



Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City

Mike Davis , Román de la Campa (Foreword by)

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Winner of the 2001 Carey McWilliams Award

Is the capital of Latin America a small island at the mouth of the Hudson River? Will California soon hold the balance of power in Mexican national politics? Will Latinos reinvigorate the US labor movement?

These are some of the provocative questions that Mike Davis explores in this fascinating account of the Latinization of the US urban landscape. As he forcefully shows, this is a demographic and cultural revolution with extraordinary implications. With Spanish surnames increasing five times faster than the general population, salsa is becoming the predominant ethnic rhythm (and flavor) of contemporary city life. In Los Angeles, Houston, San Antonio, and (shortly) Dallas, Latinos outnumber non-Hispanic whites; in New York, San Diego and Phoenix they outnumber Blacks. According to the Bureau of the Census, Latinos will supply fully two-thirds of the nation's population growth between now and the middle of the 21st century when nearly 100 millions Americans will boast Latin American ancestry.

Davis focuses on the great drama of how Latinos are attempting to translate their urban demographic ascendancy into effective social power. Pundits are now unanimous that Spanish-surname voters are the sleeping giant of US politics. Yet electoral mobilization alone is unlikely to redress the increasing income and opportunity gaps between urban Latinos and suburban non-Hispanic whites. Thus in Los Angeles and elsewhere, the militant struggles of Latino workers and students are reinventing the American left. Fully updated throughout, and with new chapters on the urban Southwest and the exploding counter-migration of Anglos to Mexico, *Magical Urbanism* is essential reading for anyone who wants to grasp the future of urban America

This paperback edition of Mike Davis's investigation into the Latinization of America incorporates the extraordinary findings of the 2000 Census as well as new chapters on the militarization of the border and violence against immigrants.

Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City Details

Date : Published August 17th 2001 by Verso (first published June 6th 2000)

ISBN : 9781859843284

Author : Mike Davis , Román de la Campa (Foreword by)

Format : Paperback 224 pages

Genre : Politics, Nonfiction, Cities, Urban Studies, History, Urbanism, Geography

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From Reader Review Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City for online ebook

Andrea says

i miraculously read this in the car without getting motion sick, but some of the things i have learned about the experiences of latino immigrants in the US did the job of making me queasy... it's been a quicker read than 'city of quartz' but also feels a little bit more dry and mainstream. all in all, highly recommended. the hardcover version i picked up has really great dustjacket design too.

Jessica says

This is a pithy little publication on what is an immensely important subject. That is, the growth of Latin American populations in the U.S. and the ever changing socio-economic conditions for this broad racial-ethnic group, often generalized as "Latino". Mike Davis' descriptive language (liberal adjective use) renders the statistics and data heavy material highly palatable for lazy readers such as myself. But it comes at a price and that price is clearly marked on the cover: "Magical Urbanism". After reading the book, I'm still not clear on the reason for this seemingly sexy title. It appears to be a reference to magical realism, which is an aesthetic style that has been popularized by Latin American authors. I'm hoping that he is not implying that there is a magical or surreal aspect to the conditions he describes.

The information that Davis provides however, is significant and critical. His writing on "transnational suburbs" and the chapter that deals with bilingual education are compelling. In the former one, he describes the continuing cultural and economic connections between immigrant suburbs that are origin-specific and their home towns across the border (watch the documentary *The Sixth Section*). This nine year old publication often portrays Latinos in a victimized role rather than an empowered one and it leaves me wondering what is going on now, what has been left out. I'd recommend that you read this with a critical eye and continue with the subject after you are done with the book. Davis is known for his popular appeal so this shouldn't be the final destination, just the beginning.

p.s. If anyone out there reads the book and interprets the following line as anything other than an overt racial slur against another diverse group, let me know! I'm hypersensitive :)

New York's burgeoning but profoundly underdog Mexican population, as we have seen, struggles to survive in the benthic layer of the economy: working as busboys in Greek restaurants, risking their lives in gypsy construction, illegally selling candy in subway stops, or hustling flowers at street corners.

