OUTSIDE INFLUENCES AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN DOMESTIC SPACE AMONG THE COLONIA RESIDENTS OF CAMERON PARK, TEXAS

A Thesis

by

FRANCESCA GIANCRISTOFARO

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of Texas A&M University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 1994

Major Subject: Anthropology
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ABSTRACT

Outside Influences and Traditional Knowledge in Domestic Space among the Colonia Residents of Cameron Park, Texas. (December 1994)

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This research is based on qualitative field-work among the residents of the "colonia" community of Cameron Park, north of Brownsville, Texas. Colonias are substandard and rural subdivisions usually within 50 miles from the Mexican border. They are often characterized by the lack of basic infrastructure such as sewage, paved roads, treated water and street lights. The residents are mainly of Hispanic origin, hence the Spanish term. They are Mexicans or first and second generation Mexican-Americans with often a limited literacy of English and little or no formal education. Coping with these grim surroundings and various levels of social, geographic and linguistic isolation, the 3,500 residents of Cameron Park engage in a daily struggle to improve their life conditions.

This study aims to improve basic knowledge of the colonia sub-culture by using housing issues as reflections of sociocultural characteristics. It also
provides specific information on Cameron Park to help the ongoing Texas A&M University community development project led by the Center for Housing and Urban Development (CfHUD) in the College of Architecture. As part of the "Colonias Project", CfHUD is involved with building and managing community centers in colonias along the Texas-Mexico border, including one in Cameron Park.

My research focuses specifically on the use and organization of the domestic domain. During a bi-monthly stay of three to four days with a family within the community, I conducted informal interviews of a number of residents. They were asked about their cultural background, daily activities, perception about issues related to housing and the community. The in-depth characteristic of these interviews limited the number I was able to conduct during my field-work. My findings therefore are not necessarily a representative sample of the entire colonia but rather focus on issues of relevance to my informants. My conclusions identify sociocultural patterns that characterize the colonia sub-culture and offer specific suggestions to individuals or agencies involved in ameliorating the conditions of these unique settlements.
To the community of Cameron Park
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisory committee: Dr. Duncan M. Earle, Dr. Norbert Dannhaeuser and Dr. Kathryn Henderson for offering me their experience, counsel and support at all stages of this work. I am also indebted to the Center for Housing and Urban Development at Texas A&M University for the financial support which made possible my field-work in the colonia of Cameron Park. I am grateful for the patience and flexibility of the staff of the Center who dealt with scheduling my trips, guided me through the meanders of bureaucracy and, whenever necessary, allowed me the use of their facilities.

Most importantly, I thank the families in Cameron Park who generously extended not only their time but also their most sincere collaboration. Particularly Ms. Gloria Moreno contributed to the success of my research by introducing me to community residents and by facilitating my work in any way possible. I am indebted also to her large family and to the Siordia and Larkini households for their hospitality and friendship. Without the support, assistance and warmth of all these individuals this research could not have been accomplished.

Finally, I remember the support, encouragement and the good sense of humor of my family and friends.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Attempting an analysis of the practice of "building spaces" requires the consideration of a number of disciplines besides architecture such as anthropology, sociology, geography, economy and psychology. From the variety of this list, it is obvious that the issue is a complex one and that, in order not to hamper understanding, it should be approached broadly. Currently, studies on the use of domestic space based on different perspectives are proliferating, confirming the number and variety of components involved (Duncan, 1976; Rapoport, 1969; Kent, 1987). By defining "architecture" as an artificial manipulation for the creation of bounded spaces (built form) and, the "use of space" as the "why" these boundaries are created, "culture" becomes one of the major concepts involved and its complexity requires further analysis.

The last 30 years of anthropological research has witnessed the development of a number of interpretations of the concept of culture. Keesing (1974) summarizes the major anthropological views associated with this concept. He identifies one trend following the steps of Leslie White, who views culture as an adaptive system (Harris, 1968; Vayda and Rappaport, 1968; Rappaport, 1971). Other ideational interpretations include the view of culture as a cognitive system (Goodenough, 1957 and 1971; Chomsky, 1959;

This thesis follows the style used by the Sociological Review.
Tyler, 1969), as a structural system (Levi-Strauss, 1971), and as a symbolic one (Geertz, 1973; Schneider 1968).

