

**Learning from Tijuana
Developing Housing for Hispanic
Immigrants
Trends, August 2006
By Nina J. Gruen**

Housing fads come and go. Modernism, with its unadorned architecture, championed the concept that the built environment could positively influence behavior and reigned through most of the 20th century. In the latter part of the 20th century “the new urbanism” — pedestrian-oriented communities with clustered housing, notable front porches and town squares — became *de rigueur*. New urbanism was designed to induce a greater sense of community by harking back to the traditional “our town” model — more a mythological lifestyle than anyone’s reality. Initially, it was thought that these pedestrian-oriented communities would be able to serve households typically priced out of the suburban housing market. This did not turn out to be the case. In fact, some of these communities served primarily as second-home communities for the upper-middle class.

Another sacred concept in many jurisdictions is inclusionary zoning. Inclusionary zoning requires a certain percentage (typically varying from 10 percent to 20 percent) of market-rate housing projects to be provided at below-market rates to households meeting various income standards, predicated on the average household income for the respective community. An explicit goal of most inclusionary zoning programs is to diversify housing projects by including households of different ethnic and income groupings.

Given the distinct housing preferences of Hispanic and Asian households, these models may need to be rethought. This article explores Hispanic market preferences and construction models designed to meet those specific cultural and social needs.

Architect Teddy Cruz offers a different low-cost housing model for Hispanic immigrants that is based on Tijuana shantytowns.¹ Cruz feels we have more to

learn from the Tijuana model than we do from either the modernism or new urbanism models. The Tijuana shantytown model Cruz is copying consists of elaborate systems of retaining walls made out of used tires packed tightly with dirt. Small concrete houses are built on top of these retaining walls, finished up with corrugated metal and used garage doors. The one- or two-car-wide areas between the retaining walls underneath the houses are used by the occupants for car repair, small metal shops and other entrepreneurial activities.

Cruz uses this basic concept in his design of a housing project with up to 12 units to be located in San Ysidro, a heavily Hispanic suburban community located outside of San Diego. His partner in this development is the advocacy group “Casa Familiar.” The retaining walls in Cruz’s design are in the shape of Donald Judd’s sculptural cubes and are made out of concrete. These concrete sculptural cubes provide a block-long, semi-public loggia that serves as shared communal space for markets or festivals. On top of the cubes is a row of small wooden houses. Each of the interlocking housing units can accommodate one to two bedrooms, and their interconnectedness can permit extended families to live side by side. A second phase is proposed that calls for parallel rows of housing for the elderly interspersed with publicly shared gardens.

The preference for cheek-by-jowl housing and shared public spaces runs counter to the traditional post-World War II American dream of a single-family detached house with its own private front and back yards.

Reuben Hechanova, the director of new projects for Mission Housing Development Corp. in San Francisco, concurs that the Hispanic housing model is one of higher-density clusters (13 to 19 dwelling units per acre) with shared public spaces, whether these spaces are playgrounds or communal gardens. An example of a successful housing development that offers below-market-rate units to Hispanic households is the Plaza del Sol, located on Valencia Street in San Francisco’s Mission District. The

project consists of 25 two-bedroom units, 29 three-bedroom units and five four-bedroom units. All of these units have zero yard space. Instead, there are four public spaces located at each of the corners of this development that include playgrounds and communal gardens. Households whose income increases beyond the allowable subsidization are required to pay market rents. Consequently, some of these families move to the suburbs but find themselves missing their old neighbors and spend most weekends and holidays in their former neighborhood.

At this point in time, these distinct Hispanic market preferences often run afoul of communities, particularly suburban community zoning and regulations. It is questionable whether many communities would accept the Tijuana/Cruz model of building cube space underneath small housing units to facilitate entrepreneurial and community activities. Given the growth of the Hispanic market, however, there likely will be a potential counter force that weighs against the now accepted standards for the new urbanism or the traditional infill and suburban developments that incorporate inclusionary housing units. The urban construction and layout designs that endure are those that best serve their users and residents. Given the changes in U.S. urban demography, some accepted “best practices” may need to be rethought.

¹ As drawn from *The New York Times* March 12, 2006, article entitled “Will Tijuana’s Shantytowns Become America’s New Suburban Ideal?”



**Nina Gruen is a Principal with
Gruen Gruen + Associates, a research
and consulting firm with offices in San
Francisco and the Midwest.**

www.ggassoc.com