

Book Review:

Magical Urbanism, Latinos Reinvent The U.S. Big City

By MIKE DAVIS (London and New York, Verso Press, 2000). 172 pp. \$19.00, L12

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Race in the United States is most often seen in the sharp contrast of black and white. U.S. history has been defined by slavery, the struggle for civil rights, and never ending police violence in the black community. But in his new book, *Magical Urbanism*, Mike Davis refocuses our attention on the rapid Latinization of the U.S., particularly in its cutting edge global cities.

The reshaping of the social landscape has made the Latino community the largest minority in six of the top ten U.S. cities, and the minority with the largest urban concentration. Davis puts these demographics on center stage to show their political, economic, and cultural ramifications for a rapidly developing future only dimly perceived by most Americans.

Davis is at his best uncovering the many ways Latinos have changed the urban environment. This is a multilayered picture, as diverse as the Latino community itself. The three cities, which claim to be the Latino capitals of the U.S., New York, Los Angeles, and Miami, themselves reflect very different Latino communities. Puerto Rican and Dominican in New York, Mexican in L.A., and Cuban and Haitian in Miami. Each city has its own set of politics, and problems, as well as common historic roots.

Information technology has been the driving force of globalization so its no wonder that this industry is merging faster and bigger than any other. Not only are microprocessors in every product from cars to wristwatches, but also the info tech industry is at the heart of the new economy. Phones, cables, satellites, and computers have created a command and control system that makes global production and finance possible. E-commerce is building a market in the hundreds of billions, and the reach of digital entertainment is defining world culture.

Davis argues that Latinos are "remaking urban space in novel ways that cannot be assimilated to the earlier experiences of either African-Americans or European immigrants." (p. 39) Earlier patterns of Latino communities were in the traditional mode of a single primary community, much like Chinatown, Little Sicily or the Black Belt. But in the great Latino population surge of the 1990s new patterns emerged. In Chicago "polycentric barrios" developed with major Latino concentrations rooted in physically separated neighborhoods. In New York a 'multicultural mosaic' pattern spread with twenty-one Latino communities throughout four boroughs. While in Los Angeles there developed a "city-within-a-city" with a Latino population so large, (more than five million), that Spanish speaking subdivisions and cities radiate out from the original Eastside core to create an inland metropolis.

The author traces the spatial growth in L.A. to the labor market in which Latino workers occupy the "base of the post-Fordist occupational pyramid" (p. 44) in labor-intensive service and manufacturing jobs. Latinos have replaced Anglo blue-collar workers and moved into the quadrant of industrial neighborhoods southeast of Downtown. Meanwhile Anglos have moved into private-sector management, high tech, and entertainment fields, with Afro-Americans occupying civil service jobs. Davis also traces the development of San Gabriel Valley where 400,000 working class Latino

households earn more than \$35,000 annually, and has grown into the "most important Latino constituency in the nation." (p 48)

Moving from jobs to culture Davis shows how Latinos have tropicalized and transformed dead urban space. While Anglos flee urban centers or move into protected neighborhoods of cybercommuters, Latinos have revitalized urban home ownership and neighborhood markets. Reminding the reader that Ibero-Mediterranean and Meso-American cultures have historically used the plaza and mercado as space for daily social interaction, Davis argues that Latin American immigrants use parks; playgrounds, libraries and other endangered public spaces more than any other segment of the population. As he points out Latinos "thus form one of the most important constituencies for the preservation of our urban commons." (p. 55)

The author also excels at revealing how the Latinization of the U.S. is intimately connected to globalization. This globalization takes many forms, including the labor market, self-identity and consciousness, as well as the physical space around the border. One of the most interesting chapters is "Transnational Suburbs," in which Davis examines how village members separated by thousands of miles stay connected and involved in community affairs. Entire communities in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean have transnationalized to find work and support the economic life of their hometown. Extended households and migrant families reestablish their small communities inside Los Angeles, New York, and the Silicon Valley creating a "radical new social and geographical lifeline." (p 80) Survival strategies have incorporated new roles for telecommunications. For example, elders from the Mexican village of Ticuani now living in Brooklyn debate communal business with weekly conference calls to their counterparts in Mexico. Money sent back to Ticuani has built two schools, public buildings, and helped renovate the local church.

Politics also crosses the border. Half of the population of the Mexican state of Zacatecas lives mainly in Los Angeles county. This has spawned forty-nine hometown clubs, gubernatorial candidates campaigning north of the border, and a request to create two new seats in the state legislature for U.S. residents.

But U.S. culture also penetrates back to Mexican villages and the small countries of Central America. Returning immigrants sometimes build large gated homes and separate themselves from the poorer members of their community. And thousands of repatriated youth have brought northern gangs and violence to their hometown streets in the south.

Lived-in space holds a special fascination for Davis so his examination of "La Frontera," or the border area between Mexico and the U.S., offers the reader the surprising insights the author often brings to this topic. Davis investigates how an increasingly militarized border acts like a "dam, creating a reservoir of labor-power on the Mexican side that can be tapped on demand via the secret aqueduct managed by...smugglers." (p 27) This has created an "Orwellian" situation in which a barricaded border produces a borderless economy.

The economic and cultural ties are particularly strong in the twin border cities of Matamoros/Brownsville, Tijuana/San Diego and Ciudad Juarez/El Paso. These border metropolies lord over the maquila industries of garment and electronic production employing a million workers, 60% of whom are women. But this isn't just a U.S./Mexican affair, in a true sign of globalization Asian capital has come to see this as part of the Pacific Rim market. Japanese and Korean capital are close competitors to U.S. interests. In San Diego the official policy of the mayor is to encourage Asian corporations to set-up in Tijuana, move their managers to San Diego, and avoid import taxes

through NAFTA regulations. In fact, 60% of components for maquilas come from Asia, while the U.S. supplies just 38%.

While Asian and U.S. managers live in pristine suburbs crossing the border each day to work, in the opposite direction thousands of green-card carrying Mexicans travel into the U.S. cleaning homes and working in low-end service jobs. Also flowing over the border is a toxic mix of hazardous waste compelling a transnationalization of urban infrastructure, such as the \$440 million International Wastewater Treatment Plant between San Diego and Tijuana.

In the last section of the book Davis covers more familiar ground presenting the reader with facts and stories about poverty rates, the struggle over education and language, and the problems faced by the Puerto Rican community in New York. He ends the book with two chapters covering the growing electoral presence and labor power of the Latino community. Predicting the possible election of the first Latino mayor of Los Angeles, Davis warns the reader that "only powerful extra-electoral mobilization, with the ability to shape agendas and discipline candidates, can ensure representation of grassroots...interests." (p 142)

Skeptical of electoral politics, Davis invests more faith in the growing labor movement that has made Los Angeles into a new center of working class struggle. He ends his book saying, "class organization in the workplace is the most powerful strategy for ensuring representation of immigrant socio-economic as well as cultural and linguistic rights...The emerging Latino metropolies will then wear a proud union label." (p 149)