhoods add qualitative depth to each case study, as do descriptions of the built environment and analyses of accessibility across all modes of transportation.

What makes each case successful, in Lara’s estimation, is ethnic economic entrepreneurship. The business communities turned formerly vacant storefronts in strip malls or other commercial areas into businesses and services that met Latino immigrants’ needs, such as restaurants, markets, specialty stores, and immigrant-serving social organizations. The concentration of these activities, and

the way in which businesses engage with the public space through visual displays or sidewalk vending, create vibrant places for gathering, socializing, and community gathering. Another key to development was the community-driven processes by which these places came about. In some cases, leadership and growth came in the void of formalized planning processes, which had abandoned areas in decline or otherwise deprioritized them. The lack of top-down prescriptions illustrates the role that planners should take in encouraging economically, culturally, and environmentally sustainable immigrant communities. Lara argues that “planners, designers, and policy makers need to step back and take a more enabling approach to planning rather than a prescriptive one. The value and approach of ‘bottom-up’ processes initiated by local residents and community leaders need to be recognized” (p. 125).

The success of organic placemaking in these cases suggests a few strategies for creating vibrant and healthy communities, which comprises the final chapter of the book. First, planners should pay attention to what is already working and support efforts to turn these corridors into cultural destinations by capitalizing on their uniqueness. This could be through supporting local businesses through policy and investment, creating public-private partnerships for capital investments that improve the attractiveness of neighborhoods, and identifying neighborhood retail gaps and encouraging new small businesses to fill those missing services. Second, planners should work to build community capacity to provide the foundation for successful entrepreneurship, such as through training seminars, facilitating mentoring, and supporting network-building through immigrant organizations. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, planners must focus on the built environment and support changes that activate space.

Latino Placemaking and Planning leaves readers with the impression that immigrants can be the key to revitalization in many declining areas. The case of the West Vernor-Bagley Street Corridor is the most stark example of the book’s five cases: it is a lonely oasis of growth in the desert of Detroit’s decline. But the concluding chapter notes that the cases selected for the book are exceptional rather than normal; they illustrate what can make some places successful, but not necessarily what will make all places thrive. A useful supplement to validate these research findings would be to examine Latino neighborhoods where immigrant entrepreneurship was not able to turn a neighborhood around and whose future parallels that of the surrounding city. Each of the cases also has a strong focus on the role of the ethnic business community in creating places for eating, shopping, and gathering. While the book shares how other immigrant service organizations are also important in creating community, especially in places where immigrants

have long been settled so that the networks are strong, the actions and perceptions of other residents are notably absent. We do not learn how people who rely on the neighborhoods' economic and social services feel about how their needs are met and what they might think of their communities in the context of change elsewhere in the city.

Another important, but missing, nuance in telling the story of Latino placemaking is in distinguishing clearly how diversity in origins creates different needs across constituencies. While certainly there are commonalities across Latino groups, there is no singular pan-Latino identity. Foods and traditions in Oaxacan communities will not be the same as those from indigenous communities in El Salvador, nor will they necessarily resemble the histories of US-born Latinos. For example, while 95 percent of Latinos born abroad speak Spanish, at least 40 percent of Latinos born in the United States do not. Thus, the strategies that revitalize a Mexican immigrant neighborhood may not translate in the same way to a predominately middle-class US-born Latino neighborhood. Nevertheless, many of the prescriptions offered as successful neighborhood-building strategies are good planning no matter who the residents of the neighborhood are.

Latino Placemaking and Planning is a useful overview of the intersection of culture, identity, and place in Latino immigrant communities, accomplishing the mission of the University of Arizona Press Latinx Pop Culture series. It tries to strike the difficult balance of being scholarly while also accessible to a lay audience, and as such could make a good supplemental text in a course that focuses on immigrants in the city or the intersection of culture and planning. Scholars interested in Latino Urbanism will also find this book provides a foundation for further research.