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"Las Plazas of South Los Angeles"
in ed. Josh Sides, Post-Ghetto: Reimaging South Los Angeles (Huntington Library/UC Press, 2012)

Replica of Mexico City's Ángel de la Independencia, Plaza Mexico, 2012.

JORGE N. LEAL

Las Plazas of South Los Angeles

Mexican citizens dread visiting government offices. They have to take time off from work, stand in line for hours, deal with petulant bureaucrats, and face the inevitable prospect of giving hard-earned money to an unresponsive government in order to obtain an identification card or passport. But in the era after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the quest for documentation has taken on particular urgency for Mexicans. And so, despite the drawbacks, they stoically wake up at dawn to be among the first in front of the office located in "La Plaza." The niggling office visit could take a mere half hour or stretch out all morning. However, there is a small consolation prize waiting outside. With the documents firmly clenched under their arms, they can walk to the plaza's center to buy a *raspado* (shaved ice), drink some *champurrado* (hot chocolate thickened with masa), or perhaps venture to an Oaxacan restaurant for lunch and finally get the courage to eat a taco stuffed with *chapulines* (grasshoppers). Less adventurous eaters can order chicken breast bathed with *mole*. After they can pronounce the famous adage, "*Panza llena, corazón contento*" (When the belly is filled, the heart is content), they might have time to window-shop for shoes made in Guanajuato or a *guayabera* shirt from the Yucatán peninsula. And if the budget is tight, they could acquire small *chuchulucos* (souvenirs) for the kids, which would inevitably be part of the official merchandise line of Chivas, Aguilas, or any of the other major soccer clubs in Mexico.

The plaza experience described here is an integral part of the Mexican and Latin American urban setting. In the Spanish-Latino American urban-planning tradition, the plaza is the center of the city, the place where the most prominent institutions—including government agencies and the church—are housed. However, the scene above takes place not in Mexico, but in Plaza Mexico, in the South Los Angeles city of Lynwood. Built by Korean developers in 2002, the Mexican-themed shopping

center has evolved to satisfy the official, material, affective, and religious needs and desires of Latino immigrants, whose numbers have surged over the last two decades. What was designed as a Mexican-themed mall has become a surrogate landmark for Mexicans in South Los Angeles. It is also a model of resourceful private development in the heart of a poor community.

In South Los Angeles, such sites as Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza (BHC Plaza) and the artistically oriented Leimert Park Village have historically served as examples of "authentic" African American centers for commerce and community. Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza, which opened in 1947 as the Broadway-Crenshaw Center, was hailed as an early model of the regional shopping center.[1] In 1988 the shopping center was significantly renovated and rechristened. Although the term "plaza" was added to its name, this shopping precinct can best be described as an enclosed mall. Since 2006, Chicago-based Capri Urban Investors has owned the BHC Plaza; its commercial anchors are Walmart, Macy's, and Sears.[2]

The BHC Plaza serves as a community center for adjacent African American neighborhoods. For example, the Museum of African American Art is located on the third floor of Macy's. Additionally, the movie theaters at the BHC Plaza—formerly owned by and named after basketball star Earvin "Magic" Johnson Jr.—are a venue for the annual Pan African Film and Arts Festival.

Leimert Park Village is about half a mile from the BHC Plaza, along Crenshaw Boulevard. A park acts as the center of the "village," which is surrounded by a couple of streets. Hence, the village itself consists of adjoining shops, restaurants, bookshops, art galleries, and several multiuse storefronts, such as the World Stage and the Lucy Florence Coffee House and Cultural Center. The World Stage is a jazz venue that has operated in Leimert Park since 1989. Some of the West Coast's jazz greats regularly perform there, and emerging talents use it to hone their skills. For its part, the iconic Lucy Florence Cultural Center, established in 1996, functions as an art gallery and African American specialty store. Both venues occasionally stage spoken-word events. The Kaos Network is another storefront that serves as an arts center at Leimert Park Village. It is recognized for sponsoring Project Blowed, which has hosted a hip-hop open-mic workshop every Thursday since 1994. Some of the most popular artists in the hip-hop community have performed at Project Blowed, as Scott Saul's essay in this volume explains.

Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza and Leimert Park Village complement each other. The BHC Plaza caters to the shopping needs and desires of

average African American residents by offering them a vast array of stores that carry culturally specific products, and these are situated in a familiar and welcoming shopping-mall setting. In contrast, as Nazanin Naraghi notes, Leimert Park Village serves as a place to perform, absorb, and experience African American "artistic ingenuity and cultural consumerism." It is a community space where African American identity is constructed through artistic and musical expression and through business and property ownership.[3]

The historical presence of African Americans along Crenshaw Boulevard accounts for the prominence of such shopping sites as Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza and Leimert Park Village. However, little in Lynwood's early history portended that it would become home to a dynamic Latino cultural phenomenon. A city of about five square miles, located fifteen miles from downtown Los Angeles, Lynwood was typical of rural South Los Angeles when it was incorporated in 1921. The majority of its 800 residents then were farmers. During the 1940s, Lynwood's population increased significantly, and it took on the cast of a working-class suburb, very much like South Gate, its neighbor to the north, the subject of Becky Nicolaides's pathbreaking account, *My Blue Heaven*.[4] Most families who moved to Lynwood after World War II sought work in the tire, automobile, and steel industries that had begun to operate in neighboring South Gate and Downey. Lynwood experienced a population boom in the postwar years with the migration of white World War II veterans who settled in the city to work in defense-related factories in Downey and nearby Long Beach. Their arrival doubled Lynwood's population. By 1950, the city had 25,823 residents, and almost all of them, according to the U.S. census, were white.[5]

