

Contemporary Urban Landscapes of the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas: The Geography of Inland Ports

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The cities of the South Texas Rio Grande Valley are part of a unique Mexican-American cultural region molded by a complex and lengthy history. Though once remote, today they are among the fastest growing cities in the state. They contain landscape features that reflect contemporary patterns of global commerce at the same time that they represent the Mexican-American culture that has dominated the region for the past century and a half. This essay traces the business activities, and policy making that have shaped contemporary urban landscapes of the South Texas Rio Grande Valley. The study is based largely on available data from various public sector agencies, chambers of commerce, and other entities concerned with the promotion and regulation of international trade. Open-ended interviews of government officials and members of the private sector engaged in urban planning, international trade, commercial real estate, the planning and creation of international bridges, and economic promotion were helpful in developing an understanding of the processes that shape the contemporary economic landscapes of these border cities. *Key Words:* *urban geography, Rio Grande Valley, South Texas inland ports*

Introduction

The cities of the South Texas Rio Grande Valley are part of a unique Mexican-American cultural region molded by a complex and lengthy history. Though once remote, today they are among the fastest growing cities in the state. They contain landscape features that reflect contemporary patterns of global commerce at the same time that they represent the Mexican-American culture that has dominated the region for the past century and a half. The bulk of the social science and humanities literature produced on the Texas side of the river focuses on the region's unique cultural and historical development. Although the contemporary forces of globalization have reshaped the region's urban areas dramatically, this reality remains to be fully elaborated in the academic literature.

Today the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas is strongly linked economically, culturally, historically, and even politically to Mexico's northern border region, but it is increasingly connected to points further south in Mexico

through trade. Such trade is enhanced by the legal and economic frameworks of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and by improved rail and highway access to the highly industrialized Central Valley of Mexico and to that country's Pacific and Gulf of Mexico ports. The Pacific ports handle an increasing tonnage of goods shipped in containers between Asia and North America, and Gulf ports increasingly are connected to Europe, the Caribbean, and South America, thus making the Texas-Mexico connection a facilitator of global trade rather than mere international trade. Factories in Mexico that produce goods destined for U.S. markets are financed by capital not only from the NAFTA member countries, but also from Europe and Asia. Policy makers in Texas and several Mexican states, along with federal officials of both countries, are spearheading projects to expand existing transportation corridors and create new ones to foster the growing international trade.

The daily life along the Rio Grande that straddles the border includes the activities of, among others, freight forwarders, customs brokers, and consumers. Several cities along the Rio Grande first and foremost are conduits of the international movement of goods, people and capital, and their sprawling urban landscapes reflect this reality. As such, these cities are "inland ports," meaning they are points where cargo is processed, inspected, and often shifted from one transportation mode to another, but not at coastal locations. Like maritime ports, inland ports have "forelands," or distant places with which they are connected, and "hinterlands," regions that they serve and in which they are embedded (Weigand 1958; Hilling and Hoyle 1984; Hayuth 1982). The widening network of roads, highways, and rail lines creates difficulties in accurately defining overlapping forelands and hinterlands of competing inland ports. But like maritime ports, the dynamic nature of inland port economies results in dramatic urban landscape change.

The centuries-old connection between the north bank of the Rio Grande and Mexico has continued unabated despite the fact that the South Texas Valley has flown six national flags. It has produced not only a very colorful cultural history, but a dynamic and evolving economic landscape which sometimes masks that unique history and its associated landscapes. In short, the border is an artificial creation punctuated by numerous points of linkage between the U.S. and Mexico, rather than serving merely as a dividing line between the two countries.

This essay provides an examination of urban growth that is related to global and bi-national trade in the Mid-Rio Grande Valley cities of Del Rio, Eagle Pass and Laredo, and the Lower-Rio Grande Valley cities of Harlingen and Brownsville, McAllen, Mission, Pharr and Edinburg. The primary characteristics of this growth include sprawling warehouse districts, large cargo inspection facilities, international bridges, the feeder roads that link the bridges to the region's expanding highway networks, rail switching facilities, and

shopping malls. Suburban housing is spawned by population increases that are partly natural and partly due to the influx of people working in border-related activities, including security, trade, trucking, and retailing. Manufacturing plants in the Mexican border cities, financed by capital from North America, Europe, and Asia, are linked to the Texas border cities which contain the warehousing infrastructure they require, and the residences of most managerial personnel. The article will demonstrate that while Tejano culture is a subtle feature of the sprawling landscapes of these border cities, trade-related infrastructure and contemporary suburbanization has become so dominant as to largely obscure vestiges of the ranching culture that had defined for so long the peripheries of these cities.

