



# **Chicano Identity and the Cultural Landscape of Fruitvale**

- Benjamin Remington



*Fig. 1: In this aerial view of Fruitvale, the Fruitvale transit village is visible in the lower right, and Saint Elizabeth Church is visible in top center. (Image by google maps)*

## **Abstract**

From the time of its first European settlement by the peralta family in 1821 until the present day the Fruitvale area has remained a center for the Latino population of Oakland. Census figures show an official count of the Latino population at around fifty percent in this area, though other organizations have found evidence of a significant undocumented population which would add to this percentage significantly. Fruitvale has become the undisputed center of Latino life and culture in the East Bay, and the cultural landscape bears witness to the influence of this fast-growing segment of the population. Their presence is made easily visible through Spanish-language signage, transnational services, and Mexican food ways. However, more subtle, and more pervasive, elements of the landscape can be traced to differing ideas about space, community, and culture which have been brought north from Mexico by residents of the area. These elements pose interesting questions about the nature of assimilation and identity which are explored in this report through an examination of the ways in which Mexican cultural ideas and attitudes are enacted on a primarily white-American built environment. This is done through researching literature on Mexican and Chicano landscapes, both literal and imaginative, and observation and documentation of the permutations and variations of this heritage extant in the present cultural landscape of Fruitvale.



*Fig. 2: A mosaic situated on the community information kiosk in Fruitvale Plaza Park. Appearing within the branches of the central tree figure are examples of Spanish-colonial and indigenous architecture, California's migrant workers employed in agriculture and the construction of railroads, and long-distance connections with Fruitvale's community shown in the form of telephone, email and letters.*

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*Fig. 3: "Fruitvale feels like home and I feel comfortable when I go there. Since it mixes the traditional Mexico and the want-to-be-American Mexico." - M. Rodriguez*

### **The Purpose of this Research**

The built environment provides a current reflection of the lives and identities of its inhabitants, is the site of production for both personal and social memories, and finally acts as a storehouse for the preservation of a broad historical narrative. The role of planners, architects and city governments should be to actively foster and preserve this landscape as a vital part of building strong communities, creating a sense of place, and preserving civic history. Unfortunately, those in government may not even know what the features of this landscape are.

The overall goal of this project was to research the cultural landscape of the Fruitvale neighborhood as a reflection of Chicano identity, in order to determine how planning and development practices can best reflect the culture and values of the community residing in this unique and vital neighborhood.



*Fig.4: “That Bank of America in the background doesn’t speak Spanish. People in the neighborhood are more comfortable with someone that’s more like home. The tile roof and even the stucco is more Mexican.” - N. Zavala*

### **How this Research was Conducted**

Research was performed in the following ways:

- By conducting a thorough review of literature pertaining to Chicano, Mexican, and border cultural landscapes.
- By documenting the Fruitvale neighborhood through photographs, and written observations.
- By discussing this documentation with a diverse group of Mexican-Americans via social media and in-person interviews.
- By producing and analyzing GIS maps focusing on demographic and socio-economic factors.
- By researching the history of Fruitvale through city, local NGO, and historical society websites.
- By researching notable planning and community organization efforts within the neighborhood.



*Fig. 5: "When I first moved to California, the transition wasn't that difficult, besides the language, because Fruitvale was a lot like where I lived. I didn't feel as homesick when I was in Fruitvale, but when I went to cities like Berkeley, I felt lost because the city was too modern, clean, and not as colorful." - M. Rodriguez*

### Previous Research by Others

The body of literature concerning the Chicano and Third Nation cultural landscape consists primarily of documenting the appearance and elements of the vernacular landscape; little has focused on its workings and interactions with municipalities, (save for the freeways of East Los Angeles and San Diego's Barrio Logan) and little to none has focused on documentation of a designed Chicano landscape. Also, much of the research is concerned with the use of space, in a temporary or transient way. Ricardo Romo discusses borderlands murals, José Luis Gámez writes of the murals and cultural practices of East LA, and Ellen J. Pader writes of differences in the use of domestic space on either side of the border.

Beyond front yard fences, brightly colored walls, and the occasional mural, there is little focus on the built environment itself. J. B. Jackson wrote of contrasts across the border in 1951, but the Mexican planning and architecture he described have not made much of an advance Northward in a coherently recognizable form. Arreola and Curtis reference clashes between American-style development and Mexican architecture and planning taking place in Mexico, but when Monika Kaup writes of "the architecture of ethnicity" springing up in the United States, it exists only in literature. Indeed, few



*Fig. 6: "Looks like they're growing some corn. Gardens are a big part of Latin culture. There are probably chiles back there as well behind the fence." - N. Zavala*