The hegemony of working-class white residents was maintained by racially restrictive housing covenants that forbade nonwhite homeowners from buying properties in such Southern California suburban communities as Lynwood. Starting with *Shelley v. Kraemer* in 1948, a series of decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed racial covenants for real estate. This did not prevent Lynwood's white residents from keeping nonwhite prospective buyers out of the city in subsequent decades, however. According to legal scholar Kathryn Julia Woods, "in order to maintain racial exclusivity, whites created all manner of self-operating cooperatives, associations, and leasing arrangements." Woods asserts that

these extrajudicial racial covenants, backed by tacit pressure from other residents, were used by Anglos to maintain and perpetuate Lynwood's all-white character throughout the 1950s and 1960s.[6]

In fact, Lynwood's lily-white image became prominently publicized in 1962, when *Look* magazine published a pictorial that named Lynwood an "All-American City."[7] During this apparently placid era, Lynwood witnessed the birth of two of its most famous citizens: actor Kevin Costner and parodist "Weird Al" Yankovic. By the late 1960s, however, Lynwood's urban and demographic composition began to change because of two main factors: "white flight" and the impending construction of the 105 Freeway, which eventually bisected the city.

The Watts Riot of 1965 caused the first wave of white flight out of Lynwood. The civil unrest that took place literally a block away from the seemingly tranquil streets of Lynwood provoked the anxiety of white residents, many of whom opted to uproot and move in search of communities that were more racially compatible with their ideal of "lily-white Lynwood." Although a considerable segment of white residents remained in the city throughout the 1970s, Lynwood witnessed a large influx of African American residents. Their arrival, part of the second wave of middle-class black migration in Southern California documented by Josh Sides in *L.A. City Limits*, is reflected in the statistics of the U.S. census in the following decade.[8] Whereas in 1970 whites made up 97.8 percent of Lynwood's population, just a decade later, blacks made up about 35 percent of the population. Whites, who were previously in the majority, were reduced to only 37 percent of Lynwood's 48,548 total residents in 1980. However, this figure might overstate the white population, as the Bureau of the Census used the term "of Spanish Origin" as part of a category that also included whites, blacks, and "other."[9]

The black population made inroads in Lynwood in the late 1970s and 1980s. Robert Henning was elected as Lynwood's first African American city councilman in 1983, and during much of the 1980s, black politicians emerged as the controlling group in city government.[10] However, blacks retained a political and demographic majority in Lynwood for only a decade. By 1990, the city boasted a total population of 61,945, and residents "of Hispanic origin" were the solid majority, accounting for 70 percent of the population; 36,750 of them claimed to have come from Mexico. In contrast, the proportion of black residents had decreased to 23 percent, or 14,652 residents.[11]

The decrease in the number of black residents in Lynwood can be attributed to the construction of the 105 Freeway, also known as the Glenn

Anderson or Century Freeway. The construction required the city to demolish several mostly black low-income housing corridors. Residents, with the support of the NAACP, the Sierra Club, homeowners' associations, and other city governments of the area filed numerous lawsuits in the 1970s to try to prevent the construction of the 105 Freeway. Ultimately, these legal proceedings only managed to postpone the construction of the freeway for more than a decade. More than a thousand housing units were bulldozed along the south border of Lynwood in what became known as the Lynwood Freeway Corridor, in order to provide passage for the multi-lane road, which was inaugurated in 1993. Indeed, many residents of the Freeway Corridor uprooted a long time before the wrecking ball began to swing. Faced with the grim prospect of being forced to move, they opted to leave on their own; the area of boarded-up homes that remained became crime-ridden. And although residents were promised government assistance in relocating within the city, it appears that most opted to move to neighboring communities.[12]

Presently, the 105 Freeway ushers drivers through a city that is radically different from the "lily-white" Lynwood of the 1950s and 1960s. Contemporary Lynwood is also very different from the city that was governed by black officials in the 1980s. According to census figures, by 2000, Lynwood residents identified as being of "Hispanic descent" numbered 57,503, or 82.3 percent of Lynwood's total population of 69,845, whereas the number of black residents had sharply decreased to 13.5 percent, or 9,451. In the 2008 estimates provided by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the trend prevails: the Latino population of Lynwood peaked to 83 percent of an estimated 71,000 residents, with blacks constituting about 11 percent of the city's residents. These numbers mirror the statistics for other neighborhoods and municipalities in the area, a reflection of the black exodus from South Los Angeles and the enormous influx of Latino residents.