Following a brief overview of the literature on the cultural geography and settlement history of the border cities of South Texas, this essay traces the business activities, and policy making that have shaped contemporary urban landscapes of the South Texas Rio Grande Valley. The study is based largely on available data from various public sector agencies, chambers of commerce, and other entities concerned with the promotion and regulation of international trade. Open-ended interviews of government officials and members of the private sector engaged in urban planning, international trade, commercial real estate, the planning and creation of international bridges, and economic promotion were helpful in developing an understanding of the processes that shape the contemporary economic landscapes of these border cities. Detailed case studies of Laredo, Brownsville, and Harlingen illustrate these processes.

Geography and Settlement History of the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas: The Creation of a Tejano Landscape

The South Texas Rio Grande Valley consists of ten counties, and two sub regions: the Lower Rio Grande Valley (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy Counties) and the Mid-Rio Grande Valley (Val Verde, Maverick, Dimmit, Webb, Zapata, and Kinney Counties) (Fig. 1). During the eighteenth century it was relatively unimportant to the Spaniards who nonetheless fought the region's indigenous people for control over it. Settlements, including San Antonio, generally took hold north of the Nueces River before those along the Rio Grande (Arreola 2002: 35). Inspired by the leadership of José de Escandon in 1748, the Spaniards initially established fourteen villages along the Rio Grande. Within a decade of the establishment in 1749 of Camargo, the first Rio Grande settlement, a total of 24 towns and missions existed, the majority of which were located on the river's south side (Maril 1989: 21-22). Productive land for ranching and farming generally was more plentiful north of the river, so cross-river connections were forged early on between villages and

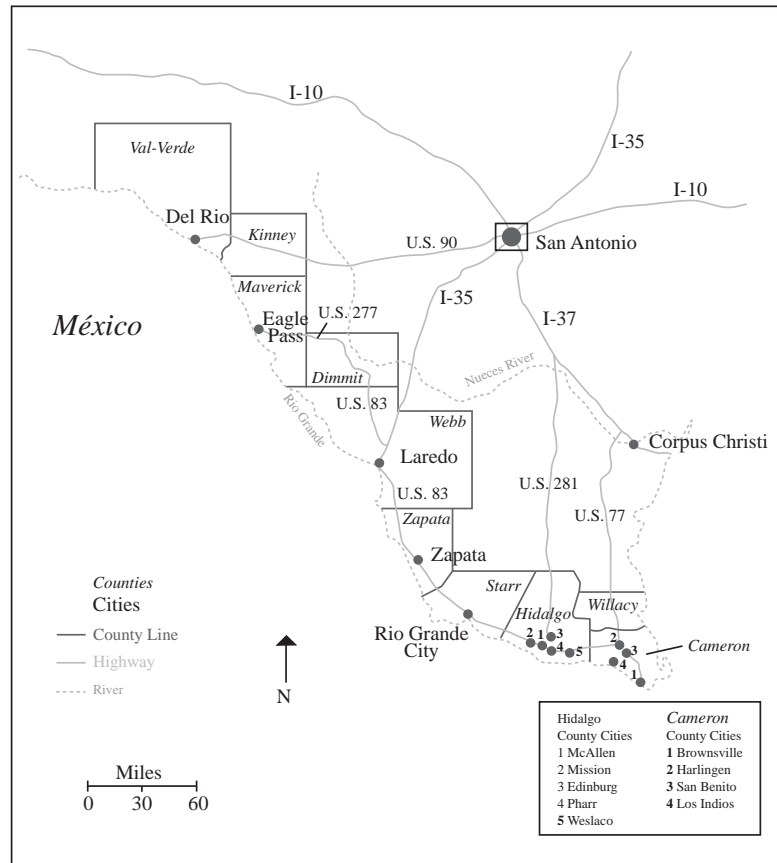


Figure 1. South Texas Rio Grande Valley

ranch- and farmland (Arreola 2002: 35; Galindo 2003: 2; Harding and Lee 2003: 1-2). Among the Spanish settlements north of the river are Laredo (1755) and Zapata (1770). After Mexican independence from Spain in 1824, and especially after the United States acquired the north bank of the Rio Grande Valley in 1848, settlers established several new villages and towns, including Brownsville (1848), Eagle Pass (1850), Hildalgo (1861), and Del Rio (1869) (Arreola 2002: 43, 38-39).

The fortified riverside villages, or *municipios*, served as points of social and economic contact for the valley's ranching population, which raised goats, sheep, cattle, mules, and horses for the more highly populated mining towns of Nuevo León, Coahuila, and elsewhere in present-day northern Mexico (Valerio

Jiménez 2001). Small land parcels close to the river were utilized to produce irrigated food crops for subsistence. The colonial grants for the ranch lands, called *porciones*, generally ranged in size from 1,700 to 2,500 hectares, and were laid out in “long lot” or linear fashion perpendicular to the river to allow as many colonists as possible to enjoy favorable locations with respect to the river and the *municipios* (Galindo 2003: 7-8). Beyond these long lots, further into the frontier, the Spaniards granted additional ranch lands in an even more remote area, the *despoblado*, which resulted in isolated ranch settlements north and east of the Rio Grande *porciones*. These ranchos were organized around extended families, an arrangement that to this day is a noteworthy trait of Tejano culture (Tijerina 1998: xx-xxi, 5).

