

# A New Subdivision in a Chicano Barrio

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**In 1996, after graduating with a Master's degree in** planning from the University of Iowa, I returned home to San Antonio, Texas. Within weeks I found myself working for Habitat for Humanity as a VISTA Volunteer. There I soon discovered that low-income housing is not just about hammers and nails. This paper is based on a nine-month undercover investigation of Plaza Florencia, a controversial low-income subdivision.

In 1996, in a crime-ridden section of San Antonio's predominantly Chicano mid-westside,<sup>1</sup> the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity turned a vacant lot into a 41-home affordable subdivision.<sup>2</sup> Habitat, a non-profit housing developer, helps low-income families become first-time homeowners.

But soon after moving in, residents became unsettled when their private recreational facilities—a playground, park, and pavilion in the center of the compound—became a haven for local gangs. “They come in at all hours, and they smoke pot and drink beer,” said Missy Caballero (fictitious name), who bought a house next to the playground. “I don't feel safe...I'm scared for my children.” Many residents worried that the subdivision's long, straight-a-way design would encourage drive-by shootings. Some privately blamed Habitat.

The situation surprised Habitat officials, who responded by telling residents to call the police. But many residents rejected their suggestion, arguing that the police had always been unresponsive. Said one anonymous resident: “I'm from the westside. And the police never come...unless someone gets killed.” Several residents said they would not call the police because they feared gang retaliation. Habitat officials, who lived in affluent areas of the city, dismissed these fears, calling them trivial.

In early 1997, residents formed a homeowner's association. At one meeting, while discussing safety issues, residents unanimously agreed that the recreational facilities should have been located outside of the subdivision, or not built at all. They also agreed

that speed humps should be installed to deter future drive-bys.<sup>3</sup>

While observing these developments as they unfolded, I became completely fascinated. How could so much money, time, and good intentions end in such a mess? Determined to find out what went wrong, I started piecing together what happened during the planning process, which occurred prior to my arrival.

### **The Planning Process**

The Planning Committee, which met monthly for over a year-and-a-half, was composed of a diverse group of people. Among the members were ten Chicano families, a few of whom were living on the subdivision site at the time. Homes for these families were built and occupied first; the rest would later move in after completion of the subdivision. Other members of the committee included: two Habitat board members (a former board president, white male; a current board member, Mexican American female, bilingual); Habitat's executive director, a construction specialist (white male); two local architects (white males); one local geologist (white female); and one local sociology professor (white male).

As I discovered, the call for the recreational facilities came from the ten families themselves. Families said they wanted a place, not far away, where their children could play and adults could meet and socialize. This sat well with Habitat planners, who wanted to give families a large voice in the planning process.

But a crucial error was made when Habitat planners,

who led the process, failed to adequately assess the potential impacts of the recreational facilities. They did so by omitting the following key questions: What people would recreational facilities attract after they are built? Would they attract gangs? Would the design of the subdivision facilitate drive-by shootings? Should defensive architecture and landscaping be included in the design to prevent drive-by shootings? Do barrio residents have faith and trust in the police's ability to help in an emergency? If no, why?

Adequate answers to these complex questions require an in-depth understanding of barrio social dynamics; and none of the committee members, including the ten Chicano families, seemed to possess such insight. Nor did anyone seem to appreciate the dangers of omitting these questions. So, it follows that at least one key participant was absent - a barrio planner.

In brief, a barrio planner is a planner with expert understanding of and sensitivity towards the barrio and its residents. This planner is intimately familiar with the language and culture of the people, and is able to negotiate through possible class barriers. He or she must understand how, in the barrio, the spaces we create play on the spaces that already exist.

In the case of Plaza Florencia, a bilingual barrio planner was needed to facilitate the ideas of the families as they developed. Also needed was a discursive space, which would have allowed for expression in both Spanish and English. And the meetings, which were sometimes held at the architect's office, should

have been held in a place the families were familiar with and comfortable in.

### **In the Absence of a Barrio Planner**

What influenced Habitat planners to treat the barrio with such benign neglect? Among the many possible factors, I argue that the planners' deep-seated attitudes towards the people they served are worth examining.

At first I was amused to learn that the planners (the key decision-makers) within the organization were not necessarily the individuals with the most knowledge about housing; rather, they were the ones who donated the most money. I was not so amused, however, when I learned about the attitudes of these planners, all of whom were well-educated white males, many of them quite wealthy.

On several occasions, one planner expressed the belief that Mexican Americans possessed inferior intelligence. Others expressed intolerance of the Spanish language. Over and over I overheard outrage against affirmative action, even though I was conducting my study in the wake of its defeat in Texas. At one point during my study, Habitat and Congressman Henry Bonilla (R-Texas) staged a joint media event at the subdivision site with then-Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich serving as guest of honor. With a subdivision full of low-income minority families with children, several of whom were Mexican immigrants, the event sent a provocative message, considering Gingrich's stance on minority issues.

Apart from the bigotry, I detected a resounding Eurocentrism—perspectives that reinforce the normalization of white culture and values (Shohat and Stam, 1994). In part, this was exemplified in the following ways: a staggering lack of awareness about and antagonism towards Chicano history and culture, a privileging of white political perspectives, and an inability to acknowledge and validate the perspectives of Chicanos from the barrio.

Several of my key informants (homeowners) said there was widespread anger among homeowners over mistreatment by Habitat, but many felt reluctant to protest for fear of losing their house. Habitat holds a twenty-year mortgage on the properties.