Rapoport (1986) also notices that, "built form" and "culture" are not concepts standing at equal levels. "Culture is a theoretical construct of vast domain... which, in a sense, contains 'built form' in it". Geertz (1973) argues the need for "cutting the culture concept down to size... into a narrowed, specialized, and... theoretically more powerful concept". Rapoport continues his analysis suggesting the need for dismantling "culture" and for identifying various components useful for concrete analysis. He lists, in order of increasing specificity, the following cultural components: world views, values, lifestyles and activities. The identification of these parts allows the assessment of the relations between "built form" and the newly defined cultural aspects, for example: religious beliefs, societal values, family patterns of interaction and the like.

Some approaches to interpreting housing forms are based on components determined by basic physiological needs and environmental factors (Sanders, 1990). My research emphasizes the role of housing as a reflection of the people, rather than vice-versa. Protection, safety and ecological constraints are not attributed primacy over sociocultural values and, within evident ecological and economic restrictions, individuals are largely left with a sizable range of possible options.

In our society, ownership of material goods such as houses, cars, furniture and appliances is a sign of distinction and functions as a symbol for class and individual differentiation. Cultural values and individual preferences
are embedded in all our daily activities, a large part of which is performed within the domestic sphere. I hypothesize that people create artificial environments that are supportive of valued behaviors and activities which maintain and re-enforce prescribed sociocultural patterns.

Bourdieu's socioeconomic analysis ascribes personal taste and preferences to expressions of the *habitus* which, in turn, is dictated by the person's amount and composition of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). *Habitus* (similarly to "culture") is developed since early childhood and becomes manifested in all our choices and expressions including the furniture we choose, the music we play, the food we eat and even our own body posture. Bourdieu's analysis partly supports my view of the importance of the cultural component which, within specific restrictive economic boundaries, is still reflected in individual decision making. A deeper knowledge of the colonia *habitus* will increase the awareness of the cultural expressions within colonia households.

**RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS**

Pressing issues pertaining to colonia communities include the lack of basic infrastructure such as sewage, drinkable water, paved roads, drainage and street lights. However, even within such limitations, residents of the colonias clearly recognize the value of housing, the quality of which is also related to the group's social rules and cultural activities. Within evident economic restrictions, the variety of housing patterns characterizing Cameron Park clearly suggests the recognition of house as equity. The value (aesthetic and functional) of a dwelling, however, does not rely exclusively on standard
market criteria but also on more "subjective" ones. These criteria, I believe, are strongly related to the sociocultural background of these individuals (de la Torre and Pesquera ed., 1993; Gardiner, 1974; Rapoport, 1969 and 1986; Rudofsky, 1977; Shipway, 1962, 1964 and 1966; Smith, 1979) and are factors my research aims to identify. More specifically, I pursue the making of a list of sociocultural components of the Cameron Park community that contribute to define the concept of home, and how that translates into everyday choices and uses of the domestic space.

The definition and maintenance of invisible boundaries and the building of concrete ones within a household are used as social indicators for the presence of dichotomies or their degree of fusion. The "Mexican-American", "private-public", "sacred-profane", "enforced-avoided", "male-female" represent extremes of traditional concepts which are usually not exclusive but rather part, to various degrees, of family interactions, gender roles, generational exchanges, social relations and the like (Beneria, 1987; Berkely, 1989; Williams, 1990).