After independence, the Republic of Mexico continued to pursue a similar settlement and land grant arrangement in the region (Tijerina 1998: xxii). The Republic of Texas joined the United States in 1845 at which time the latter claimed land southward to the Rio Grande. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848, solidified the American claim on these lands. Mexicans often encountered problems maintaining ownership of their lands, given that laws of the U.S. did not recognize land grants issued by Spain before 1824, nor Mexico between 1824 and 1848. This legal technicality paved the way for a subsequent surge in Anglo settlement in the Rio Grande Valley (Tijerina xxviii-xxix).

Anglo ranching became increasingly widespread in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in the latter 1800s because of slaughter facilities, and improved ability to ship meat, hides and tallow to markets through the maritime port at Corpus Christi. Anglo cotton merchants with steam boats conducted during the 1860s what would be the Rio Grande’s first large-scale cross-river trade. They turned many of the profits they generated into local land acquisitions (Maril 1989: 29-31). In 1904, the St. Louis-Brownsville-Mexico Railroad completed a line from Kansas City to Harlingen, San Benito and Brownsville, which paved the way for additional Anglo settlement of the area (Harding and Lee 2003: 2). Some 400 miles of additional rail lines constructed by Southern Pacific Railroad in the 1930s enabled the Lower Rio Grande Valley to become not only a productive region for truck farming (fruits and vegetables) and cotton, but a major real estate venture that attracted Midwesterners and other Anglos drawn by the cheap Mexican and Mexican-American labor (Maril 1989: 35-37; Harding and Lee: 19-21; Hobbs 1943: 14-15, 19-20). Thus, prior to World War II, the development of the region’s farming and ranching went hand in hand with the broadening of its transportation network. The evolving transportation has subsequently played a major role in the region’s dramatic economic diversification in recent decades.

Contemporary Economic and Social Trends in the South Texas Rio Grande Valley

The farming and ranching economy played a significant role in the shaping of the identity of the South Texas Rio Grande Valley region until the 1960s and 1970s, when international trade in general, and the Mexican manufacturing boom in particular, captured the attention of investors and other members of the private sector along with public officials. The region and the adjoining Mexican border cities have witnessed impressive economic growth and transportation development during the past four decades, owing to this cross-border trade and the establishment of *maquiladoras*, or in-bond assembly plants that enjoy favorable tax laws in Mexico and low cost Mexican labor.

Bi-national trade and the influx of personnel to manage *maquiladoras* contribute to population growth in the region. So too do the immigration of Mexican nationals, a growing border security bureaucracy, and a high birth rate by U.S. standards (Yoder 2006 and 2007; Arreola 2002). The population of the entire ten-county region is predominately Hispanic (Table 2). Today the narrow strip of the South Texas Rio Grande Valley from Val Verde County to Cameron County contains seven percent of the population of Texas. The region experienced a growth rate of nineteen percent between 2000 and 2006 with Hidalgo, Cameron, and Webb Counties exhibiting the most impressive population gains during the past two decades. Laredo, McAllen, Brownsville, and Harlingen are among the fastest growing cities in the state (Fig. 3).

In some border cities, the *maquiladora* phenomenon is relatively more important than in others. The twin cities of Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila and Del Rio, Texas represent the highest number of *maquiladoras* and related employment per capita of all cities of South Texas. Laredo, the largest inland port along the entire U.S.-Mexico border, and the adjoining city of Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas rely more heavily on trucking and relatively less on *maquiladora* activities than other twin cities where cross-border transportation of cargo is important (Phillips and Manzanaras 2001) (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). Reynosa, Tamaulipas and the adjoining cluster of small and mid-sized cities of Hidalgo County enjoy more *maquiladora* activity than any other metropolitan area downstream of the twin cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez (Reynosa 2007).