Along with this transformation, Lynwood has experienced a decrease in living standards. White, blue-collar residents used to enjoy middle-class status as the fruit of their labor at unionized factories near Lynwood. But when factories like Firestone Tire and General Motors in South Gate closed in the 1980s, jobs for Lynwood residents disappeared, as did the benefits associated with unionism. In *L.A. Story*, sociologist Ruth Milkman has analyzed the loss of these union jobs and its impact on Los Angeles. Milkman states that in the 1950s, 37 percent of Southern California's labor force was unionized; by 2004, the figure had plunged to 15 percent.[13]

Today, job opportunities for Lynwood residents are limited, and any prospects are mainly in the low-paying, non-union service sector. For

Lynwood residents, the median family income is $45,081, as estimated in 2008, which is only 85 percent of the California family median and 71 percent of the national median.[14] Moreover, according to the census, a large portion of Lynwood's residents live just above the U.S. poverty level, and 17 percent of the city's families are classified as living below it.[15]

These bleak numbers, coupled with the commonly held notion that the area is crime-prone, have dissuaded department stores, supermarket chains, and mall developers from establishing operations in the cities of South Los Angeles. According to urban policy analyst Amanda Shaffer, the levels of poverty directly correlate to the absence of supermarkets in South Los Angeles low-income communities. In her report *The Persistence of L.A.'s Grocery Gap*, Shaffer argues that, as of 2002, "each supermarket in Los Angeles County serves 18,649 people, while in low income communities one supermarket serves 27,986 people." Shaffer directly ties the absence of supermarkets in South Los Angeles to the low income level of the residents in these communities. According to Shaffer, while there was an effort led by Rebuild L.A. to bring supermarket chains into South Los Angeles after the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, almost a decade later, statistics show that these efforts were fruitless. In 2002, there were fifty-six stores, twenty-six independents, and thirty chain supermarkets, a net gain of only one store from 1995. Shaffer also explains that "in zip codes with 0–10 percent of the households living below the federal poverty line, there are approximately 2.26 times as many supermarkets per household as there are in zip codes where the number of households living below the federal poverty line exceeds 40 percent."[16]

Though these statistics deter large corporations, they present opportunities for shrewd developers with ample understanding of the material and cultural needs of the Latino residents of Lynwood. And in the multiracial milieu of Los Angeles, two such developers are Min and Donald Chae, Korean Americans whose company, M D Properties, has developed Plaza Mexico as a shopping mall. Plaza Mexico encompasses a thirty-six-acre site bordered by Long Beach Boulevard, Imperial Highway, and the 105 Freeway. In the 1970s, the site was originally developed as a shopping mall, with a Montgomery Ward store as its anchor. The Lynwood Towne Center was part of a larger effort by regional redevelopment agencies to revitalize commercial centers in southeastern Los Angeles cities suffering from white flight. In fact, the Lynwood shopping center was hailed as an

early success in this type of commercial renewal effort. Over time, however, it failed to entice other major chains to Lynwood. By 1986, Montgomery Ward closed its location in Lynwood, citing economic reasons, and the Lynwood Towne Center ceased operations.[17]

The site remained abandoned for seven years, until the Chaes leased the property and turned it into an indoor swap meet named the Lynwood Marketplace. The swap meet, which opened in 1993, housed vendors who offered a broad range of products, from clothing to fresh vegetables.[18] The swap meet attracted revenue, but according to Donald Chae, it was only the first step. M D Properties envisioned redeveloping the site into what was originally intended: a full-fledged shopping mall. "We started pitching the proposal to the national department stores," Chae recalled:

> This was the time after the 1992 riots. . . . These companies had promised to look into establishing stores in South L.A. Their representatives did come and tour the site, they all asked questions, but not one of them ended up offering a proposal. I literally presented the plan (to build a new shopping center in Lynwood) to every single major department store out there, but none of them opted to invest. So there we were, we had the lease to this potentially incredible and lucrative project, but not a single major store committed to serve as the anchor.[19]

In fact, the major department stores skipped Lynwood in favor of nearby South Gate, Paramount, and Downey. "One of the biggest reasons retailers didn't look at Lynwood was the income," stated Louis Morales, director of redevelopment for the city of Lynwood in 2004.[20]

Nevertheless, the Chaes had come to know and understand their Lynwood clientele very well; Donald Chae realized not only that most of his customers were Mexican but also that they yearned to shop in a familiar place that would remind them of their roots. "I grew up in Lincoln Heights around Chicanos, so I was already immersed in the culture, and one of my first business ventures involved traveling to Guadalajara, to buy textiles," he said. "That is how I got to know the way Mexican people lived and the importance of the plaza, the public square as a shopping destination in the life of a Mexican town."[21] After trying unsuccessfully to bring in department stores to develop the shopping mall, the Chaes decided to finance the project themselves and build a shopping center that appealed to the clientele who already patronized their swap meet.

Plans to erect a long-envisioned all-American shopping center were discarded, and instead, construction of a Mexican plaza began. The Chaes perceived that Plaza Mexico, as a shopping destination that evoked Mexican culture, would be unique. According to Donald Chae, nothing else of the sort existed in Southern California: "In Los Angeles, Chinese have Chinatown. Japanese have Little Tokyo. Koreans have Koreatown. Vietnamese have Little Saigon. But there's 5 or 6 million Mexicans in Los Angeles, and they don't have a place."[22] Although Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles has long been considered a destination for Angelenos and tourists to get a taste of "Old México," when asked about the possible similarities between the two sites, Chae affirmed that he did not consider Olvera Street and Plaza Mexico to be alike; on the contrary, he argued that Olvera Street was an homage to the Hollywood vision of "Old México."

