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## **Hidden in plain sight: Design approaches to Midwestern Mexican-American landscapes**

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While increasing numbers of new immigrants from Mexico recruited for meatpacking, food processing, and light manufacturing jobs are joining Mexican-origin people resident in the Midwest since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, both established and new Mexican-American communities remain virtually invisible to those shaping the built environment. To learn to “see” these Latina/o communities and make appropriate decisions regarding them, designers require information. This article provides descriptions of Mexican-American landscape types found in small cities across the region, and discusses their landscape characteristics, constraints, and opportunities in various land uses, as well as their implications for work beyond these small Midwestern cities.

Keywords: social justice, environmental justice, Latina/o communities

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## **Introduction**

A quiet revolution is under way in many out-of-the-way places in the center of the United States. Substantial Latina/o communities, mostly Mexican-American, have arrived seemingly overnight in many small cities and towns. They are often the first major newcomers to these cities in decades, exaggerating the impact of their arrival. Many people outside the Midwest will be surprised by these statements, yet Mexican-Americans in the Midwest are far from a new phenomenon. They have been a part of this region for at least a century, yet as of 2010, all Latina/os were only 7.0% of the region's population. More important than this low percentage is its growth rate: a striking 49% from 2000 through 2010 (Ennis et al 2011). This growth comes in a region where overall population growth is lackluster at best. Michigan's overall population actually fell from 2000 to 2010, hiding the growth of the state's Hispanic population (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez 2011). Seventy-four percent of these Midwestern Latina/os are of Mexican descent, including both recent immigrants and those whose families have been in the US for generations (Ennis et al 2011). In the non-metro Midwest, as others have noted about rural America in general, most immigrants are from Mexico (Miraftab & McConnell 2008).

Whether immigrant or well-established, Midwestern Mexican-American communities are virtually absent from assumptions made about local built environment context, its use by the public and placemaking; they are "hidden" in these processes by their exclusion from the designer's gaze. Learning to see these communities and their landscapes could change whom designers and planners serve in their work, both within academia and professional practice. Where designers lack a native's knowledge and social ties, the ideal solution is to conduct a thorough analysis of the community. Participatory design processes would be a substantial part

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of this ideal, but they are not a panacea, especially because of perennial budget and schedule limitations. The result is a tendency to overlook Latina/o communities in small Midwestern cities, whether through deliberate bias or simple error. Regardless, this omission makes the challenging task of effective design all the more difficult, because a plan designed to suit the wrong community is designed to fail.

The purpose of this manuscript is to examine Mexican-American neighborhood landscapes using a design and planning approach, and highlight opportunities for design and planning work to further spatial equity within these neighborhoods and in their surrounding small cities. This article presents a brief history of Mexican-Americans in the Midwest, focusing on the current built environment of Established, New, and Mixed Mexican-American communities. I then discuss landscape characteristics and opportunities within these cities, organized by land use. I close with a set of guidelines for working in Mexican-American and immigrant communities outside this region or in larger cities.

## **Background**

Latina/os remain the nation's largest minority group, at 16.3% of the population according to the 2010 Census. This status is compounded by a growth rate that outpaces the general population – 43% in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Passel et al. 2011). At the same time, disparities in income and poverty levels between Latina/os and non-Hispanic white residents remain, with a recently released report finding that US Hispanics comprise nearly three in ten of those living in poverty nationally, a rate well over twice that of non-Hispanic whites (Lopez & Cohn 2011). Aggregate figures such as these mask the remarkable diversity of Latina/os, a group ranging

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from American citizens with generations-long roots within this country to transnational migrants, and encompassing people varying in national heritage, race, and socioeconomic status.

The current status of immigrants within the US is the focus of considerable discussion. While the recession that began in 2007 slowed the breakneck pace of immigration seen during the 1990s and early 2000s, some have noted that the flow of new arrivals into the US quickly resumed in anticipation of a reviving economy (Singer & Wilson 2010). Some see profound changes in the experience of immigrants due to larger trends in economics, communications and transportation, allowing continuing ties with their home countries (Durand, Massey, and Capoferro 2005; Portes 1996). Various authors note the emergence of Mexican-American and other Latina/o populations in regions such as the Midwest and the Southeast, where there has been little immigrant presence for decades (Lippard & Gallagher 2011; Martinez 2011; Massey, Rugh, & Pren 2010; Mirafteb & McConnell 2008; Singer 2009; Smith and Furuseth 2006; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005). Mexican-Americans, placemaking and the built environment of the Southwest have received some scholarly attention (Diaz 2005; Villa 2000), especially within cultural geography (Arreola 2002, 2004; Rojas 2006, 2010). This Southwestern focus restricts its generalizability, however, due to that region's contested history for Mexican-Americans, in marked contrast to their history in the Midwest as an immigrant group (Valdés 1999). More of these sources are limited by their discipline-specific viewpoints, which rule out intervention into the built environment in order to shape it.

Although scholarly attention from landscape architects to social inequality in the built environment exists (Harris 2007), it remains rare. This extends to the most basic description of Mexican-American landscapes in the Midwest. Scholarship within cultural studies, including

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historical sources, adequately describes non-spatial aspects of Midwestern Mexican-American communities established in manufacturing cities in the first half of the twentieth century (Valdés 1991, 2000; Cárdenas 1958). Other scholarship of more varied discipline addresses non-spatial aspects of Latina/o communities in meatpacking and light manufacturing towns since the late 1980s (Gouveia 2005; Grey and Woodrick 2005; Millard and Chapa 2004). However, to find work focused on the built environment, the reader must broaden his/her search to more general immigrant and minority communities (Abrahamson 1996; Ford 1994; Wright 1981). Mexican-American and Latina/o communities are rarely mentioned by name within these sources.