Retailing holds an increasingly important place in the economies of the Texas border cities, owing to the increase in size of the Mexican middle class (Yoder 2006). Del Rio, Eagle Pass, Laredo, McAllen, Harlingen, and Brownsville all have shopping malls that rely heavily on Mexican consumers. License plates observable in these mall parking lots indicate that shoppers visit from places further than the Mexican border cities, and in some cases as far as Mexico City and the states surrounding it. The high level of retail service

Table 1. Selected County Population Data, South Texas Rio Grande Valley

County Name	2006 Population (estimated)	2000 Population	Percentage Change, 2000-2006	Hispanics/Latinos as Percentage of Population	Median Household Income, 2004	Percentage of Population Below Poverty, 2004
Cameron	387,717	335,227	+15.7	86.0	\$26,729	29.4
Dimmit	10,385	10,248	+1.3	83.5	\$24,069	28.2
Hidalgo	700,634	569,463	+23.0	89.4	\$26,375	41.0
Kinney	3,342	3,379	-1.1	50.3	\$31,335	18.8
Maverick	52,298	47,297	+10.6	95.3	\$24,786	27.9
Starr	61,780	53,597	+15.3	97.6	\$19,775	34.8
Val Verde	48,145	44,856	+7.3	78.2	\$31,202	22.1
Webb	231,470	193,117	+19.9	94.9	\$29,433	26.8
Willacy	20,645	20,082	+2.8	86.6	\$24,451	29.6
Zapata	13,615	12,182	+11.8	87.7	\$26,157	27.2
REGION	1,530,031	1,289,448	+18.7	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
TOTAL						

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007. <http://www.census.gov/population> (Accessed 15 April 2007)

Table 2. Selected City Population Data, South Texas Rio Grande Valley

City Name (County)	2005 Population (estimated)	2000 Population	Percentage Change in Population, 2000-2005	1990 Population	Percentage Change in Population, 1990-2000
Brownsville (Cameron)	167,493	139,722	+19.9	98,962	+41.2
Harlingen (Cameron)	62,318	57,564	+8.3	48,735	+18.1
San Benito (Cameron)	24,699	23,444	+5.6	20,125	+16.5
McAllen (Hidalgo)	123,622	106,414	+16.2	84,021	+26.7
Edinburg (Hidalgo)	62,735	48,465	+29.4	29,885	+62.2
Mission (Hidalgo)	60,146	45,408	+32.5	28,653	+58.5
Pharr (Hidalgo)	58,986	46,660	+26.4	32,921	+41.7
Weslaco (Hidalgo)	31,442	26,395	+19.0	21,877	+20.7
Laredo (Webb)	208,754	176,576	+18.2	122,899	+43.7
Eagle Pass (Maverick)	25,571	22,413	+14.1	20,651	+8.5
Del Rio (Val Verde)	36,020	33,867	+6.4	30,705	+10.3

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007. <http://www.census.gov/population> (Accessed 15 April 2007)

Table 3: Northbound Truck Crossings, 2004-2005.

Location	2004 Crossings, Number of Trucks	Percent of Texas Total	2005 Crossings, Number of Trucks	Percent of Texas Total
Brownsville	186,947	6.17	192,060	6.08
Harlingen (Los Indios)	39,342	1.30	42,580	1.35
McAllen (Pharr)	454,351	15.00	483,889	15.31
Laredo	1,380,414	45.58	1,455,607	46.05
Eagle Pass	100,100	3.31	97,729	3.09
Del Rio	64,061	2.12	64,075	2.03
El Paso	723,669	23.89	740,654	23.43
TEXAS	3,028,706	100.00	3,160,818	100.00

Source: Texas Center for Border Economic and Enterprise Development, Texas A&M International University. <http://www.texascenter.tamui.edu> (Accessed 15 April 2007).

Table 4: Southbound Truck Crossings, 2004-2005.

Location	2004 Crossings, Number of Trucks	Percent of Texas Total	2005 Crossings, Number of Trucks	Percent of Texas Total
Brownsville	201,447	7.71	208,953	7.57
Harlingen (Los Indios)	37,026	1.30	43,238	1.57
McAllen (Pharr)	392,306	15.02	411,980	14.95
Laredo	1,464,908	56.08	1,543,379	56.02
Eagle Pass	98,211	3.76	95,804	3.48
Del Rio	63,183	2.42	78,371	2.84
El Paso	292,288	11.19	306,406	11.12
TEXAS	2,612,214	100.00	2,755,043	100.00

Source: Texas Center for Border Economic and Enterprise Development, Texas A&M International University. <http://www.texascenter.tamui.edu> (Accessed 15 April 2007).

employment contributes to income levels of the region registering lower than the Texas average (Texas Workforce Commission 2007). The familiar pattern of American suburban sprawl, consisting of residential and retail land uses, and a hefty automobile-dominated landscape of parking lots and broad, unsightly feeder highways and congested thoroughfares, is evident throughout the region. One difference from the U.S. norm, however, is the Mexican interest in suburban commercial development, not only on the part of shoppers, but increasingly through Mexican investment in retail property development. For example, it is estimated that one half of the recent strip shopping center development in Laredo's northern and southern suburban fringe is financed by Mexican nationals (Yoder 2006).

