

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Los Angeles -- La Vida Libre: Cultura de la Calle en Los Angeles Este (The Free Life: The Street Culture of East Los Angeles)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1cg384gs>

Journal

Places, 8(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Diaz, David R

Publication Date

1993-04-01

Peer reviewed

La Vida Libre:
The Free Life:
Cultura de la Calle
The Street Culture
en Los Angeles Este
of East Los Angeles

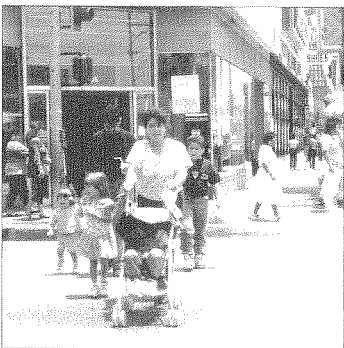
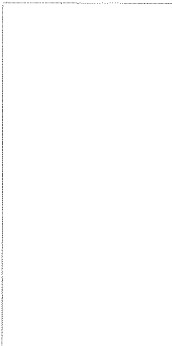
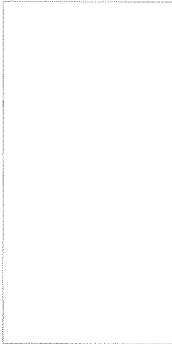
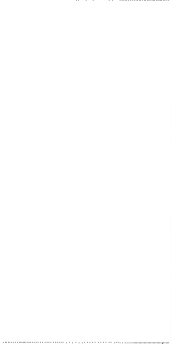
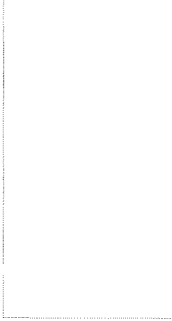
David R. Diaz

As mothers and children pour into the street from every conceivable direction, their casual routine of daily shopping becomes a magical experience in this land of autos and freeways. Kids tug skirts; strollers and shopping carts poke for an opening in the crowds on the sidewalk; eyes glance at storefronts; everyone is in a swirl of decisions. Spanish is the predominant language, with intelligible English also available upon request. What to buy, what looks exciting, which store has the best sale, how much to buy, how far to walk back home?

In this community of brown faces, the vibrant street culture remains a timeless experience of pleasure as well as necessity. *En la calle por la gente*, the interaction of people is as important as the commerce that takes place. Instead of building upon and learning from existing multi-ethnic cultural patterns, Los Angeles' blinded leaders have poured a king's ransom building a skyline that can be seen on the horizon, a vain attempt to recreate what exists naturally across the Los Angeles River. Sadly, the city's "dream policies" (read redevelopment) believe they can purchase a lively street-level milieu.

The day-to-day activity in two East Los Angeles shopping areas, along Brooklyn and Soto Streets and

The downtown Los Angeles skyline towers over East Los Angeles, visually and symbolically. Background photo courtesy Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency. Other photos by David R. Diaz, unless otherwise indicated.



Whittier Boulevard, exhibits a street life that is foreign to most Southern Californians. It has nothing to do with stylish architecture or planning projects; the buildings and their facades haven't changed in years, except for occasional new paint and minimal remodeling. The activity on the streets is reminiscent of past eras; the people continue a fun, daily routine that expresses their rootedness in the place and the community — a sense of living shoulder to shoulder that exists in too few neighborhoods in this region.