Mexican-origin people in the Midwest include immigrants from various parts of Mexico, domestic migrants of Mexican heritage from the southwestern US and migrant agricultural workers, many of whom have settled permanently within the region. These groups have comprised several waves of new migrants to the Midwest throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, drawn at different times by different employers to different settings (García 1996; Vargas 1993). This difference naturally extends to the physical environments that resulted, a fact obscured by the non-spatial perspective typically employed by those reporting this history.

## **Methods**

To reveal these differences within the physical environment, I began by selecting an initial group of cities to study. I studied cities specifically mentioned in the literature as home to either established (i.e. most Mexican-American residents were not new arrivals) or newly formed (i.e. many recent immigrants or domestic migrants) Mexican-American communities. These cities also met several selection criteria: location within northern Indiana, northwest Ohio, or

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southern Michigan; a 2000 Hispanic<sup>i</sup> population of at least 10% or 1000 people minimum; an overall 2000 population of less than 50,000; and a location outside of a larger Census Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). I then used local newspaper and historical reports (Horne 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d, 2000e; Evanoff and Lopez 2007; About La Casa 2007) to select four additional study cities, confirming that they also met the selection criteria listed above, for a total of eleven initial study cities,. Figure 1 shows the initial study cities.

(Figure 1 about here)

Figure 1. Map of initial study cities.

I then gathered descriptive information about the landscape through direct observation in each study city, aerial photos, maps and Census data, recording these data in a narrative and graphic format. I focused particularly on the unusual and unexpected within each city, as well as similarities in landscape characteristics between the different cities I visited. An *a priori* list of characteristics based on the literature reviewed added structure to this phase and incorporated the views of Mexican-American scholars (see Table 1). I then developed standardized codes for observed landscape, social and economic characteristics in the study cities, and combined these codes with the narratives in an iterative process that sorted the cities into groups based on economic, social, historical, functional, demographic and built environment similarities. To determine whether these groups were relevant beyond my initial study cities, I selected key quantitative characteristics from each group's description that could be assessed using Census data. I then applied these characteristics to all 2000 Census Designated Places for Indiana, Ohio and Michigan, identifying 40 additional study cities, shown in Figure 2. I identified each of these additional study cities by group (Established/Mixed/New), as shown in Table 2. To confirm the

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presence of additional expected spatial characteristics within these cities, I randomly selected 20% of each group and checked for the presence of key landscape features, such as industrial parks and railroads, using online aerial photos. These tests supported the initial identification of cities using Census data. For comprehensive methods information about the process summarized here, please see (Dieterlen 2012) and (Dieterlen 2009).

(Table 1 about here)

(Figure 2 about here)

Figure 2. Map of additional study cities.

(Table 2 about here)

### **Profiles of city landscape categories**

The process described above produced these profiles.

#### ***Established Communities***

Established Communities' initial Mexican-American residents arrived between 1900 and 1980. Mexican immigrants recruited for work in sugar beet cultivation, railroads and industry in the 1910s and 1920s (García 1996; Valdés 2000; Vargas 1993) and those that arrived as guest workers via the Bracero Program from World War II into the 1960s (Calavita 1992) formed these communities. While many Midwestern Mexican-Americans left or were deported during the Great Depression (García 1996; Vargas 1993), others remain in these cities and towns today. I found this landscape type to be most common in small cities located outside the metropolitan area of larger industrial cities, but also occurring within smaller cities engulfed by the suburban growth of these larger metropolitan areas, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. These cities depended

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heavily on early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century industry, which has declined over the last several decades to the detriment of the local economy and population growth. Their built environment consequently exhibits many signs of economic disinvestment. In contrast to regional and national figures reported elsewhere (Saenz 2011), Mexican-Americans in these cities have average incomes more or less on par with other local residents, although average income in these cities for all residents tends to be rather low, according to Census data. Local Mexican-Americans also are more likely than those within New or Mixed Communities to be homeowners (US Bureau of the Census 2000), but many live in isolated vernacular housing areas that evolved from temporary workers' camps, sending conflicting messages about the level of acculturation within the local community. This concentration into the most substandard of neighborhoods, as well as a local history and economy conducive to serious environmental justice concerns, makes Established Communities the type with the most inequality relative to the built environment (Dieterlen 2012).

### ***New Communities***

The initial Mexican-American residents of the New Communities arrived between 1980 and the present. These smaller rural towns attracted meatpacking, food processing or manufacturing plants relocating from higher-wage, higher-cost locations in larger cities (Fennelly and Leitner 2002; Gouveia 2005). While lower costs of doing business, and often concessions such as tax abatements, attract these industries, these new locations lack a sufficient labor force to power the factories (Millard and Chapa 2004). The factories therefore recruit Mexican immigrants (and smaller numbers of other Latina/os) from out of state, often near the Mexican border. This produces rapid growth in the local Latina/o population from virtually zero to a substantial percentage (Gouveia 2005), up to 52% by 2010 in the cities I studied, according to Census data

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(US Bureau of the Census 2010). This sudden rapid change provokes hostility in many other residents.