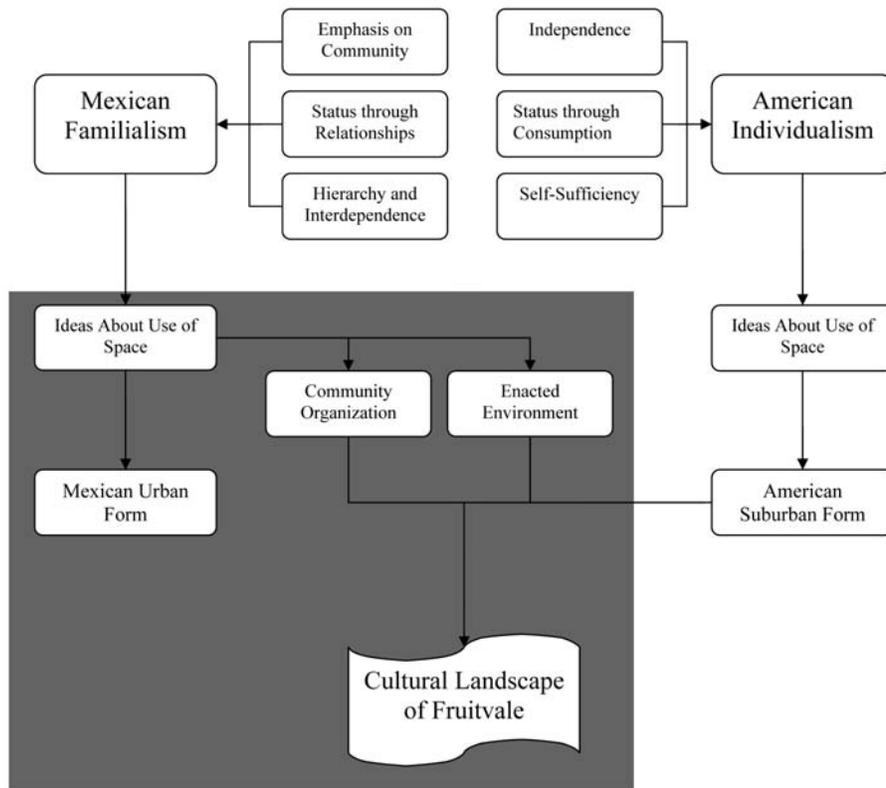
examples exist of truly Mexican architecture anywhere North of the border. Nina Veregge asserts that New Urbanism with a particularly Mexican twist may provide the answer to a hybrid built environment, though this also remains in the realm of theory (and the approach certainly opens itself up to the usual criticism of inauthenticity and unsuitability for the rehabilitation of existing neighborhoods.)

Chicano identity on the other hand, is a comparatively easy thing to research. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado discuss strategies for building community identity in a remarkably diverse Mexican immigrant community. Roger Rouse writes of the developmental workings of a transnational identity among Chicano people and the interplay between the personal and the collective. Jason Rothman and Amy Beth Rell even write of the relationship of Spanglish to Identity. The journal of Chicano studies, *Aztlan* returns at least 38 entries from a query of "identity". This report will focus on literature which at least references migration or a specifically transnational identity.



Fig. 7: In this image one of the signs reads “No Venda Su Oro!” which translates as “Don’t sell your gold!”. “Latin people keep gold because you can pawn it. It’s an informal credit or barter system, like something you would see in Mexico. If you’re arrested or deported, the police can take money from you, but they can’t take personal items like jewelry. Your mujer (woman) can come get the gold and sell it, and then use the money to get you out of jail.” - N. Zavala

**Research Model**



Focus of Research



*Fig. 8: In this image a heavily customized low-rider with a hydraulic suspension system is displayed on the street as part of an informally organized car show near the Fruitvale Transit Village.*

In the preceding diagram the cultural divide between Mexican and American expressions of identity is shown. The Mexican emphasis on Familialism is diagrammed on the upper-left of the image, and the American emphasis on Individualism is diagrammed on the upper-right. In the United States' individualistic culture, shown on the right, status is primarily expressed through levels of material consumption, independence and self-sufficiency. Conversely, in Mexico's familial culture, shown on the left, status is primarily expressed through connections and relationships of interdependence. These differences in approach spill over into ideas about the use of space, and the formation of communities. The results are a more interconnected and dense spatial pattern of development in Mexico, with an emphasis on a sense of plaza and community interaction and more frequent multi-generational housing. In the United States, a more isolated and orderly suburban pattern has emerged with a spatial emphasis on nuclear families living in single-family homes. The focus of this research project has been to examine the ways that these Mexican spatial ideas, realized and exemplified in Mexican homes and cities, are altered and hybridized to be applied to the built environment of a typical American inner-ring suburb like Fruitvale, with the intent to find value in their application for planning and development efforts.