**Inland Port Landscapes of South Texas:
Laredo, Brownsville, and Harlingen as Case Studies**

Maritime port cities historically evolve through different stages of physical growth, and in some cases decline, as changes occur in global trade routes, global patterns of investment in different regions, national economic development policies, and transportation technologies (Airriess 1991; Gilliland 2004). For example, the container revolution altered the geographies of ports the world over, allowing some ports to flourish and expand dramatically while others became bypassed (Harris 1994). As the inland ports of the South Texas Rio Grande Valley illustrate, one can identify similar stages of evolution of inland port cities.

Inland ports differ from maritime ports in one important way. Given their orientation toward trucking, inland ports exhibit flexibility in terms of the location of much of its infrastructure, whereas maritime port facilities tend to be concentrated at the shoreline. As a result, warehousing, which requires large areas of land, access to the border, and high capacity roads, tends to be located in suburban portions of the Texas border cities where land is relatively less expensive, and where road access to the nearest international bridge that accommodates cargo is favorable. *Maquiladoras* in Mexico's border cities are linked to warehouses located in Texas border cities. The warehouses serve to collect and store the components to be assembled on the Mexican side of the river, and the assembled goods destined for distribution throughout the U.S. Furthermore, since cargo inspection and the preparation of documents for both north- and southbound traffic generally occurs on the U.S. side of the border, the infrastructure of trade is somewhat more concentrated on the U.S. side. Mexican customs brokers locate their warehouses and offices on the U.S. side of the border in order to prepare clients' documents prior to crossing the Rio Grande with southbound cargo. Freight forwarders, who arrange for Mexican trucks to pick up loads of cargo destined for the interior of Mexico or *maqui-*

ladoras along the border, also locate their warehousing and trailer storage facilities north of the river (Phillips and Manzanaras 2001; Vargas 2001). International trade thus rivals population growth as a catalyst for the sprawling suburban zones of the border cities of South Texas.

Among the important landscape features of inland ports are warehousing, cargo inspection facilities, trailer storage lots, rail yards, and the international bridges, roads and rail lines connecting to them. Particularly complex and lengthy is the planning process for construction of international bridges, because governments in both the U.S. and Mexico must coordinate such efforts in a bi-national fashion. Furthermore, the two federal systems of the U.S. and Mexico become clearer upon examination of the interrelationships between federal, state, and local governments within each country. Border cities of Texas, and sometimes border counties, compete with each other for the permission to construct bridges and derive the revenues they generate in the form of bridge tolls. In Mexico, however, states generally compete with each other, given that a change in the Mexican federal law now allows them to receive some or all of the revenues that traditionally have gone entirely to the federal government in Mexico City (Yoder 2007). All three Mexican states adjoining South Texas, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Coahuila, regard international bridges as key features of their broader fiscal strategies.

Once the momentum began in the 1980s between the private and public sectors for promotion of a free trade agreement between the U. S. and Mexico, several new bridge projects to span the Rio Grande were proposed and one old proposed bridge idea was revived. Bridges dedicated entirely or in part to cargo that have been completed since the drafting and signing of NAFTA include those at Eagle Pass, Los Indios (Harlingen), Pharr, Brownsville, and two at Laredo. Additional bridges are proposed and at various stages of planning at Mission and Donna in Hidalgo County, and immediately south of Laredo.

Case Study I: The Inland Port of Laredo

Laredo handles about forty six percent of northbound cargo between Texas and Mexico and fifty six percent of southbound cargo (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). In the late 1990s the city accounted for some sixty percent of all earnings in transportation services of all the Texas border cities combined (Phillips and Manzanaras 2001: 12). The warehousing associated with this growing trade dominates the built environment of the city's northern suburban zone. Much of the warehousing is located in twenty six warehouse parks that are in effect major real estate developments. Only four of these are located on the city's east and south side. In addition, dozens of freestanding warehouses are scattered individually throughout the city, primarily the northern suburban fringe. The reason for their northerly location within Laredo's built-up zone is the proximity that the area enjoys with respect to the two cargo bridges, the World

Trade Bridge on the city's northwest side, and the Colombia-Solidarity Bridge, located some twenty-four miles upstream of downtown Laredo and sixteen miles beyond the city's northwest suburban fringe.

The World Trade Bridge that links Northwest Laredo to the west side of Nuveo Laredo was inaugurated in 2000, nearly fifteen years after local officials on both sides of the border petitioned for it, given that traffic congestion of the downtown streets of the two cities had become burdensome. It is the only bridge and crossing point along the entire U.S.-Mexico border dedicated strictly to commercial traffic (Collazo 2004; Martin 2004). Its location immediately west of the juncture of the Bob Bullock Loop and Interstate I-35 required major highway projects, including overpasses that dominate the skyline of northern Laredo that remain under construction in 2008. However, it has greatly improved traffic flows in the city by eliminating the long truck queues at the terminus of Interstate Highway 35 adjacent to downtown Laredo.