New Communities typically have experienced long economic and demographic declines, prior to the new factories' arrival, in connection with the decline of surrounding small farms. There are many signs of disinvestment in the landscape and an abundance of affordable renter- and owner-occupied housing (Dieterlen 2012). The visibility of Mexican-Americans in the built environment, through characteristics such as Mexican-American/Spanish-language businesses and Southwest-style housescape characteristics (described below), may increase with the length of time since the arrival of the new employers – as the Mexican-American population grows and becomes more established, their presence in the built environment becomes more noticeable. I found more spatial equality in New Communities than in the Established Communities due to greater economic and spatial integration. Many of their Mexican-American residents work at the same jobs for similar pay and live in similar houses in the same neighborhoods as their non-Hispanic white neighbors (US Bureau of the Census 2000), in contrast to national and regional aggregate figures (Saenz 2011). While average income may be at approximate parity between Mexican-Americans and other residents (US Bureau of the Census 2000), the level of acculturation within these rapidly changing communities is logically quite low. Design and planning challenges here revolve around accommodating the new meatpacking or manufacturing plants and their workers, as well as the reaction of the existing populace to these changes.

### ***Mixed Communities***

Mixed Communities are home to a small core of well-established Mexican-American residents and a much larger group of new Mexican-American residents similar to those in the New

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Communities (Dieterlen 2012), a population dynamic documented by others (Griffith 2005).

Local average income data reveals the numerical dominance of these new residents, showing a marked disparity between Mexican-Americans and other residents (US Bureau of the Census 2000). Acculturation levels are likely to vary between the two components of the Mexican-American community in the same way, with the larger newly arrived group far more socially isolated and culturally distinct. Mixed Communities primarily are found in agricultural regions that employ migrant workers, both currently and historically (Dieterlen 2012). I observed within them a greater percentage of Mexican-American/Spanish-language businesses and a relative lack of Southwest-style housescape characteristics, compared to New or Established Communities. The Mixed Communities are also relatively affluent with a more stable local economy, characteristics expressed through landscapes less marked by disinvestment. Their Mexican-American landscape-related issues tend to be less urgent than those of either the Established or New Communities.

### **Landscape characteristics, opportunities, and approaches**

Each of these landscape types includes characteristics of interest to designers and planners, with clear imperatives for future work, here presented with associated opportunities and goals by land use. This section draws primarily on the empirical work summarized above, interpreted through a practitioner's gaze. As empirically based information, in places these observations contradict popular portrayals and some existing scholarly literature about Mexican-Americans in the Midwest.

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The paradigm of landscape architecture sees the physical world as a medium to be sculpted. However, these places do not necessarily need improving. In some cases, these vernacular Mexican-American landscapes are achieving common yet elusive program goals, such as increasing street life or creating an authentic sense of place. Given the demographic gulf between the typical landscape architect, architect or planner and the residents of these communities, thoughtful use of participatory processes, not merely the required minimum, is especially vital here.

This same landscape architectural paradigm is a fundamental difference between this research and that of others who have studied neighborhoods and cities, such as anthropologists, sociologists, historians, geographers and various kinds of cultural scholars. Where a study of Midwestern Mexican-American landscapes by any of those scholars would likely focus on testing or developing theory, this study focuses primarily on physical intervention in actual neighborhoods and cities to improve residents' quality of life. The addition of professional practice experience to research expertise is essential to this effort.

This involves the identification and mitigation of many minor spatial expressions of larger socioeconomic inequalities within these communities. Clearly any one of these recommended changes will not repair this larger inequality, but just as clearly each small remedy redresses one tangible point of intersection between that inequality and daily life. The outsider has the luxury of focusing on the ideal of grander theoretical conclusions, but for a neighborhood resident who, for example, dodges cars on her daily walk to a distant bus stop, sidewalks matter, despite their mundane nature.

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Many familiar goals in site planning and design projects remain unrealized in these neighborhoods, highlighting the extent to which the residents of these neighborhoods are underserved by the current planning and design infrastructure. The simple and practical recommendations within this section promise incremental improvements in quality of life for residents of these communities, moving toward more equitable life chances. The nature of landscape is to remember the past in an utterly concrete way, inflicting disadvantages of difficult access, lower services and substandard infrastructure even where barriers to social equality have fallen over the years. These landscape disparities will remain until outsiders see neighborhoods where Mexican-Americans live as places that matter and advocates for these communities see their landscapes as malleable media of justice.

### ***Residential neighborhoods***

The literature describes several different kinds of neighborhoods with a common emphasis on urban location, rental housing, transience and locally substandard housing and infrastructure (Valdés 2000; Abrahamson 1996; Valdés 1991). A substantial number, especially in the New Communities, are more accurately characterized as owner-occupied housing, often surrounded by single-family vernacular rentals or in new modular housing areas (Dieterlen 2012), a finding that echoes that of case studies of similar New Communities (Miraftab & McConnell 2008). This contradicts the popular idea that Mexican-Americans are transient, a persistent stereotype that local elites may echo. This mismatch underscores the need to avoid assumptions regarding a resident Mexican-American community and their stake in the future of the community as a whole.

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Design and planning recommendations in residential neighborhoods in New and Mixed Communities are less urgent overall than those in Established Communities because of their greater level of spatial equality, especially integration in housing, as described in “Profiles of city landscape categories,” above. New and Mixed Communities both are defined in part by the presence of middle class Mexican-American residents; thus less intervention is needed on their behalf.

Mexican-American neighborhoods in the Established Communities include one or more former workers' camps, evolved over the decades into very modest neighborhoods of small vernacular houses and semi-rural landscape character. These evolved camp neighborhoods abut disamenities such as railroads or industrial sites, and are often within floodplains or drained wetlands. Their housing and infrastructure, particularly streets and sidewalks, falls below the local standard. These neighborhoods are difficult to find, even for outsiders who know they exist within a certain area (Dieterlen 2012). Those unfamiliar with a municipality are unlikely to discover these neighborhoods without a targeted effort. New plans and designs should break with local tradition by taking these neighborhoods, their challenges and their residents' input into account.

