

The American Ciudad

Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. Big City by Mike Davis. Verso Books, 2000. 174 pp., \$19.

Reviewed by Bruce Webb

There's nothing particularly magical about the urbanism Mike Davis writes about in this prickly exploration of how Latinos are transforming American cities. Rather, this is the work of a street-smart demographer, high on statistical evidence that shows, among other things, that Spanish surnames have increased five times faster than the general population; that Hispanics now outnumber non-Hispanic whites in Los Angeles, Houston and San Antonio; and that over the next 50 years they will account for two-thirds of the country's population growth. Whatever magic there is comes from Davis' ability to wade into heaps of demographic data and come out with his sensibilities inspired and ready to spin statistical bits into vivid and entirely compelling pictures of the urban melting pot at the point of Latino saturation.

Hispanics are a budding political force. Davis reports that their share of the vote rose an amazing 16 percent in recent years while overall voter participation in the United States continued to decline. But as a group they lag behind the general population (and other minorities) in terms of respect, entitlements, and getting a piece of the good life. Davis describes a pattern of income and educational inequalities as well as straight-out discrimination that is sadly reminiscent of the treatment afforded immigrants in the 19th century. But he argues convincingly that the historical analogy isn't adequate for dealing with what is actually taking place: in scale and character, and in the context of an intensely globalized economy, the impact of Latinization on America's cities and culture is unprecedented and calls for new conceptual explanations and new narratives. Davis' strategy is to zone in on situations where hidden realities of this burgeoning crossover culture can be uncovered and revealed through his unique brand of broad-band research, facile interpretations and soaring speculation. The result is a protean, almost manic collection of 15 diverse, stand-alone essays, each one chipping into a different aspect of the subject.

Little can be taken for granted. In his second chapter, Davis tackles the seman-

tic issue of defining (and hence naming) the subject population; the exposition reveals the shifting biases in the U.S. attitudes toward immigrants from Latin American countries. Davis points to vacillations at the U.S. Census Bureau over the question of whether Mexicans were a race, concluding yes in 1930 and no in 1940. "Hispanic," which became the official collective for 12 different national identities during the Nixon administration, is preferred in South Florida, while Texas and California favor "Latino." (Both are 19th-century European labels.) The implied homogeneity of either name is deceptive, since the Latino population itself is complex, as Davis reminds us: U.S. cities contain the most diverse blendings of Latin American cultures in the entire hemisphere. As each generation evolves, it establishes its own unique cross-cultural identity. As Román de la Campa writes in his superb foreword, "All Latinos in the United States can be said to share some characteristics besides the imposed need to identify ourselves with names we may not like or agree with like Hispanic, Latino, or hyphenated American." What those characteristics are can be difficult to pin down, an enigma that drives the heterotopic, crossover aesthetic of Latino expatriate art and literature.

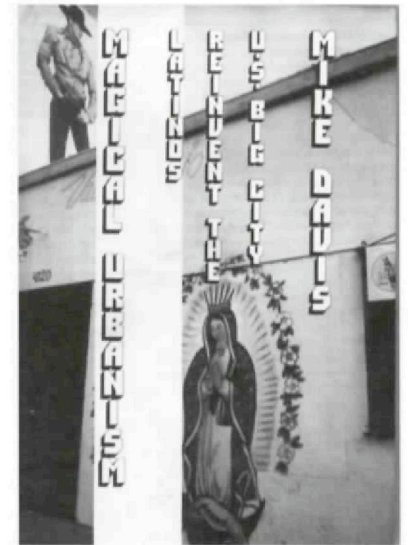
Davis is a committed Angeleno, and many of his observations reflect on Southern California, where a population of 5 million Latinos in L.A./Orange County has created a new urban ecology, an ethnic city-within-a-city equaling in size its Anglo counterpart. As a ferocious critic of urban America, Davis views this Latino hegemony as just what the doctor ordered. In a chapter called "Tropicalizing Cold Urban Spaces," he touts the Latino "genius for transforming dead urban spaces into convivial social settings" and literally coloring drab neighborhoods and resurrecting moribund urban districts with "micro-entrepreneurship." But these efforts are often applauded in theory and persecuted in practice: "The glorious sorbet palette of Mexican and Caribbean house paint — verde limón, rosa mexicano, azul añil, morado — is perceived as sheer visual terrorism by non-Hispanic homeowners." And a labyrinth of laws, conventional zoning, and building codes along with city funding programs favoring middle-class professional gentrification have frustrated attempts to build vibrant, ethnic inner-city neighborhoods. Taking a lesson from the community advocacy planners of the 1970s, Davis argues that mainstream planning lags far

