



# NORTHERN NEWS



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## Latino vernacular

*Latino spatial and cultural values transform the American single-family house and street*

By James Rojas

The vast majority of America's single-family housing was built in the twentieth century with values and spatial requirements that met the social, cultural, design, and economic needs and dreams of America's working- and middle-classes. As great numbers of Latino immigrants move into those homes, they bring attitudes towards housing, land, and public space that often conflict with how the neighborhoods and houses were originally planned, zoned, designed, and constructed.

Latinos moving into single-family homes add their cultural living patterns to the American spatial forms to create "Latino vernacular." This vernacular offers cultural, economic, and environmental solutions to the residents' needs as they customize and personalize their homes. Every change Latinos make to their homes, no matter how small, has meaning and purpose, representing the struggles, triumphs, everyday habits, and beliefs of the new working class residents.

Latino vernacular synthesizes cultural styles that are neither "Spanish" (as the general public views it) nor Anglo-American. The beauty of the vernacular cannot be measured by any architectural standard but rather by life's experiences, expressions, and adaptations. The vernacular represents Latinos' adaptation to their environment.

### **Public vs. private; outdoor vs. indoor**

Many Latinos come from the rural places of Mexico or Latin America where social, cultural and — to some extent — economic life revolves around the *zocalo* or plaza. The plaza becomes an extension of residents' home life. The dialogue between home and plaza — which is very apparent in the physical structures of Latin American settlements — manifests itself in the way Latinos redesign their single-family homes in the U.S.

Because of warm weather and Spanish urban design precedents, the traditional Mexican courtyard home is built to the street and designed with a "patio" or interior courtyard. The patio helps ventilate the interior of the home and floods it with light. With most rooms facing the patio, it becomes the physical focus of the home.

By contrast, the American house has a strong linear movement that begins at the front of the house and works its way back. American rooms are arranged beginning with the "public" (the living room) in front, to the private (the bedrooms) in back. In the Mexican house, the focus is on being either inside or outside, not in front or in back. Privacy is usually not an issue.

### **Front yard as plaza**

The Latino household extends its presence to all four corners of the lot. Nowhere else in the Latino vernacular home is Mexican use of space so illuminated and celebrated than in the enclosed front yard or plaza. As Mexican immigrants settled into their new homes, the American front yards became a space for cultural identity.

The Mexican brings a new interpretation to the American front yard ("la yarda") because many homes in Mexico don't have them. Depending on the practical needs of the owners, the use and design of the front yards vary from elaborate courtyard gardens reminiscent of Mexico to working spaces. One Mexican resident said, "In Mexico I never had such a piece of land like this." *La yarda* thus reflects Mexican cultural values applied to American suburban form.

The personalization of *la yarda* by the residents, along with the enclosing fences, has greatly changed the appearance of the front yards and the street. In Latino neighborhoods, enclosed front yards are now so dominant that they

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have altered the general physical characteristics of the neighborhoods and the residents' behavior patterns. The continuous green, park-like setting that symbolized the American suburban front yard has been cut into individual slices in East Los Angeles. These "slices" readily allow for individuality and sociability and create diversity.



**An enclosed front yard is an extension of the house. The porch appears to be an addition.** Photo: James Rojas

In many middle-class American neighborhoods, the appearance of the front yard is the standard for acceptance. In Latino neighborhoods, acceptance is not based on appearance of the front yard but on physical and social contact with neighbors. In contrast with anonymous lawns, Latino front yards are personal vignettes of the owners' lives.

### Fences as social catalyst

The visible expanse of lawn fronting American suburban houses is a symbol of ownership and privacy. It is also a psychological barrier that separates the private space of the home from the public space of the street. People do not walk on another person's front lawn unless they are invited to. While one can find fences in many front yards across America, the egalitarian front yard has led many to think of fences in terms of exclusion, seclusion, or security — barriers against the world. By contrast, in Latino neighborhoods and barrios, fences bring neighbors and pedestrians together. Front-yard fences have become cultural icons and places for social interaction.

While it's true that many Latino homeowners also build fences to protect their homes, keep neighbors pets off their



**The front fence offers a place to chat.** Photo: Jose Barrera

lawns, or keep their small children from running into the street, the Latino front-yard fence creates an edge where people tend to congregate — a comfortable point for social interaction between people in the front yard and on the sidewalk.