Fig. 9: Shown is part of an ofrenda displayed during the Fruitvale Neighborhood's annual Día de los Muertos celebration. The ofrenda shows the communities strong connections to Mexico and continuing struggles with La Migra. (Immigration enforcement)

**Data was taken from the following sources:**

- Multiple in-person visits to the Fruitvale neighborhood to photodocument and observe cultural landscape elements.
- US Census Bureau and City of Oakland geospatial and demographic data; analyzed utilizing ArcGIS software.
- Cultural informants: Friends and family members who have immigrated to the Bay Area from Mexico. These individuals were engaged in social media discussion, supplemented by telephone interviews, of research photographs; also including experiences of, and feelings toward, the neighborhood.
- Scholarly literature pertaining to Chicano identity, migrant and trans-national identity, Mexican cultural landscapes, and Chicano cultural landscapes.
- Government, non-profit, and local community organization reports and research publications on the community of Fruitvale and its history.



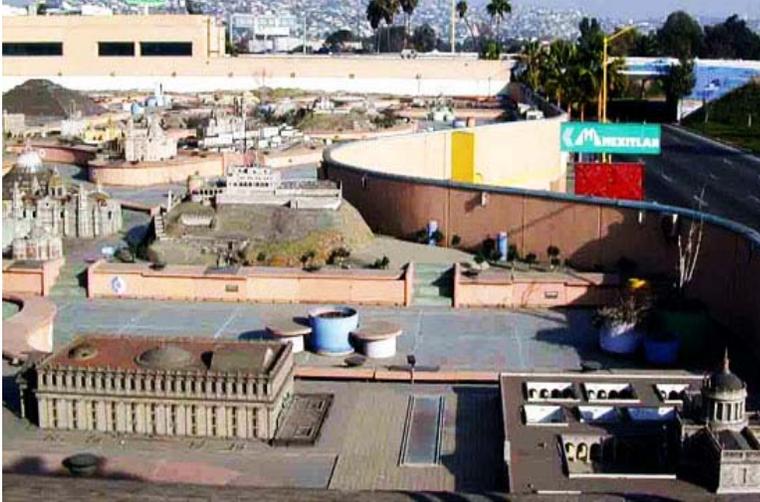
Fig. 10: “This building is probably owned by immigrants who have been in the US a long time. They painted it like that to show their prosperity to newcomers. They obviously take pride in it. Too bad about the placas, it’s a beautiful job.” - N. Zavala

### The Mexican Landscape

One of the first things a researcher might encounter when exploring the cultural landscapes of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, is that both landscape and architecture are major touchstones of Mexican identity. In fact, even a simple google image search for the term “Mexico” returns a first page which is nothing but maps of Mexico, Mexican flags, and Mayan pyramids. With almost any other country entered as a search term, google only returns a series of maps; no symbols of nationalism, and no buildings. While it’s a somewhat frivolous example, it does say some interesting things about national identity, at least in the eyes of google. But, google is not the only place this is encountered. Images of Mayan, Aztec, or Spanish Colonial architecture show up fairly often in cultural representations. Certainly for most of Mexico’s history, where they are present, all of these types of architecture have dominated the landscape. Above is an example from Fruitvale’s landscape. When a former resident of Mexico City was asked what he thought of this image, he replied,

*It’s so interesting that when the Spanish came to Mexico they built the biggest cathedrals over indigenous religious and ceremonial centers. And even though this major archaeological dig lies underneath the National Cathedral in Mexico City the thought of destroying any part of a house of God is inconceivable. – C. Ruiz*

Both the mural’s imagery, and his discussion of it, are heavily focused on indigenous and colonial architecture.



*Fig. 11: Shown is the now-defunct Mexitlan theme park in Tijuana. The logo is a fusion of indigenous and Spanish-colonial architecture with the silhouette of a church superimposed over that of a pyramid. Image from: Mexico Desconocido*

Perhaps an even more compelling example of this cultural preoccupation with architecture and landscape, is the case of Mexitlán. Mexitlán was a Tijuana theme park designed with the sole purpose of showcasing Mexican architecture and landscape design through a series of models. The models were built at a 1:25 scale and showcased not just architecture, but public spaces, and even entire villages. One of the lead architects on the project described its purpose thus “We’re trying to show who we are.” (Herzog, 160) His partner, Ramírez Vázquez, said, “This work will help to strengthen the sense of rootedness, of belonging to a nationality built on an ancient culture, that compels us to deepen awareness of our identity.” (Mexico Desconocido, translation by google) In addition to a strong cultural focus on architecture, Mexican patterns in the use of space are also quite different from their northern counterparts. In 1951, J. B. Jackson wrote about the landscape of Chihuahua and described the settlement patterns as having a compact, urban quality, with a higher density than typical US suburbs, even in rural areas of Mexico. (Jackson, 52) Years later Nina Veregge described the towns of Sonora in a similar way, with buildings lining the street continuously, mixed-use structures, and heavily fenestrated facades. (Veregge, 52) It was these continuous buildings that gave shape to streets and public plazas. J.B. Jackson explained the difference in spatial patterns thus, “To the south of the Rio Grande the world of Man is thought of as created in the likeness of a social theory and not, as with us, in the likeness of an economic force.” (Jackson, 52)

