

EVOLUTION OF A COMMERCIAL STRIP IN A TEXAS–MEXICO BORDER CITY: LAREDO'S SAN ANTONIO HIGHWAY

Michael S. Yoder

This article examines the San Antonio Highway commercial strip of Laredo, Texas, an important tourist and trade-related gateway to Mexico. It traces the evolution of the strip from its beginnings in the 1930s, when tourist courts and filling stations appeared at the city's edge, through the 1940s, when a major filling-in of businesses geared largely to tourists and financed largely by non-local investors occurred. The argument is made that Laredo's strip became filled with architecture and nomenclature deliberately designed to appeal to visitors' stereotypical images of, simultaneously, ornate Mexico and the "Old West." However, Laredo is neither, and thus, a false place representation was produced. The austere vernacular architecture derived from northern Mexico and typical of Laredo's existing neighborhoods was missing from this fabricated tourist landscape. Subsequent evolution of the San Antonio Highway strip is traced, including its adoption of generic strip malls and the eventual disappearance of many of the oldest tourist features. Finally, the article concludes by identifying the strip's latest stage of evolution into a unique district dedicated primarily to the importation and wholesaling of curios from Mexico. *Key Words:* commercial strip, Texas, Laredo, place representation, tourist landscape.

The boulevard becomes a perfect symbol of capitalism's inner contradictions: rationality exists in each capitalist unit, leading to anarchic irrationality in the social system that brings all these units together (Dear 1995: 35).

The urban built environment historically has enjoyed a persistence that transcends generations and, therefore, serves as a strong conveyor of messages about many of the overarching values of a given culture. During the twentieth century, however, the staying power of the urban landscape has

been challenged by speculation in commercial real estate for the purpose of turning a quick profit. This is especially evident along the commercial automobile strips that have become a dominant feature of American urban geography.

Architecture and landscape critics frequently lament how stand-alone commercial buildings, strip shopping centers, and massive parking lots spring up practically overnight, only to have their façades and brightly lit signs change when franchises or locally owned retail establishments fold and new investors occupy the rapidly constructed buildings. What is perpetuated is a “cartoon landscape” of boxes built of cheap materials spread out along highways and boulevards in a patchwork manner that is highly wasteful of land (Kunstler 1993; Fishman 1987; Jackson 1985). The architecture and layout of the commercial strip are designed more for attracting the attention of drivers and accommodating the needs of their cars than for posterity’s sake. To quote the landscape critic, James Howard Kunstler (1996), the United States has created a “national automobile slum,” in which the automobile reinforces itself: space is required to park them at home, at work, and at places of shopping and recreation. Buildings are separated from each other because of parking lots and the patchy nature of development associated with land markets, thereby recreating automobile dependency (Safdie 1998).

Other critics, most notably the architect Robert Venturi and his colleagues, celebrate the automobile landscape as a repository of America’s diverse popular cultural tastes (Venturi, Brown, and Izenour 1977). Jakle (1990), likewise, is uncritical of the aesthetics of the automobile landscape; rather, he approves of it as a facilitator of the contemporary American lifestyle, given the pervasiveness of automobile culture and the increased mobility of the public. In part because of the debate over their form and aesthetic characteristics, a growing literature, largely within geography, is recognizing the need to document the origins of commercial-strip landscapes of individual American cities, as each has its own unique beginnings (see, for example: Sargent 1998; Francaviglia 1996; Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers 1996; Liebs 1995; Hudson 1994; Wyckoff 1992; Jakle and Mattson 1981).

The Texas–Mexican border city of Laredo is a sprawling mid-sized city of some 200,000 people (94 percent of whom are Hispanic), which suffers from traffic

congestion, the result of unfettered free-market forces and spontaneous auto-centric construction of the type that critics of suburban sprawl lament. Like most mid-sized cities throughout the American Sunbelt, the historical central business district (CBD) and inner-city neighborhoods of Laredo have become marginalized aesthetically, culturally, and economically, while commercial automobile strips dominate the city's geography, both visually and in terms of land use (Yoder 2000). In the typical American fashion, Laredo's contemporary automobile landscapes are heavily commodified with symbols and signs whose primary purpose is to attract consumers and their spending power (Sargent 1998; Kunstler 1996, 1993; Liebs 1995; Ford 1994; Goss 1992).

The roots of the commodified automobile strip in Laredo lie in tourism and the attempt to represent the city as an exotic "gateway to Mexico" (Laredo Chamber of Commerce 1931). Nearly all American cities had begun to develop commercial automobile strips along the highways leading out of town by the early 1920s, and Laredo's strips exhibit many norms among such cities. However, Laredo's historically most developed tourist strip, the San Antonio Highway, is sufficiently distinctive to warrant study because of the unique nature of place representation so strongly embedded in certain architectural features oriented toward tourism. Laredo's earliest commercial strip designed for motorists represents the important first step toward the more recent chaotic sprawling of the city's north side. In the process of doing so, the strip was the result of a stereotyping of local cultural imagery, as in many other American cities where tourism has held an important place in the local economy, but in a unique U.S.-Mexico border setting. In effect, early developers of Laredo's tourist-oriented commercial strip attempted to produce an image suggesting Mexico and the "Old West," but north of the Rio Grande and geographically no further west than the Great Plains. As such, the strip became an interesting cultural feature of place identity in the city's history during the first half of the twentieth century and a strong instigator of spatial sprawl to come.