The Colombia-Solidarity Bridge, inaugurated in 1991, has not been nearly as successful at generating revenues nor affecting traffic patterns. The disappointing increases in commercial traffic stem from its relative remoteness, given that it links a rural part of Webb County to the narrow portion of the Mexican state of Nuevo León bordering on the river, upstream from the northwestern boundary of the state of Tamaulipas. The City of Laredo chose to annex land along Highway FM 1472 to the bridge site to be able to administer the bridge within its bridge system, to ensure that a presidential permit would be secured from the U.S. Department of State, and to generate tax revenues from expected future warehouse development along the highway. Such warehousing is beginning to dot the brush landscape of the area. A private investor built the Camino Colombia Toll Road to link the bridge to Interstate Highway 35, some twenty-four miles north of downtown Laredo (Collazo 2004; Villarreal 2004; Selman 2004). That venture failed, and the Texas Department of Transportation now runs the toll road (Texas Department of Transportation 2004). Interestingly, the Mexican side of the project was financed and is administered by FIDENOR (today CODEFRONT), a public corporation set up by the State of Nuevo León in the form of a fiduciary trust to allow Nuevo León to generate revenues that otherwise would go to Mexico City (Marcos Cuevas 2004).

Suburban Laredo's sprawl, which includes plans for additional future warehouse development, obscures the locality's colonial and Mexican heritage. The city's private and public sectors frequently are critiqued for short-sightedness by turning their backs on the historically-relevant central business district and surrounding barrios that exhibit the rich vernacular architecture of earlier times and that would most likely be considered ripe for gentrification in other cities.

Case Study II: The Inland Port of Brownsville

In 1999, a mere four years after the implementation of NAFTA, the Veterans International Bridge, the bridge furthest downstream of the entire Rio Grande, opened in Brownsville. Located less than three miles east of downtown, it immediately enhanced the connection of the city's suburban east side to the industrial parks of the east side of Matamoros, Tamaulipas (Fig. 6). By the early 1980s the central business districts of both Brownsville and Matamoros had become clogged with truck traffic crossing the two existing bridges. The City of Brownsville in tandem with Cameron County garnered the necessary funding and feasibility studies to obtain a presidential permit for the third bridge, which serves both passenger vehicles and all cargo vehicles (Sepulveda 2006). The State of Tamaulipas coordinated the financing and planning of the Mexican portion of the bridge, with the assistance of federal funds (CAPUFE 2006).

Cameron County and the City of Brownsville share the revenues equally, though the county runs the day-to-day operations of the bridge under the Cameron County Bridge System. The county government issued \$84 million in revenue bonds to finance the construction of the bridge and related infrastructure. Given the decision to extend U.S. Highway 77/83 to the bridge location, and the need for the highway to cross a major east-west thoroughfare, an overpass became a necessary part of the infrastructure. For its part, the city government purchased 175 acres of land for the bridge infrastructure, inspection facilities, and the access road system (Hudson 2006).

The bridge has spawned development of new warehousing throughout Brownsville's east side, especially in the vicinity of the airport, close to the maritime Port of Brownsville, and along the major east-west trending commercial boulevards on the city's near north and suburban east side. Most such development involves a scattering of freestanding warehouses or small clusters of five or fewer buildings. Among the noteworthy commercial real estate development projects stimulated by the bridge is the Veterans Trade Center, a warehouse park located immediately at the northern boundary of the bridge facility, and the NAFTA Industrial Park, located at the intersection of Texas Highway 48 (the Port Isabel Highway) and Loop 511 at the entrance to the maritime port. The maritime port enjoys enhanced accessibility to the *maquiladoras* of Matamoros and the highways of the interior of Mexico by way of the new bridge. The Port of Brownsville handles cargo for an average of 300-500 truck trailers a day, most of which cross the bridge (Torres 2006).

Although the Veterans International Bridge has led to a boom in construction of commercial real estate related to international trade in Brownsville's rapidly expanding east side, several officials and citizens complain that the bridge was constructed too far west of the areas of future growth, and too close to the city's downtown, for it to be effective at alleviating traffic congestion in

the future (Torres 2006; Hilts 2006; Lozano 2006). The bridge clearly has enhanced accessibility on the part of Mexican consumers to Sunrise Mall, Brownsville's major regional shopping mall located along US Highway 77/83 and "big box" retail establishments in the mall's vicinity. As in the case of Laredo, rapid suburbanization of residential and retail sectors of the city and high-traffic thoroughfares tend to isolate historically relevant and important landmarks, such as the central business district and several neighborhoods.