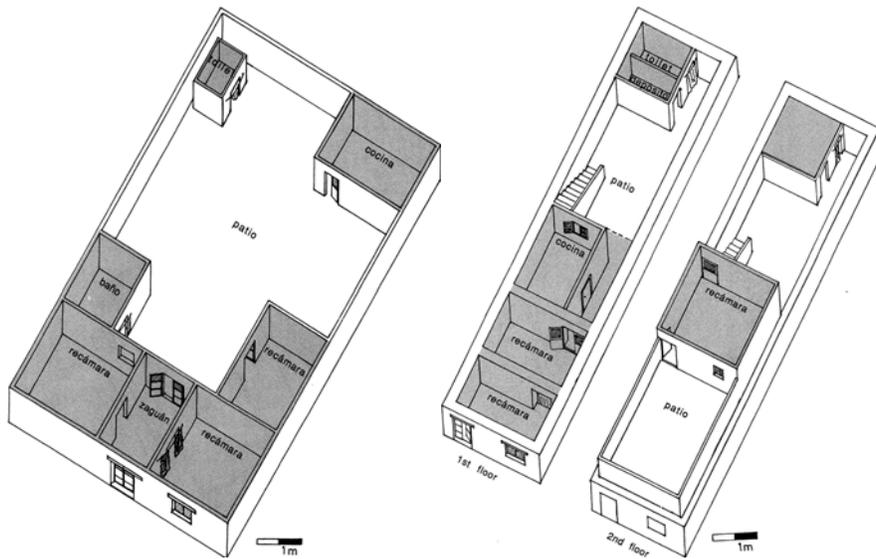


Fig. 12: Architectural drawings of Mexican homes. Images from: Ellen J. Pader

Also, Mexican homes themselves follow different spatial patterns. These homes often have multiple entrances from the street and less formal designations of rooms within them. The separation between public and private areas of houses are much less rigidly defined, and front entrances to dwellings which open onto sleeping areas are not uncommon. Another notable feature of Mexican homes is their patios or courtyards, enclosed outdoor spaces in which daily work or socializing is done. Perhaps the most striking difference in Mexican homes when compared to American homes, is the emphasis on familial relations, closeness and interdependence. Recamaras, rooms fulfilling some of the functions of an American bedroom, often open directly onto one another. Often children's sleeping areas are directly connected to areas of the house where adults socialize or watch TV, thus maximizing proximity and social contact. Connections with extended family and community members are echoed in Mexico's domestic architecture as well. The Zaguán is a multi-purpose room which often serves as both a reception area and a workspace for the home, where a mother might sit and work while enjoying the sociability of an open door to the street. While the single-family home of the American suburb isolates stay-at-home wives and mothers in islands of domesticity, their counterparts south of the border are likely to spend their day working and socializing steps away from a lively street, or traveling to a nearby grocer by foot, rather than by car.



Fig. 13: Graffiti on a Fruitvale sidewalk expressing a common Chicano sentiment.

### **History and Cultural Landscape of Fruitvale:**

Fruitvale's history of exposure to these ideas is a long one. It is perhaps ironic, or perhaps just predictable, that more than a century after its construction, the *reconquista* of what was once a great Mexican rancho would take place around the 1870 home of one of its first Mexican settlers, still standing (though in a new location) in its own Peralta Hacienda Park. Members of the Peralta family were the Fruitvale area's first European settlers. They established a sprawling 44,800-acre rancho spanning from what is now Berkeley to the northern reaches of San Leandro. However, this remained a primarily rural, agrarian setting until the US war with Mexico came to a close and, soon thereafter, gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill. The layout of the area's streets and subdivisions didn't take place until after California's statehood when white settlers gained control of the land through dispute of Mexican land claims, purchase, or squatting. (Peralta Hacienda.org) The last remnant of the Peralta estate was sold to Henry Z. Jones in 1897 to be developed into a subdivision called the Galindo Tract, but the presence of Mexican-Americans remained strong in the area. Subdivisions such as these continued with the introduction of a streetcar line in the 1920s and the typical pattern of development that attended it. Despite the Latino community's concentration in the area, its population remained predominantly German, Italian, and Portuguese until the 1980s, when the