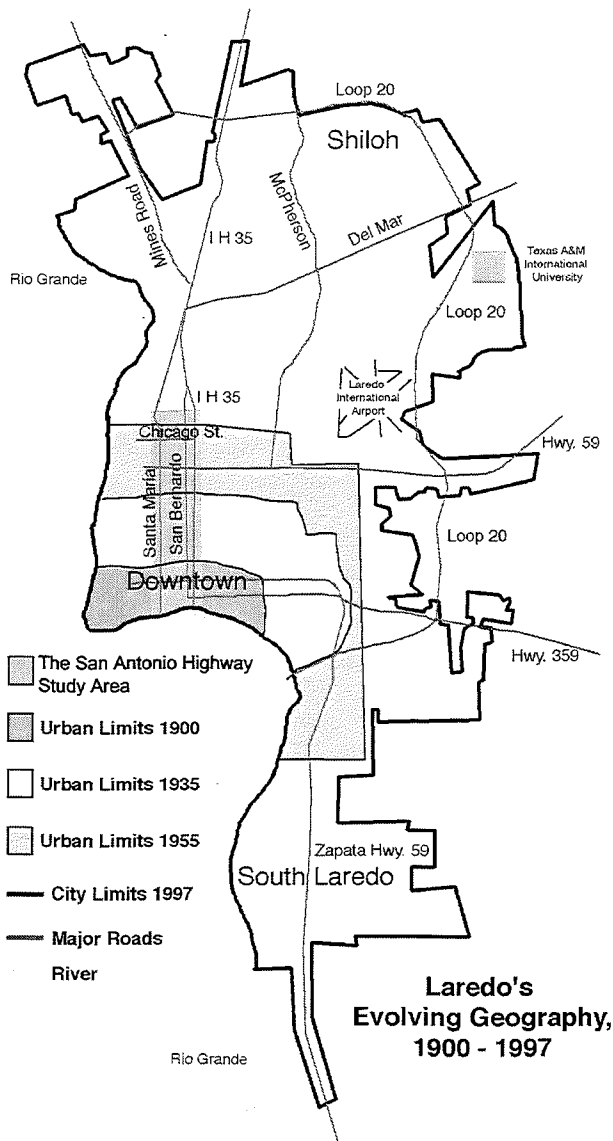
This article is an attempt to add to the literature on the evolution of unique American commercial strips by using a majority-Hispanic border city as a case study. It examines the historical geography of the San Antonio Highway commer-

cial strip of Laredo, with an emphasis on the time period of 1930 to the late 1940s. That era coincides with the beginnings of the strip's commercialization and its initial dramatic alteration of the city's aesthetic and spatial character, especially after it shifted six blocks to the east in the early 1930s (Figure 1). The article considers the most conspicuous businesses that emerged on the strip and some of their salient architectural features, as well as the role of the strip in stretching the urban area's limits dramatically to the north. I will argue that the prominent architectural features of the time period along the strip are not only dissonant *vis-à-vis* the architectural conventions typical of Laredo's residential areas and central business district, but, along with the names and signage of many businesses, were also an attempt to recreate stereotypical imagery of Mexico and the West. Furthermore, I will describe how the tourist strip served as a catalyst for subsignature architecture appeared at the sparsely populated city's edge and served to spatially distend the city's north side.

The most reliable data obtained for this study of the strip's expansion came from city directories published in 1930, 1935, and 1961, and telephone directories from these same years, plus 1946 and 1955. To document the strip's architecture and its role in the production of the city's image, I examined approximately ninety old photographs of streetscapes and postcards of motels and cafes. I interviewed three long-time residents of Laredo who recalled the strip's evolution. Additionally, I visually examined architectural features of the period that remain standing. Descriptions of the more important features of Laredo's first automobile strip in the 1930s and 1940s form the primary basis for my twin assertions that its architecture was incongruous with the overall aesthetic qualities of Laredo's urban landscape at the time and that the city's culturally distinct, compact spatial character was irreversibly changed.

The Automobile Strip in the Historical Geography of the American City: Alterations to Urban Spatial Layout

Urban historical geographers and other scholars have noted that commercial strips predate the automobile era and have origins that lie across the Atlantic.



Source: N. Nixon-Mendez. *City of Laredo: Historic Preservation Plan*. 1996.

Figure 1. The San Antonio Highway study area, Laredo, Texas.

Friedrich Engels (1993) described the retail businesses that lined the most heavily traveled thoroughfares of Manchester in the early 1840s. Commuters traveling by horse-drawn omnibus could not see the deplorable conditions of working-class neighborhoods located behind these nearly continuous rows of businesses along the major roads outside the central business district. In the United States, electric-streetcar lines fostered development of commercial strips, though there is some inconsistency in the literature about how extensive this development was. Jackson (1985), for example, describes small clusters of retail shops near streetcar stops in urban areas throughout the country, while Liebs (1995) discusses long rows of retail establishments along the entirety of streetcar lines. In either case, it is clear that commercial activities outside of the central business district were not insignificant prior to the automobile era of the 1920s. Hudson (1994) discusses the evolution in the 1890s of Chicago's "Midway Plaisance," a largely spontaneous linear "amusement zone" for pedestrians that celebrated oriental and other exotic foreign themes and emerged by means of free-market forces, in contrast to the adjacent pre-planned and publicly financed "White City" that served as classical architectural symbolism in Chicago at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893.