The private sphere, also, cannot be viewed as completely detached from the outside world. Domestic dynamics do not develop exclusively from the inside but are also highly dependent upon external conditions. The public realm impinges and penetrates the domestic walls in a number of ways. Improved technology and faster communication transmit images of realities thousands of miles away. The nearby city lifestyle, a seasonal pattern of migrations to other U.S. states, and a standardized school system further contribute to dilute ethnic identity and traditions with an homogenized blend of preferences and commonplace behaviors.
Attention is paid to gender communication patterns in decision making concerning, mainly, the use of domestic areas (Elmendorf, 1976; Jensen and Miller, 1986; Radway, 1984; United Nation, 1983; Coats and Cameron Ed. 1988; Wajcman, 1991; Wolff, 1990). The Mexican home has been traditionally defined as the female sphere, but is this true within Cameron Park? If so, is a new trend of working women modifying the traditional roles? Are the males of the household redefining their domestic roles too? Is Mexican taste still valued highly or is there a desire to adopt an aesthetics that is more American? Are more Americanized families showing different use of their domestic space than less acculturated ones? What are, then, the major factors that shape the overall appearance of colonia dwellings: tradition, acculturation, economy, assimilation to mainstream America? These are the basic questions that gave me direction during my field-work and that are discussed in the body of this thesis.

At the same time, the domestic sphere and the daily activities around it are not only invaded culturally but also practically by an increasing number of legal regulations and codes defining the available options. The ancestral knowledge of the traditional Mexican-American home-builder becomes devalued by his lack of the legal skills necessary to interpret the normative body delimiting "normalized" American housing development. Different technologies are often implied in State or Federal safety and hygienic codes, leaving the poor builder/dweller unable to comply with the dominant norms of U.S. construction. It becomes clear that the currently unrestricted use of owned land within Cameron Park is a major factor which not only shapes this colonia into a unique living context, but it also complements the residents'
preferences in term of social solidarity and specific adaptations in managing their environment.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Manipulation of natural spaces for cultural purposes can be considered a universal practice that characterized human behavior since the dawn of time. Its details, cross-culturally and through time, should not be interpreted as mere consequences of the surrounding environment but, more importantly, as reflections of adaptations and preferences of its makers. Residential segregation plays a relevant role in the organization and use of social activities within certain spaces. Interactions between groups and among groups of the larger society are interdependent and strongly affected by existing distances and boundaries (Hawley, 1978).

My research focuses on the wide range of cultural components involved in housing preferences, and suggests that the abilities to adapt are culturally specific and that, as a result, qualitative work is necessary for the outsider/observer to make sense of the specific choices made by the studied group or individual. Rather than an absolute evaluation of the 'properness' of these specific choices, my goal is to develop a sociocultural understanding of space use within the particular cultural context of the colonia of Cameron Park. Most importantly I emphasize the importance of the "emic" perspective, where the discourse and interpretations of the "people" are given priority over the "etic" version of the outsider/observer.

This thesis is based on qualitative field-work among the residents of the mainly Hispanic colonia community of Cameron Park, north of Brownsville,
Texas. One of the two main goals of this study is to develop basic research and to increase our knowledge of the colonia sub-culture now accounting for a population of up to half a million people distributed along the Texas-Mexico border. The other goal consists in estimating the impact sociocultural knowledge has on practical issues associated with colonia development. My investigation of the use and organization of domestic space in a colonia not only contributes to defining the impact of tradition and acculturation in a border culture, but it also explores social issues that can be relevant to service providers, social scientists, elected officials and developers working to help the community.
CHAPTER II
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

BASIC APPROACH

It is through an holistic view that my research explores the domestic
dynamics of the colonia sub-culture. Emphasis is given to the use of a
qualitative approach which methodologically advocates a variety of research
techniques. By being open to theoretical orientations supportive of an
interdisciplinary approach, my results aim to concretely contribute to the
understanding of the relatively new branch of multidisciplinary studies in the
architectural field.

My theoretical approach follows the credos of qualitative ethnographic
methods (Whyte, 1984; Burgess ed., 1982); participant and non-participant
observations were made emphasizing the role of the actors and abolishing
traditional dichotomies such as subject/object, observer/observed, interviewer/
interviewed (Rosenau, 1992). This study relies mainly on classic ethnographic
practices such as direct contacts, personal interactions and casual conversation
with the residents. Thanks to my Catholic up-bringing, Latin background and
a fair knowledge of Spanish, I feel that some of the usual hurdles of cross-
cultural field-work were rapidly overcome (Okeley, 1992). Sketches of floor
plans, community mapping and some photographic reporting was also done.
Because of my interest in pursuing a holistic approach, whenever convenient
my visits included contacts with other workers serving the Cameron Park
community such as local service providers or Texas A&M University researchers involved in the 'Colonias Project'.

EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

In the fall of 1993, I took an initial survey of colonias along the southernmost part of the Texas-Mexico border (Figure 1). The Texas Water Development Board (TWDB, 1992) accounted for a total of 1,193 colonias in the state of Texas. Of the almost 300,000 people living in colonias, about 60 percent resides in the 4 counties of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Cameron Park was estimated the largest single colonia and one of the oldest in the State.

My first stay was relatively brief but thorough enough to pinpoint issues and initiate contacts. I visited a number of these communities stretching from McAllen to Harlingen and Brownsville, Texas and I chose Cameron Park because it was best suited for the research I had planned. Cameron Park is a large community and the location where Texas A&M University built one of its community centers. Funds for this research were approved by CfHUD and regular bimonthly visits started soon after and continued until October 1994.

On March 31, 1994, the CfHUD community center in Cameron Park was inaugurated under the auspices of the Cameron County Commissioner, other local officials, representatives of Texas A&M University and the community residents. CfHUD's responsibility is not only to build the community centers but also, once built, to coordinate their utilization. This is actually the most challenging part of the 'Colonias Project' and the outreach to the community the main focus.
Even though my field-work became part of the basic research supported by CfHUD, it was conducted as an independent contribution to improve the understanding of the culturally unique colonia communities. A better knowledge of this sub-culture is the necessary platform from which to open a dialogue between the multicultural variety present in Texas. Furthermore, this basic research also aims to contribute information to facilitate a more sensitive social intervention to be pursued through the CfHUD community center activities and other organs involved in colonias improvement.

THE SETTING
"The U.S.-Mexican border is an open wound where the 3rd world grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood merging to form a third country: a border culture". (Anzaldúa, 1987)

Geographically, Texas includes a wide variety of climates with areas characterized by very different natural resources and highly diverse economies. Even more importantly, it is the presence of many historical realities, of a multiethnic population and of multiple sociocultural perspectives that often create a climate of charged complexity. Everyday existence develops out of tensions between tradition and innovation, individuality and conformity, the haves and have-nots, acculturation, assimilation, racism, sexism, power struggles and economic extremes. Generational differences, gender conflicts, class fights and social tensions characterize the space built by a mankind
searching for a place to rest, eat, play, socialize, work and reproduce. While it is true that both public and private spaces reflect and maintain values and behaviors of each human group, my investigation focuses only on the domestic sphere. I suggest that further research should develop an analysis of the outdoor public space and its use as well.

American communities are characterized by the coexistence or close proximity of different cultural groups whose interactions are responsible for social phenomena and behaviors suggesting that assimilation is not always a peaceful process, nor necessarily a welcomed one. Often cultures express a marked resistance to the "melting pot" ideology, and struggle to maintain, consciously and not, the views and behaviors of their forefathers (Bowker, 1989; Cohen, 1968; Fisher, 1984; Gordon, 1968; Lofland, 1973; Rapoport 1974).

A border region particularly presents a marked diversity which, while fascinating for the scholar, it has very distressing consequences, especially on the less empowered (Blea, 1988; Cockcroft, 1986; de la Garza, 1985; Fernandez, 1989; Grayson, 1985; Herzog, 1990; Jordan, 1984; Martinez, 1988; Meinig, 1988; Pastor, 1989). The Mexican-American border is one of the very few border regions in the world where the two adjacent countries, while sharing a regional history and impacting each other's sociocultural patterns, have extremely contrasting economies and political situations (Hewitt de Alcantara, 1984; Isauro-Duran and Bernard ed., 1982; Romanucci-Ross, 1973).

