

PREFACE



The Trouble with Representing Barrios

It was easy for me to fall in love with barrio environments and to feel that institutional trends somewhat validated the admiration I felt. Such a feeling would have been rare for much of the twentieth century. Barrios—generally defined as Latinx spatial concentrations—have been historically marginalized in US cities.¹ In contrast, in the early twenty-first century, while I was in art school in New York City, designers widely discussed the inclusion of messy, garish, and even impoverished landscapes in professional design. By then, architects Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour, and Denise Scott Brown had published *Learning from Las Vegas*. That collection of essays about the commercial storefronts of the Las Vegas Strip as observed from a car window had inspired a generation of designers to look at vernacular culture for creative inspiration.² There were critics of this type of work, of course. The theorist Fredric Jameson saw the trend as a postmodern “aesthetic populism” that espoused sociocultural inclusivity but was really at the service of a capitalist logic of exploitation and exclusion. Among design professionals though, the vernacular, that is to say the ordinary, nonprofessionally made built environment, was regularly heralded as an antidote to a modernist architecture perceived as sterile and socially indifferent, if not oppressive. Similarly, in the fields of two-dimensional design, vernacular urban culture was seen as an alternative to clinical, digital modernist typefaces, such as the ubiquitous Helvetica. It was precisely in a postmodern design context that I was first able to bring the barrio culture I had grown up in to bear on design circles. When my college typography instructor assigned us to

photograph street text for a new font project, I seized on the opportunity to include an ethnoracial difference that was absent from the modernist design curriculum that surrounded me; design history books assigned in my courses predominantly featured European and white American innovators, and white men were the majority in the design faculty at my college.³

I took a NJ Transit bus to get across the Hudson River and into Union City, the low-income barrio where I was raised, to mine the city for aesthetic inspiration. From my bus window, Union City's facades looked remarkably different from the professionally designed landscapes of power and wealth depicted in design magazines, commercials, tourism, and glamorous lifestyles. To fulfill my class assignment, I photographed the hand-painted lettering found on outdoor advertisements along Bergenline Avenue, the city's main commercial corridor, but I also took note of the Latin American flag colors on storefronts that catered to their respective national communities. I contemplated the inventive simulacra of painted stone and brick on business exteriors. The real materials, I speculated, were too difficult or expensive to come by. I saw murals of tropical, mountainous lands and colonial houses. I noticed Virgin Mary statues and artificial flower arrangements on the slivers of concrete that served as a "front yard" between the sidewalk and door. Though I would not know it until after years of academic research, this enthusiasm for postmodern vernacular was already evident among Latinx designers, such as graphic designer Pablo Medina's early twenty-first-century typography based on the Latinx commercial landscape in Union City (and the surrounding North Jersey area) and James Rojas's 1991 MA thesis on urban planning in East Los Angeles, the latter of which was also influenced by the Chicano movement of the 1970s.⁴ Like them, I embraced barrio visuals as underappreciated assets whose value could enrich institutionalized design culture. I was, in the terms set forth by this book to describe the major actors analyzed herein, beginning to assume a "broker" identity by visually cataloging that which made spaces "Latinx" and adjudicating their value in relation to the aesthetic preferences of professional circles that in my mind needed cultural difference.

This book is in large part an assessment of that practice. Compromises are made to render barrio landscapes for mainstream consumption, compromises that are at times disconnected from the visuals of said barrios. Putting this aside for a moment, it is important to underscore that the mere desire to identify Latinx culture and life as a contribution to US urbanism is a notable contrast to the long-held view that low-income Latinxs clustered in space, in barrios, are unseemly urban subjects who pose a prob-

lem for modern cities. A sweeping view of twentieth-century urban history shows that the latter formulation has been the source of much attention. Throughout that time period and well into the twenty-first century, social welfare programs, assimilation efforts, health campaigns, redevelopment projects, urban renewal, housing regulations, social movements, and community organizing were debated as solutions to the ostensible problems Latinxs, and poor people of color, bring to cities. This book examines a less frequently discussed solution: the aesthetic depiction and manipulation of Latinx urban life and culture as a way to counteract the fear that Latinxs and their culture were transgressing normative expectations of urbanness. I refer to this as a brokered solution that differs from the work of artists and community organizers who have, since the Latinx social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, altogether challenged the problem that urban Latinxs supposedly present by championing barrio culture and directly offering barrio residents murals, posters, community-based architecture, and gardens. This book focuses on a set of privileged actors whom I call brokers—a group of architects, urban planners, policy makers, ethnographers, business owners, and settlement workers—whose reactions to the barrio and its role in urbanization generated new Latinized landscapes. While the following chapters cover multiple instances of a brokered Latinization of space, the initial spark for the book was my personal encounter with a politics of seeing, appreciating, and representing barrio culture and life. Moving between the field of design, graduate school, and Union City offered lessons in the differing values attributed to barrio landscapes and their consequences for low-income residents.