Likewise, the literature discusses several types of commercial strips in terms of how they relate to other suburban land uses, especially during the era of the "streamlined" strips of the 1930s and 1940s, to use Ford's (1994) terminology. For example, the examination by Jakle and Mattson (1981) of the evolution of the primary commercial strip of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, reveals that it was largely a combination of the transformation of residential land uses to commercial ones and the filling-in of vacant lots in already existing residential areas between the central cores of the twin towns. In a similar fashion, the McDowell strip in Phoenix emerged as a series of retail outlets to serve adjacent residential areas (Sargent 1998).

The Van Buren strip of Phoenix, on the other hand, was more typical of automobile strips leading in and out of cities that enjoyed significant tourism. It was flanked by a collection of motor courts and other tourist land uses well beyond the built-up zone of the city's east side to greet tourists as they drove into town (Liebs

1995). Albuquerque's Central Avenue, or Route 66, also developed as a linear repository of motels, cafes, and filling stations far removed from the built-up zone of the city, both east and west of the CBD (Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers 1996). Denver's Colfax Avenue, the main strip of an increasingly popular tourist destination, exhibited significant development of motels, cafes, and filling stations in previously unbuilt areas between Denver's inner city and the centers of adjoining suburbs to the east and west prior to and after World War II. The strip began to lose its dominance as the premier thoroughfare for tourist accommodations once it was bypassed by Interstate 40 (Wyckoff 1992). Liebs (1995), on the other hand, describes strips that parallel newer freeways and therefore persist because they, in effect, serve as access roads to these freeways as they lead into and out of downtowns. Motorists can view neon signs and the architecture of the tourism landscape from the interstate and exit either before or after for easy access. Laredo's strip has continued to flourish in part because it parallels, within one block, the access road of Interstate 35, completed in the 1981. Moreover, as a tourist strip that developed initially beyond the built-up zone of the city, it exhibits similarities to Albuquerque's Central Avenue and Van Buren Avenue in Phoenix.

Historical geographers attribute the automobile strip's beginnings early in the twentieth century and its subsequent commanding presence in the landscape to a variety of demand and supply factors. One common but incomplete interpretation of the phenomenon is that the automobile is synonymous with the basic principles of freedom and democracy upon which the national culture was founded. According to this view, Americans, in awe of the radically faster mode of transportation embodied in the car, got a strong sense of enjoyment from driving beyond the city's built-up area, and businessmen responded by developing commercial and residential real estate along the highway (Jakle and Sculle 1994). Thus, unlike the commercial strip of Latin America and Europe, America's was not simply a spilling-over of excessively crowded downtowns onto the highway leading from town, but was a newly created place with its own exciting sights and sounds that Americans increasingly demanded, especially during the affluent 1920s (Ford 1994).

Belasco (1979) documents how motorists coming into town typically pre-

ferred camping on the outskirts of town to staying in drab downtown hotels. This phenomenon led in the 1920s to the popular municipal campgrounds and privately owned cottages on the roadside leading into town, the latter of which eventually took on the U-shaped "tourist court" arrangement by the 1930s (Belasco 1979). These various demand-side explanations of the evolution of the tourist strip at best tell only part of the story.

A number of supply-side factors gave rise to the commercial strip and perpetuated its growth to almost uncontrollable levels across the United States. Land farther away from the CBD historically has tended to be cheaper than nearer land. Automobiles permit consumers relatively easy access to sites at the margins of cities. Investors eagerly began building not only residential neighborhoods on this cheaper land, but restaurants, gas stations, motor courts, and various architectural boxes that housed retail and service establishments, which generated enough revenues to pay the taxes on this land and produce a healthy profit. Ford (1994) refers to these small businesses as "taxpayer buildings," and describes them as "packaged sheds" whose façades could easily be changed. The alterability that characterized the architecture of the new automobile strip, and the patchiness that characterized its layout, represented a marked contrast with the spatially coherent and unified layout of the downtown commercial zone (Ford 1994).

Beginning with the Federal Road Act of 1916 and Federal Highway Act of 1921, the federal government assisted these businessmen by subsidizing the construction of the arterial highways linking the downtown with lands beyond the city, such as the San Antonio Highway in Laredo. As a result of this legislation, highway miles doubled during the 1920s and automobile ownership reached 23 million by 1930 (Ford 1994). During the Depression years, Franklin D. Roosevelt believed that such subsidies would create an economic stimulus by putting people to work constructing them. Additionally, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), established in 1933 to create construction jobs through federally guaranteed loans for new homes, stimulated highway construction because it stimulated suburbanization of cheap land outside American cities (Kunstler 1993; Jakle 1990).

Laredo experienced a smattering of such suburbanization on its north side

beginning in the mid-1920s with Calton Gardens. Within the first ten years of its existence, only a handful of houses were constructed in the subdivision (Nixon-Méndez 1996a). It was a small, isolated community located some three miles north of downtown and surrounded by the natural brush vegetation of the region, known locally as *monte*. In the 1930s, the two streets that served at separate times as Laredo's first automobile strip, Santa Maria Avenue and San Bernardo Avenue, as well as the streets in between, were still sparsely settled beginning a few blocks north of the city park and all the way to the city limits (Figure 1 and Figure 2). City directories from 1930 and 1935 indicate that the traditional high density of residential land use in neighborhoods immediately north of Washington Street/Bruni Plaza and those around the city park was not yet developed toward the more northerly of the east-west cross streets (see Figure 2). The filling-in of those streets with houses, primarily in variations of the locally popular, austere Mexican Vernacular style and constructed in a high-density fashion, would not occur until the 1940s (Yoder and LaPerrière de Gutiérrez 2004).