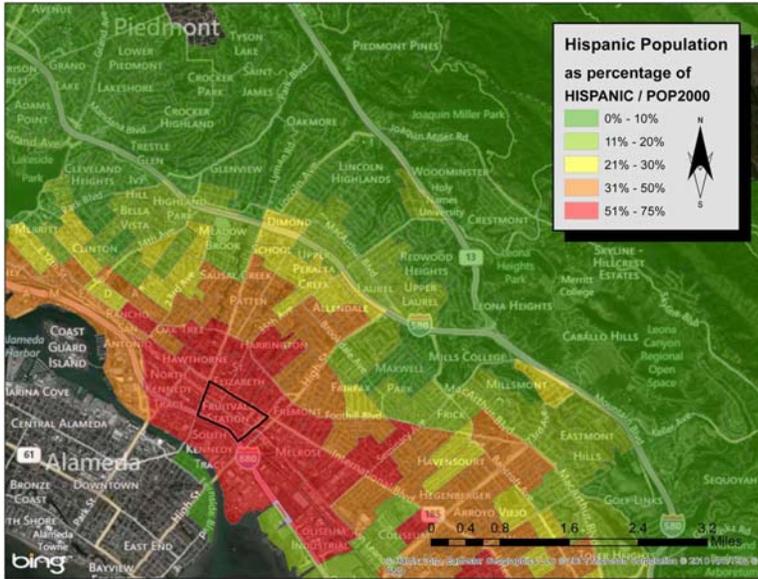


Fig. 14: Map created using US Census demographic data showing Hispanic population concentration in Fruitvale and surrounding areas. Concentrations increase markedly with proximity to Fruitvale Transit Village.

continuing legacy of “white flight” led the Latino population to statistical dominance once again. When looking at demographic maps today, it’s quite clear that Fruitvale is overwhelmingly the Latino center of gravity for Oakland, with the Fruitvale Station area at the center of what is essentially a bulls-eye.

Today, the Latino population is estimated as hovering around fifty percent of the neighborhood’s total residents, though certain discrepancies do alter that percentage somewhat if they are taken into account. A 2005 study was able to document a 4.1% population increase over official census counts, and an informal economy in the area worth more than 1/5 of the area’s total economic activity. (Social Compact, 14) A quick look at the urban landscape provides some explanation for these discrepancies. The supply of businesses offering services to those lacking state-issued identification, offering non-traditional credit mechanisms such as pawn services or title loans, and delivering telephone service without the requirements of a credit history, point to widespread demand in the area for a certain set of services. These are the services required by undocumented migrants who are faced with the daily crossing of a second, invisible border as they carry out their daily business. Today the majority of households in the area are renters, though as much as sixty-six percent of buildings have at least one unit occupied by its owner. (Social Compact, 7) Consequently, though they hold a strong personal stake in the area, the freedom to significantly alter the fundamental forms and

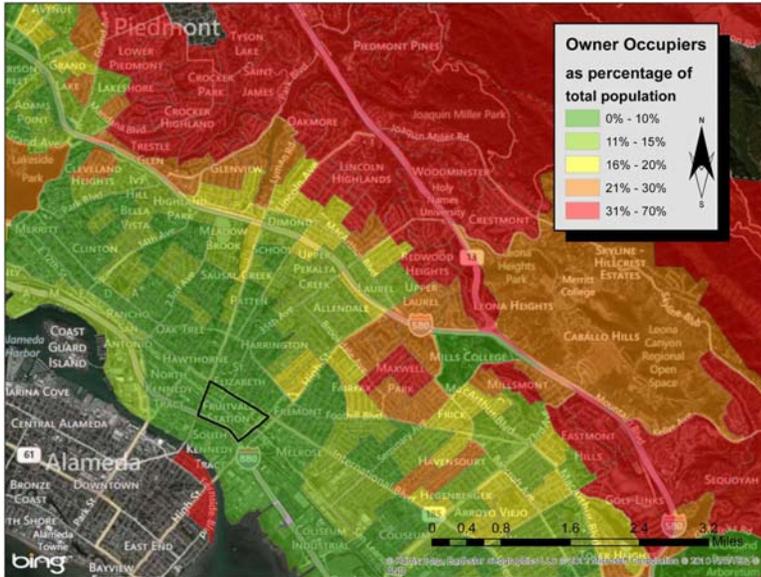


Fig. 15: Map created using US Census demographic data showing an inverse correlation between Latino populations and owner occupancy.

structures of the built environment around them is out of reach for most immigrant families. In addition, American consumerism – including dominant tastes, the market, and advertising, have a significant impact on the visible expression of identity. Monika Kaup writes, “Assimilation, ‘becoming American’ as described in Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory*, is mirrored in making a home within Anglo-American architecture.” (Kaup, 387) If an individual is an undocumented immigrant, this pressure is two-fold, not only from social pressure to assimilate, but also from the lurking specter of *La migra*. Many believe that, if you’re undocumented, the best course of action to follow is to not stand out. (Rouse, 35)

Despite the preexisting culture of the area, and the outside pressures of assimilation, the cultural landscape of third-nation identity does find expression in Fruitvale. Most advertisements are in Spanish or Spanglish, the foods being sold are unquestionably of Mexican ethnicity, Spanish is as common to hear on the street as English, and transnational services are provided at many, or even most, of the businesses along the main shopping corridors. The symbols of this hybrid identity find their way into murals, logos, architecture, even sculptures and parks in the area. Images of the Mexican landscape appear on buildings in a style reminiscent of *pulqueria* paintings, while images of Mexican indigenous architecture or Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe appear in murals and along storefronts.