In 2004, as a new graduate student in the New York University (NYU) American Studies Program, my interest in Latinx built environments was sustained by geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians whose research was expanding the field of Latinx urban studies. Their books and articles told of the potential of barrio culture to reshape a capitalist spatial order. With the exception of Arlene Dávila's pioneering research on the neoliberal marketability of Latinx culture in East Harlem's urban redevelopment and the community's opposition to it, these publications did not address the political contradictions of Latinized built environments. Nor did they highlight the brokers I describe here. Instead, the prevailing subject formation evinced in these works is defiant and engaged in political resistance and community organizing. This is a seductive and galvanizing narrative of Latinx urbanization. For example, at the heels of a 2000 census that reenergized talk of a Latinx "sleeping giant," Mike Davis

described a Latinx “magical urbanism” that was, despite unwelcoming policies, spreading across US cities and suburbs and reinventing dilapidated landscapes. Luis Aponte-Parés and Juan Flores respectively wrote about “casitas” and the accompanying community gardens that Puerto Ricans created as social and visual alternatives to a postindustrial landscape of loss in New York City’s poorest neighborhoods. Raúl Homero Villa told the history of cultural and social activism against displacement in the Logan Barrio in San Diego. Mario Luis Small researched a 1960s Puerto Rican tenants’ council whose organizing efforts compelled the Boston Redevelopment Authority to design a public housing development in a style reminiscent of colorful Puerto Rican houses. James Rojas argued that the East Los Angeles landscape was an underexamined alternative to urban planning typologies. Also referencing the murals, houses, and spatial configurations of late twentieth-century East Los Angeles, Margaret Crawford saw a landscape that reinvigorated the democratic possibility of public space. Gustavo Leclerc and Michael Dear referred to the “cultures of everyday life” in barrios as part of a larger “cultural revolution.” David Diaz championed “barrio urbanism,” specifically “Chicana/o urbanism” in the US Southwest and California, as a way to counter the racism that plagued the urban planning profession. Through works such as these, the built environment that Latinxs shaped entered academic literature as an object of activism, evidence of a Latinx population ready and willing to make its social, political, and economic mark against the odds.⁵ Intending to follow in this vein, my graduate research began by examining the politics of Union City’s Latinx landscape. The political dynamics I found, however, were different.

I conducted my research by walking, a practice that urban theorist Michel de Certeau preferred to the top-down, voyeuristic perspective that high, enclosed places, such as a bus, or the car in *Learning from Las Vegas*, offer.⁶ I also interviewed locals. Both methods dissuaded me from falling into the trap of romanticizing barrio culture based purely on its visual differences vis-à-vis non-Latinx landscapes. Indeed, interview-based research offered two important lessons. First, my visual study of Union City while in college was a flat aestheticization of the landscape that overlooked the ways locals experienced the city. Second, the community activism and cultural resistance that prevailed in scholarship on barrios was not evident in all Latinx built environments. Some interviewees in Union City had little interest in discussing their built environment. They would interrupt my questions and demand to know if I was with “la migra” (immigration enforcement) or a vendor trying to sell them goods.⁷ My focus on aesthet-

ics felt petty, bourgeois, removed from the issues affecting this vulnerable, policed community. To my chagrin, my visual preoccupation with the landscape betrayed a distance between me and the barrio I had grown up in. This distance, I realized, had been long in the making. By attending a magnet high school in a nearby middle-class suburb, I missed much of the everyday experience of walking on Bergenline Avenue during my formative teenage years. Whereas I felt a certain nostalgia for Bergenline, my friends who attended Union City high schools disdained it, perhaps because its familiarity felt oppressive, a reminder of economic stagnation and the difficulties ahead for those striving to join the middle-class mainstream. Friends and family visiting from Latin America would comment on how ugly Union City was, how it resembled a poor barrio in their native country. It became clear to me that my everyday distance, in addition to my accumulation of artistic cultural capital in college and an academic propensity to search for the political in culture, contributed to my appreciation of the city's built environment. Doing what was expected of low-income students—leaving for educational opportunities elsewhere—also cast doubt on my belonging. One interviewee, a Cuban storeowner on Bergenline Avenue, reacted astonished when, responding to his questions, I told him I was raised in Union City: “You talk like a really, *really*, white girl.” I had trained my eye to see beauty and novelty in undervalued landscapes as a way to minimize the very distance I had accumulated throughout the years of living in white contexts. Now I had to come to terms with the fact that an intrinsic risk of that aestheticization was cultivating a privileged, selective, and socially distant gaze.