Initially, Laredo's main automobile strip, like those of Albuquerque, Phoenix, Denver, and several other cities, clearly was more a function of tourism than of residential suburbanization. Since 1881, the year of the completion of the Texas-Mexican Railway, the first rail line to link the U.S. and Mexico, Laredo has represented itself as the gateway to Mexico (Nixon-Méndez 1996a; Thompson 1986). This theme would prove important in the establishment of the city as a tourist destination and the evolution of the San Antonio Highway commercial automobile strip. All evidence points to this Mexico- and border-bound tourism, rather than residential suburbanization, as the stimulus to the building boom along the San Antonio Highway.

American Commercial Strips, Architecture, and Place Representation: Was Laredo's Strip Unique?

For more than a century, the American commercial strip has exhibited architectural features designed to market culture. Chicago's Midway Plaisance, in stark contrast to the planned Beaux Arts-style White City, included a mosaic of oriental

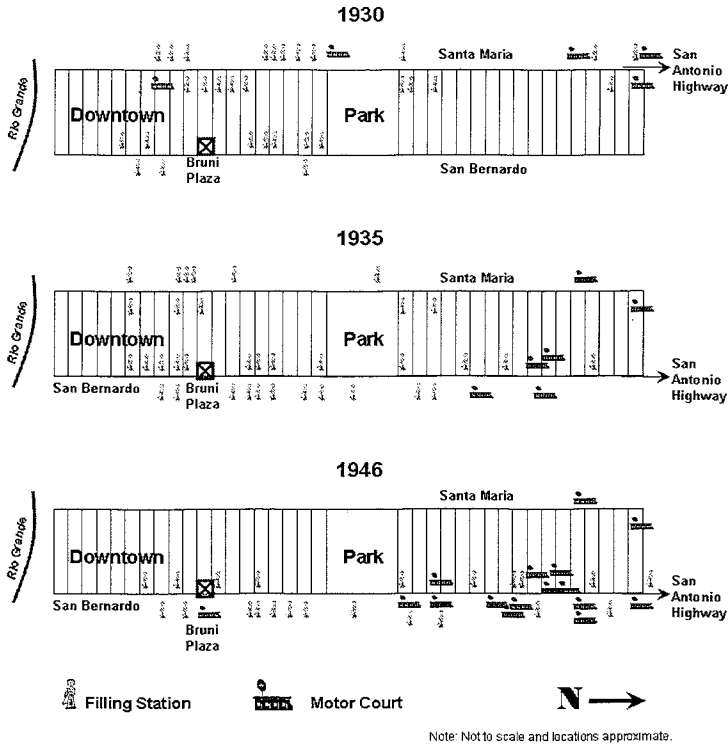


Figure 2. Filling stations and motels, San Antonio Highway, Laredo, Texas, 1930–1946.

and other foreign styles to capture the eye of consumers, and was regarded as a spontaneous “architecture of commerce” (Hudson 1994). Los Angeles businessmen would soon pick up on this theme, where various “other” motifs were conspicuously on display, including shops shaped like or displaying such things as windmills, sphinxes, and other Eastern and Middle Eastern icons. Many critics saw this as dissonant and out of step with overall architectural norms, while others celebrated it as the best of free enterprise. Hudson (1994) argues that the logical outcome of these early experiments in commercial strip aesthetics is today’s fran-

chise signature architecture.

The tourist-oriented commercial strip extending beyond the city's edge began to take on place-imagery themes as early as the 1930s. Cities of the east coast, for example, frequently had highway gateways leading into them that were lined with motor courts composed of exaggerated Cape Cod or Tudor cottages. In many Sunbelt cities that served as destinations or pass-through points for tourists, one could encounter the occasional motor court or café with an exaggerated Spanish style or Western theme to capture the gaze and the imagination of motorists (Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers 1996; Liebs 1995). For example, in their case study of the evolution of Albuquerque's Route 66 tourist strip, Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers (1996) describe a landscape of motels and motor courts, many of which exhibited "Pueblo Revival architecture."

Architecturally, Laredo's original strip shared some commonalities with the American norm of product marketing through architecture and signage as prominent landscape features. Between 1908, the year the Ford Model-T was first offered, and 1920, most filling stations across the United States, including those of Laredo, consisted of stand-alone gas pumps in garages or in front of grocery stores or motor courts. To enhance marketing, the oil companies provided distinctive pump styles and signs that conspicuously displayed brand names and emblems (Jakle and Sculle 1994). In Laredo, nearly all of these initial filling stations were located within the downtown area until about 1920, and half were still downtown by 1930.

The first separate gas station buildings, constructed to oil-company specifications, were designed not to be bold, but to blend in with local architecture. These date to the 1920s in most American cities. Often they took the physical form of residential houses, such as Laredo's Magnolia Petroleum Co. cottage-style station (Thompson 1986), and the Mexican Vernacular Gulf station on the Santa Maria Avenue (San Antonio Highway) commercial strip (Gil 1998). By the 1940s, the signature modernist box, distinctive for each oil company, came to dominate filling-station architecture nationally, to attract high-speed drivers and reinforce brand loyalty (Jakle and Sculle 1994). In Laredo, as elsewhere, the commercial strip

was the preferred location for the newer stations. In 1946, for example, some three-fourths of all of Laredo's filling stations were located along the San Antonio Highway tourist strip, outside of downtown, and their advertisements in the telephone directory of that year suggest that most exhibited the streamline style.