In contrast, Plaza Mexico was conceived to have a more authentic Mexican feel, with replicas of actual buildings in Mexico and stores that are popular there. Hence, Mexican residents would have the experience of visiting an authentic Mexican plaza.[23] For the construction of Plaza Mexico, M D Properties hired several consultants and Mexican architects to recreate colonial-themed alleyways, Toltec-inspired fountains, and façades of iconic Mexican buildings. The company invested $55 million in the development of the site, which was finalized in 2002. Plaza Mexico began receiving visitors in the fall of 2002, and it has gradually continued to develop storefronts and open new sections.

David J. Hidalgo, the architect in charge of the first phase of development, said he considered the urban characteristics present in Lynwood and included them in the overarching mission to make the plaza aesthetically authentic as well as appealing to the area's residents. Specifically, Hidalgo considered the high population density in Lynwood and the fact that many Latino residents in the area are limited to using public transit or walking. "Plaza Mexico will be a haven for pedestrians, it will integrate the atmosphere of a Mexican neighborhood within a dense urban setting," he said.[24] Hidalgo's statement is reinforced by the description found on the Plaza Mexico website: "The cultural experience of walking through a small village is brought to life with the use of plazas which are park-like settings, the 'Alameda' which is the main pedestrian walkway, the 'Zocalo' which is the principal gathering place, and open spaces."[25]

The design of the plaza incorporates elements from Mexican towns, some of which were modeled after Spanish towns. Nonetheless, the promotional literature of Plaza Mexico emphasizes that the design of the plaza follows "the basic principles of the ancient city of Monte Alban."

Fountain at Plaza Mexico, 2012.

This enigmatic site in Oaxaca is considered to be one of the largest and most sophisticated urban centers in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. The description on the Plaza Mexico website reads: "Now an archeological site, the city was designed with a north-south access and platform structures similar to the pyramids of the sun and the moon placed at each end. The spatial composition of Monte Alban's two platforms includes a series of ceremonial spaces, plazas, and courtyards defined by massive facades. This organization is also evident within the many small towns . . . in Mexico."[26] Thus, by directly connecting Plaza Mexico's design to a world-renowned indigenous urban model, the developers attempt to enhance the authenticity of the plaza in the eyes of the public and tacitly contrast Plaza Mexico with such competitors as Olvera Street.

In fact, the architecture of Plaza Mexico shies away from the famed Spanish Revival style that usually prevails in Mexican-themed sites in California. Instead, Plaza Mexico's myriad architectural details are intended to create and assert an authentic Mexican essence. In addition to the walkways described above, the buildings at Plaza Mexico are replicas of iconic Mexican structures. For instance, the former Montgomery Ward building has been redesigned to resemble the façade of the government palace of the state of Jalisco. The middle of the plaza features a large fountain that resembles one originally built in the city of Guadalajara;

Replica of Mexica Sun Stone, Plaza Mexico, 2012.

Lynwood's version includes additional Aztec and Toltec motifs. A visitor can also find several scaled-down replicas of recognizable landmarks from other Mexican states, such as the Zacatecas aqueduct and the Mexica Sun Stone (also known as the Aztec Calendar Stone).

In addition, several sculptures have been erected to honor Mexican historical figures. They include statues of Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, leader of the Mexican independence movement; Ignacio Zaragoza, the Mexican general who led the Mexican army to victory against the French in the battle of Cinco de Mayo in Puebla; Benito Juárez, the first indigenous president of Mexico; and Francisco Villa, the rogue Mexican revolutionary who dared to raid U.S. territory in 1916, which led to a failed manhunt led by General John J. Pershing in Mexico, thus earning Villa everlasting status as a modern-day Robin Hood.

Other sculptures recognize Mexican womanhood. A monument to motherhood, for instance, is found in the effigy of *la China poblana*, an homage to the dress and character of women from the Mexican state of Puebla. Most significantly, there are several statues of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In order to reproduce the architecture, Hidalgo stated, "We took thousands of photos of the architecture of these [Mexican] cities to reproduce it in this project. We brought in some of the construction materials. We brought the quarry, the tiles, and the benches from Mexico. We even brought the plants from Mexico, and this is because we want the plaza to be really Mexican."[27]

Bench at Plaza Mexico, 2012.