Such efforts might address inequality in housing, both owner- and renter-occupied. High residential concentration suggests that other housing choices for Mexican-American residents are limited, although residents' personal preferences are also obviously a factor. While property values are low in the evolved camps, other areas of these affordable cities must have housing costs that are only marginally higher, meaning that this residential concentration cannot be explained solely by lower Mexican-American income. As noted elsewhere regarding African-

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Americans (Massey and Denton 1993), past discrimination in housing and lending practices continues to impact current wealth in minority communities, in part by concentrating minority home ownership within areas where property values were lowered by practices such as redlining. The history of the evolved camp makes it a landmark, and property ownership makes it financially important to the local Mexican-American community. A recurring theme of the evolved camp is *separate* and *inferior* in landscape condition or scale. This sends a message that this an undesirable place, not as good as other neighborhoods. In addition, inferior standards of public goods and services, such as utility service or fire protection, are discriminatory where these standards are lower for neighborhoods with more Mexican-Americans.

Prime among these shortcomings is poor access to the neighborhood. Evolved camps may have only one access road or access only from one direction, typically via a minor road. These access roads, in one case located behind a derelict factory, limit the neighborhood's visibility. Residents may see this as desirable, but it enables inequality by hiding it. A balance must be struck between residents' desire for privacy and security, preservation of sense of community within the neighborhood and making the neighborhood visually and physically part of the larger city. Many small steps would help with this, including upgrading the access road's profile and surfacing. The access road should meet visual standards for area roads, instead of those for driveways or alleys. Access roads need to have standard street signs, possibly with additional signs noting which streets are located in the neighborhood's interior. Where access roads are themselves difficult to find, install municipal-quality signage on the nearest through street indicating its presence and direction. Overgrown vegetation along public rights of way, including roads, freeways, watercourses and railroads, also helps hide evolved camps.

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The evolved camp lags behind area standards for municipal infrastructure such as roads and utilities, even where this standard is low. This depresses property values and may raise insurance rates, as well as creating safety concerns as noted below. Many evolved camps lie just beyond the city limits, which may enable this inequality by making them subject to lesser county or township services. Where this exists, services to the evolved camp should be provided to the same level as in other places within the county with an equivalent housing density and development fabric.

Roads within the neighborhood also need to be brought up to local standard. This is especially imperative where the meager width and turning radii of these roads impede fire engines or large utility trucks. This clear safety issue will bias utilities toward not maintaining items in this area. Property rights and takings issues involved in widening roads and turning radii need to be resolved in a fair and equitable manner, with a process comparable to that used in other local neighborhoods. Road paving, curbs and sidewalks are also usually below standard or absent altogether. Improvements should use permeable paving, especially where the existing condition is permeable (including disintegrating pavement), given that evolved camps are often poorly drained or flood-prone. Curb installation should also be very careful of this issue. This poor drainage is exacerbated by proximity to settling ponds and watercourses and by the informal construction of the houses, many of which have finished floor elevations very close to grade. By their nature, drainage issues need to be addressed at a neighborhood or larger scale. In some places, runoff may be draining into the neighborhood from adjacent land, which may be corrected by regrading the adjacent area. Many evolved camps intentionally were sited on poorly drained land because it was the least valuable (Valdés 1991, 2000), so their problems are intrinsic. In these areas, storm sewer systems may be the best option, designed to drain not only

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the public streets and rights of way, but also the individual yards. Another potential solution for smaller-scale issues is the installation of swales, infiltration basins or rain gardens on individual properties, to draw runoff away from buildings and drives.

Neighborhood access also needs to be improved for those without cars. Lower-income residents are much more likely to lack reliable car transportation, which impacts their ability to find work, keep jobs, and access healthy food, education and healthcare. American cities are generally inhospitable to the carless, but the evolved camps' lack of good physical access exaggerates this. Pedestrians need a safe and obvious route from the neighborhood to the nearest thoroughfare. This may be a sidewalk, but could also be a marked and paved shoulder, bike lane or paved trail. Issues to consider are lighting and security, winter maintenance, ADA access and signage. Successful pedestrian routes are likely to carry quite a bit of traffic, so the privacy of adjacent properties should be considered, possibly using fences or vegetative screening.

Related concerns include pedestrian access along the narrow unpaved streets within the neighborhood, and carless transportation within the larger city. The typical evolved camp access road deposits people in an industrial or edge-of-town area, hardly conducive to safe and easy transport by foot or bike. Where bus systems exist, there needs to be a stop here, serviced by regular buses. This might also be used by school buses, which will have difficulty navigating through the evolved camp. These stops should allow shelter from the elements and security from passing cars for those waiting. Sidewalks and bike lanes should connect to the access road, and allow reasonably direct travel to major employers, retail areas and schools. Consider how pedestrians and bikes will navigate across busy streets.

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Evolved camps usually are bounded by barriers such as railroads and watercourses (Dieterlen 2012) which may prevent direct travel by foot or bike to destinations like supermarkets and schools. Where these exist, install footbridges and paved trails across these barriers. This strategy also can be employed where large blocks of land, such as landfills, fairgrounds and cemeteries, isolate the evolved camp. A paved trail requires little land, even less when rights of way or easements are employed.

Utility infrastructure within the evolved camp should be brought up to local standard, particularly aged septic systems or tanks and wells. Evolved camps beyond city limits are likely to lack municipal water and sewer service, despite the consequences for safe carrying capacities from tiny lots, fairly high housing density and frequent crowding within the houses. This health issue, which also depresses property values, is difficult to see and therefore more insidious.