Prior to 1930, lodging in Laredo consisted of such downtown hotels as the Bender, the Plaza, and the Hamilton. Architecturally, these were various revival styles that fit well into the ensemble of shops, banks, and other businesses with only sidewalks separating their fronts from the grid-patterned streets. By 1930, there were nine hotels downtown and four tourist courts on Santa Maria Street, which was the San Antonio Highway at the time. Two tourist courts were located in the brush country just beyond the northern reaches of Laredo's built-up zone. They were the Longhorn Tourist Camp (which later would become the Cactus Gardens Motor Court) and the Gateway Tourist Court. Grocers and filling stations were close to each of these motor courts, despite the paucity of residential dwellings. By 1930, Laredo's tourist-oriented commercial strip was born.

The San Antonio Highway initially led into Laredo along Santa Maria Avenue until the late 1930s, when the state of Texas switched the highway six blocks east to a parallel street, San Bernardo Avenue. The "conventional wisdom" is that the switch in location was politically driven and economically motivated. Local elites exploited their political connections to successfully arrange the switch in location of the designated San Antonio Highway in order to enhance the value of the potential commercial property they owned along San Bernardo (Hartwell 1999). A more detailed version of this change in location is that the Bruni Family, which owned the Plaza Hotel downtown, realized that tourists entering the city along Santa Maria encountered the competing Hamilton Hotel first. The family arranged to have the highway switched to San Bernardo to give the Plaza Hotel the advantage of the first downtown hotel to greet travelers (Johnson 1999).

Apparently in anticipation of the switch, four motor courts were constructed along San Bernardo between 1930 and 1935, and the Texas Highway Department's warehouse changed location from Santa Maria to San Bernardo sometime between 1930 and 1935, according to the City Directory of 1935. In 1930, Santa Maria had

four motor courts and San Bernardo had none, according to the directory. By 1935, there were two left on Santa Maria and four on San Bernardo, including the Casa Grande Tourist Courts, San Antonio Tourist Courts, and Las Palmas Courts. After 1935, motor courts sprang up rapidly along San Bernardo Avenue. There were 15 on the strip by 1946, and Laredo was a well established tourist gateway to Mexico (see Figure 2). Their exaggerated regional architecture can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to “package” an image for Laredo that would appeal to tourists, even while misrepresenting local culture and geography.

One cannot help but note the economic logic to the creation of this type of tourist aesthetic in Laredo. Packaged landscapes are successful economically because they are calculated representations of landscapes of consumption. In the modern era, people partake of their surroundings during times of leisure, not during times of work. Those responsible for the marketing of place encapsulate place-specific imagery vividly in architecture. To distinguish one tourist destination from another, a necessity under competitive capitalism, the tendency is to exaggerate thematic architecture to package an overall image (Riley 1994). Laredo had to compete with other “gateway cities” such as Brownsville, McAllen, and El Paso (Arreola 2002). Perhaps this gateway theme is what inspired the construction of arches in 1938 in Bruni Plaza, a park located along the strip that was the site of the Chamber of Commerce until 1975 when it became a public library (Nixon-Méndez 1996b) (Figure 3).

The architecture of Laredo’s commercial strip prior to 1945 was in accordance with American norms in the sense that it was more about capital accumulation than about the creation of an overall harmonious landscape dictated by formal planning (Dear 1995). Put another way, the inauthenticity of local culture employed in Laredo’s commercial strip is “subject to the same cultural logic of late capitalism, and to the structural imperatives that regulate political economy for the purpose of the reproduction of the capitalist system” (Watson and Kopachevsky 1996: 292). What this Laredo case study illustrates is the importance to capital reproduction of what John Urry (1990) terms “the tourist gaze” and Kent Mathewson (1979) terms “the consumption of the spectacle.” In this case, inauthentic tourist landscape fea-



Figure 3. Bruni Plaza, Laredo.

tures are reified culturally, but are integral components of capital's constant need to reproduce itself through real-estate investment, or the "secondary circuit of capital" (Harvey 1985).

The architecture and place-image-packaging of the San Antonio Highway strip's motor courts frequently emphasized two basic themes: Laredo as a Mexican place, and Laredo as a Western place. It was not at all uncommon during the time period for the occasional motor court of the American Southwest to exhibit exaggerated Mission style or other exotic Southwest motifs (Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers 1996; Jones 1995; Liebs 1995). In the Laredo case, however, this theme was repeated in numerous examples, creating an extended corridor of the city with an exotic architectural flavor that diverged strikingly from the more common residential and commercial architecture of the city. Arreola (1999) notes a similar phenomenon in northern border cities of Mexico, in which tourist-oriented curio districts that are clear anomalies of Mexican culture are packaged and marketed as authentically Mexican theme parks of sorts for tourists.