Perhaps the most impressive testament to the Mexican authenticity of Plaza Mexico is the exact replica of the Ángel de la Independencia, Mexico City's most iconic monument. The winged victory statue, made of bronze and covered in gold, stands majestically on top of a column on one of Mexico City's main boulevards. It was commissioned in 1910 to commemorate the centennial of Mexico's independence. In contrast, Lynwood's Angel is approximately half the size of the original; it was sculpted at La Esmeralda, the National School of Painting, Sculpture, and Printmaking in Mexico City. In order to produce a replica of the original Ángel, the artists in charge of the project had to meticulously research the sculpture's shape, details, and dimensions, using Mexico's national archives. Surprisingly, these artists did not find much information, nor were they able to find blueprints of the statue. This led them to conclude that no other attempts had been made to replicate the piece in Mexico in the last five decades.[28] The Ángel has become the monument that Mexicans gather around to celebrate sporting victories or to protest against the government. The angel erected in Plaza Mexico was placed there to mirror that function. "We want an 'Angel' so we can celebrate in the same way that [Mexicans] do in Mexico City," said Hidalgo.[29]

In the walkways of the plaza, visitors can find a diverse array of stores. A shoe store—part of a well-known Mexican chain—is set next to a record store that specializes in Latin music. Another tenant is a department store that offers to ship merchandise to customers in Mexico and Central America. There are several clothing stores and a "virtual car dealer" that processes on-site purchases of cars and trucks, which are then delivered to buyers' relatives in Mexico. Around the Kiosk are carts that sell such items as silver jewelry from the town of Taxco and soccer jerseys with Mexican team logos. There are also several food establishments, some of which are fast-food restaurants offering dishes from specific Mexican regions, while two others, La Huasteca and La Guelaguetza, offer more upscale fare. These restaurants are anchor tenants, and they are credited with offering authentic culinary delights from central Mexico and Oaxaca, respectively.

Based on the author's empirical observations, the vast majority of Plaza Mexico's visitors are of Mexican origin. African American residents from nearby communities such as Watts, Compton, and Willowwood also frequent the plaza. Other regular visitors are Anglo workers whose job sites are located within driving distance of Plaza Mexico; these visitors go to the plaza mostly during the lunch hour. Non-Mexican Latinos—mainly Central Americans—often visit Plaza Mexico. One of their main destinations is La Curacao, a department store that is part of a chain that primarily caters to Central American customers. The La Curacao chain comprises eleven stores, most of which are located in Southern California. The founders and owners of the La Curacao chain are Jerry and Ron Azarkman, two Israeli immigrants who perceived an opportunity to do business with the Central American community, a relatively untapped segment of the Latino market. Although there are no Central American–themed shopping centers in Los Angeles that compare to Plaza Mexico, La Curacao does operate other Central American–themed businesses, such as La Curacao Travel and Pollo Campero, a fast-food franchise. These businesses normally operate together as clusters at shopping centers throughout Southern California, thus attracting a Central American clientele.

Whereas the architectural and aesthetic authenticity of Plaza Mexico has been vital to the crafting of its Mexican/Latino essence, the staging of events and celebrations on the grounds of the plaza has turned it into a public square with multilayered social ties in South Los Angeles. The foremost premise of the plaza is to attract visitors and generate sales for its tenants; nonetheless, its developers have retained a team of public relations specialists with abundant knowledge of the Mexican community in

Southern California. These consultants have effectively developed ties with Mexican and Latino community advocacy groups who now host their functions, events, and even press conferences at Plaza Mexico.[30]

These public relations consultants have also been effective at creating partnerships with hometown associations from various states in Mexico. The associations from such states as Puebla and Durango have established "Casas" in the plaza that not only showcase the states but also serve as offices where Mexican expatriates can handle legal and business matters. Another office called Casa del Migrants periodically stands in as a temporary Mexican consulate where Mexican government officials expedite *cédulas consulares* (identification cards) for undocumented residents; these cards are legally accepted by U.S. banks and other entities in lieu of U.S.–issued identification. Owing to the perceived significance of Plaza Mexico for the Mexican community of Southern California, the site has become a destination for Mexican government officials such as city mayors, governors, and even prospective candidates who aim to reconnect with Mexican citizens in the diaspora.

Another feature that sets Plaza Mexico apart from standard shopping malls is the presence of Mexican religious elements and the use of the plaza for religious celebrations. The plaza has an ornamented chapel dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's most popular religious and cultural image, which portrays a mestizo icon of the Virgin Mary. The chapel is open during the plaza's business hours, and visitors treat it as a formal religious site, leaving lit candles, fresh flowers, and even photos of relatives in need.[31] Moreover, the plaza is the site of two major religious festivals each year: the Day of the Dead celebration on November 2 and the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12.[32]

In their pioneering work, Macarena Gómez-Barris and Clara Irázabal suggest that the "cultural religiosity" expressed by the participants at these events at Plaza Mexico is another element with which they shape their immigrant identity within the predominant society they inhabit. These celebrations serve to foster what these scholars define as "affective connectivity," a process in which the plaza serves as a large-scale site for the "transnational cultural connections and familial transmissions of culture between different generations of immigrants."[33] Although these celebrations and connections would normally be made in the immigrants' private sphere, such as at their homes or semienclosed locations such as

churches, they are now made in the plaza, where the cultural transmission of Mexican-ness occurs with hundreds and perhaps thousands of other people from their community.