Fig. 16: USDA Aerial NAIP imagery of the Fruitvale area showing the high density of housing. Note the additions visible to the homes as indicated by changes in the color and structure of roofs. Some homes display multiple additions or even second structures behind the primary home.

Spatial patterns are also notably denser in the area than elsewhere in Oakland. Aerial photos of Fruitvale reveal a pattern of homes being altered over time with multiple additions, or additional structures added to rear yards on the deep lots. Monica Kaup asserts that the house has become even more symbolically linked with Chicano identity than the *tierra* of the *corrido* world, or even ideas of the Chicano homeland of Aztlán. She cites the example of author Richard Rodriguez’s “houses of memory”. Rodriguez uses houses and architecture as a way of discussing Chicano identity and the ways it interacts with the dominant culture of the US. Particularly noteworthy are the ways in which these “houses of memory” both reveal and promote attitudes of familialism and community brought north from Mexico, that stand in contrast to American ideals of individualism and independence. This familial orientation of Fruitvale’s housing is fairly evident when analyzed by GIS maps of the area. When looking at a map showing average household size, Fruitvale clearly ranks fairly high in comparison to neighboring communities. When examining a map of family households as a percentage of total households, it becomes clear that the majority of these households are not simply roommate situations, but in fact families. Then perhaps most interestingly, when looking at the percentage of school-age children (under 18 years old) it becomes clear that a fair percentage of these families living in Fruitvale are comprised of adults, perhaps adult children or even siblings. Roger

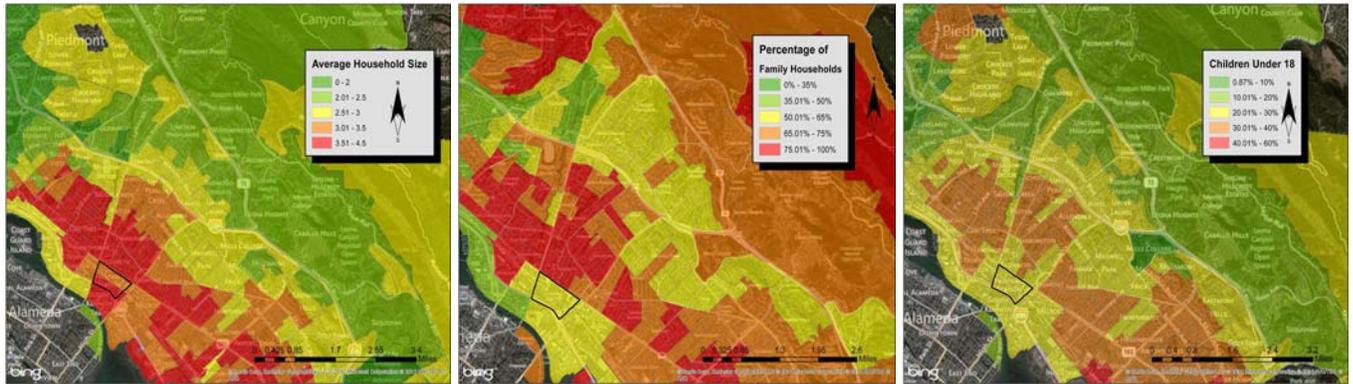


Fig. 17: Maps utilizing US Census demographic data showing household size and school age children.

Rouse quotes a Chicano resident of Redwood City as saying, “I’d like everyone to be here quietly in the house until they marry. But it’s impossible to control the children... at eighteen or so they want to leave and go off on their own.” (Rouse, 39) Clearly in Fruitvale some fathers are getting their way.

Fruitvale also reflects Mexican ideas about space through the ever-present fencing, which takes the place of the continuous building facades which would have enclosed the street in Mexico. These fences are often substantial, ranging from chain link to elaborate and imaginative wrought iron designs. In describing this effect in East Los Angeles, James Rojas stated that through these fences reflecting the personality of their owners, there is a transformation, and the suburban becomes urban. (Rojas, 69) Fenced front yards in Fruitvale often contain sculptures or fountains, elaborate plantings, and outdoor seating, thus acting as a stand-in for an enclosed patio or courtyard and blurring the lines between public and private space. Evidence of children is often visible in the toys left scattered in the yard, and the presence of small dogs is occasionally indicated by the use of rabbit wire fencing attached between the bars of a more significant wrought iron fence. An additional reaching out toward the street takes place in the frequent use of front porches. Ellen Pader writes, “Mexicans living in U.S.-style homes lack two conceptually and physically central regions of their natal home: the outside *patio* and the inside *zaguán*.” (Pader, 132) In Fruitvale, the front porch and the front yard fulfill some of the uses of both. The porch provides a space from which to interact socially with the



*Fig. 18: A Fruitvale home showing three different layers of fencing, a highly personalized front yard, and front porch seating. "The ironwork is nice. That color is very Latino, so are the plants and pottery and the gravel yard."  
– N. Zavala*

neighborhood, but it also provides additional living space for a home's residence. Though the physical remodeling and extension of porches sometimes seen in places like East Los Angeles has not yet taken place frequently in Fruitvale, almost all porches have some type of seating available in the form of benches or chairs.