Mexican vernacular architecture characterizes housing in and adjacent to Laredo's downtown area and in the working-class barrios on the eastern and northern edges of town (Figure 4). Near the downtown, housing typically was simple and box-like, with flat roofs, and constructed either of adobe, brick, or board-and-batten. Houses often faced sidewalks directly. In the early-twentieth-century working-class barrios, the Mexican vernacular architecture that prevailed was of clapboard construction, simple and box-like (Nixon-Méndez 1996a). One can see hipped roofs on many of these modest houses built between 1900 and World War II, which most likely is a blending of North American and traditional Mexican styles (Brown 1999). Like most of Laredo's residential dwellings prior to World War II, the taxpayer buildings along the San Antonio Highway strip were modest in this way and reflective of the city's austere beginnings. Many of these old commercial buildings can be observed today along San Bernardo Avenue.

Folk housing of Mexico's northeastern borderlands and adjacent areas of

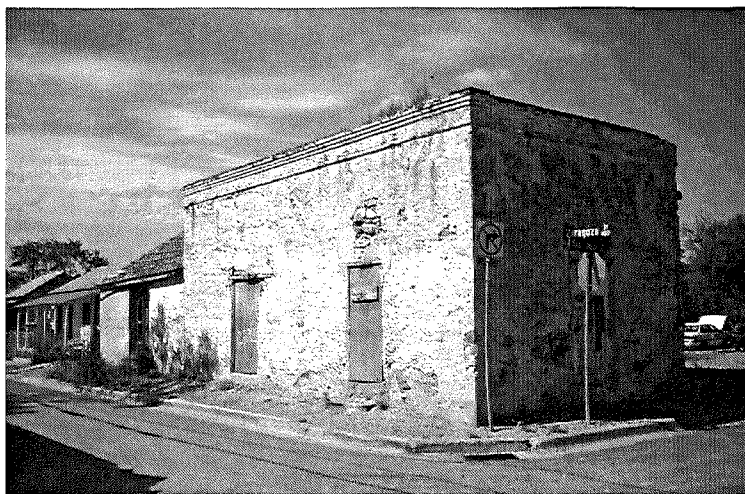


Figure 4. Traditional Laredo housing: Mexican Vernacular architecture.

South Texas exhibits a blending of influences, including Spanish, Anglo-American, Moorish, Sephardic Jewish, and Meso-American (Brown 1999). This is not surprising, considering that the region was not only a distant frontier in the historical geographies of New Spain, Mexico, and Anglo America, but also a region where the two worlds ultimately converged (Arreola 2002; Offutt 2001; Kearney and Knopp 1995; Arreola and Curtis 1993; Cuello 1990; Villarreal Peña 1986). In the lower and middle Rio Grande Valley, a variety of building materials and shapes traditionally were used, though all forms are best described as austere. The most common vernacular house type is the flat-roofed adobe dwelling with raised foundation, but gabled roofs did find their way from Iberia to the northeastern reaches of New Spain, including Laredo (Brown 1999). Thus, the region including South Texas and Mexico's northeast was by no means the land of intricate colonial doorway and window arches, ornate tile work, and mixtilinear (mixed curved and angled) cornices as depicted in some of the tourist architecture of the San Bernardo strip (Figure 5).

The dwellings of the wealthy and middle class of Laredo of the early 1900s, on the other hand, exhibited a combination of house types and revival-architectural styles commonly found throughout Texas and the American Southwest (Figure 6). Downtown buildings were a mixture of revival styles that gave the landscape a look of unity and harmony (Figure 7). Mission revival and ostentatious Spanish-Mediterranean architectural styles that included tile roofs and archways were the exception in Laredo and generally were limited to the wealthier residential neighborhoods. The exaggerated Spanish architecture along the tourist strip was oriented toward capturing the "tourist gaze." As listed in city directories of the 1930s through the early 1950s, "Las Palmas Court," "Loma Alta Motel," "El Patio Courts," "Mexico Trail Café," and "Court Cortez" are examples of the commercial creation of Mexican imagery along the strip (see Figure 5). "Down Mexico way" was a commonly employed advertising cliché encountered in signage and advertisements.

The Western motif found in the San Antonio Highway tourist strip in the 1930s and 1940s is based largely on place names and the iconic use of cactus images (Figure 8). Interestingly, images of the saguaro cactus, a plant native to the

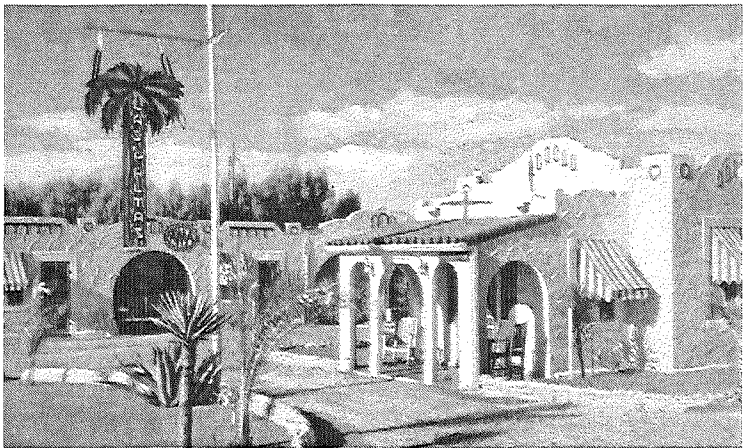


Figure 5. Exaggerated Alamo architecture, Las Palmas Court, Laredo (postcard, ca. 1945).



Figure 6. Traditional up-scale Laredo residence: Revival architecture.



Figure 7. Revival architecture, Laredo's Central Business District.