Gómez-Barris and Irázabal mention that while conducting research during a Virgin of Guadalupe celebration, they interviewed a group of mostly Central American young men who identified themselves as gang-affiliated. These youngsters said they visited Plaza Mexico to attend the religious celebration, as the Virgin was an important figure in their lives. These young men origin suggested that they traveled from the predominantly Central American Pico Union area to Plaza Mexico as a way to stay off the streets. Gómez-Barris and Irázabal write: "For Manuela (a seventeen-year-old), 'being safe' was synonymous with taking a break from gang territories by coming into 'neutral' spaces like Plaza Mexico, which resided outside of the traditional gang circuits, a place that provided temporary relief from gangs and the police in equal measure." The celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Plaza Mexico "allowed these young men to feel freer to come together with their fellow ethnics and co-nationals to celebrate their identity as Latinos."[34]

Irázabal and Gómez-Barris have also considered the tourism aspect of Plaza Mexico, arguing that the plaza functions as a sui generis tourist destination, serving a population of immigrants who—as a result of the recent strengthening of national borders—are constrained by their undocumented status from leaving their present communities in the United States to visit their homeland. Irázabal and Gómez-Barris posit that Plaza Mexico could represent a new model for urban tourist sites "whereby venture capitalists opportunistically reinvent tradition within a structural context of constrained immigrant mobility." Therefore, the plaza serves Los Angeles's immigrant communities as "a space of bounded, diasporic tourism in Southern California through nostalgia, belonging and the culling of national and regional identification."[35]

The allure of Plaza Mexico is not exclusive to recent Mexican immigrants with nostalgic yearnings who might not be able to visit their homeland often. The plaza also serves as a gathering location for teenagers and young adults who were born and raised in South Los Angeles and whose visits to Plaza Mexico serve a different purpose. Younger visitors see the plaza as a meeting space that is both culturally familiar and part of their city boundaries; hence, they feel a deeper sense of belonging at Plaza

Chapel dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Plaza Mexico, 2012.

Mexico than they do at other shopping malls in the area. Moreover, the preeminence of the plaza in the landscape of Mexican Los Angeles has made it a popular broadcasting location for Spanish-language radio and television shows visiting Los Angeles. Previously, the shows would have been broadcast from such Mexican-related locations as East Los Angeles or Olvera Street. Plaza Mexico's fame has also led it to become a popular venue for Latino artists and sports personalities to showcase themselves and host autograph signings.

Another way in which the plaza functions in civic life is through fundraising events. Nancy Montes, a longtime Lynwood resident and a community activist who works in South Los Angeles to create job opportunities for Latino youth, recalled her early impressions of the plaza: "We all remember the Lynwood Marketplace as a rather plain swap meet where families from the city would go get fresh produce. So when Plaza Mexico first opened, we used to joke about its Mexican folksiness all the time." But Montes's view of the plaza has changed over time. Montes, who also serves as co-chair of the Lynwood Alumni Association, a group that works to encourage Lynwood students to attend college, says she has found a receptive atmosphere for the association's activities in the plaza: "The different stores at the Plaza are active members of the community, and when we have to spread the word about an upcoming event, we are welcome to go and announce our activities. Moreover, the restaurants are very open to having fundraisers for the different organizations in the city."

By Montes's estimation, the plaza has inspired loyalty among Lynwood residents: "It is great that they [the shopkeepers who are Lynwood residents] chose to invest back in the community, and as Lynwood residents, we are more inclined to patronize their stores, because we feel we are spending our dollars in our local business, so the money stays in the community."[36] Consequently, the fundraising events hosted within Plaza Mexico serve a dual purpose. First of all, they reinforce the social significance of the plaza as a public space where residents of the city assemble to foster their involvement in community affairs.[37] They also allow shopkeepers to cultivate a base of loyal consumers who appreciate the value of buying locally.

Not surprisingly, Lynwood city officials are generally effusive about the role of the plaza in civic life. "Plaza Mexico has become a destination within our city; people from other cities in the area and even beyond Los Angeles County now come to Lynwood to visit Plaza Mexico," said Ramón Rodríguez, who has served as a city council member since 2001. In Rodriguez's view, "Lynwood is now known because of Plaza Mexico,

it has put the city on the map. For the Latino residents of Lynwood—which are the majority in the city—the plaza makes them feel connected to their Latino culture."

However, Rodríguez hints that the relationship between the city and the developer is not seamless in terms of coordinating public events: "The events held at Plaza Mexico are organized by them. The plaza administration asks and obtains the permits they require from the pertinent city departments. But while Plaza Mexico hosts several events that benefit the community, such as toy drives, holiday celebrations, and events of this nature, we can't, however, talk about a partnership between the city of Lynwood and Plaza Mexico, as the main intent of their events is to bring people to their site so they can patronize their stores."[38]

Rodríguez says that the three parks within city limits function as public space available for use by residents as an alternative to commercially focused Plaza Mexico.[39] Nonetheless, he admits that, as a result of California's financial crisis, the city has experienced substantial budget cuts. The funding shortfall has rendered the city unable to continue funding the cultural events previously held at Lynwood city parks, such as the Cinco de Mayo Festival and the Holiday Parade. In contrast, the plaza continues to celebrate myriad cultural events throughout the year. "So in that way, Plaza Mexico does fill the void," Rodríguez said. "When they organize events such as the Cinco de Mayo celebration or a Holiday Toy Drive, it brings the community together, even when we as a city can no longer put together these events, as we need to allocate the resources on more pressing matters."[40] As a result of persistent underfunding for community activities, Lynwood residents have the plaza, a private shopping center, as another option for hosting community celebrations.

