



I-10 Primer

*Guadalupe Plaza,
Houston*

*Plaza Guadalupe,
San Antonio*

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Top: Elevation, Plaza Guadalupe, San Antonio, Reyna Caragone Architects, 1984-89. Guadalupe Street row of storefronts ("Las Tiendas"), phase I.



Above: Arcade, Plaza Guadalupe, San Antonio, completed 1984. Guadalupe Street front.

Above: Vaulted passageway leading to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.

Satisfactory public spaces require the sort of public life that is no longer common in American cities (if it ever was) – something that urban planners and designers are in any case hard put to manufacture. Where such projects are envisioned to serve an ethnic constituency predisposed to civic conviviality, the prospects for success would seem greater. But good intentions and wishful urban typecasting are no substitute for proper location and real community ties, as two plazas of almost the same name, separated by several hundred miles of Interstate Highway 10, demonstrate. Names excepted, Guadalupe Plaza in Houston and Plaza Guadalupe in San Antonio have little else in common.

The dedication of Guadalupe Plaza Park, as it is called in official cityspeak, in September 1988 was yet another chapter in the serial drama of El Mercado del Sol, an ill-fated 400,000-square-foot Hispanic-theme shopping complex that opened in summer 1985 in a remodeled five-story factory and warehouse building on Houston's east side near downtown (*Cite*, Fall 1985, pp. 9-11). When the Houston City Council initially approved the use of \$2.3 million in federal Community Development Block Grant funds for park construction in July 1987, El Mercado had already been in Federal Savings & Loan Insurance Corporation receivership for more than a year. In September 1987 the FSLIC threatened to foreclose, announcing that it would evict tenants if a new owner could not be found. With a commitment from the city of Houston to loan up to \$5 million (also to be drawn from the federal funds), Abercrombie Interests and Equity Fund Advisors formed El Mercado Partners II, purchased the development for \$1.9 million, and began additional renovations. Since then the city has loaned \$2.1 million toward the completion of work on El Mercado, which reopened rather unceremoniously in February.

In his article "In Search of Public Places" (*Cite*, Fall 1987), Peter Papademetriou commented on the precarious balance between El Mercado's need for viable shops and an authentic civic role. On the one hand, he writes, the project risks becoming gentrified by introducing shops and attractions that have broad economic appeal but ignore the needs and desires of local residents. On the other, he points out, El Mercado has never been a "purely indigenous effort," and its economic success was (and is now entirely) dependent on public and private investment

from outside the Hispanic community. Guadalupe Plaza is a modest attempt by the city to improve the image of El Mercado by adding public amenities to what is essentially a private (albeit publicly subsidized) commercial redevelopment project.

According to architect Luís Bodmer, the park's designer (along with Arnold DeAnda of DeAnda Engineering), the park was part of a "loose package" of supportive improvements discussed with the city of Houston by the project's first developers in 1983.¹ Guadalupe Plaza as realized is in many ways as bereft as the nearly empty building it is meant to complement, consigned to the far western edge of the Hispanic East End (which, ironically, has supported a successful city-sponsored commercial redevelopment carried out by Weingarten Realty on the site of a former Sears store located several miles farther east at Wayside

and Harrisburg, near the heart of the community). The park sits on a 6.4-acre parcel of land along the west side of Jensen Drive that begins at Runnels Street, in front of El Mercado's parking lot, and leads down to the south bank of Buffalo Bayou. The 2.8-acre corner tract on which the plaza itself is located faces one side of its namesake, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church across Jensen Drive. The bayou section of the park includes a small boat dock, reached by an enormous staircase and a system of switchback ramps. The plaza is separated from El Mercado del Sol by some 170 feet of parking lot and is surrounded by low walls on the south and east street sides. A freestanding arcade is located on the west edge, facing onto the market buildings. At the center of the plaza is a raised circular stage overlooking a court enclosed by an expansive, 12-foot-high pergola. The architectural elements (arcade, pergola, stage, perimeter wall)

organize the park into formal, axially related, semi-autonomous precincts. Within the park, the structural bays of the arcade and pergola work off a grid that is reiterated as a pavement pattern. Sapling elms and palms have been planted in rows on center with the pergola's structural bays, along with what few flower beds the park's "low maintenance" mandate will permit.

Although the plaza affirms the city's interest in the success of El Mercado, the connection between the two is tenuous and made more so by the intervening parking lot. Rather than attempt to engage the renovated warehouse directly, the park lies somewhat detached beyond El Mercado's parking lot, though even so it lends an appreciable sense of civic intent to its enormous neighbor. Conceived as a tribute to Houston's Hispanic community, the park has a subtext of Aztec images incised in the pavement at various places,

Below: Guadalupe Plaza, Houston, DeAnda Engineering, Inc., with Luis Bodmer, architect, completed 1988. Runnels Street entrance between El

Mercado parking lot (not visible, left) and Clinton Drive (right). Our Lady of Guadalupe Church (not visible) stands across Clinton Drive on the right.





