Mi casa es su casa

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1. Aztec Warrior and the Virgen de Guadalupe

The Politics of Everyday Life in East Los Angeles

Even the briefest encounter with East Los Angeles reveals a landscape of heroic bricolage, a triumph of what Michel De Certeau calls "making do."[1] These lived spaces, exuberant but overlooked, pose an alternative to the middle-class American house, actual or imagined. Taking control of ordinary personal and social spaces, residents have transformed a stock of modest single-family houses into a distinctive domestic landscape. Extending their presence beyond their property lines to the sidewalk and street, they construct community solidarity from the inside out, house by house, street by street. Through personal and cultural alterations to their houses, the residents of East L.A. reenact, in innumerable individual versions, the social drama of Mexican migration to Los Angeles, invoking memories that are both unique and collective. The house and yard are sites of ambiguous signification, revealing the complex tensions between culture and personality, memory and innovation, Chicano and Mexican, Mexico and America. Charged with human expression, these houses reestablish use and meaning as their primary definition. By investing their dwellings with the personal values contained in their interests, competence, and originality, the residents remove them from the context of mass-market values, and thereby decommodify them.[2] Their pleasure in transformation and self-expression reclaim a central aspect of homeownership that many other Angelenos, obsessed with property values, have forgotten.

These activities appear to exemplify what De Certeau identifies as "tactics," the opportunistic maneuverings utilized by those without power. De Certeau's description of tactical operations emphasizes their momentary and circumstantial qualities, privileging fleeting experience over fixed and constructed space. Comparing tactics to the meandering footsteps of thousands of ordinary pedestrians in the city, De Certeau celebrates their creativity and their meaninglessness. Since they evaporate in an infinity of personal trajectories, no order or pattern can ever emerge. Seen on the run, the quotidian transformations of East L.A. support De Certeau's conclusions. In contrast to the solidity projected by most suburban houses, these dwellings, shaped and given meaning by occupation and use, convey a provisional quality. Their occupants allow time and memory to control space.

Yet these apparently ephemeral uses and alterations, repeated countless times over the course of several generations on adjacent lots and streets enclosed within the cultural and spatial borders of East L.A., come together, not only forming a distinctive pattern but suggesting a direction. Asserting more than just personal and social autonomy, they have acquired the potential for political significance. In its decommodified form, the house becomes a vehicle for mobilizing social identity, making a publicly legible statement that provides residents with a new sense of agency. Thus redefining the political field to include issues clustered around the home, daily life, and urban residential space offers the residents of East L.A., massively underrepresented in official political channels, new venues for collective activity. As a form of social action, their continuing use and transformation of existing houses questions both the need for architectural intervention and the need for reinventing the house.

The Border

Any discussion of East Los Angeles must begin across the Mexican border, one hundred forty miles to the south, a line crossed by successive waves of immigrants drawn to the region's economic power. Mexican immigrants provided low-wage labor for the city's phenomenal industrial growth, but early in the century, Americans, intent on expanding the commercial district, building a civic center, and segregating their neighborhoods, pushed them across another border, the Los Angeles River. By 1930 the east side of the river was solidly Mexican. Currently, with more than three hundred thousand residents, the eastside is the largest concentration of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the United States, a Mexican city in the heart of Los Angeles. Beginning in the 1940s, thirty years of freeway construction imposed new borders. The incisions made by the San Bernadino and Santa Ana freeways on the north and south created barriers not links, separating East L.A. even further from the rest of the city. Finally, the Long Beach and Pomona freeways carved an X through the community's heart, erasing it from the view of anyone passing through.

2. Border crossing

Latinos in East Los Angeles have "inherited" a modest single-family housing stock from a past era. Through complex and creative cultural negotiations, they have produced a distinctive domestic landscape. ADOBE LA regards the space allocated to them in House Rules *metaphorically as the modest housing stock into which the Latino communities have moved, and have conceived an installation that illustrates the different methods and cultural forces behind the physical transformation of these spaces. The installation guides the viewer progressively from a representation of exterior spaces into the realm of the house's interior. The elements of the installation that mark the gradual progression from public to semiprivate to private space are the fence, the* yarda, *the altered house, and the domestic interior.*

3. [De] Fence, 430 East 30th Street

The Fence

The visitor to the exhibition is met by a metal fence, a replica of the fences found throughout the Latino community. This element defines the line between street and the yarda.