Perhaps less subtle than these alterations in the built environment is the Chicano use of space. It is through the use of space that Chicano ideas about public versus private space, and about identification and interaction with their community, become most clear. In his observations of the cultural landscapes of East Los Angeles, James Rojas discussed what he entitled the "Enacted environment". In this enacted environment, participants were active in claiming and defining spaces. Rojas described this process as being "like a table in a restaurant. The table creates a defined private space for the individual seated there, while at the same time they are part of the bigger public space." (Rojas, 70) This behavior is frequently apparent in Fruitvale. The use of the street for social or business space is common. It is common to see groups of neighbors stopping to chat on the sidewalk or next to their cars, sometimes with a participant shouting hello from a nearby porch. Stores spill their wares out onto the sidewalk, even setting up tables of merchandise there to entice those strolling by to stop and browse. When the proprietor of a business is not busy with customers, rather than quietly waiting inside behind a counter, many will step just outside the doorway of their shop to watch the street or say hello to passing neighbors. Also, streets and empty parking lots fill in for the public plazas



Fig. 19: “This feels like such a better utilization of community to me. It’s annoying that San Francisco’s community can’t be more inclusive of the people who can’t afford the crazy pricey booths at farmers markets. In Fruitvale, if you slice up a mango and put it on a stick they will come.” – C. Ruiz

and zocalos present south of the border as a way of recreating what Lawrence Herzog called “the public market culture dominant in their homeland.” (Herzog, 130) Through the use of an umbrella or awning, some vendors define their own spaces of business in otherwise underutilized areas. Others are more mobile, selling candies or plastic toys attached to poles or ringing the bells of their small pushcarts containing everything from tamales to ice cream. Still others use carts or food trucks to peddle sliced fruit with chili and lime, or a variety of tacos, as Fruitvale is one of only two places in the city where such businesses are allowed to operate. Throughout the neighborhood such appropriations of space make the streetscape lively and engaging. These streetscape vendors aren’t just cultural niceties, but vital to the local economy. Fruitvale’s informal economy was recently valued at a conservative estimate of \$130 million, or around eighteen percent of the total economy. (Social Compact, 8,18) These ideas of appropriation of public space also play out in visual appropriations. Homes and businesses in Fruitvale are painted in bright colors not often seen in Anglo neighborhoods. Advertising often appears across the whole façade of a business in a colorful and energetic style known as *Amontanado* or “stacking”. Murals adorn businesses and public buildings, and graffiti *placas* or tagging are common on neglected properties. Like the highly personalized and fenced yards lining the streets, these expressions of identity compete for visual dominance in the landscape.



*Fig. 20: Fruitvale Transit Village seen from the BART platform. Photo from: flickr user AndyKaufman.*

Rising above the landscape of the neighborhood is the Fruitvale Transit Village. Dolores Hayden writes, “Festivals and parades also help to define cultural identity in spatial terms by staking out routes in the urban cultural landscape. Although their presence is temporary they can be highly effective in claiming the symbolic importance of places.” (Hayden, 39) It is no small wonder then, that the Fruitvale community has chosen the Fruitvale Transit Village as the site of its Dia de los Muertos celebration and the Cinco de Mayo parade which passes directly in front of its entrance plaza. It’s a remarkably successful project built by local non-profit The Unity Council, in partnership with multiple government agencies including the Bay Area Rapid Transit system. It serves as the heart of the local Latino community, and provides space for housing, childcare, small businesses and the Unity Council itself. Also, like the Latino front yard serving as an extension of the house to the street, the transit village serves as an extension of the neighborhood to the BART station beyond it. Rather than allowing a railway to overshadow and isolate a community, which has certainly happened to other neighborhoods across the country, Fruitvale has now appropriated the station into its urban fabric, allowing it to connect with the rest of the city.

The Unity Council has been a growing factor in the development of the neighborhood since its founding in 1964 and relies on a three-pronged approach to direct its actions, consisting of: community development, social development, and economic development. Many of the improvements in the Fruitvale area, both prominent and minor, bear the



*Fig. 21: Dia de los Muertos celebration taking place in the Fruitvale Transit Village.*

stamp of the Unity Council in some form. The council provides low-income and senior housing, matching grants for small business improvements, a public market for small businesses, and tireless advocacy, organizational, and financial support for the Fruitvale Transit Village. The grassroots planning and community advocacy efforts of the Unity Council are a direct extension of the familialism and focus on community interconnection found in Mexican culture. The results of these cultural inclinations are also evident in the transit village's dense mix of small businesses, community organizations, and mixed income housing; all of which are centered around a public plaza which connects the BART station with International Boulevard, the area's main shopping destination.