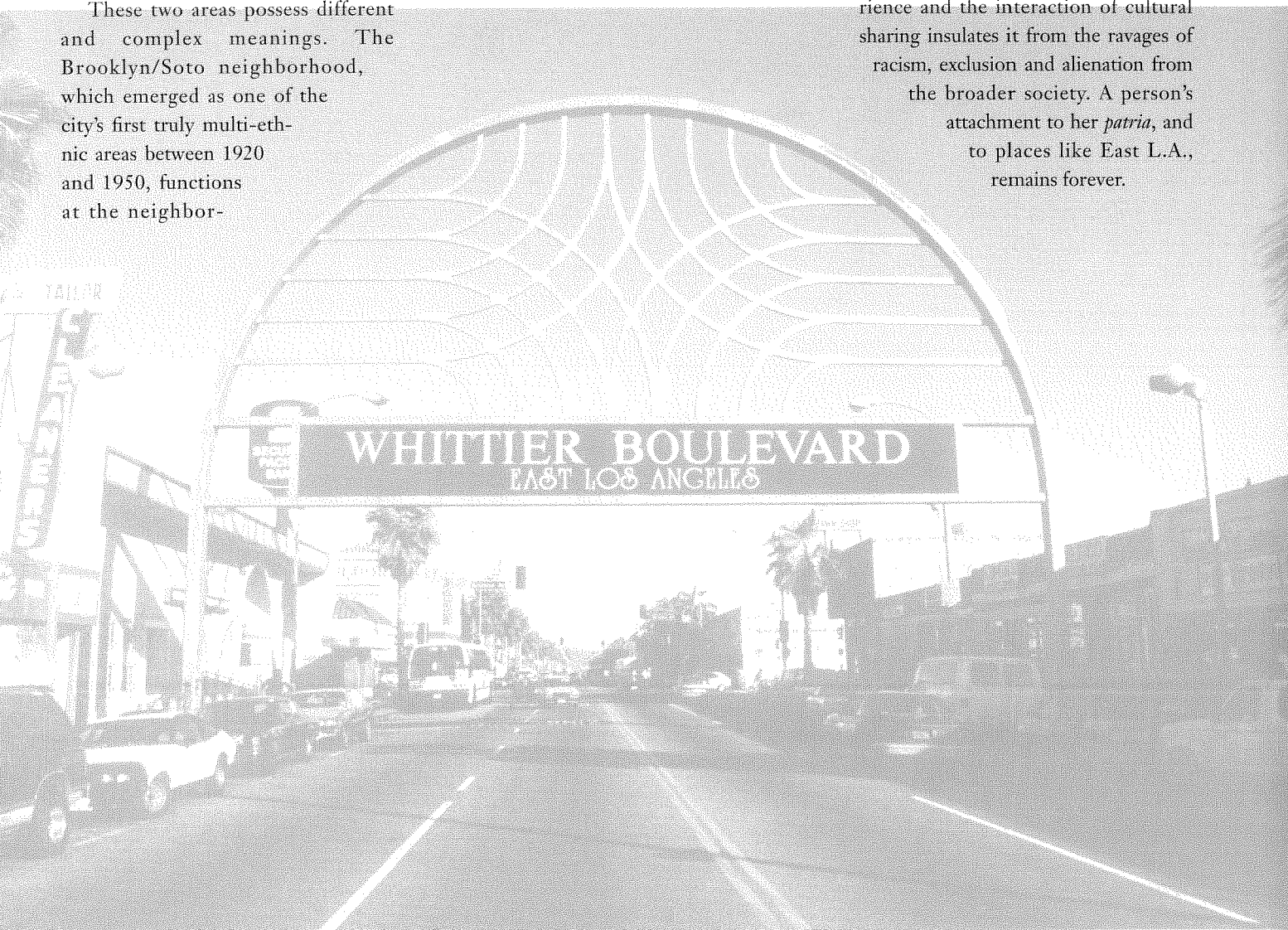
These two areas possess different and complex meanings. The Brooklyn/Soto neighborhood, which emerged as one of the city's first truly multi-ethnic areas between 1920 and 1950, functions at the neighbor-

hood level. It is an area of personal use and attachment: Pedestrians are bonded by family, church and school the communal connection of place that mirrors social networking in Mexico.

Whittier Boulevard is the historic center of East Los Angeles. The street is synonymous with East L.A.: Songs have been written about it, demonstrations pass through it, cars still cruise it and teenagers flock along its sidewalks to see and be seen. Along it are community landmarks like the Golden Gate Theatre, a prominent building where

every Mexicano child grew up watching movies, and Ruben Salazar Park, where a significant battle with the L.A. police occurred. For four generations, families have come to Whittier Boulevard from near and far to enjoy midday strolls and window shopping.

Since the 1920s, East L.A. has been the center of L.A.'s *Mexicano* population. But in a very real sense East L.A. is a state of mind that encompasses a broad area within Los Angeles County. A community takes the shape of a country (*patria*) when the flow of experience and the interaction of cultural sharing insulates it from the ravages of racism, exclusion and alienation from the broader society. A person's attachment to her *patria*, and to places like East L.A., remains forever.



The culture of East L.A. is a state of mind that streetscape symbols cannot capture. Courtesy Loftur Eiriksson.

Streams Of Life: Brooklyn and Soto

By 9 a.m. on a typical weekend morning, the bus benches fill with people of all ages — workers, shoppers, people embarking on a day of visiting or errands. Markets, *pandarias*, *carnecerias* and gift shops are typical destinations for shoppers. Families with special afternoon plans scurry down Soto Street for a quick spin to a few specific shops, and the first *mariachis* roam the restaurants, strumming the chords of culture.

The streets surrounding this shopping district are tributaries of humanity. Children, sent out to make morning purchases, walk hand in hand or with arms slung around each other's shoulders, a reminder of ancient village rites of friendship and community. *Viejos* congregate at benches and near restaurants, continuing a ritual practice of mediating another day's events among trusted *amigos o amigas*. Cars roam, hopelessly searching for a place to park. They are a somewhat useless apparatus that gets in the way of the main show.