While Lynwood's elected officials might express some qualms about their working relationship with M D Properties, the plaza has caught the attention of a more high-profile critic: former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. In the midst of his 2007 re-election campaign, Schwarzenegger made several off-the-cuff comments about illegal immigration. He cited Plaza Mexico as an example of Mexican immigrants' unwillingness to assimilate into American society. Schwarzenegger, an Austrian immigrant, said that upon his arrival, he had tried to assimilate quickly into American society: "I made an effort . . . but the Mexicans don't make that effort." To illustrate his point, Schwarzenegger described a visit to Plaza Mexico: "Literally I felt I was in Mexico City . . . everyone only spoke Spanish, every shop was in Spanish, every sign was in Spanish. They create a Mexico within California."[41]

Schwarzenegger's disapproval of Plaza Mexico's characteristics notwithstanding, the plaza has been emulated in Walnut Park, an unincorporated area south of Huntington Park and north of Watts. According to census figures, about 95 percent of Walnut Park's 16,000 residents are Latinos.[42] The company Primestor Development chose Walnut Park as the site to develop Plaza La Alameda, which opened in 2008 at an estimated cost of $70 million.[43] The shopping center is an eighteen-acre property at the corner of Alameda Street and Florence Avenue. Its design is a hybrid between a plaza and a suburban outlet. As opposed to Plaza Mexico, Plaza La Alameda features a wide variety of national retailers, such as Marshalls, Big 5 Sporting Goods, Office Depot, and EB Games. And although Plaza La Alameda does have some Mexican restaurants, most of its offerings are in line with American mainstream culinary tastes, such as Starbucks, Chuck E. Cheese's, and Panda Express.

Plaza La Alameda has several architectural features in common with Plaza Mexico; for instance, both plazas have a kiosk and a fountain in the middle. Most significantly, Plaza La Alameda is pedestrian-accessible, and it has a transit center for buses that travel east and west as well as ones that connect riders with the Blue and Green lines of the Metro. In terms of community events, Plaza La Alameda has become the chosen location for Mexican-themed celebrations that were previously held in the major streets of nearby Huntington Park.[44] Thus, the developers of Plaza La Alameda—much in the same fashion as Plaza Mexico—have claimed the function of the public square for their plaza-style shopping center. In this way, it has become a fixture in the social, public, and civic life of the communities that surround Plaza La Alameda.

The construction of Mexican-themed plazas deep within South Los Angeles attests to the rapid and sweeping demographic transformation of the area in the past fifty years. In spite of being located in economically challenged communities, the shopping centers have been able to thrive by creating commercial spaces that are architecturally and culturally modeled after Latin American plazas. Latino residents of South Los Angeles recognize these sites as welcoming public spaces where they can gather and even take part in organized cultural events.

Although the primary objective of these plazas is to attract customers, they act as public squares in neighborhoods that sorely lack community spaces. Because the plazas are private, "public" spaces, there are limits on how the public can use them. Nonetheless, the plazas have repositioned the cultural and societal nucleus of these communities. They offer the opportunity for Lynwood and Walnut Park residents to

create more significant ties between merchants, and perhaps over time, these interactions will generate a stronger sense of community.

Most significantly, the emergence of two Mexican-style plazas in South Los Angeles in the first decade of the twenty-first century ought to be understood as both a historical continuation and a break in terms of urban public spaces in Southern California. The South Los Angeles plazas could be considered successors to Olvera Street, particularly in terms of the public function served by the plaza, as detailed by William Estrada in *The Los Angeles Plaza.*[45] Nonetheless, the quest for Mexican authenticity at these shopping centers can also be seen to refute the Spanish style deeply ingrained in Olvera Street. Its construction in the 1920s was part of a larger trend of "Spanish fantasy" envisioned by Anglos in California and analyzed by Phoebe Kropp in *California Vieja*.[46] By appropriating elements of California's nostalgic Spanish past, Anglo boosters sought to assert themselves as the present and future of California, thus relegating Native Americans and Mexicans to a bygone era.

In contrast, the plazas allow Latino visitors to immerse themselves in an authentic Mexican experience by developing a historical narrative that commemorates a proud indigenous past. The plaza situates the visitors in a contemporary space that is part of their distant homeland and of Southern California. In this way, the development of South Los Angeles takes another turn, and in fact, comes full circle to Los Angeles's origins as a Spanish pueblo. Whereas communities like Lynwood and Walnut Park were originally built as sprawling suburbs with little association to the Spanish town model, the plazas have now begun to reshape these communities to include a public square, much in the tradition of El Pueblo de Los Ángeles. The El Pueblo model, if employed wisely, could provide a blueprint for a nucleus where residents can gather and perhaps perceive themselves as part of a larger and more inclusive South Los Angeles community.

Notes

1 Richard Longstreth, "The Mixed Blessings of Success: The Hecht Company and Department Store Branch Development after World War II," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 6 (1997): 244–62 at 252.