Guadalupe Plaza, Houston. Clinton Drive entrance looking toward El Mercado parking lot and El Mercado.

but the architectural realization ignores this potentially provocative source of form in favor of a generic array of "Hispanic" postmodern elements, deployed like so many toys. Perhaps a thematically resonant work of public art would help the plaza transcend the conventional qualities of its built components as well as strengthen its civic identity. The recent controversy surrounding the proposed installation of Luis Jimenez, Jr.'s *Southwest Pietà* in Albuquerque's historic Old Town and its subsequent installation in that city's Martineztown/Longfellow Park illustrates the potential for such work to galvanize space and a community.²

Reyna Caragone Architects' Plaza Guadalupe in San Antonio (*Cite*, Spring 1986, p. 16) provides an instructive basis for comparison with Houston's Guadalupe Plaza. The one-acre, \$1.7 million plaza was completed in two phases between 1984 and 1987 as part of an extended, community-based effort to revitalize San Antonio's Guadalupe Avenue and the surrounding low-income Hispanic neighborhood. Since the early 1980s, the Avenida Guadalupe Association along with the city of San Antonio has undertaken a master plan that in addition to the plaza includes a privately developed medical office building, completed last spring, and the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, an adjoining cinema successfully renovated as a performing arts and exhibition space, whose offices now spill over into a building across the street. Long-range plans include continued expansion of the arts center and renovation of low-income housing in the area. The neighborhood association has just completed a 20,000-square-foot row of street-front shop spaces across Avenida Guadalupe from the plaza that will be occupied by merchants in time for Christmas.

Both Plaza Guadalupe and Guadalupe Plaza offer outdoor performance areas as central elements, and both feature an assortment of incidental structures such as trellises, freestanding arcades, walls, and entryways. But Plaza Guadalupe is architecturally somewhat more sophisticated, if at times overwrought (evidenced particularly in the premature deterioration of fussy details) and still dependent on a generic postmodern vocabulary. Smaller in scale and more densely arranged, it successfully links Guadalupe Avenue with the nearby Our Lady of Guadalupe Church by a succession of outdoor spaces cut through a block. These are intended to be enclosed by buildings on either side. Guadalupe Plaza, on the other hand, is sited and sized more like a front lawn. Because it is isolated from its surroundings its ability to serve as an urban public place is compromised.

Both plazas raise questions about the ability of civic spaces to contribute to the revitalization of neighborhoods. Both depend almost entirely on programmed events for public activity because neither is particularly conducive to daily and spontaneous interaction – a deficiency that, in the case of Plaza Guadalupe, may be remedied once the row of shops across the street is occupied. The spirited, nurturing vision of the Avenida Guadalupe Association has motivated and sustained the project thus far, boding well for its future. Plaza Guadalupe shows the virtue of small-scale, incremental interventions that grow out of viable neighborhood contexts. But in the case of Guadalupe Plaza, El Mercado's ability to generate daily activity seems doubtful. Even the plaza's occasional use is problematic, given its tenuous link not only to the East End but to El Mercado itself.

Houston has experienced persistent difficulty in managing community development funds and thinking in neighborhood terms – monumentally so in the case of El Mercado, for which initial feasibility studies recommended only 70,000 square feet of retail space, roughly one-sixth of what was finally developed.³ Even as enthusiastic a supporter of El Mercado as Bodmer admits that "the renovation of a large complex such as El Mercado and the addition of Guadalupe Plaza will not be sufficient to stabilize the area in the long run."⁴ Nor does the creation of a tax abatement district in May 1988, embracing El Mercado along with other depressed Second Ward real estate, seem sufficient to overcome fundamental problems of location and community ties.⁵ One wonders if, all along, the more reasonable course would have been to take both plaza and market to the community, instead of attempting the reverse. ■

Notes

- 1 Luis Bodmer, "El Mercado del Sol: Pioneering Redevelopment Solutions in Houston," typed manuscript.
- 2 William Peterson, "Luis Jimenez, Jr.: *Southwest Pietà*," *Artspace* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 62-64.
- 3 Susan Allen, "The Rise and Fall of El Mercado," *Houston Business Journal*, 27 October 1986, p. 1.
- 4 Bodmer, "El Mercado."
- 5 City of Houston ordinance no. 88697, May 4, 1988.

Citespecific

Gulf Gate

Missed Metaphors at the Gulf Freeway – Loop 610 Interchange Design Competition

Drexel Turner

City gates are a comparatively recent feature of the American landscape, a byproduct of the creativity of Dwight Eisenhower, whose genius as architect of the interstate highway system managed to surround virtually every locality possessed of at least one shopping mall and a chamber of commerce with a loop road that enabled motorists to transit the city without ever passing through it. The new highways also ran to and through the centers of cities, usually propped up on stilts like low-riding Augustinian aqueducts, penetrating the loops to form rudimentary if inadvertent gates. The loop roads constituted perhaps the most spectacular transformation of the national topography since Jefferson's Cartesian partition of trans-Appalachia. Coiled around city after generic city like multi-laned cousins of the long-discarded ramparts of European capitals, they rounded out whole pages of the urban atlas with a template efficiency that Rand McNally could only envy.

Shopping malls were far less plentiful then than now, a deficiency Eisenhower's highways also corrected. For wherever the loop roads and main highways came together, spaghetti-like interchanges resulted, soon attended by shopping malls in one or several of the corners of the newly dissected and excited real estate. Daunting as Eisenhower's vision was, the highways and loop-sided city gates were marked by a certain sameness and predictability that merged not unsmoothly with the memory of the sponsor-general himself. But to a