Case Study III: The Inland Port of Harlingen

Harlingen and the adjoining small city of San Benito traditionally are not considered "border towns" by virtue of their inland locations, each located fifteen miles from the village of Los Indios, located along the Rio Grande, and 26 and 21 miles respectively from the international bridges at Brownsville (Fig. 2). Furthermore, their economies since the 1920s have generally been geared toward agriculture and processing of agricultural products for the domestic market. For the sake of economic diversification, the business communities of Harlingen and San Benito began in the mid-1950s to explore ways to become border towns through a linkage to Mexico by an international bridge located at Los Indios, the closest point on the river to Harlingen and San Benito. Local businessmen formed the San Benito Bridge Company for the purpose of gaining a presidential permit and lobbying the county and state governments to support the bridge effort (Card 2006; Fincher 2006). A major obstacle that delayed construction of the bridge for some three decades was the lack of interest on the part of Mexican officials, given that the proposed location was a remote and undeveloped agricultural area west of the built-up zone of Matamoros. In the latter 1980s, however, officials of the State of Tamaulipas agreed to pursue a concession from the federal government for construction of the bridge (Card 2006). The Free Trade Bridge opened in 1991 in anticipation of the signing of NAFTA (CAPUFE 2006; González Káram 2006).

The Free Trade Bridge at Los Indios has a unique financing arrangement that deviates from the Texas norm of strictly municipal or county financing. The City of Harlingen and Cameron County evenly split the costs necessary for the construction of the U.S. portion of the bridge and related infrastructure. The county receives half the revenues generated from bridge tolls, and Harlingen and San Benito each receive one fourth. To illustrate the importance of the bridge to Harlingen's business community, the city government was willing to finance construction of the Mexican side of the bridge, though the Mexican federal government committed to funding its half a few months before construction was slated to begin (Card 2006). The county provides tax breaks and subsidies for infrastructure for those companies that establish warehouses in the county and agree to use the bridge exclusively. San Benito has benefited from bridge revenues but has seen little in the way of trade-related active-

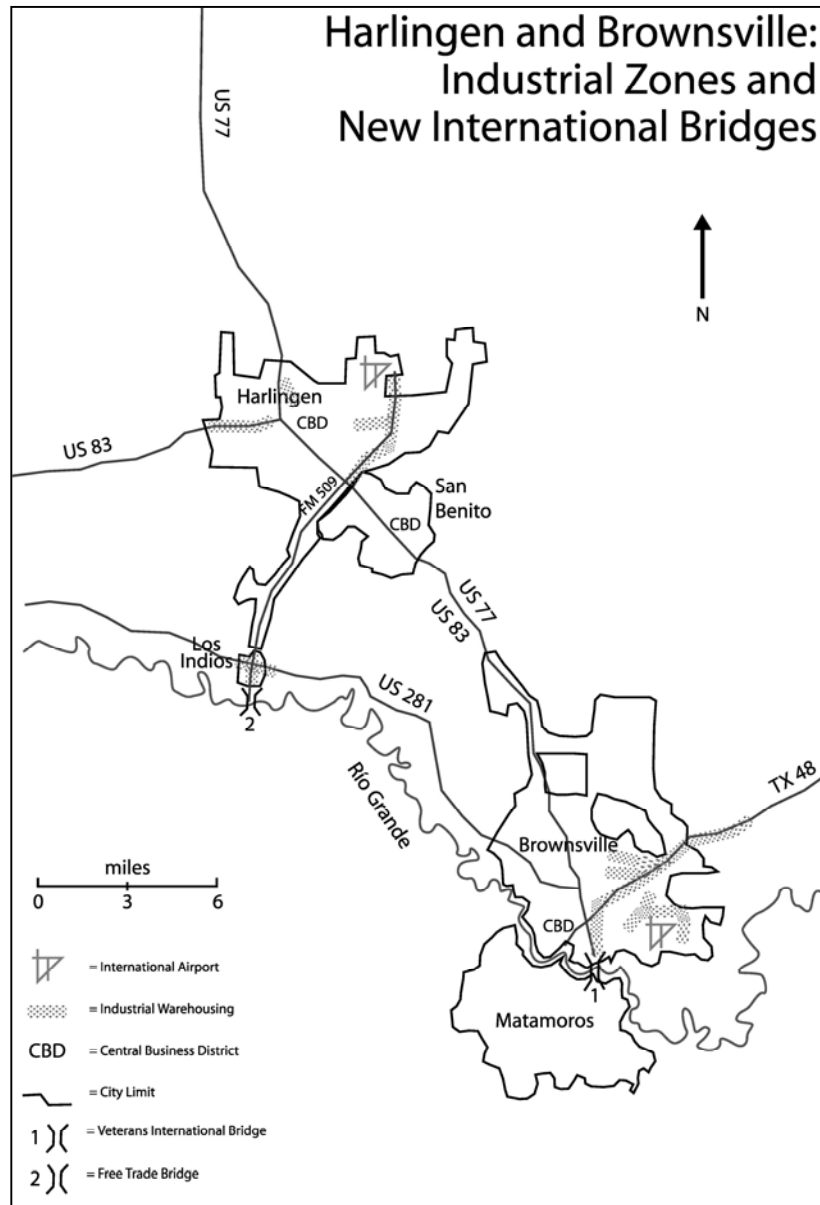


Figure 2. Harlingen and Brownsville: Industrial Zones and New International Bridges.