The Texas-Mexico border accounts for the presence of more than a thousands separate colonias for a total population of over 300,000 persons
The extremely poor conditions of these settlements include lack of basic infrastructure such as sanitary water or adequate sewerage disposal systems. In the last years, main concerns focusing on public health and safety issues have become widespread among Texas and Federal agencies.

Furthermore, the definition of colonias includes only locational and settlement criteria; the cultural and social implications can only be hypothesized, mainly due to limited available data. The absence of a more direct social terminology might reflect a lack of attention to identifying the cultural component (Winner, 1985) but also a possible institutional ignorance of the dominant group about the culture characterizing this peculiar pattern of settlement.

My research aims to fill this lacuna by exploring housing issues. It also suggests the need for a redefinition of colonias in social terms. This, together with an increased understanding of colonias local culture, will have a major impact on the designing of future policies that address these settlements.

THE COLONIA OF CAMERON PARK

Cameron Park is in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. Topographically, the Valley is not a valley but a delta plain bordering the Republic of Mexico to the South and the Gulf of Mexico to the East. Cameron Park is located in the Cameron County, less than 1 mile north of the Brownsville, Texas city limits, on Paredes Street. It encompasses approximately 360 acres and is characterized by a flat landscape. The northeast edge is delimited by a shallow river, seasonally dry, locally called Resaca (Figure 2).
The census by Rogers et. al. (1993) counted for an ethnically homogeneous (96 percent Hispanics) population of 3,690 (TWDB, 1992), mainly Mexican immigrants and first generation Americans of Mexican descent. This colonia is one of the oldest in the area and grew as a result of the steady Mexican immigration to the Lower Rio Grande Valley since World War II. Its density is 10.3 person/acre (TWDB, 1992). Nowadays, colonia people share not only a similar ethnic background but the hardship of the immigrant experience. In 1987, a TDHS study found that 45.5 percent of colonia residents were employed in agriculture and 14.4 percent in construction work, this being the second highest ranking occupation. Because of the seasonality of both these two occupations, the unemployment rate for colonia residents in the Lower Valley reached as high as 47 percent.

According to Rogers et. al. (1993) agricultural work among the residents in Cameron Park is not the major occupation. Work in the field is the primary occupation for only less than 10 percent of the main wage earners in this colonia. Not completely in line with these statistics suggesting that only 5 to 6 percent of the Cameron Park population migrates, my study records a larger percent of families (about a third of my samples) involved in agricultural work, mainly seasonal and up North rather than a local one, year around. The study by Rogers et. al. further indicates as primary occupations among Cameron Park residents: construction work (18 percent), homemaking (13 percent), and factory work (9 percent). This combination of low wages and often unstable employments can have disastrous effects on the colonia residents standards of living and particularly on their housing options.
ARRANGEMENTS AND LOGISTICS

During my field-work, the community center was used as a way for getting introduced to colonia residents and for initiating a chain of acquaintances. It also allowed me to develop a practical social knowledge that would otherwise have taken me much longer to acquire. My regular visits to Cameron Park started in February, 1994 and continued twice a month until October 1994, except during summer when I scheduled only one monthly visit. Each stay usually lasted 3 to 4 days and, for the first couple of months, it coincided with social events taking place at the CfHUD community center. These opportunities allowed me to get to know a large number of residents as well as service providers and other people who were involved to reach a successful utilization of the center.

At the same time, my association with the community center had to be played down because I did not have any concrete role in its administration and I rather used it as a liaison of convenience for the time being. Eventually, such relation could even turn out disadvantageous in cases where the residents were not supportive of the initiatives that local officials or CfHUD were offering through the community center. Furthermore, it was obvious that, by finding informants during events at the center, I would automatically leave out residents not participating in the center activities or not belonging to specific circles of friendships. Because of this bias, I made an effort to pursue other channels to find interviewees. This consisted in collecting names of friends of friends, neighbors or relatives not necessarily involved with the center or its activities.
Finally, in order to witness the daily routines of the life in the community, I arranged to stay, during my visits, with a family from the colonia. This decision revealed to be of key importance because it not only facilitated my understanding of the colonia sub-culture but it also made the residents less and less aware of my presence and more willing to open up and act "natural" when I was around. Staying with few different families allowed me not only to have more opportunities to be invited to special events or celebrations, but even more importantly, to experience the daily routines of each household. This further developed my understanding of the culture of the people I was working 'with', while increasing opportunities for conversation and exchanges.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE SELECTION