In all cases, special attention must be paid to the preservation of local landmarks and landscape character. The evolved camp may have been the local center of the Mexican-American community for decades, made more important by the overt hostility of the rest of the city, as reported in historical sources (Cárdenas 1958). An outsider has no chance of identifying what is important to the shared history, culture and sense of place of the neighborhood, and therefore is likely to bulldoze through memory unintentionally. Participatory design methods should be used to involve residents in decision-making about improvements that will potentially destroy history. Ideally this would involve a comprehensive plan for the neighborhood. A chief goal of this process should be to listen to the residents and hear what landmarks and landscape characteristics are important to preserve.

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Evolved camps may have serious environmental justice issues, such as locations adjacent to polluted settling ponds, industry, watercourses, railroads and freeways. In one Established Community, an evolved camp has a history of major environmental contamination, combining the negative effects of proximity to the pollution source and the conduit of many residents carrying pollutants home from work at this same factory (Baron 1980a, 1980b). The concentration of Mexican-Americans into the evolved camps in the Established Communities makes this a discriminatory case. Many of these disamenities are the legal responsibility of other parties, but others are externalities of public goods, borne disproportionately by the evolved camp residents: pollution and noise from railroads and freeways, for example. Mitigation could include barriers to noise and airflow, visual vegetative screens, cleaner transportation and traffic management to minimize idling. Environmental justice concerns of this type are often beyond the scope of landscape architectural work, but because of their focus on the built environment, designers can be the ideal people to see these injustices and speak truth to power as respected outsiders.

Housing in these neighborhoods is below local standard in size and condition (Dieterlen 2012), but it is also privately owned and a major component of the sense of the place. Work to improve the housing, but go carefully. Tools such as maintenance and improvement funds or low-cost loans may be made available for the landowner. Dilapidated housing may be the result of too little time to devote to repairs, an inability to get credit for repairs and/or apathetic landlords. Enforce or improve tenants' rights regarding housing conditions.

Mixed and New communities both may have evolved camp neighborhoods similar to those of Established Communities. The issues of these neighborhoods are more urgent in the

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Established Communities because of the greater concentration of their Mexican-American residents into these modest and often substandard areas. However, many of the same observations and recommendations apply to similar evolved camp neighborhoods in the New and Mixed Communities.

Mexican-American neighborhoods in all three landscape types often include areas of Old Rentals, large single-family homes dating from the early 1900s, now transformed into inexpensive apartments (Dieterlen 2012). As befits the age of the housing stock, these areas are usually adjacent to the central business district. Nearby housing of similar age but grander scale may be a gentrified historic district, particularly in Mixed Communities. The fabric of Old Rentals neighborhoods includes gridded streets with curbs and sidewalks, often with median strips of lawn between the sidewalk and street. These streets are generally lined with mature trees. Yards are small and houses set close together. Most Old Rentals neighborhoods do not have driveways. If present, narrow driveways squeeze between the houses to small detached garages in the backyards. These areas may also have alleys that serve garages in the backyards (Dieterlen 2009).

Because of their central location and standard infrastructure (streets and utilities), Old Rentals neighborhoods are far less isolated than evolved camps, which makes their landscape issues less numerous. Old Rentals neighborhoods are so common that they may escape notice. However, they do contain the following opportunities for design and planning, and should be considered in planning and design efforts for these communities.

A hallmark of an Old Rentals neighborhood is the lack of personalization in the housescaping and housing stock, possibly associated with renter turnover. Maintenance levels of

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both buildings and landscape are generally quite low. These are areas of affordable housing, and efforts to improve their appearance and condition should be wary of gentrification that will displace low-income tenants. In New and Mixed Communities, Old Rentals areas can serve as a place of first arrival for new immigrants, an important function that should be preserved. In addition to the degraded condition of privately owned property within these neighborhoods, public works such as street paving, curbs and especially sidewalks are frequently in disrepair. These should be maintained in keeping with city-wide standards.

Old Rentals neighborhoods display much higher concentrations of parked cars than similar single-family neighborhoods do, a result of the higher density of housing units and higher average number of people living within those housing units. These extra cars fill on-street parking, any available driveways, and often the small front yards as well (Dieterlen 2009). Care should be taken to maximize parking in these neighborhoods, or at least avoid removing spaces. As observed below, the social front yard is characteristic of other Mexican-American neighborhoods in these communities. A front yard used for parking is not available for this purpose, so the provision of additional parking may allow the social use of Old Rentals front yards. Given the potential crowding within local housing units, outdoor social space is a desirable amenity. Multiple social front yards in an area promote community cohesion and enhance security through increased informal surveillance of the street. With these potential benefits, barriers to social use of the front yards presented by zoning and similar ordinances (such as those prohibiting fences or furniture in front yards) should be removed or minimized.

Old Rentals are in many ways placeless spaces, in that they are characterized by transient renter residents, indifferent landlords and the lack of personalization of the landscape that

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follows. Design and planning interventions can assist in creating a sense of community and place within these neighborhoods. Not all renters are transient, and every Old Rentals neighborhood is someone's home. Participatory design methods are particularly necessary here in order to discover, preserve and enhance the landmarks and sacred spaces of these neighborhoods.

### ***Residential housescapes***

Housescapes or yards resembling those described by cultural geographers studying Mexican-American landscapes in the Southwest (Arreola 2002, 2004; Rojas 2006, 2010) are most common in Established and New Communities (Dieterlen 2012). These Southwest-style housescapes focus on the use and furnishing of the front yard as a social space, in marked contrast to the ornamental front yard associated with non-Hispanic white traditions. Either all or part of the front yard is furnished in the manner of an interior room, which may include interior or outdoor furniture, grills, potted plants, ornaments of various kinds and paving or clean-swept packed earth in place of lawn. A fence or masonry wall, generally along the front and side property lines, usually surrounds this social space (see Figure 3).