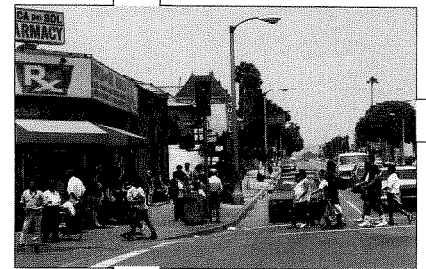
By 10:30 Brooklyn Avenue is a sea of parents and children. Shops bursting with clothes and whatever else can be sold have opened their doors and windows; some merchants set up street booths to lure casual shoppers searching for a bargain and shoppers who haven't spent enough yet. Sidewalks sway with the scrambling of children and parents drifting along searching, visiting, shopping and relaxing.

What brings this active mass of humanity to this location? Brooklyn Street, the main commercial thoroughfare, offers a typical array of contemporary consumer desires. There are plenty of restaurants; La Parilla is among the best Mexican restaurants in the city. King Taco, the pride of the famous East L.A. taco trucks, started on the corner of Brooklyn and Soto

(now it is a successful chain serving delicious specialty meats). A sea of butcher-paper signs advertising sales at Big Buy Foods hangs as if strung from a clothesline. *Mariscos* are readily available. The Lopez *cantina* and El Azteca normally have a packed house of *conjuntos* and trios taking breaks from their ritual restaurant runs, a constant flow of guitars along the street, morning, noon and night. The smell of Mexican *pandulce fresca*, one of the best snacks in the world, is never far away. Mountains of clothes for children of all ages are piled on open-air sidewalk tables and hang on storefront windows. (Sometimes, it seems, children's clothes are not bought; they are just handed out as families pass by.) If a store doesn't have some sort of sale, the owner is in the wrong business, or the wrong place.

The daily routine of shopping for food and household necessities generates a sense of *colonia*, a feeling that the families in the area own the street. As an example of this *confiado en la calle*, young teenagers are sent off by themselves on errands like quick trips to the market — a practice that no longer exists in most parts of Los Angeles.

The sidewalks comprise a crossroads for people still bound by a border, political and historic. They are an important social space, a community news network where neighbors and friends swap news about people, jobs, politics and scandals. In this neighborhood of cottages and small apartment buildings, which suffers from L.A.'s collective lack of attention to people, parks and open space, encountering one's friends is an important reason for being on the street. The telephone won't do; communication works best when it's face to face, when you can not only talk to people but also see them and touch them.



Being on Brooklyn Street is a daily ritual, and the street is a setting for encounters of everyday life. Greeting friends and swapping news during impromptu sidewalk conversations is as important as making the day's purchases or taking advantage of the latest sale.





The Historic Street: Whittier Boulevard

Although Whittier Boulevard is characterized by the same intensive pedestrian character as the Brooklyn/Soto district, it has a different historical meaning for the East L.A. community. This is the street that made cruising popular and was L.A.'s first ethnic and class battleground, foreshadowing the city's current ethnic diversity. It was also the scene of the most influential moment in modern Latino political history and that same history's most tragic loss.

The street's regional commercial character attracts shoppers from throughout East L.A.; they arrive by

car, bus and foot. Shoppers come in all sizes. It's not uncommon to see two strollers being wheeled around by mother and an older child. Sometimes the biggest battle is carting the crew and equipment — kids, bags and strollers — when the light changes to green. Neighbors and friends invariably meet, taking carefree time to discuss the latest neighborhood matters oblivious to the people passing by. The kids tolerate the day by waiting for their moment in the sun, the purchase of a *paleta o raspada*. (If they're really hungry a steaming *elote* will do the trick.) After being tugged along for two or three hours they deserve a treat.

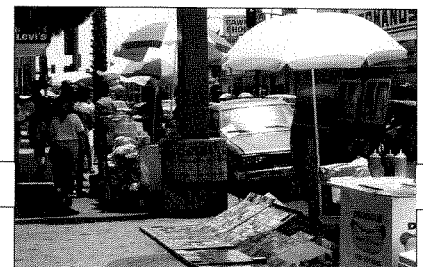
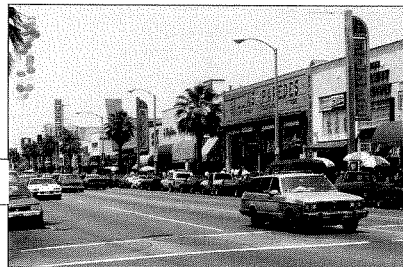
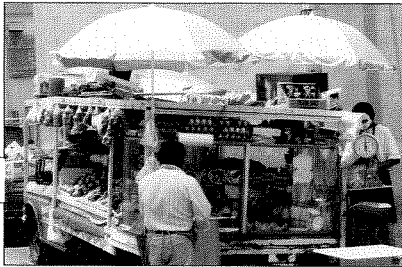
Whittier Boulevard has three commercial characteristics that differentiate it from Brooklyn and Soto: furniture stores, *secundas* (second hand stores) and street vendors; the latter two are

particular evidence of social realities. Whittier Boulevard does not have many restaurants and the street vendors, who sell all types of food (*elotes, paletas, aguas, raspadas* and *frutas*) do a brisk business throughout the day.