Most of the interviewees were women, mainly housewives ranging between early twenties and late sixties. The total number of households I visited is 35 but, at times, more than one family member participated to the interview. Sometimes husbands or adult sons would also enter the conversation and were asked similar questions concerning the domestic schedule, arrangements, decision making patterns and their perception about the community. All except one interview, were done at the interviewees' house because of the importance of relating their responses to the domestic environment itself. The interviews were informal and emphasized the importance of a "friendly" approach that facilitates the flow of the conversation by allowing flexibility in carrying on the questions.

More than half way through my work, I realized that there was a bias in the location of my samples. Most of them were located in the "front" part of
the colonia while only a couple of informants actually resided further back, toward the Resaca. An explanation for such situation is given in the results section of this thesis but, following these findings, a conscious effort was done to interview more residents living in the "back" of the colonia.

Whenever possible the interviewees were invited to show me around the house and the yard while describing the type of activities going on throughout the day. The overall idea was to find, through multiple interviews, a consistent pattern which could be used to identify a colonia life-style or way of thinking. Depending upon the availability and interest of each individuals, interviews lasted a minimum of forty minutes to extremes of three hours.

A standard interview would open with a brief introduction of myself and a summary of the main goals of my study. Assuming a tape player would have made some interviewees uncomfortable, the conversations were not taped but their transcripts were written down as soon as possible in order not to miss details of what said. To end my introduction, I would ask if they had any question they would like to ask me about myself or the study.

During the first part of the interview I focused on the general characteristics of the household such as the number of family members living there, if there were other house-mates, the interviewees' birthplace, the number of years spent in Mexico or in the U.S. and the dynamics of eventual moves.

Then I would focus on the house itself. When it was built, how big it was at first, the modifications and work done, who did them, why and when. At this point I would ask to be shown around to get an image of what makes, in their eyes, that house their home. I would invite them to identify things they particularly treasured: a picture, wall ornaments, a religious image, a specific
color. These apparently unimportant things I could have wrongly given a pure esthetic value, often revealed the sociocultural background of their owner. The attachment to a certain object, its symbolic meaning, preferred materials, choice and positioning of items were emic information I used to identify patterns of preferences revealing the ethnic origins and cultural background of my informants.

Once finished my inquiry about the housing characteristics, I asked the informants about their domestic daily routines and their perception of the community. Who does what, when and where in the household and how are chore responsibilities divided among the family members. Then I asked why they chose Cameron Park, are they happy here and why, what would they change, how safe they feel, how comfortable, their peer support and how long do they plan to stay.

Finally, I concluded by asking their opinion about the CfHUD community center, if they use it, if not, why and what kind of services or classes they would like to see offered.

As mentioned above, the interviews were not rigidly structured and, depending upon the kind of relationship developed with each individual, the conversation touched a variety of other issues. Overall, people were very open and friendly and, I believe, collaborated with me spontaneously and sincerely. In exchange I have tried to communicate my appreciation for their participation by sharing some of my own life-experiences or by satisfying their curiosity about my country and culture. In this thesis, whenever real names are cited, people were asked if that was their desire or if they rather have me using pseudonyms.
CHAPTER III
ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

This chapter is divided into two main parts, one addressing general cultural issues, the other one only issues pertinent to housing. Each of these two parts is divided into a number of smaller sections focusing on what I considered relevant topics that were brought up by my informants during the interviews.

Some of these sections summarize more my own observations about colonia resident life-style and their ways of thinking recorded during my stay in Cameron Park. Particularly, sharing a large amount of time with the family members I lived with and becoming involved with their daily routines and problems, allowed me to take a closer look into the more private life that develops in a colonia household. Day after day my presence was less and less acknowledged and it is possible that later on little or no behavioral modifications were made because of my presence. Throughout this chapter I will indicate when relevant statements were mine or my informants'.

