

LATINO PLACEMAKING: HOW THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT RESHAPED EAST LA

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This guest article is by James Rojas, someone who has long inspired PPS by working and playing with him over the years. His pioneering research on Latino Placemaking demonstrates the informal creativity, common sense, and personal expression that is often missing from Placemaking in American culture. Building on this research, James' tireless work in communities is powerfully bringing out these qualities in everyone he meets.



As I played in my backyard in East Los Angeles on Saturday August 29, 1970, just a few blocks away the streets were aflame. The Chicano Moratorium, a protest against the recruitment of young Hispanics drafted into the Vietnam War and a demand for civil

rights, ended with the destruction of Whittier Boulevard, the East Los Angeles “main street”. My community was permanently changed. The visual and physical repercussions of that day reshaped the environment around me prompting me to launch my urban planning career and become a Latino placemaker.

Latino Placemaking goes beyond creating great public spaces. It also includes cultural identity, which is shaped by needs, desires, and imagination. The Latino quest for cultural identity parallels the African-American Civil Rights Movement of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, which has its genesis in protests - many of which were carried out in public spaces.

Eventually, the need to define the Chicano identity moved beyond politics. During the 1970s, public art became a defining aspect of the transformation of East Los Angeles. Aztlan, which is the mythical region where the Aztecs are said to have originated from, was scrawled on many walls alongside gang graffiti. Murals were painted on the blank walls of the East Los Angeles public housing projects and other public buildings. ASCO, a group of Chicano artists based in East Los Angeles, used ephemeral interventions such as a dinner party in a traffic island, performative murals, and sidewalk parades down Whittier Boulevard to create identity through the use of public space.



The initial grassroots artistic Chicano interventions of the 1970s created civic discourse and influenced architecture. Many of the public and private commercial buildings in East Los Angeles were designed and redesigned with Chicano identity in mind using tile, stucco, stone, wrought iron, and patios. The facades of the Roybal Center on Third Street, the First Street Store, and the Doctor's Hospital on Olympic Boulevard used murals, mosaics and cultural icons to enhance their buildings. These buildings became cultural landmarks that used images of the past to create an idealized image of the future utopia.



Barrio Planners, a team of architects and urban planners, focused their practice on building a Chicano utopia and designed El Mercado as a community serving space based on the design of a market in Guadalajara, Mexico. El Mercado was financed through a community collective and was originally designed as a two-story building with basement parking. The building had a large patio in the middle with a skylight that used natural light to flood the Mexican food stalls and the second floor restaurants and small shops. El Mercado or El Mercadito as it is referred to today remains one of the most popular tourist draws in East LA.

As Chicanos reorient the community both socially and spatially, the enduring term plaza, which is a place that brings people together, appears in the names of Eastside service organizations such as Plaza de La Raza. Public spaces in the Eastside were designed to mimic plazas such as Lincoln Park's El Parque de Mexico. With its numerous statues of Mexican heroes, it was built in part as a street enhancement project.



In the 1980's great numbers of Central American and Mexican immigrants began to migrate into many parts of Los Angeles, making it a polycentric Latino metropolis. They brought with them a different way to use and to imagine the suburban form. Their homes, ciudades, pueblos, and ranchos in Latin America are structured differently both physically and socially than the suburbs.

The loss of manufacturing jobs in Los Angeles in the 1980s made Latino Placemaking interventions economically driven. Street vendors roamed the streets and occupied sidewalks throughout Los Angeles. Day laborers hung around hardware stores. House workers would ride the buses across the greater Los Angeles area. Mariachis waited for

gigs at a donut shop in Boyle Heights. Latinos began to reshape public space beyond East Los Angeles with these shadow interventions.



In my MIT masters thesis “The Enacted Environment: The Creation of Place by Mexican and Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles” written in the late 1980s, I explored the physical and social changes reshaping my community. I focused on the everyday Latino behavior patterns, examining streets, sidewalks, front yards, houses, street vendors, and small businesses. This primer tells the story of a larger placemaking trend taking place not only in these neighborhoods, but across the country. The cultural impact of these community-based interventions are as crucial now as they were then to creating or continuing the identity that sense of place brings to our cities.

James Rojas is the founder of [Place It!](#) and the Latino Urban Forum, a non-profit dedicated to increasing awareness of planning and design issues facing low-income Latinos. He holds an MA in City Planning and an MS in Architecture Studies from MIT. You can read his full thesis [here](#) and he can be reached at jamestrojas@gmail.com.