Many of the nearly sixty interviewees in Union City, Santa Ana, Los Angeles, New York, Miami, San Antonio, and Mexico City and historic and contemporary actors I encountered in archival research for this book grappled with how to aesthetically manage their social distance from the barrio. Some of them kept this distance reluctantly and do not self-identify as brokers. They are critical of how an assemblage of elites who decide how built environments look continues to require that this distance from the barrio be performed aesthetically. Others, including some who live and work in barrios, purposefully seek to visualize their distance, to abstract from the materiality of life in barrios, in an effort to accomplish higher retail returns and real estate values or emulate middle-class suburbia or newly gentrified spaces. Still others are implicated in a distance they are unaware of. In all cases, distancing is at the crux of the cultural politics of brokering that I examine in this book and which, through an analysis of the

built environment as a primary source, I argue is implicated in low-income barrio invisibility.

Invisibility, of course, is the result of more than the aesthetic brokering discussed here. Anti-immigration policies, gentrification, exclusionary housing practices, the policing of communities of color, and intra-Latinx racism have all made it difficult for Latinxs to be in public view in urban spaces. During the early stages of writing this book, I regularly visited the rental apartment where I grew up and where my mom still lived. There, the political and economic factors shaping Latinx visibility in urban space were inescapable and the possibility of redressing Latinx exclusion via aesthetics proved wanting, a reminder of the possibilities and challenges of merging the political and the visual.

My mom migrated from Medellín, Colombia, to Union City with me, a toddler in tow, in 1983. After a few months of living with family in a crowded railroad apartment, she secured employment at an embroidery factory and the two of us moved into a third-floor studio in a multifamily, owner-occupied house. The apartment had a side entrance that opened through an iron gate. Once at the gate, we would walk through a narrow path lined with garbage pails, and then take a left turn at the owner's backyard and go up metal stairs. The entrance was undesirable, but we were lucky to find housing. The large numbers of new immigrants and refugees entering the city barely fit in a landscape of worn-down row houses, where landlords were converting rental units into condominiums in an early effort to entice New York City gentrifiers, and landlords' discrimination created a severe housing shortage that hit low-income racialized Latinxs particularly hard. Our landlord, a light-skinned, middle-aged Cuban man, had agreed to rent to my mom, despite having disapproved of her being unwed and single, because everyone else who had viewed the apartment was, according to him, a "Marielito." That was the moniker given to the mostly dark-skinned Cubans who left the port of Mariel and arrived at Florida's shores after Fidel Castro reportedly proclaimed to "flush" his "toilets" of Cubans unfit for the revolution. Union City's established middle-class and light-skinned Cuban population, including the aforementioned landlord, suspected that Marielitos had lived with communist ideology for too long to truly appreciate capitalist values or follow a bootstrap ideology of hard work. Some worried the new arrivals would tarnish the reputation earlier Cuban migrants had established in the city's commercial and housing sectors. Race played a major role in the icy welcome Mariel refugees received. While dark-skinned Cubans arriving to the United States at this time had lived nearly twenty

years under a regime built on the expectation of racial equality, *light-skinned* Cuban Americans saw the new arrivals through the lens of racial hierarchies that prevailed in Cuba prior to the revolution and were validated by the institutional racism in the United States that denied black people equal access and opportunities.⁸ Though my mom was the daughter of a dark-skinned man of indigenous descent, she was racialized as “una Italiana” and therefore deemed acceptable despite the landlord moralizing about our family. My mom took the apartment and in doing so made us complicit in practices that upheld the racial privilege of light-skinned Latinxs and left undisturbed the hold that elite Cubans had over the city’s landscape, its shape, its aesthetics, and its ownership.