(Figure 3)

Figure 3. A social front yard in Michigan, complete with a conversational grouping of furniture, decorative potted plants and ornaments and non-lawn surfacing. A low ornamental fence encloses the front of the yard.

The social front yard of Mexican-American neighborhoods is strikingly similar to the fashionable outdoor room promoted by upscale shelter magazines. Equitable local government needs to treat them in a similar manner, recognizing and overcoming the non-Hispanic white bias

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against using the front yard for anything beyond decoration. Social front yards have several potential benefits: they provide excellent surveillance of the street, they increase opportunities for neighbor interaction and they (like outdoor rooms) make a small house live larger without increasing its carbon footprint. They also reduce the area of lawn, creating a more sustainable landscape. Zoning ordinances typically discourage any use of the front yard except decoration. More inclusive zoning would recognize the social front yard (and its cousin, the front porch furnished and decorated like an interior room) as legitimate uses, while regulating their elements and excesses in the same way they might regulate outdoor rooms. The presence of a viable alternative to the non-Hispanic white front lawn – mowed lawn, scattered shade trees and evergreen foundation shrubs – allows the designer to use the front yard space in new ways, perhaps mirroring the social use, perhaps borrowing only the line of the enclosure fence or wall.

The other Southwest-style housescape characteristic of greatest interest to the designer is the wider palette of colors and materials used on the house and within the yard. This includes decorative masonry, stonework, and ceramics, as well as some use of brighter colors and ornamental metalwork on house facades and fences (Dieterlen 2012), also reported in the Southwest (Rojas 2010; Curtis 2004; Arreola 2002). Implications for design include an extension of the very limited palette of colors and materials typically employed, although the harsh climate of the Midwest should be remembered in the use of new materials – ceramic tile used by a homeowner may not be sufficiently durable or weatherproof for institutional or commercial uses.

### ***Retail areas***

Mexican-American/Spanish-language businesses, most often specialty groceries and restaurants, occur in all three types of cities, but in different places and with different characteristics. They

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are rarely clustered into “Mexican” areas or enclaves, instead occurring individually or in small clusters within a single building. In Established Communities, these businesses occur primarily in older neighborhood retail buildings and along retail corridors. Many Mexican-American businesses, especially those other than restaurants, stand out as less well-kept and prosperous-looking than their neighbors, through poorer building and grounds maintenance (Dieterlen 2012).

Mixed Communities have abundant Mexican-American/Spanish-language businesses, including specialty shops and professional services, spread throughout the city. The downtown retail districts of these cities may be considerably gentrified, excluding Mexican-American and other local businesses in favor of chain stores. Mexican-American businesses and their neighbors are similarly well-kept and prosperous, with little to distinguish the Mexican-American businesses besides Spanish-language signs and business names (Dieterlen 2012). These are an asset that any landscape intervention should not disrupt. There may be opportunities for the development of public or outdoor spaces adjacent to these businesses or business clusters using more Mexican-American or Southwest-style elements (e.g. masonry walls, tile, decorative metalwork, vivid colors, murals), if used with taste and restraint. These promise a welcome novelty in Midwestern designs, as well as an opportunity for enhanced sense of place that simultaneously reinforces the view of the Mexican-American community as a legitimate and welcome part of the local business arena. The combination of landscape elements recognized by the local Mexican-American community as “Mexican,” those that are more typical of the city as a whole (industrial or agricultural materials, for example) and references to authentic local history could be particularly rich.

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Mexican-American businesses in New Communities also are present throughout the city, including both the downtown and sprawl retail areas. They are markedly more prosperous and better-kept than their neighbors, with noticeable customer traffic, fresh paint and new signage (Dieterlen 2012). The most important implication of these businesses for planning and design is their presence and apparent prosperity in the often moribund retail areas of the New Communities. The establishment of successful businesses such as these in empty storefronts is a desirable end for many plans and designs. Some Mexican-American businesses include lavish Southwest-style building remodels (see Figure 4). The impact of this kind of investment in a depressed retail area needs no elaboration; it is a strong statement of confidence in the viability of one's business and community.

(Figure 4)

Figure 4. Southwest-style remodel of retail building in Indiana, including both improvements to the building facade and an elaborate freestanding wall. The outdoor space may be intended for the store's weekly barbecues.

The Mexican-American retail landscape as documented elsewhere (Rojas 2010) includes unique characteristics, such as displays of merchandise on the sidewalk, signs painted directly on the buildings, and vivid paint colors on facades and site furniture, which could be penalized through zoning or encouraged as exciting and distinctive. Communities that want to capitalize on this potential revitalizing influence might allow pushcart vendors, provide additional seating and other pedestrian amenities, and install bilingual signage. There is likely to be backlash from some residents against "too many" Mexican-American shops, especially in the downtown, still the symbolic heart of the city. Many Mexican-American landscape characteristics are easy to

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miss, but a row of *panaderías* on Main Street proclaims unmistakable change. The dispersed character and lack of clustering of Mexican-American/Spanish-language businesses, even where abundant, in all three types of cities (Dieterlen 2012) runs counter to the development of specialized “ethnic” shopping districts as potential tourist attractions, a likely strategy for capitalizing on these businesses. A more realistic and promising attitude is to promote these businesses as simply viable local enterprises subject to the same planning tools used to encourage businesses of any ethnicity, with Spanish language accommodation.