Michelle says

This book chronicles how Latinos have changed the culture and landscape of the U.S., and how Latinos are

continuing to effect policy in their native countries while living in the U.S. Mike Davis is an amazing writer.

Lfrench says

Judging this book by its cover, title, and general paratext, I expected it to be more about Latinos' cultural influence on U.S. cities. Instead, Davis focuses more on demographic shifts and enduring socioeconomic and educational inequalities. Overall, though, I enjoy the historical context he provides, but I wish I had read *Magical Urbanism* 10 years ago.

Andrea says

It opens with the best quote ever from Diego Rivera in 1931:

When you say "American" you refer to the territory stretching between the icecaps of the two poles. So to hell with your barriers and frontier guards!

Much of this I really liked as I like Mike Davis. It is a quick read, a survey really. It describes the changing face of America, the next few decades in which Latinos will become majorities...and it even breaks down some of the divisions in this blanket term that so many wield as though it were a united group: Carribeans, Mexicans, Central Americans, South Americans: 1st generation, 2nd and 3rd. The hybridity along the borders, the dual identities and chicano identities and straight nationalisms in exile always looking back towards the old country. It might not do this enough.

Nothing can capture Tijuana, but it tries. It might not do this enough.

It recovers a history of violence against immigrants along the border that is chilling, and rarely reported on in mainstream news. This I liked the best.

So given all this, given how the growing numbers of latinos in cities not along the border have not been enough studied (though I don't know if he is counting New York, Philly, Miami), there is this call to understand how latinos are transforming these cities. He creates a typology of settlements - primate barrio with satellites (LA 1960), polycentric barrio (Chicago), mosaic (NY), and city within a city (LA 1990). I needed more detail, wanted this set into conversation with other settlement patterns, how does this fit into African-American and Asian geographies? There is a little, but not enough.

Of course, this 'latinoization' of the city is where I feel we move onto problematic ground. He has a chapter called 'Tropicalizing Urban Space'. Uh oh, I think to myself. He writes:

Here, in the aftermath of the 1965 Watts riot, bank "redlining," civic indifference and absentee landlordism accelerated the decay of an ageing, poorly built housing stock. Yet today, even in the historically poorest census tracts, including most of the Central-Vernon, Florence-Firestone and Watts-Willowbrook districts, there is not a street that has not been dramatically brightened by new immigrants (61)

He describes this restoration of neighborhoods to 'trim respectability', a process that has allowed 'older African-American residents to reap unexpected gains in homes sales: a serendipitous aspect of "ethnic succession" that has been ignored by analysts who focus only on the rough edges of Black/Latino relations' (62). There are no rough edges in this account, but the amount I have studied the embattled history of these neighborhoods, this sentence pains me greatly. South Central has always been a mosaic of trim respectability and beautiful gardens alongside absentee owned rentals falling down from neglect. Sadly many African-Americans have felt this dynamic as a push, not serendipity.

He writes further:

In the most fundamental sense, the Latinos are struggling to reconfigure the "cold" frozen geometries of the old spatial order to accommodate a "hotter," more exuberant urbanism...a rich proliferation of public space (65).

This essentialising a widely divergent group of people into binaries of hot and cold, private and public is so strange to me. That new immigrants should bring different conceptions of space with them, yes...that all of them should want to recreate the old in a new country I balk at, that their children should want to continue with this, layered onto Latinos that have lived here generations, that are as much part of these 'frozen geometries' as any other ethnic or racial group apart from WASPy whites, who undoubtedly had the most power, money, and ability to define the shape of the city. This is more complex, no?

And then we are back to a survey of anti-immigrant sentiment, the highlighting of representative setting up of checkpoints, the activities of immigration, the bulldozing of encampments, the dangers faced by workers. Some lovely stories of solidarity, villages moving en masse, buying up buildings. I wish this were more representative, but in all my years of neighborhood work I never came across anything like what he describes. Networks and remittances yes. Property? No.

