

Conference Spotlight Lessons of Latino Informal Housing Practice at APA CA 2016

by Jonathan Pacheco Bell, Land Use Regulation Planner, County of Los Angeles



Panelists (left to right): Jonathan Bell, James Rojas, Vinit Mukhija, and Mark Vallianatos

The American Planning Association (APA) has identified a number of key emerging issues in the planning field (On the Radar <https://www.planning.org/resources/ontheradar/>). These policy areas, which deal with issues such as aging, diversity, food systems, and shrinking cities, summarize some of the biggest challenges and opportunities for both planning and the public. The Latinos and Planning Division, recognizes that two issues in particular: Aging and Livable Communities and the Changing Faces of America: Planning for a More Dynamic Population—speak directly to the needs of planning and engaging Latino populations in all age groups in decision-making processes. The following articles discuss some of these issues, drawing on personal and professional experience and exploring how planning for diverse communities impacts decisions related to housing and redevelopment.

Informal housing is no longer a condition associated solely with Less Developed Countries. In Developed World cities like Los Angeles, informal housing is found in every jurisdiction, every geography, every

demographic, and every socioeconomic stratum. But you wouldn't know that from the planning literature. Research is scant on informal housing in L.A. and other metro areas, despite the fact that informal development has been a characteristic of urbanism for decades. Moreover, because the city planning profession keeps code enforcement at arm's length, planners rarely, if ever, go into communities and see unpermitted dwellings up close. These knowledge gaps constitute missed opportunities for planners to understand the "on the ground" realities of today's informal housing market. Indeed, the more we know about informal housing, the better we can plan for it.

This realization was the driving force behind the session, "Crafting Mi Casa: Lessons of Latino Informal Housing Practice in Los Angeles" at the APA CA 2016 Conference in Pasadena, CA. The

presentation was organized by four L.A.-area planners with unique housing insights. Moderator Jonathan Pacheco Bell is an L.A. County Land Use Regulation Planner with over ten years of zoning enforcement experience in South Central L.A. James Rojas is a hybrid artist-planner widely regarded as the godfather of Latino Urbanism. Vinit Mukhija is a UCLA planning professor and informal housing scholar. Mark Vallianatos is a policy expert and staunch advocate for affordable housing.

Challenged to deliver a session on housing resilience, they drew inspiration from L.A.'s Latino community. Latino homeowners renovate their homes based on imagination, needs, and know-how, sometimes without permits. This long-standing cultural practice has produced innovative housing models and redefined the basic dwelling unit in Los Angeles.



Subdivided house with garage conversion. Photo Credit: Erika Pinto

Yet despite its ingenuity, Latino informal housing runs into considerable city planning obstacles, from rigid municipal codes to NIMBYism to the very real safety concerns of substandard garage apartments. The group felt that planners could learn a lot from an analysis of Latino informal housing practice. The resulting session entailed an in-depth look at the visual, spatial, policy, and regulatory implications Latino informal housing practice has in planning multicultural Los Angeles.

Bell opened the talk addressing the question, “Why focus on Latinos?” He explained that the group recognized creative solutions in the way Latinos transform traditional housing in L.A. Bell then introduced his concept of “Embedded Planning” developed from years of street-level informal housing enforcement. An embedded planner (conducting code enforcement, for example) gains awareness of what’s happening “on the ground,” leading to better understanding

of which codes and policies are working, and which are not. The presentation included images and analysis of informal housing from his fieldwork. He concluded with three takeaways. First, Latino informal housing represents innovation. Second, Latino informal housing responds to outdated zoning codes. Third, Latino informal housing occurs when planning remains unknown in the community.

Rojas explained how Latinos bring cultural values to housing, private property, and public space. His analysis showed how Latino values at times conflict with the traditional planning, zoning, and design of single-family homes. This community adds their cultural living patterns to traditional American spatial forms to create a unique “Latino vernacular.” Replete with evocative imagery of Latino homes and spaces, Rojas’ presentation explored the ways Latinos creatively repurpose front yards, sidewalks, and garages. His synthesis highlighted the informal interventions that enrich L.A.’s

built environment.

Mukhija explained how building 2nd units on single-family lots could solve Los Angeles’ housing crisis. His research of real estate listings found that informal dwellings (garage conversions, subdivided houses, etc.) are distributed throughout the City of Los Angeles. The prevalence of informal development across geographies and demographics demonstrates an existing demand for additional housing in traditional single-family zones. Latino informal development strategies can serve as inspiration for planners considering new housing codes and policies, Mukhija argued.

Vallianatos examined ways to regulate the informal housing market in Los Angeles. He drew upon existing and proposed policy frameworks relating to a multitude of informal housing types, including garage housing, unpermitted apartment units, rural owner-built housing,

accessory dwelling units, incremental settlements, and use of public land for self-built housing. Vallianatos concluded that the key feature of a sound informal housing policy should require upgrades to meet safety standards in exchange for legalizations and flexibility on zoning rules.

A lively Q & A followed the presentations. Audience members inquired about the impact of Design Review, parking requirements, and emerging state bills relaxing rules for new housing. Drawing from their presentations, panelists summarized ways the planning field can learn from Latino informal housing practice. Bell closed the session with two challenges for the audience. First, he reminded planners that you cannot plan from your desk. Planners need to be out in the community learning from

the ground up. He prodded practitioners to consider adopting the “enforcement planner” model to achieve this benefit. Second, he challenged students to pursue informal housing scholarship. More diverse voices are needed to fill gaps in the literature. Undoubtedly there are students who’ve experienced informal housing personally, and their perspectives would add insights and credibility to the debate. That challenge was quickly accepted! As of November 15th, Bell is in touch with four students (doctoral, master’s, and undergraduate levels) who’re now researching informal housing in Los Angeles.

The panelists extend thanks to audience members and colleagues who’ve expressed support in advancing scholarship on Latino informal housing practice. There’s certainly more work to do, and the panelists welcome

feedback. Jonathan Pacheco Bell can be reached at pachecob@ucla.edu and [@c1typlann3r](https://twitter.com/c1typlann3r) for questions or copies of the presentations. James Rojas can be reached at enactedenvironment.com. Vinit Mukhija can be reached at vmukhija@ucla.edu. Mark Vallianatos can be reached on social media at [@markvalli](https://twitter.com/markvalli) and abundanthousingla.org.

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Group photo of students who participated in FSU and the APA Ambassador's program Box City. Photo Credit: Yes Segura. <https://www.planning.org/diversity/ambassadors/>

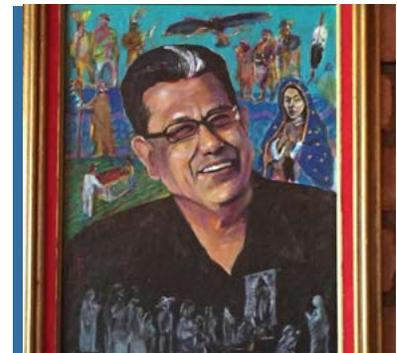
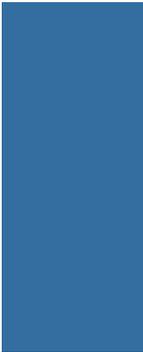
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