### ***Parks and public spaces***

The importance of the plaza or public spaces like parks as sites for socializing in Mexican-American culture is established in the literature (Arreola 2002; Gobster 2002; Loukaitou-Sideris 1995). While there are no substantial empirical findings regarding enhanced park or public space use in these Midwestern landscape types, numerous anecdotal accounts encountered within this research report large multigenerational Latina/o groups picnicking in parks in similar Midwestern cities. This activity has tremendous potential for achieving vibrant use of public spaces, including festivals, religious processions, markets and general socializing. Park facilities need to accommodate similar gatherings, with more picnic shelters and tables, trash receptacles, possibly grills, and adjacent parking, perhaps funded with money diverted from facilities for the individual active sports more popular with non-Hispanic whites (Gobster 2002). Bilingual signage is a must, especially where safety is concerned. Multigenerational gatherings also bring more elderly users to the park, so access and safety for those with limited mobility needs to be a concern. Given the ethnic tensions within New Communities (Dieterlen 2012), their parks may be spaces of conflict. Provision of an environment where users feel secure and where police can adequately patrol needs to be balanced with providing spaces for teens to socialize, an especially

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important function where housing is more modest and crowded. Issues to consider are lighting, sight lines, blind corners (especially along pedestrian routes) and audio privacy (ie if users can be overheard). Parks also provide a place for community members of different ethnic groups, social classes and ages to cross paths, especially in smaller cities where there are limited recreational venues.

### ***Industrial areas***

In Established Communities, industry primarily dates from the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and often includes canneries or heavy manufacturing, such as automakers. These factories are located in the city's core on watercourses or railroads, and may be underused or vacant. In contrast, New Communities are defined in part by their relatively large newly arrived light manufacturers, meatpackers, and/or food processing plants. These are typically at the edge of town, often within an industrial park served by a major truck route. While railroads may also serve these factories, tractor-trailer traffic is vital to their commerce. As new employers drawing large numbers of workers, these factories are likely to be running at capacity. Mixed Communities may have both types of industry, but they are less likely to have underused or vacant older industry (Dieterlen 2012).

Naturally opportunities for planning and design reflect the divergent character of these industrial areas. Established Communities are likely to have the problems associated with heavier industry, such as environmental and aesthetic concerns grandfathered from an earlier era, including the environmental justice concerns addressed above. Underused or vacant factories (see Figure 5) pose serious aesthetic and perceived security issues as well, especially for adjacent neighborhoods, which are frequently Mexican-American. However, the designer must guard

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against the assumption that the factory is merely an eyesore – neighborhood histories, both communal and personal, may be deeply interwoven with these factories. In all of these landscape types, older (pre-1970) factories often abut a neighborhood of worker housing that may have seen multiple waves of workers of varying ethnicities (Dieterlen 2012). While these neighborhoods may be undervalued by local elites, they are an important part of local history, and may be a good source of affordable housing. It is a challenge to balance the conflicting narratives and values of different socioeconomic and ethnic groups in dealing with these complicated sites. Many of these factories may be targeted by future revitalization or brownfield redevelopment projects.

(Figure 5)

Figure 5. Vacant factory building located in the core of an Established Community in Michigan. One of the city's most Mexican-American neighborhoods surrounds this factory.

The new factories in the New Communities and Mixed Communities present a different set of issues. These factories are very large pole buildings surrounded by immense asphalt or gravel parking lots, with considerable truck traffic making both the factory property and the surrounding road access inhospitable to pedestrians and bicyclists (see Figure 6). The exurban location of these factories exacerbates this problem, yet the economic status of the factory workers, particularly the mostly immigrant Mexican-Americans, means that cars may well be out of reach of many of the workers.

(Figure 6)

Figure 6. Industrial park in a New Community in Indiana. Note the absence of sidewalks and lack of pedestrian scale.

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New Communities' meatpackers in particular are known for being environmentally noxious, with pollution and odor problems (Millard and Chapa 2004), but both types of industry bring heavy truck traffic. Municipalities are likely to be cash-strapped but timid about making demands on the industry that has revived their town's economy. This presents a difficult funding issue. However, the built environment implications are fairly clear: adjacent land uses should be screened from industry, using berms, walls and/or vegetation; environmental hazards from waste, including odor issues, need to be mitigated; and regulations need to be enforced.

### ***Transportation***

Increased truck traffic presents a host of issues for New Communities beyond their industrial areas. Tax abatements often play a role in attracting these new manufacturers, especially the meatpackers (Gouveia and Stull 1997; Chapa et al. 2004). Lower tax revenues for the municipality in combination with additional trucks may create serious traffic and road paving issues. Truck routes through or around town need to be adequately signed and have appropriate turning radii to minimize hazards to smaller motor vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians. Be sure that crossings are adequate and that pedestrian and bike routes are safe from truck traffic.

Increased traffic can be a blessing to local restaurants and truck stops, but it brings noise and offensive odors, especially from livestock trucks around meatpackers. These are good arguments for routing trucks not just outside of town, but downwind, generally south and east.

Mexican-American workers are generally less likely to have access to reliable car transport. These cities also usually lack public transportation systems. This can result in far more carless residents in a New Community, a situation that can be turned to great advantage for all

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residents, new and old, by creating pedestrian and bicycle access, perhaps via multiuse trails, paved road shoulders or sidewalk extensions. A walkable and bikable community is an asset to many groups besides the Mexican-American workers: the elderly, the disabled, children, teens, the health-conscious. The implications for sustainability are clear – less driving is less energy consumed and less emissions – but there are also substantial financial ones, a boon to many besides the Mexican-Americans. Comprehensive pedestrian and bicycle plans are appropriate here, incorporating the new industry, retail centers, schools, other major employers (if any), medical facilities, parks and residential neighborhoods, especially lower-income ones. While this kind of planning and improvement are likely to be seen as frivolous and unnecessary by local authorities, the combination of increased semi truck traffic and increased bike/pedestrian traffic is a tragedy waiting to happen, adding urgency and weight to this issue.