Cars and Whittier Boulevard are synonymous; even today, more than half the people who shop on the street drive there. During the street's heyday (starting in the 1940s), traffic was bumper to bumper from 9 p.m. through early morning. This cultural experience was eliminated by the L.A. county sheriffs in the late 1970s. Concerned about crime and gangs, they put up nighttime barricades that forced drivers to detour through the surrounding neighborhood.

The street has always been a favorite hangout for teenagers. With plenty of

Whittier Boulevard, which serves a regional commercial market, also is important in the history of *Mexicano* settlement in Los Angeles.



clothes stores catering to their stylistic imagination, there is always a lively debate going on in front of display windows. These teens don't have a lot of cash; any purchase becomes a serious, conscious image decision. It's a pleasant way to spend a long afternoon, and parents are generously permissive if they know their aspiring adults are chattering away on the boulevard.

The evolution of Whittier Boulevard began with the skirmishes over good swimming spots in the L.A. River between Mexicans, who lived west of the river, and Russians, Armenians, Jews and other kids who lived to the east in Boyle Heights. In less than a decade these same teenagers would be raising their families as neighbors. The communities co-existed until the 1960s, when both Mexican immigra-

tion and the dispersal of whites to new suburban neighborhoods accelerated.

Over time, Whittier Boulevard, the main east/west street in East L.A., emerged as the center of the *Mexicano* community. It became a symbol of arrival that remains a part of Mexican folklore of the immigrant experience. Even today, it maintains a mystic magnetism for fourth generation Latinos scattered throughout suburban Southern California — any Latino raised in East L.A. will take an nostalgic spin along the boulevard whenever the opportunity arises.

In 1970, a Chicano moratorium (a march in opposition) to the Vietnam War was staged along Whittier Boulevard and ended in what was then called Laguna Park; at that point it was the largest anti-war protest ever in a minority neighborhood. Several jour-

nalists retreated to a bar to discuss the events of the day and police, nervous about what was happening, fired tear gas inside. A cannister struck and killed Ruben Salazar, a prominent Latino journalist whose voice has not been matched to this day. This event, the most important in East L.A.'s *Mexicano* history, galvanized the social and political concerns of a generation of Latinos; the park subsequently was renamed in Salazar's memory.

The scale of the street was symbolically altered a few years back by a facade upgrading project sponsored by Los Angeles County that incorporated a grotesque postmodern attempt to emulate the St. Louis arch in the middle of the boulevard. Fortunately, most users simply ignore its existence.



Latino street culture transcends time and place, thriving even along American-style shopping strips.



**People and Culture:
It's More Than A Shopping Bag**

The character of Brooklyn and Soto streets and Whittier Boulevard depends only superficially on what is sold there. The character of these streets has to do with conversation, body contact, meeting friends and life patterns like being part of a family, being independent and being part of a community. For outsiders, it is a strange sensation to experience the life of these streets, and it is to soak up, in only a few, fleeting moments, the social attitudes and pace that evident here but missing from much of U.S. culture. These are places filled with people who have learned how to wander, forget time, enjoy other people (both friends and strangers) and view themselves as a community whose existence depends on its occupation of these places.

The grid street pattern and fading brick facades of East L.A. have little connection, in terms of design, with traditional Mexican cultural space. A few murals in the area offer a semblance of our heritage. Yet this rather mundane physical demeanor is overridden with a strong sense of cultural meaning. The large immigrant community has merged with second- and third-generation families to forge a marriage between urban space and vibrant social interaction.

Latino street culture transcends time and place. Ritual contact, connection, carina with our social peers remains a constant in our changing daily lives, which are truly lived at a communal level. Here, the human scale is routine; as *la gente Latina* scurry about their indeterminate walking trips nothing appears out of the ordinary. But people taking time to stop, listen, feel and experience is a contradiction of Los Angeles' image as a place char-

acterized by herds of cars, maddening commutes and a skyline feebly attempting to emulate Manhattan. People centeredness, the dominant character of East L.A., creates a bond that seemingly cannot be found in other L.A. neighborhoods.

Downtown powerbrokers cannot buy culture, even in its rather expensive postmodern form. In East L.A. culture is free; it blows with the wind, gets scorched by the sun and is touched hand in hand or arm around shoulder. The people in the streets across the river see the office towers, and the eyes in those same towers can see these same streets. But more than a river separates a cultural community from a "cultured" society. Despite the trend towards creating spaces that separate us from each other, seeing, touching and talking face to face are forms of social interaction still exist in East Los Angeles. In East L.A., people live to enjoy their social space.