behind grassroots imagination, and the Latino metropolis needs design strategies of its own, a combination, perhaps, of aggressive pragmatism and an elaboration of its own audacious cultural hegemony.

There are enough examples of these redemptive efforts to spur the imagination about counter-strategies for reurbanizing American cities, but not enough to justify the statement that "all of Latin America is now a dynamo turning the lights back on in the dead spaces of North American cities."

Davis is at his best mapping the elusive contours of the invisible, transnational metropolis where social, political, and economic life is situated with one foot in the U.S. and the other in villages in Latin America or the Caribbean. Separated by thousands of miles, immigrant Latinos stay connected; living and working in American cities, they support the economic life and participate in the social and even political lives of their hometowns. (Davis cites the case of Houston's Randalls grocery chain, which recruited more than 1,000 workers from closely related villages in Guatemala who were installed in a "cluster of faux Georgian low-rise apartment houses.... amid the freeways and strip malls.") For some the transmigration circuit itself, rather than any particular place, constitutes the principle setting for their lives.

Nothing portrays these transnational complexities as vividly as La Frontera, the 2,000-mile-long zone of daily cultural and economic exchange. It's a zone of contrasting faces (Davis calls it the "lusty bastard offspring of its two parents") animated by daily crossover exchanges among its estimated 8 million inhabitants. The borderline itself is remarkably ineffectual. Formidably barricaded and militarized, it nonetheless is deliberately porous, "a dam creating a reservoir of labor-power on the Mexican side that can be tapped on demand via the secret aqueduct of smugglers [bringing workers to]



the farms of south Texas, the hotels of Las Vegas, and the sweatshops of Los Angeles." Traffic moves in two directions. Asian companies have been encouraged to set up shop in Tijuana while their managers live in San Diego. At the border crossing, the managers pass hordes of green-card carrying Mexicans traveling to the U.S. to perform menial service jobs.

Magical Urbanism is tinged with more than a little working-class romanticism. Against evidence of massive inequalities Davis offers stories of small, grassroots successes, some of them ingenious, some even touching. Latinos lack direct access to the power points of government or industry, but Davis sees their power growing through the labor unions, an old warhorse I haven't seen cast in a redemptive role for a long while. He may be right; the labor union and the Latino struggle may be made for one another. But the real strength of this book is not so abstract or polemical. Rather it's in engendering some of the same appreciation voiced by a prescient Walt Whitman, who in 1883 observed, "As to the Spanish stock of our Southwest, it is certain to me that we do not begin to appreciate the splendor and sterling value of its race element. Who knows but that element, like the course of some subterranean river dipping invisibly for a hundred or two years, is now to emerge in broadest flow and permanent action."

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The Latino Core

Top Latino States (1997)	Top Latino Counties (1997)	Top Latino Cities (1992)
1. California 9,941,014	Los Angeles 4,000,642	New York 1,783,511
2. Texas 5,722,535	Dade (Fla.) 1,139,004	Los Angeles 1,391,411
3. New York 2,570,382	Cook (Ill.) 867,520	Chicago 545,832
4. Florida 2,105,689	Harris (Tex.) 852,177	San Antonio 520,282
5. Illinois 1,182,964	Orange (Cal.) 761,228	Houston 450,483