There is some acknowledgement that where immigration does affect workers is at the very bottom, though he says it is not significant. But there is not enough here to help me imagine this escaping that zero sum game that people of colour have always been forced to play in America, one group rising at the other's expense. The intersections of race and ethnicity are also not explored, how much a third generation Black Puerto-Rican's experience (and 'tropicality') differs from the African-American experience, particularly of racism.

One important point I liked near the end, was how the new Latino majorities are winning bittersweet victories, taking political control of suburban cities, but with their high debt, high taxes and looted infrastructures, 'In the most extreme cases Latino majorities simply inherit wreckage' (155). But not enough about the work needed to turn this around, the coalition building that has to happen...

Travis says

Although now almost twenty years out of date, this is still a good read.

Adam says

Mike Davis is one of my favorite writers. His exhaustive research, casual style, sharp humor, disregard for disciplinary boundaries, and clear political analysis is heroic. But this book isn't among his best. The thesis

that Latinos are reinventing U.S. cities is a rich one, but the book's short length and disjointed chapters causes "Magical Urbanism" to be less than an amazing piece of writing.

A qualification to my disappointment is that the book was written in 2001 and I read it in 2010. Published right after the 2000 Census results and a few years before the resurgence of the immigrant rights movement and resurrection of May Day, Davis' book has less of an impact on me than it would have had a decade ago.

Like Davis' other works, one of this book's strengths is its expertise. Seamlessly, Davis floats between anthropological dissections of identity, urban planner's synthesis of city data, Marxists readings of history, and cultural theorist critiques of media reports.

I learned a lot from the "Siamese Twins" chapter, in which he deftly illustrates what urban theorists have described as transnational space. Davis discusses the "binational metropolises" of El Paso / Ciudad Juarez and San Diego / Tijuana. Besides the fascinating opening of transnational space via kinship structures, telecommunications, remittance-funded urban development, and cross-border electoral activity, Davis tells us how ecological destruction (often from one twin infecting the other), is tying cities' destinies together:

"Because they share these indivisible ecological problems, the borders' Siamese twins are slowly being compelled to integrate and transnationalize their urban infrastructures." In 1998 Mexican and US officials opened up the \$440 million International Wastewater Treatment Plant which treats Tijuana's excess sewage on the San Diego side of the border, the first facility of its kind in the world" (36).

As other writers have since done, Davis expertly takes on disastrous policy-making and enforcement, including the "Drug War," the militarization of the border, the regulation of labor, and the criminalization of Latino youth. The flight of the wealthy from U.S. cities, the disinvestment of public goods and infrastructure, particularly education, and the attack on Latino culture, especially through the form of English-only propositions, holds back our nation's fastest-growing demographic group.

Besides levying critiques, Davis also prescribes action for progress. He argues how "the first step in any Latino urban agenda must be to remove La Migra from the front yard" (69). Latinos are in fact a revitalizing force to failing post-industrial cities, and the structural oppression of Latinos does not just hold the population back, but also the development of cities themselves.

Public space is the terrain for much of this fight, as day laborers seek to work on corners, vendors struggle to sell their food in parks, and Latino homeowners attempt to renovate their homes in Latino styles in the face of racist public policy and local ordinances. Just as the working class is disciplined by the hyperexploitation of immigrant workers (documented and undocumented alike), so do U.S. cities suffer from the marginalization of their Latino residents.

Davis ends with an appeal for good old fashioned social movements:

"As in the 1930s and the 1960s (but perhaps even more urgently in today's post-liberal climate), substantive reform through electoral politics depends less on campaign maneuvering and bloc voting than upon resources and solidarities independently generated by struggles in neighborhoods and workplaces. Only powerful extra-electoral mobilizations, with the ability to shape agendas and discipline candidates, can ensure the representation of grassroots socioeconomic as well as ethnic-symbolic interests....Equally, if there is a renaissance of American labor close at hand, it will be a story in which Latinos, along with Blacks and other new immigrants, play a central" (164-165).