The Yarda

The front yard serves as a transitional ground between the outward, public space and the inward, domestic space. In the exhibition, large Xerox murals depict the activities that typically take place in the yarda: ***repairing cars, sitting on the porch, selling clothing, and so on. Sounds of street activities can be heard.***

Today, for most Angelenos, the eastside is both terra incognita and a zone of radical alterity. Its invisibility encourages outsiders to construct other, imaginary, borders. Is it dangerous or merely exotic, occupied by drug dealers, cholo gangs, or anonymous hordes of illegal aliens? Newspaper and television reports further demonize the eastside, providing additional ammunition for the police and sheriff's departments that control the area like occupying armies. In fact, the eastside's crime rates are no higher than those on the westside. Seen from within, along narrow streets lined with working-class bungalows, the myths of East L.A.'s mean streets melt away. Here, unnoticed by the city and hidden from professional architectural culture, its residents have created a new hybrid form of dwelling. Negotiating between the circumstances of life in Los Angeles and the customs, rituals, and traditions brought from Mexico, they define a new border condition, no longer a line of exclusion but a cultural free trade zone, accessible to continuous movement back and forth.

The Fence

The fence is the initial gesture that defines East L.A.'s domestic landscape, a method of staking claim to the barrio for as long as Mexicans have lived here.[3] Chain link is common and acceptable but residents prefer elaborate constructions of block and wrought iron. Refusing the amorphous and impersonal suburban front lawn, they use the fence to delineate the front yard as an enclosure. This moves the domain of the house forward to the street, extending its domestic space to the corners of the lot. A permeable border, protective but inviting interaction, the fence enables each family to define their own environment while maintaining contact with the activities of the sidewalk and street. In East L.A. every street presents a characteristic topography of fences; some are patrolled by dogs, others are hung with homemade signs advertising nopales or discount diapers, others support brightly colored brooms for sale. As innovation has encouraged imitation, fence styles have become increasingly complex, spurring the rapidly evolving craft of wrought iron, one of East L.A.'s largest homegrown industries.

The *Yarda*

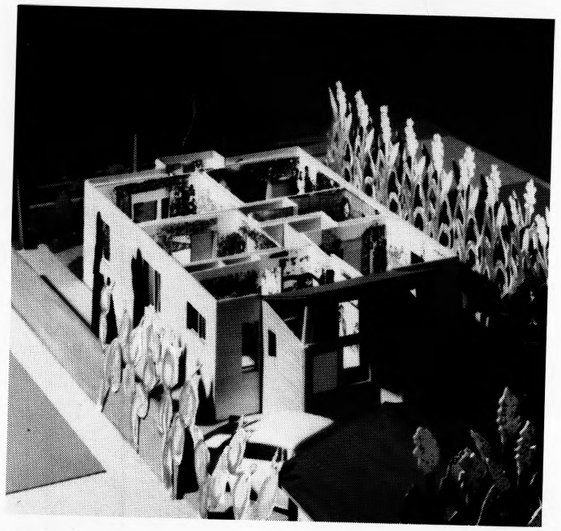
Fully occupied, the enclosed yard encapsulates the functions of the plaza, courtyard, front yard, and street. It is simultaneously an arena of sociability, a site of control, an outdoor work area, and a stage for symbolic elaboration. Both public and private, the *yarda* welcomes engagement with neighbors and passersby but can also shelter intimate discussions and family celebrations. Its nuanced space structures social encounters: strangers are met at the gate, friends invited onto the porch. By providing a vantage point onto the street, it allows residents to supervise adjacent territory. Owners and renters customize their yards by occupation and design. Busy with mundane tasks or artfully arranging plants or statuary, they expose their daily lives and deeply personal preferences to anyone passing by. Infinitely flexible and always in flux, the *yarda* can accommodate special events, from a garage sale to a *quinceanera*. It can become a lush jungle of plants or, paved over, a playground or car-repair shop. A driveway can serve as a dance floor, an outdoor hallway, or a space to display goods for sale.