### Shifting threshold

The threshold is a pivotal part of the home because it conveys social and cultural meaning. It also is a powerful device to regulate interaction by indicating whether the residence is open/accessible vs. closed/inaccessible.

A front-yard fence modifies the approach to the home and moves the threshold from the front door to the front gate. The enclosed front yard physically defines a barrier between the public and private spaces of the home and the street. Thus, the enclosed front yard of the Latino home acts as a large foyer and becomes an active part of the house. The sense of entry into the Latino home begins at the front gate at the sidewalk. This entry gate is often emphasized with an arch.

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Visitors rarely cross the threshold of a home unless invited to do so. And inviting or not inviting someone to enter the home is a clear signal of the occupant's desire for more contact or less. One can design the threshold to visually keep visitors at bay, not inviting them to cross the threshold.



**An elaborate wall plus fence establishes a new threshold and a defensible yard.** Photo: James Rojas

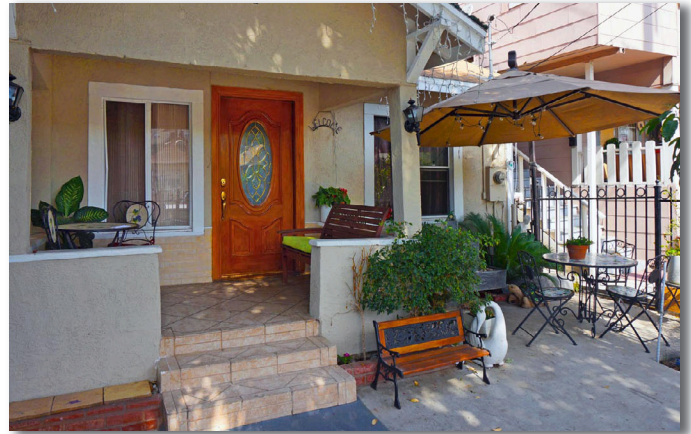
The entire, enclosed front yard becomes a large “defensible” threshold in Latino homes, which allows for more social interaction to take place there between the residents and pedestrians.

Collectively, the enclosed front yards in the neighborhoods change the scale of the suburban block and create an intimate atmosphere. As the fences along the street assign yard space to each home, the street becomes more urban in character, with each fence reflecting the personality of a resident on the street.

### Front porches are important to Latinos

In most American homes, the use and importance of the front porch has declined. But for Latino homeowners and renters, the front porch is a critical, valued connection between outdoor-indoor space and public-private space. In Latin America, rooms such as the laundry room are not roofed or are located outside the enclosed house; so the use of outdoor space as part of the home is a common practice. Thus the use and desire for outside space via the front porch comes naturally to Latinos.

Latino front porches are used to check out what's happening on the street, to socialize with family and friends, for extra storage, as a place for toddlers to play, to sell services or things, and as celebratory spaces. Therefore porches are redesigned or enlarged to meet those needs.



**The porch, with its Welcome sign, offers a place to watch or to visit.** Photo: James Rojas

The porch is where seniors sit to watch the world go by, where teenagers wait for something to happen, where a mother sits to watch her children play in the front yard, where a man might meet his friends after work, or even a place where you give haircuts! These uses make the front porch an enduring space that adds to social activity on the street.

The front porch is also where Latinos become civic and bond with their neighbors. The front porch is usually the most prominent spatial element of the home — where the house puts its best face forward, a place of civic/religious pride.

### The Latino vernacular transforms and sustains the street

Latino single-family houses “communicate” with each other by sharing a cultural understanding expressed through the built environment. The residents communicate with each other via the front yard. By building fences they bind together adjacent homes. By adding and enlarging front porches, they extend the household into the front yard. These physical changes allow and reinforce the social connections and the heavy use of the front yard. The entire street now functions as a “suburban” plaza where every resident can interact with the public from his or her front yard. Thus Latinos have transformed car-oriented suburban blocks to walkable and socially sustainable places.

*James Rojas is a globetrotting planner who engages communities in the urban planning process through a unique visualization method using found objects. Rojas, who lives in Alhambra, California, is a member of the California Planning Roundtable and a founder and member of the Latino Urban Forum.*

You can hear Mr. Rojas on this subject on October 29, 6–8 PM, at ABAG, 101 8th Street, Oakland, CM | 1.5 pending. You must register for the free event at <http://bit.ly/1tanou8> ■