My mom lived in the apartment for twenty-nine years before receiving notice to vacate the premises. Those years saw major changes in the economy and population of the city. The once-dominant Cuban population had largely moved to nearby suburbs or metropolitan Miami. The garment industry that employed my mom and many others had mostly left the area by the 1990s. My mom, like many others, turned to the nation’s public assistance programs for housing and food aid while working part-time jobs in the low-wage service and child care industries that had replaced manufacturing. Her use of Housing Choice Voucher Program Section 8, a federal program that appealed to those unable to get on what was then an eight-year wait list for public housing units, allowed her to pay 30 percent of her income on rent regardless of the landlord’s rent increases. The multifamily house my mom lived in also saw major changes. A South American couple had bought the house in the 1990s and since then worked to gradually convert it into fewer units by evicting tenants or raising rents so that tenants would be pressured to move. There was incentive to do this. In Union City, owner-occupied dwellings with four units or fewer are exempt from rent control. My mom, who had the longest tenancy in the house, put up the longest fight to stay in the apartment. Housing officials at Section 8, as the program is succinctly called, were key to helping persuade the landlord to renew her lease. Section 8 had leverage in these negotiations. They could ensure that landlords would have a steady rent in their pockets instead of dealing with high tenant turnover or delinquent renters.

By 2011, however, the possibility of cashing in on the city’s creeping gentrification outweighed the advantages that Section 8 offered. The homeowner next door was making plans to unite with my mom’s landlord to capitalize on the street’s proximity to the city’s recently designated “gateway” area to New York City by selling their plots together as one large land

mass to the highest bidder—a private developer or Union City’s municipality.⁹ Thus, for the landlord, the benefits of removing my mom were higher than usual as gentrification intensified.

The landlord devised a way of kicking my mom out by avoiding necessary repairs and maintenance. In the year leading up to her move, the trash cans were overflowing. The path from the gate to the stairs leading to the apartment was pockmarked with the owner’s dog’s shit. It was nearly impossible not to step on the shit. Our feet barely fit in the space between one pile of shit and the other. The metal stairs leading to the apartment were rusty and with holes big enough for our feet to fall through. The metal fire escape was coming unhinged. Only a third of the fencing on the porch from which the fire escape hung was upright and sturdy. The ceiling was leaking. The wooden floors had holes. The shingles that covered the exterior of the house along the path leading to the apartment were falling off. When the state’s building inspectors were called in, they were unwilling to pressure the landlord to make changes, preferring instead to condemn the apartment as unfit for habitation. A notice for evacuation came soon thereafter. In the letter, the landlord cited wanting to convert the house for single-family owner use. A few months after my mom left, the porch, metal stairs, and fire escape were fixed. The rent for the apartment was deregulated and if the landlord wished, he could rent the apartment without the constraints of rent control and well beyond the “fair market rent” Section 8 requires of participating landlords.

My mom confined her search for a new apartment to Union City because she wanted to keep the networks and conveniences to which she had become accustomed. She searched for an apartment that looked “mejor” (better) than her previous apartment because, she thought, if she (with the help of Section 8) were to pay significantly more for an apartment, it should be stylistically and structurally superior. She equated a “good” aesthetic of clean, modern buildings with a higher price in the way that nearby condo developers expecting a return on their new investments did. Contrary to a Latinx studies literature that examines the aesthetic preferences of low-income Latinxs in opposition to mainstream culture, my mom showed that low-income residents appreciate and perceive the aesthetics of new development and renewal projects to be visualizations of progress even when high-cost housing excludes low-income renters and consumers from those very lifestyles.¹⁰ Indeed, unlike developers and buyers of real estate, my mom had few housing choices. Most apartments in her price range were substandard and smaller than her previous apartment. Additionally, she experienced dis-

crimination, including landlords questioning her profession, whether she had small children, and whether she worked in New York City—indicators of a person’s gentrifier status. When calling to inquire about vacancies over the phone, her Spanish accent triggered quick hang-ups.

The new apartment, a renovated unit in a sixteen-unit building constructed in 1900, costs nearly \$400 more even though it is only slightly larger than my mom’s previous apartment. A dirty hallway, sometimes littered with dead roaches, leads to the unit with shiny parquet floors and bright white paint. The apartment was not intended for someone of my mom’s socioeconomic status nor for the building’s long-term, low-income residents. When the building’s tenants saw my mom moving in, they asked if they could stop by to view the apartment, among only a few the landlord had recently renovated. I was there helping with the move when two elderly Afro-Cuban women peeped in and with large eyes and a sound of slight disapproval said, “Hmmm esto esta muy lindo” (this is very pretty). The building’s super, acting as a proxy for the faceless New York City-based limited liability company (LLC) that owns the building, had initially rejected my mom’s tenant application, claiming that Section 8 recipients were prohibited from the market-rate building. Section 8 officials quickly checked the building’s tenant history and upon finding current and previous Section 8 tenants told my mom to contest it. The building’s super told her the apartment could be hers for \$100 more than Section 8 policy allows (and even suggested that my mom slip the additional \$100 without Section 8 knowing). My mom, who thought this apartment was the best that she would find, repeatedly asked the super to negotiate with the anonymous landlord on her behalf for the initial Section 8 compliant rent. My mom’s application was eventually accepted. But the troubles she went through to rent this apartment, despite the fact that it is illegal in New Jersey to reject potential renters because they use Section 8 vouchers, is instructive of how the forces of gentrification are intent on changing the socioeconomic composition of Union City and reducing the presence of low-income Latinxs in the city.¹¹