The successes and failures of this neighborhood bring implications for planning across the border and across the country. In fact, these strategies for adapting spaces to the communities they serve can be adopted for other communities, in other neighborhoods, in other cities. Fruitvale serves as a living laboratory where a robust Chicano culture brings differing ideas about space, identity, and community across the border from Mexico into the context of a typical American inner-ring suburb. This is a valuable space for the exploration of ideas surrounding urban place making and design. For example, critics of New Urbanism and Traditional Neighborhood Development, point to their focus on an



*Fig. 22: A grocery along International Boulevard utilizes pulqueria style painting to advertise their wares.*

anglicized “small-town main street” past, that is out of touch with the urban diversity areas like Fruitvale are blessed with. Nina Veregge writes, “Because people seek identity in their environments, it is important that the history of various ethnic groups be visible, and perhaps even tangible, in the city.” (Veregge, 50) For most planners, even the few which might not even realize it, the expression of Chicano identity is a particularly compelling prospect. The hybridized landscape of Fruitvale shares a great deal in common with idealized landscapes of sustainable urban design, New Urbanism, and Transit Oriented Development. The housing patterns are more compact and the population density continues to rise higher than elsewhere in the city. Jane Jacob’s ideas about vibrant communities play out in the “street ballet” wherein a vibrant public life takes place on each block, under the watchful gaze of the “eyes on the street” necessary to reduce criminal activity. Public parks and plazas are activated by a diverse occupancy, rain or shine. Busy sidewalks, lined with portable vendors, and shops spilling into the street provide a textbook definition of walkability. Mixed use buildings let community members live where they work and play, and assure that those with a personal stake in the area will remain after five o’clock to keep a watchful eye on the neighborhood. Most importantly the landscape is an authentic one, an “enacted environment” created by its inhabitants with a strong sense of community identification.



*Fig. 23: The Los Michoacanos taco truck stands shuttered in Fruitvale on a rare rainy day.*

While all of these cultural approaches to the use of space have hardly served as panacea to the ills of an economically and socially disadvantaged population, they have served to mitigate social problems and to provide a degree of community cohesion uncommon in most urban neighborhoods.

Jose Luis Gamez writes, “Residents in East LA have remade the urban landscape through a process of heroic bricolage... a triumph of ‘making do’.” (Gamez, 113) This process of “making do”, similarly taking place in Fruitvale, is a double edged sword of both empowerment and disenfranchisement. James Rojas writes of what he describes as “theoretical politics” versus “practical politics”. He writes, “Theoretical politics are the politics of politicians in which they sit around and discuss how people should live their lives. Practical politics is everyday life that each and every one of us expresses by our existences.” (Rojas, 91) Whether due to undocumented status as immigrants or a general sense of disempowerment in the face of government structures, Rojas wrote that the residents of East LA had chosen to express their will through the latter. Residents of Fruitvale have also firmly embraced this approach through a thriving informal economy, a blurring of the lines between public and private space, a broad embrace of street life, and strong personalization of their homes and businesses. However, these same residents have also chosen to follow the path of theoretical politics as well. Through effective



*Fig. 24: A Victorian home stands for sale adjacent to the Fruitvale Transit Village.*

community organization, and largely successful articulations with local government, the Fruitvale area now plays host to multiple award winning developments.

As the Fruitvale transit village prepares to enter its second phase, the shops on International Boulevard continue to do a brisk business, home values in the area continue to climb at a rate higher than other neighboring communities, and the thriving public life of Fruitvale continues. Though the neighborhood is far from perfect, with crime and poverty remaining major factors in its landscape, this only makes its successes more noticeable and more valuable as lessons for planners. The dominant culture of the United States has long viewed Chicanos as merely a source of cheap labor, and rarely as a storehouse of cultural resources and ideas. The story of Fruitvale suggests that it's time for that to change.



*Fig. 25: A typical Fruitvale home stands adjacent to an International Boulevard business.*

### **In Conclusion:**

The cultural ideas brought North from Mexico by many residents of Fruitvale are overlaid on the built environment that they encountered upon arrival. The resulting cultural landscape is strikingly similar to other Chicano landscapes, yet retains its own unique sense of place. Its active public spaces and robust street life are direct descendents of the Mexican cultural memory of plazas and streets as the site of commerce and social life. Mexican ideas about the home and its role in connecting with community and family members, make yards, porches, and front fences in Fruitvale social hubs where friends and neighbors interact daily. Perhaps due to its continued occupation by Mexican-Americans since the mid-nineteenth century, the community of Fruitvale also retains a remarkable cohesion and sense of identity, plainly seen in the community's reactions to the problems of blight, crime and poverty. Through the mouthpiece of the Unity Council, the Fruitvale neighborhood articulates its preferences and vision for the future to the city of Oakland, and at least for the moment, the city is responding with policing and community development strategies. Many of its problems are endemic to its context, both geographically and demographically, but these issues also serve to underscore the unusual quality and quantity of the neighborhood's successes. There is much to be learned and seen in Fruitvale, not just for planners, but for anyone who loves the place where they live.

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