Jim says

I really enjoy Mike Davis' writing style. This book is a great examination of the "browning" of the U.S. and the massive growth of Latino populations in U.S. cities. Davis has an easy prose style combined with insightful critical analysis of American racism and urban culture.

Jessica says

Typical Mike Davis provides inflammatory view of immigration into Southern California from Latin America, and taunts the American public with visions of a Latinized U.S. and unstoppable encroachment on the U.S. by the Latin South. I liked this book, but think that Davis can go over the top with some descriptions and biases, which tends to alienate some readers from hearing his messages about the need to adapt and change to accommodate more immigrants into our melting pot.

Andrew says

Mike Davis is a thoroughly persuasive writer, and a couple of his books in particular -- City of Quartz and Late Victorian Holocausts -- have had a lasting impact on the way I see the world. I was hoping for a lot more from Magical Urbanism, and I had read snippets before. And I appreciate the way he shows how Latino communities bring life back to North American cities that have undergone deindustrialization and depopulation -- go to any of the miserable towns I grew up around in Central Iowa, for instance, and see how the only businesses that are thriving are those that cater to the Latino community.

But as the title may suggest, his analysis comes off at points as this fawning fetishization of a foreign culture (look at the way they paint their houses! like, so exotic!). And while it's not Mike Davis' fault that this was written nearly 20 years ago, it was written nearly 20 years ago, and a lot has changed since. Worth it for the perspective, but don't expect a masterpiece.

Daniel Hadley says

Classic Mike Davis. A broad look at how Latinos are mistreated despite their enormous contribution to North American cities. My favorite part of the book was chapter 6, which dealt directly with urban planning and design issues. I love the "tropicalizing" trope - Davis' way of describing how Latinos revivify boring urban spaces. I also want to remember his critique of planning practices that make it illegal for people to modify their homes, either with a fresh coat of lively paint, or by adding a granny flat. These restraints on Latino urbanism are ironic, particularly in view of the myriad mini malls in "Taco Bell Moderne."

J.A. Strub says

This book is a well written examination of the role of the increasingly-prominent Latino populations in the cities of the United States, but ultimately is nothing new. The fact that it is an old book on an issue that

seems to fundamentally evolve from year to year is no fault of the author, but nonetheless, a book that cites census data taken 20 years ago is probably not the most timely selection. Some of his anecdotes, particularly on the potential for the rise of Latino populism as a major political movement in US cities, were interesting, but the book as a whole disappointed me. Also, the title seemed to imply a greater emphasis on cultural / artistic influence on urban life, which was discussed far less than I was led to believe. Mike Davis has written better accounts of this narrative in other volumes.

Shawn says

Another excellent and well-researched series of essays from the best radical left writers. Davis explores the ecological disaster of the economic boom on the US-Mexican border and the ethnography of Chicano migration patterns. Whether Mexicans will be Anglofied like the Irish and Italians I can't say. Being more cynical than others in believing in the eventual Malthusian-Hobbesian meltdown of a Caucasian-Mestizo war, I am intrigued by the prospect of a revitalized economic nationalist movement built around emerging Latino labor movements in California. Oh the irony of the Sons of NAFTA leading to the trade barriers!

Nancy says

Reading it in 2013 is a decade past it's relevance. Loads of good data on Latino/Chicano/Hispanic migration. However, it didn't hold my interest as the information it shares doesn't tell a fluid story. I read the first half and skimmed the rest.

Michael says

Ahh - Help! I lost this book with perhaps two chapters to go!!! If you happen to see it please contact me!

Alright - problem solved. I picked up a copy at the library so I could read the last 12 pages. Good, typical Davis production where he utilizes the most provocative examples of statistics and stories of abuse to discuss the numerous issues of post-NAFTA hispanic growth in the United States. He focuses generally on the major US cities and, as his some base, more specifically within the Los Angeles/ San Diego region. It's an engaging read and very timely in regard to the 2000 Census.