2 Roger Vincent, "Baldwin Hills Mall Bought by Chicago Realty Investor," *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 2006, C1.

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4 Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

5 Statistics derived from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statement of the Census (1950), and found in Kathryn Julia Woods, "California's Voters Revolt: Lynwood, California and Proposition 13, A Snapshot of Property's Slipping From Whiteness's Grasp," *University of West Los Angeles Law Review* 37 (2004): 171–90.

6 Woods, "California's Voters Revolt," 171–90.

7 *Look*, April 10, 1962. See also "Lynwood Achievements Praised by Gov. Brown," *Los Angeles Times,* March 27, 1962, A2.

8 Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 189–92.

9 U.S. Census Bureau, Statement of the Census (1970), found in Woods, "California's Voters Revolt."

10 Melinda Burns, "Lynwood Elects Black Councilman," *Los Angeles Times,* November 10, 1983, SE_A1.

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14 U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 Estimate. Fact Sheet for the City of Lynwood, State & County QuickFacts website.

15 U.S. Census Bureau 2000 and 2008. Ibid.

16 Amanda Shaffer, *The Persistence of L.A.'s Grocery Gap: The Need for a New Food Policy and Approach to Market Development* (Los Angeles: Center for Food and Justice, Urban & Environmental Policy Institute, Occidental College, May 2002), 1–106 at 11, http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/publications/the_persistence_of.htm.

17 "Some Moving Rapidly, Others Snagged," *Los Angeles Times,* September 23, 1973, SE1; "Montgomery Ward Will Close its Lynwood Store," *Los Angeles Times,* January 3, 1986, F2.

18 Amanda Bronstad, "Plaza Mexico Revamping Seen as Key to Community's Revival," *Los Angeles Business Journal,* February 2, 2004, 16.

19 Donald Chae, interview, July 20, 2005, as part of research for an article intended for *La Ola* newspaper.

20 Bronstad, "Plaza Mexico Revamping."

21 Chae interview.

22 Sam Quinones, “Non-Latinos Mine Southland’s Mexican Market,” *Los Angeles Times,* December 5, 2004, B1.

23 Chae interview.

24 Mary Ballesteros-Coronel, “Méxicotown,” *La Opinión,* February 5, 2002, 1D. All translations by the author.

25 “Design Concept,” Plaza Mexico website, http://www.plazamexico.com/menu/fashions.html.

26 “About the Plaza,” Plaza Mexico website, http://www.plazamexico.com/menu/abouttheplaza.html.

27 Ballesteros-Coronel, “Méxicotown.”

28 In 1957, the statue fell from its pedestal during a powerful earthquake that struck Mexico City. The statue was rebuilt and replaced in 1958. See Héctor de Mauleón, “A cinco décadas de la caída del Ángel” (On the Five Decades of the Fall of *The Angel*), *El Universal,* México, D.F. México, July 28, 2007, C1.

29 Patricia Cordero, “Hacen un Ángel para chicanos,” (Creating an *Angel* for Chicanos), *Mural*, Guadalajara, México, September 17, 2004, 6.

30 As of 2010, the public relations department at Plaza Mexico was led by Cristina Aguilar, a former Mexican journalist.

31 Empirical observation noted by the author on numerous visits to the site.

32 Macarena Gómez-Barris and Clara Irázabal, “Transnational Meanings of La Virgen De Guadalupe: Religiosity, Space, and Culture at Plaza Mexico,” *Culture and Religion* 10, no. 3 (2009): 339–57.

33 Ibid., 340, 354.

34 Ibid., 346–47.

35 Clara Irázabal and Macarena Gómez-Barris, “Bounded Tourism: Immigrant Politics, Consumption, and Traditions at Plaza Mexico,” *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 5, no. 3 (2007): 186–213.

36 Nancy Montes, phone interview, January 30, 2010.

37 Montes’s comments about the different reactions to the plaza from second- or third-generation Mexican Americans might also hint at the historically close yet sometimes contentious relationship between Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans in social and political realms. For more info, see David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

38 Ramón Rodríguez, phone interview, January 28, 2010.

39 There are three parks in Lynwood: Lynwood City Park, Lynwood Skate Park, and the Yvonne Burke–John D. Ham Park. The Lynwood parks comprise twenty-two acres, in contrast to Plaza Mexico, which is thirty-six acres.

40 Rodríguez interview.

41 Anna Gorman, “Latinos Lob a Few Words at Governor,” *Los Angeles Times,*

February 9, 2007, A1. Nonetheless, the website of Plaza Mexico now uses an edited version of the former governor's statement to bolster the authenticity of the plaza. It reads: "Literally I felt I was in Mexico City. . . . They create a Mexico within California." See http://www.plazamexico.com/menu/abouttheplaza.html.

42 U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, State & County QuickFacts website.

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44 Yurina Rico, "Se jugó en el Azteca y se disfrutó en LA" (Played in Mexico and Enjoyed in L.A.), *La Opinión,* March 29, 2009. See also Jorge Morales Almada, "'El Grito' hace eco en la ciudad" (Mexican Independence Day Echoes in the City), *La Opinión,* September 16, 2009.

45 William David Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

46 Phoebe S. Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).