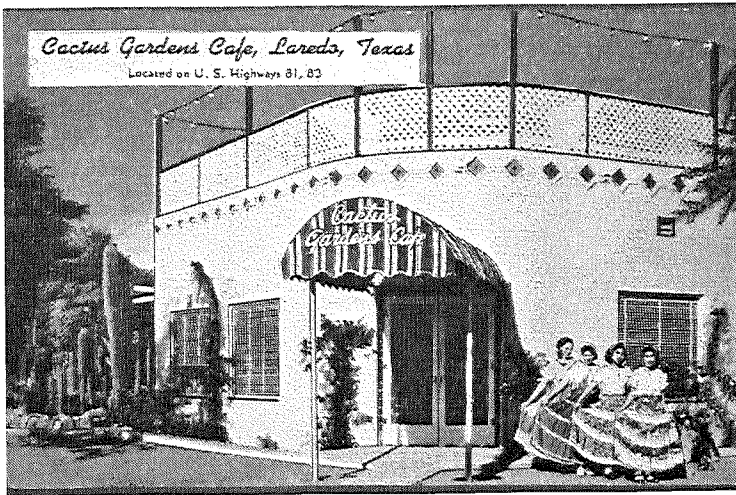


Figure 8. The Cactus Cafe, Laredo (postcard, ca. 1950).

Sonoran Desert of Arizona and northwestern Mexico, abounded in signage, nomenclature, and landscaping along the tourist strip. This Western imagery, reminiscent of Albuquerque or Scottsdale, is interesting, considering that Laredo's dominant vegetation, the *monte*, produced by the region's average annual precipitation of nearly twenty inches, is woodier than that found west of the Pecos River. The "Cactus Court," the "Cactus Cafe," the "Longhorn Tourist Camp," the "Ranch Motel," "Wagner's Roundup Café," the "Western Grill," and the "Casa Grande Tourist Court" are examples of the nomenclature of the distant desert region of West Texas-to-Arizona found along Laredo's commercial strip. The Cactus Court described its location in its advertising as "along the Old San Antonio Trail." Not until the mid-1940s did motels along San Bernardo Avenue begin to exhibit modern architecture, nearly a decade later than most commercial strips throughout the United States (Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers 1996).

One descendant of a former motel owner recalled that many tourists were in fact not Mexico-bound, but came to Laredo for hunting in the wildlife-rich *monte* (Hartwell 1999). This may have played into the proliferation of the Western theme. Additionally, she asserted that most motels along the strip were owned not by local families, but by businessmen from elsewhere who could more easily obtain financing. Laredo banks were reluctant to provide financing for tourism. The out-of-towners brought investment capital from outside the region (Hartwell 1999). Indeed, advertisements in telephone directories from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s indicate that owners or "hosts" of the motels and tourist-oriented cafes along the strip had Anglo names in every case where such names were included. One could surmise that stereotypical views of the border held by these non-local investors may have contributed to the Western imagery and "exaggerated Alamo" architectural styles of the tourist courts and restaurants they owned and managed on the strip of the predominantly Mexican-American city.

During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, dramatic filling-in of the strip occurred, as did some redevelopment. Residences and taxpayer buildings eventually encompassed all of the extent of the original strip, and new lodging, filling stations, fast-food restaurants, and shopping centers began to spring up further out on San

Bernardo on former *monte*. Some forty blocks from downtown and beyond, the strip became overwhelmingly retail in character, and the only thing distinguishing it from generic commercial strips in suburban zones of cities elsewhere in the Sunbelt was the existence of many Mexican and Mexican-American businesses, including auto-parts stores, automobile repair shops, electronics shops, and furniture stores, whose nomenclature included Mexican-American surnames and fast-food franchise names such as "Taco Palenque" and "El Pollo Loco." The ownership and the use of many of the buildings, including those built after 1970, have changed more than once, and some blocks along the newer, outer portion of the strip have experienced deterioration.

Some areas of the classic portion of the strip, northward from Bruni Plaza for some two dozen blocks, have seen new development. In the late 1960s, the Civic Center was constructed on the grounds of the main park, and a mid-rise Holiday Inn was constructed adjacent to it. In the 1990s, a mid-rise Marriot was built next door. Laredo's classic tourist strip has experienced noteworthy examples of deterioration, but by no means has it witnessed the same fate as Denver's Colfax Avenue or other American strips bypassed by more commercially attractive corridors such as freeways. In short, the deterioration of some parts of the San Antonio Highway, the spatial extension of the strip through time, and the redevelopment of some addresses everywhere along the strip are typically American phenomena, but the Hispanic origins and names of many retail businesses, and the existence of Mexican Vernacular taxpayer buildings suggest that Laredo's premier commercial automobile strip is unique.

Conclusions

Perhaps more than any other commodity, the tourist place requires signage, both in architecture and in nomenclature, to attract consumers and create an experience, however inauthentic. Tourism in this way involves the careful planning of the message or image that is presented, so that the actual production relations of an area are obscured. The imagery of Laredo constructed along the San Antonio Highway strip between 1930 and 1945 did not permit the out-of-towner to easily

experience the economic realities of a financially marginalized locality of the periphery of the United States. Watson and Kopachevsky (1996: 286) aptly describe the dilemma of tourism, in which places are "... packaged for exchange by advertising, much of which appeals to people's deepest wants, desires and fantasies...and is anchored in a dynamic of sign/image construction/manipulation. As an integral part of modern culture, [this] advertising's main function is...to serve as a discourse about objects, symbols, and ideas, and...to persuade people that only in consumption...and self indulgence...can they find not only satisfaction, but also...social status, happiness, rest, regeneration and contentment." This advertising is mediated through the signature architecture of Laredo's tourist courts, the nomenclature of the tourist sites, and even the messages presented on their signs, postcards, and telephone-directory advertisements.