Ironically, Habitat served San Antonio's minority clientele, with Chicanos and African Americans comprising eighty-five percent and fifteen percent of homeowners, respectively. A considerable number of these Chicanos were immigrants who spoke only Spanish. The communities in which Habitat built its housing, and hence where its clientele resided, were low-income minority neighborhoods.

In contrast to the clientele, Habitat's permanent office staff was predominately white. Until April 1997, when Habitat hired its first African American executive director, only one out of eight directorship positions had been held by a non-white person. Sources inside Habitat said the 1997 hiring was largely a token gesture aimed at mending relations between Habitat and the African American eastside and that the new director knew close to nothing about housing. Habitat's Board of Directors, in contrast to the staff,

was quite diverse. About half of the members were minority, yet the people on the Board with the most political pull were white.

### **So What?**

What we see here is a suspicious correspondence. On the one hand, a controversial plan. On the other hand, planners with controversial beliefs and attitudes. Did the latter cause the former? No, I would not say that, for a variety of other factors need to be considered.

I would say, however, that the planners' beliefs and attitudes could have played a partial role in influencing their behavior. That is, potentially, these beliefs and attitudes could have been barriers to gaining a greater and more appropriate understanding of the barrio and its residents. After all, how can we treat a diamond like a diamond when all we see is a lump of coal?

### **Conclusion**

Even though the homeowners themselves requested the recreational space, Habitat planners should have been aware of the dangers. I suggest that the problems with the subdivision's recreational facilities stem directly from an inadequate impact study. Yet, indirectly, these problems have their roots in deep-seated attitudes of the planners. Such problems could have been avoided by including a credible, knowledgeable barrio planner in the planning stage.

The most important point here is that housing developers do not just build houses, they create new social relations. The success or failure of future barrio

subdivisions may depend upon the extent to which planners consider the potential dynamic interplay between the proposed project and the pre-existing social relations, as well as their own fundamental beliefs.

### **Epilogue and Methodology**

In doing this study, I gathered most of my information through informal conversations. Inside Habitat, I spoke with planners, staff, and some of the board members. Conversations took place in the lunchroom or at local bars after work hours. Only one co-worker knew I was conducting a study, a tactic that was necessary due to the perceived hostile political climate within the organization.

Outside Habitat, I spoke with the homeowners themselves. This went slowly at first, but as time went on I earned the trust of three homeowners in particular, and they became my key informants under conditions of anonymity. Knowing Habitat's plans to build future subdivisions, the homeowners strongly encouraged me to share my findings so that the problems with their subdivision not be needlessly repeated. As one informant put it: "Use us as guinea pigs... Just make it better next time."

One factor worth mentioning is my ethnicity. I am Chicano. And while I am sure this had a lot to do with what was said around me by Habitat's mostly white staff, frankly, I was shocked and amazed at what I was allowed to hear.

Looking back, I think the hardest part of my research was keeping my composure while witnessing much bigotry and benevolent treatment. By benevolent

treatment I mean whites treating Chicanos like children—"talking down to" is the common street term. These subtle displays of indignity hurt me deeply. What is more, I saw working-poor Chicano families trying to better their children's lives in the face of all this. They too had to keep their composure, which meant playing the role of the quiet, obedient Mexican, always careful to remain within the boundaries prescribed to them. To a large extent, I must admit, this was also my strategy. I, the self-described radical Chicano, had to keep my mouth shut, for I needed data that could only be gotten by letting people feel comfortable enough to just let it out. In other words, I needed to stay on the good side to get the good stuff, so to speak.

I lost my composure only once, in the final month of my study. One of the new homeowners called the office with questions concerning electricity hookups and wanted to know where to find information in Spanish. After the matter was taken care of by a bilingual staffer, the lead planner, a white, monolingual man who was also a big financial contributor, stood up and said, "Spanish. Damn, we're trying to run a legitimate business here." At this point, I had had enough. Quickly, on a piece of paper, I wrote, "Trying to run a legitimate business? You're in San Antonio. Learn Spanish, gringo!!!" I put the note inside this individual's office mailbox. Later in the day, word got out, and several white staffers in the office expressed shock at the note, wondering who had written it. I took the blame and gave a small lecture on cultural respect. The lead planner did not speak to me after that. No matter. By then I had

gotten all the information I needed from this person. To this day, I remain surprised that this was the only rebellious act on my part.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this text, Chicano and Mexican American are used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> The subdivision is located within census tract 1714, which has a population of 6,100 persons according to the 1990 Census. Approximately ninety-five percent of the population is of Hispanic descent, thirty-five percent live below poverty-level, and the median family income is just below \$18,000. Out of the forty-one families in the subdivision, forty were Chicano and one was white. Of the Chicano families, about fifteen were Mexican immigrants.

<sup>3</sup> While the gang activities were met by a resounding “keep out” by residents, the subdivision was not completely exclusionary. In fact, one highly

inclusionary feature distinguishes it. At least four out of the forty-one homes are cottage-style, one-bedroom homes. These small houses were sold to low-income older couples who wished to spend their retirement years in decent housing. This is significant for two main reasons. First, reportedly, it was the Mexican American homeowners who, during the planning process, requested that elders be included in the subdivision. Second, this reflects a resistance to age segregation. Traditional Mexican cultural practices, e.g., living arrangements and celebrations, typically involve all ages. Elders are highly respected and are central to the concept of family. The inclusion of elders in the subdivision is a reflection of this cultural trait.

### References

Shonat, Ella and Robert Stam. 1994. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge.

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