David Madden and Peter Marcuse call such urban vulnerability the “experience of residential alienation.” The phrase builds on the concept of “alienation” frequently deployed in Marxist scholarship to describe how capitalism isolates the working class from society in order to extract value from them.¹² Low-income tenants in cities are alienated from the social and political relations that shape space, what geographer Henri Lefebvre calls the “production of space,” and they are, with some exceptions, unable to consume, visibly imprint their culture in space, or feel they belong.¹³

This alienation is at odds with what a researcher of Latinx urbanism, accustomed to reading about resistant Latinx cultural expression in urban space, may expect to find. That is because spatial powerlessness and invisibility, landlord neglect and their literal shit, and the political economic structures that circumscribe tenant mobility and expression are much more difficult to bear witness to than Latinx commercial built environments and homeowner decorations. In Union City, for example, this alienation is invisible, but government-sanctioned Latin American Independence Day festivities and, by the 2010s, the rise of memorials to historical Latin American figures erected throughout the city are not. The brokered spaces of municipal parks, streets, murals, and plazas named after Cubans, Colombians, Ecuadorians, and Dominicans enjoy hypervisibility just as low-income tenants are subjected to ever more precarious living spaces and fleeting experiences of walking and consuming the city. This contradiction is not happenstance but key to the brokering described in this book. Visually conspicuous Latinx landscapes can galvanize, unify, and amuse. They are easy to fall in love with. Spatial disempowerment, in contrast, can be repulsive, difficult to find and mobilize around but nonetheless important to bring to light. In fact, it may reveal power relations that easily go unnoticed if we limit the study of the Latinization of the built environment to only what we *see* in public spaces shaped by community struggles over space, property owners, or those with control over property such as public officials. In Union City, where activist and community appropriations of space are absent, I found that the Latinization I found so appealing was contingent on access to the outer, visible features of property and thus rested in the hands of people with the privilege to shape public space. To put it a different way, reflecting on precarious renters showed just how consequential the role of the broker, and their privileged access to property, was in making a Latinx aesthetic visible in cities where low-income Latinxs were believed to be incompatible with urban progress.

And yet these brokers are underexamined. This book is an attempt to contribute to this gap. And while spatially disempowered people are not the focus of the book, they are critical in influencing how I analyze my subject matter. This book attends to brokers' production of space not to fetishize it as representative of Latinxs but to understand how representations of Latinidad can at times be removed from marginalized urban residents and their barrios. For while brokered spaces can be construed as humanizing Latinx urban subjects by their mere recognition and inclusion of difference, they are very much intertwined with circuits of capital that

value some landscapes and residents over others. In examining brokers, I want to draw attention to how much of capitalist urbanization's approval of Latinxs has been premised on the selective visibility of racialized and economically classed aesthetics, which is to say on an abstraction of barrios that produces a Latinization that does not interfere in the economic and cultural interests of normative urbanity: a Latinization that would not, in other words, enflame a crisis of urban belonging.

Union City is an example of a brokered Latinization where low-income presence is increasingly managed and contained. My experiences in the city animated my thinking of the outsized role that brokers play in making Latinx culture visible in urban space. But as a small city it does not, in the company of Latinx studies scholarship that addresses large metropolitan spaces, register as powerfully as tracing a brokered Latinization across multiple spaces and times. The book is organized to reflect the broader scope of brokering in several places where major twentieth- and twenty-first-century crises in urban belonging identified Latinx culture and life as excessive and where, in turn, brokers curbed these excesses. Though expansive, the book is by no means exhaustive. Rather, it underscores a long-term process whereby cultural representations of Latinx culture and life repeatedly coexist with anxious portrayals of Latinxs. In so doing, it draws attention to the inability of cultural representations to deter future crises from forming, a testament to the limits of a brokered Latinization of cities and a reminder that Latinx visibility matters, but the representations used to promote this visibility need to be read in light of their limitations and the actors who produce them.