The often criticized and sometimes admired "gaudy" architecture of America's commercial strips that began to appear in the form of tepees, chalets, and other out-of-place objects by the 1920s (Jakle and Sculle 1994) took the form of conspicuous Spanish and Western architecture and landscaping in Laredo, the gateway to Mexico. I see the relevance of Edward Said's (1979) eloquent views of "orientalism" to the packaged tourist landscape of Laredo. Said shows us that orientalism is eurocentric in that it treats anything oriental as "other," lumping together such diverse topics as language, religion, values, and histories, as well as diverse places (North Africa to China) that are, clearly, incongruous. Orientalism is a generalization of sorts that leads to false representations of non-Occidental culture, or "eclecticism with blindspots" (Said 1979: 52). In much the same way, Laredo's packaged tourist strip bows to quaint, pre-modern sentiment. As the geographer Kent Mathewson (1979: 45) asserts, such a tourist landscape "functions as a narcissistic reinforcement of feelings of cultural superiority." The packaged tourist landscape is, arguably, postmodern in that "the same (process) which has removed time from travel has also removed from it the reality of space" (Mathewson 1979: 45).

Perhaps of greatest relevance to the Laredo case are assertions by Curtis and Arreola (1989) about tourist districts of Mexican border towns. By examining these

districts in eighteen of Mexico's border cities, they conclude that tourists from the United States are attracted to such places because they think that is what Mexico is or should be. As the authors (1989: 20) state, "[w]hile these districts are caricatures of both the border town and the country and could easily be criticized for perpetuating false and distorted images, they are places that have precious little to do with the Mexican people or culture but instead are deliberately directed toward outsiders, or stated more specifically—North American tourist-consumers." The authors apply J. B. Jackson's idea of "other-directed places," meaning tourist landscapes that deliberately represent local culture falsely for the benefit of tourists who would rather consume absurd versions of reality than the real thing (Curtis and Arreola 1989: 20–21). Laredo's San Antonio Highway automobile strip of 1930–1960 fits this concept. The tourist landscapes of Mexican border cities and the early Laredo tourist strip indicate that there is no shortage of confusion about the ways North Americans have regarded Mexico.

More than 50 years later, the classic San Bernardo tourist strip is now completely surrounded by neighborhoods and commercial development. Because of the continued success of Mexico-bound travel and the San Bernardo strip's proximity to Interstate 35, a half-dozen motor courts from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s remain in business, though most have been renamed and/or remodeled beyond recognition. The strip has expanded far to the north, in the form of the interstate's north- and southbound access roads. They are flanked by the large, regional "Mall del Norte," seas of strip malls and "power centers" housing nationwide chain stores and surrounded by gigantic parking lots, and generic brand-name motels and hotels that cater to Mexico-bound tourists and business travelers. Laredoans endure a dysfunctional, sprawling, congested, automobile-dependent urban geography whose roots lie in the commodified and spread-out tourist landscape of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

Epilogue

The San Bernardo tourist strip, now designated as Business Highway 35, has taken on a new form and function during the past ten years. Today there are some

47 import businesses that specialize solely in curios from Mexico within the twenty-block motel strip that emerged between the mid-1930s and mid-1950s. During the past seventy years, that section of the strip has evolved from a predominantly tourist landscape to a mixed tourist and retail-shopping strip, to primarily a wholesale-curio zone. These businesses sell many of the same types of items found in the tourist district of Nuevo Laredo, including rustic furniture, yard pottery and iron objects, and indoor decorative pottery. Each proprietor tends to specialize in one of these product categories. The district, however, is not a deliberate recreation of a Mexican border-town curio landscape to cater to local consumers or tourists as Arreola (1999) has documented in Phoenix and Los Angeles. Rather, as an agglomeration of like business, it caters to wholesale buyers from out of town who can take advantage of one-stop shopping. During any weekday or Saturday, an abundance of rental-type moving trucks and small flatbed trailers pulled by hefty pickup trucks can be observed in front of these business, loaded to the brim with goods destined for retail shops elsewhere in Texas, in neighboring states, and even as far as the eastern United States, according to one such business owner. Some businesses appear seedy, almost as small junk yards, while others have made an attempt to tidy up the façades of buildings and create the appearance of gift shops.

While research on this theme is a work in progress, preliminary interviews and observations reveal that most of these San Bernardo businesses and particularly those most recently established there, are in fact long-time businesses originally located in Nuevo Laredo that catered to wholesalers from the U.S. The decision to relocate to the Laredo, Texas, side of the border has been motivated in part by the anxiety on the part of clients from elsewhere regarding high drug-related crime rates in Nuevo Laredo, and in part by the increasing difficulties of crossing curios across the border, given tightened U.S. federal regulations. This arrangement leaves the burden of successfully moving goods across the border to long-established suppliers or artisans located in Jalisco, Michoacan, Oaxaca, and other Mexican states. Some who made rustic Mexican furniture themselves in Nuevo Laredo now do so in their Laredo shops and still market it as Mexican. As one San Bernardo

furniture maker expressed it, the Mexico that is marketed on San Bernardo for the first time is real.

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