In Mixed Communities, the presence of migrant agricultural workers compounds this need for adequate carless transportation. Provide for carless transportation linking migrant camps and fields with area destinations, such as shopping areas, medical facilities and schools. This includes provisions for pedestrians, bicyclists and bus service/stops. As in the New Communities, improving these facilities will also benefit other area residents. Since migrants are newcomers (although some may return to the area every year), ensure that there are sufficient signs and wayfinding to allow them to find the destinations mentioned above, including on carless routes.

## **Conclusions**

While this discussion has examined conditions and opportunities within small cities of the Midwest, the growth of Mexican-heritage communities outside the Southwest is certainly not

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restricted to this region. Yet the paucity of research and information about the built environment and Mexican-American communities, despite recent scholarship noted above, means that in many places there is little guidance regarding similar planning and design challenges. What does this research have to offer designers and planners working beyond the non-metro Midwest? A set of broader guidelines distilled from the above observations and experiences is a starting point for similar work beyond the landscape categories here depicted.

Consider the possibility of a Mexican-American presence within the city, independent of input from local non-Latina/os. Be aware that others may assume that the Mexican-American community is transient and therefore does not merit consideration in community planning and design decisions. There may be a custom of ignoring Mexican-American neighborhoods, especially evolved camps.

Strive to incorporate local Mexican-American landscape elements and land uses into design and planning solutions. Use the variety around the project site to widen the range of locally acceptable landscape elements, materials, uses and behaviors. This provides the designer with a wider range of inspirations and a potential connection to authentic sense of place. It could also contribute to the larger goal of making local Mexican-American landscapes more widely accepted within the community by legitimizing similar elements and/or alternatives.

Suit your designs, plans and policies to Mexican-American participation, behaviors and landscape traditions exhibited locally. Examples include establishing a link between a trail system and a nearby Mexican-American evolved camp neighborhood or the redesign of a residential street corridor to incorporate a sidewalk detail and alignment that allows an orderly connection with front yard enclosure fences. Capitalize on extant Mexican-American land uses

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and behaviors to achieve planning and design goals – for example, a streetscape designed to increase street life, or a plaza intended as a festival space.

Finally, other immigrant and minority groups may share substantial portions of these landscape characteristics. This is of particular import regarding the level of in/equality in the landscape and whether the more established – more inequality/ less established – less inequality relationship discussed here holds true for other groups. The persistence of greater spatial inequality in Established Communities to the present day and the likely succession of New Communities from non-Hispanic white to substantially Mexican-American are implications too large for those who study and shape the built environment to ignore.

#### **Notes**

<sup>i</sup>This manuscript primarily uses the term *Latina/os*, but preserves the term *Hispanic* [resident] when referring to information from the U.S. Census Bureau, since it is the primary term that institution uses.

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Table 1: *A priori* list of landscape characteristics

Notes: This list is not comprehensive; it is provided for illustrative purposes only.

*Housescape level*

Brightly painted building façade or trim
Stucco on building façade
Christian icons
Potted plants or flowers
Functional (ie not ornamental) furniture in front yard
Front yard enclosed with fence, hedge or wall
Laundry or items for sale on fences
Under-construction appearance of house or construction materials in yard
Objects placed in street, sidewalk or parking lot to claim space
Work (ie car repair or housework) in front yard
Lawn replaced by paving or other surface
Interior furnishings on front porch

*Neighborhood level*

Mexican-American/ Spanish-language businesses
Money wiring or check cashing services
Churches with Spanish signs
Other businesses with Spanish signs
More street life relative to rest of city (ie vendors or day laborers)
Murals, bright graphic signs or graffiti art
Disamenities (noxious land uses) adjacent to neighborhood
Lack of curbs
Lack of sidewalks
Evidence of private wells (wellheads) or primitive toilets (privies)

*City level*

Mexican-American neighborhoods at or beyond edge of town
Main employers adjacent to Mexican-American neighborhoods
Economically depressed retail areas
Mexican-American/ Spanish-language businesses and institutions in central business district

Author's final draft post-refereeing (post-print) version.

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Table 2: Additional study cities

*Established Communities*

Allen Park, MI	East Lansing, MI	Michigan City, IN
Ashtabula, OH	Ecorse, MI	Port Huron, MI
Bay City, MI	Fostoria, OH	Saginaw Township North, MI
Bowling Green, OH	Gibsonburg, OH	Whiting, IN
Buena Vista, MI	Jackson, MI	Winona Lake, IN
Campbell, OH	Lincoln Park, MI	
Carrollton, MI	Melvindale, MI	

*Mixed Communities*

Archbold, OH	Kentwood, MI	Schererville, IN
Beechwood, MI	Mishawaka, IN	St. Louis, MI
Comstock Park, MI	Monticello, IN	Warsaw, IN
Findlay, OH	Ottawa, OH	Wauseon, OH
Imlay City, MI	Plymouth, IN	Willard, OH

*New Communities*

Bridgeport, MI	Muskegon, MI	Portage, IN
Munster, IN	Painesville, OH	Southgate, MI



Figure 1. Map of initial study cities.



Figure 2. Map of additional study cities.



Figure 3. A social front yard in Michigan, complete with a conversational grouping of furniture, decorative potted plants and ornaments, and non-lawn surfacing. A low ornamental fence encloses the front of the yard.



Figure 4. Southwest-style remodel of retail building in Indiana, including both improvements to the building facade and an elaborate freestanding wall. The outdoor space may be intended for the store's weekly barbecues.



Figure 5. Vacant factory building located in the core of an Established Community in Michigan. One of the city's most Mexican-American neighborhoods surrounds this factory.



Figure 6. Industrial park in a New Community in Indiana. Note the absence of sidewalks and lack of pedestrian scale.