Alterations

"Mexicanization" is a recognizable yet versatile idiom, a mutable aesthetic adaptable to many conditions. Immediate changes are easily accomplished with yellow, mango, or peach paint, strings of Christmas lights, and attention to intricate detail. Other alterations require more time and money: replacing wood surfaces with textured stucco or columns with ornamental wrought iron or stuccoed arches. Still others derive from family needs: garages remodeled as rental units, extra bedrooms, or small businesses. In addition porches are often added, expanded, or covered, furnished with tables, chairs, or couches and decorated with wrought iron, paint, or potted plants. Whether the product of the owner's weekend labor or that of unlicensed neighborhood contractors, most alterations are constructed without working drawings, building codes, or permits.

4. Mosaic depicting Virgin at Self Help Graphics, East Los Angeles

5. Wedding of Gloria Lopez



6. Model

The Altered House

At the border between the exterior and interior areas is the model. ADOBE LA has duplicated the shell of a typical single-story house of 1920–30 stock, much like those inhabited by Latinos in East L.A. Added to the shell, and differentiated from it through contrasts in technique and palette, are elements used by residents to transform their homes.

Plants

Apart from the ubiquity of rose bushes — collective remembrances, perhaps, of the roses miraculously transformed into an image of the Virgin of Guadeloupe — gardens in East L.A. are primarily lovingly tended personal statements. As visions of paradise, they demonstrate the many varieties of metamorphosis, blurring the distinctions between agriculture and ornament, artificial and natural, sacred and mundane. Neat rows of corn and nopales appear among the standard Southern California cypresses, fruit trees, and bougainvillea, traces, along with illegally kept chickens, of a rural past. Eno, a variety of Spanish moss used to decorate Christmas crèches, hangs from tree branches. On any street you might find container gardens in recycled washtubs set on concrete slabs, complex compositions of flowers and paving, with fountain and birdbath centerpieces, comic assemblages of plants, plaster yard ornaments, found objects, toys, and solemnly pretty shrines elaborated around statues of Christ or the Virgin Mary, all vying for attention.

The House

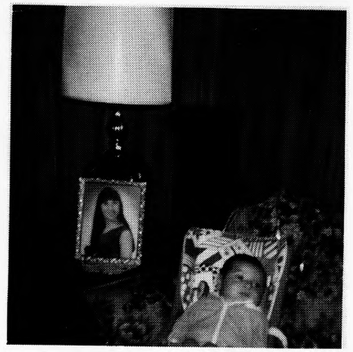
The interior of the house is the center of the family's power. Since the *yarda* is the primary site of social life, casual guests rarely enter the house. Although large extended families live in these small spaces, they rarely alter the arrangement of rooms. Instead, parents, grandmothers, and children crowd in together. With children sharing tiny bedrooms and everyone sharing the single bathroom, privacy is rare, but not particularly valued. Living rooms overflow with plastic-covered furniture, photographs of birthdays, graduations, and weddings, and carefully ordered collections of "beautiful little things," religious mementos, and family souvenirs. The television is here, imposing its schedule on the room: Spanish-language soap operas from 4 to 7 p.m., followed by American situation comedies, and, on weekends, Dodgers games and soccer matches. Still, the heart of family life remains the kitchen, the only room that might be enlarged. Focused on cooking, eating, and household chores, this is the territory of the mother and the female members of the family. Fathers, working outside

7. House on Whittier Boulevard

8. Fast Cuts Salon

9. *No compre uvas*

10. *Mi cumpleaños*



11. Eric and his mother

The Domestic Interior

In the exhibition, framed photographs of interiors define the domestic space of the Latino home. These images show objects that are prized for their cultural and emotive value. A codex that incorporates texts and drawings adds to the description of these interior spaces. Sounds of intimate domestic life can be heard.

the house all day, appear in the evening, to watch TV, water the plants, or putter in the yard.[4]