ties like warehousing or manufacturing plants, except for the small San Benito Industrial Park (López 2006). The village of Los Indios, however, became incorporated as a municipality in anticipation of the bridge, with the hope of eventually raising revenues through property taxes levied on the growing infrastructure of trade (Leftwich 2006). Six large warehouses are located in an industrial park that emerged on former farmland adjacent to the bridge facility at Los Indios.

Because of the bridge, Harlingen's industry-related development is increasing at a steady pace. The city government has aggressively pursued annexation of land toward the river along Highway 509, which links south Harlingen and north San Benito to Los Indios. Officials of Harlingen view Highway 509 as an "industrial corridor" or highway loop that links southwest Harlingen to the city's east side, and ultimately its north side (De la Garza 2006). The corridor contains several warehouses, such as those of freight forwarders and the "twin plants" of *maquiladoras*, for storage of goods exported to Mexico, and warehouses for goods imported from Mexico, including cold storage facilities for perishable agricultural produce. Furthermore, the corridor is the site of several manufacturing plants that carry out injection molding and metal fabrication processes for *maquiladoras* of Matamoros and Reynosa (Borchardt 2006).

Fields planted in sorghum and cotton throughout what had been a major region of American truck farming for nearly a century are visibly being encroached upon around McAllen, Mission, Edinburg, Pharr, and Harlingen by the real estate of free trade, suburban housing, and retail outlets. U.S. Highway 83, which passes through the heart of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and connects most of its cities, is taking on a generic American freeway aesthetic. Relatively little open space remains along the stretch of highway from Mission to Brownsville. Shopping centers, franchise restaurants and motels, warehousing, office buildings, and other features of the built environment dependent on freeway access dominate the landscape. The landscape of Highway 83 is typical of what Robert Lang calls "the edgeless city" (Lang 2003). Bridge overpasses provide vistas beyond the scattered commercial development of distant palm trees that mark residential subdivisions that cater to a growing population, including retirees drawn to the region's subtropical climate.

Conclusions

Studies of the cultural and historical geographies of the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas are important in highlighting that it is unique as a majority Mexican American region. Its distinctive semi-arid environment and indigenous history, combined with dramatic and at times frequent change in political control over the region ushered by the arrival of the Spaniards, Mexicans, and

people of northern European descent, collectively created a succession of cultural landscapes that together serve as a template for a contemporary regional identity undergoing modification. A driving force of this transformation is the steady growth in trade between the U.S. and Mexico since the region came under American control, and especially since the beginnings of the Border Industrial Program that paved the way for *maquiladora* assembly plants in the Mexican border cities, and the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). NAFTA has generated much debate between supporters and detractors over the nature of employment and social class dynamics. However, one fact is indisputable: trade between the two countries has steadily increased since its implementation in 1995. In the Spring of 2007, monthly trade by truck between the U.S. and Mexico reached \$20.1 billion (US Department of Transportation 2007). Migration, however, continues unabated as Mexico's rural and urban poor face increasing difficulty in maintaining economic security at home (Audley, et al 2003).

As conduits of bi-national trade, cities of the South Texas border region are growing rapidly in physical size and population, and these urban landscapes are being transformed indelibly. Each of the mid-sized cities and some of the small cities of the region promote their lucrative sites along a number of emerging trade corridors that link Texas, the South, the Midwest, and the Great Plains regions of the U.S. with interior points of Mexico and several of that country's Pacific and Gulf maritime ports. Increased truck and rail traffic results in a trade infrastructure that involves warehouse facilities, congested roadways, and international bridges, which in many ways obscure the vestiges of the region's ethnic uniqueness by isolating many of them to inner city neighborhoods. Sprawling developments of tract houses displaying standardized marketing-tested facades increasingly occupy agricultural and ranch lands surrounding these cities, thus diverting the gaze of citizens and visitors away from the region's vernacular architecture. By North American standards of small and mid-sized cities, those of the South Texas Rio Grande Valley with few exceptions continue to have vibrant central business districts that cater largely to shoppers from Mexico. Suburban retailing, however, is generally stronger in all but the smallest towns. Regional shopping malls and large adjacent shopping centers and huge parking lots in Laredo, Eagle Pass, Del Rio, McAllen, Harlingen, and Brownsville are indicative of the importance of retailing to the economies of the region, and the growing influence of standardized global culture along the border.

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