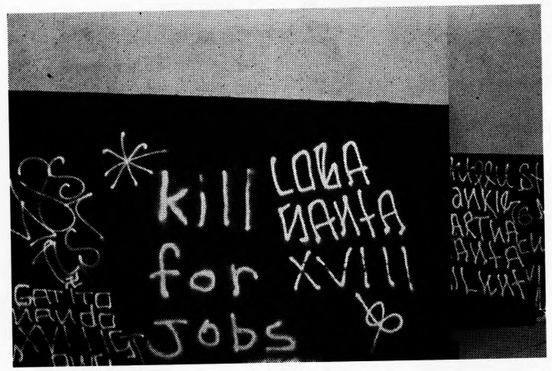
The activities that take place in these houses and yards unfold over time, producing the distinctive rhythm of East Los Angeles. On weekends the enclosed household routines spill out into the yard's extroverted space. On Saturday the tempo intensifies, as men gather to work on cars, friends and relatives drop by, tables and chairs are set out for parties and barbecues, vendors offer their wares, and teenagers cruise by in minitrucks or low riders. By Sunday the pace slows. Families, dressed up, leave for church, neighbors chat over the fence, and children play in the yard. Family time is measured in even slower cycles; renters move to other houses, relatives arrive from Mexico, children grow up, and a new generation moves east to suburbs in the San Gabriel Valley or San Bernadino County. Yet throughout these changes, threads of memory persist, to be rewoven into surprising new combinations. The polyglot sounds overheard from car stereos or boom boxes on Spanish-language KLAX (Southern California's most listened-to radio station) or such popular shows as *Alma del Barrio* or *Voices of Aztlan*, demonstrate this process of transformation. Segueing from norteño ballads to rhythm and blues oldies, banda to Led Zepplin, they mix old and new, English and Spanish, nostalgia and rebellion in complex combinations that, like East L.A. itself, defy interpretation.

The Politics of Everyday Space

The cultural and political weight of these continuous transformations render speculative housing development, architectural intervention, and traditional real estate practices almost completely irrelevant in East Los Angeles. Since poor or working-class Mexicans and Mexican-Americans rarely purchase new houses, market-oriented designers and builders do not take their tastes or preferences into account when selecting spas or improving master bedroom suites for new subdivisions. In this world of hand-me-down housing, the professional services and specialized culture of architects are even more remote. When architects choose to donate their services, the results have often

been inappropriate or demeaning. Contemporary architectural styles, whether postmodern or abstract formalist, hold little interest for a culture already rich in visual imagery, expression, and meaning.

Ironically, these identifiably "Mexican" qualities have contributed to low prices and stability in East L.A.'s housing market. Almost entirely Mexican, it is an unlikely target for gentrification. In other parts of the city, however, the quotidian house transformations tolerated in the East L.A. barrio are under attack. Class and ethnic struggles over space disguise themselves as struggles over architectural values. Preservationists in Pasadena, horrified by "Mexicanized" Craftsman bungalows, have issued Spanish-language pamphlets that attempt to convince homeowners not to alter their houses. In response to their arguments for the social and financial rewards of maintaining a house's original historical and cultural character, East L.A.'s lived politics of the everyday poses the questions: whose history, whose culture, whose house, whose space?



12, 13. Kill for Jobs

Notes

1. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 29–42.

2. See David Harvey, "Accumulation Through Urbanization," *Antipode* 19, no. 3 (1987): 269–71. James Holston describes the processes that Harvey outlines in his work on Brazilian self-building, "Autoconstruction in Working-Class Brazil," *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 4 (1991): 464–65.

3. This discussion is indebted to James Rojas's pioneering work on East L.A.,"The Enacted Environment: The Creation of 'Place' by Mexicans and Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles, " Master's thesis, Department of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991.

4. Ibid., 80–82.

Figure Credits

1. Photograph by Julie Easton.

2, 4, 7, 8. Photographs by ADOBE LA.

3, 9–11. Horacio Diaz Family Archives.

5. Sr. Enrique Castro, Horacio Diaz Family Archives.

12. 13. Mural Resource Center, SPARC.

Project Credits

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ADOBE LA: Ulises Diaz, Ignacio Fernandez, Gustavo Leclerc, Alessandra Moctezuma, and Elpido Rocha, architects and artists