GENERAL ISSUES

HERITAGE

There seem to be a strong sense of pride in the Mexican heritage which is perceived as an integral part of the person's identity and a factor positioning the individual within the largest group. While there is a willingness to
understand and accept some features of the world outside the colonia, most of my informants are not assuming such openness at the expense of their Mexican heritage.

During some interviews of older people I recorded a concern for being able to communicate this Mexican identity to the younger generations and to maintain a sense of belonging within the Mexican-American population, regardless of age or status differences. Several times I heard words of scorn and disappointment for people that rejected their ancestors' Mexican heritage by calling them Inglesados. However, all my informants, a few children included, acted as proud Mexican-Americans and believe that adopting core values of Mexican society does not jeopardize their ability to succeed in the U.S. society. A young man showed me his valued T-shirt representing the U.S. and Mexican flags bleeding together into a common pool (Figure 3). Other kids told me about being discriminated against while they were in summer school during their seasonal stay in the North, but that later on, they gained the respect of the other boys. During my field-work I have not heard any regrets from my informants for being Mexican-American even though they sometime feel treated as second class citizens.

**ACCULTURATION**

Even though respect and pride for Mexican heritage characterized the overall attitude of the residents I talked to, it is important to remember that Cameron Park comprises, almost exclusively, manual laborers. It is quite possible that the lack of status within the English world minimizes not only the
willingness to embrace the sets of values of the mainstream group but it also
limits the intensity of the daily contact with foreign ideas.

Most of the first generation colonia residents I interviewed came
directly from Mexico. They often spent their childhood there and moved to the
U.S. only later on. Many of the women never had a job and speak very little, if
any, English. The study by Rogers et al. indicates that more than 60 percent of
the residents in Cameron Park read, write, and speak English very poorly to
not at all (1993). This social and linguistic isolation further limits the
opportunities for contacts with non-Mexican cultures. Even the main media
for homogenization; television, given the number of Spanish stations available,
has only a small role in the acculturation process.

The younger generations, instead, are more deeply caught in the
dilemma between acculturation and tradition. Proficient in English, and much
more exposed to other cultures than their sometimes uneducated parents,
Youths are pressed to operate a continuous compromise between the
surrounding cultures and the credos of their family heritage. Particularly
because of school, some individuals are forced to compartmentalize their lives
and adopt different sets of values depending upon the circumstances. As with
light skinned African-Americans, some occasionally make a conscious effort
"to pass" in order to avoid those social or economic discriminations reserved
to Hispanics.

Economic differences are also potential factors affecting the level of
acculturation reached. For example, the quality of housing I observed in
Cameron Park is quite varied: it ranges from square structures of laminated
material, cardboard and other scrap materials without any infrastructure
whatssoever, to motor homes, and to two storied brick houses with standard amenities such as car garages and a surrounding elaborate landscaping (Figures 4, 5 and 6). More than a couple of informants confirmed that a large number of the "up-scale" houses in Cameron Park are the result of illegal activities, mainly drug dealing. In fact, the issue of safety is a primary one within this community where people often choose to pretend they do not "see" what is going on in order to be able to keep their peace. One informant who lives in a high traffic drug block, told me has been openly threatened to keep quiet if he did not want to endanger his life, his wife's, and his property. Partly for these reasons I interviewed only one of the residents of such "up-scale" dwellings who, another neighbor told me, was able to build such house because of some kind of construction scam. This resident has the same Mexican background as most of the community, and does not have a higher level of schooling or a job. An heritage of agrarianism and tradesmanship seem to characterize the background of most residents. Their base line status might facilitate the maintenance of a more traditional folk culture and the retaining of those core values which I found so strongly rooted within this border community.

White (n.d.) notes that immigration and cyclical migration provide a source of cultural replenishment and sustenance which slows down the aggregate process of cultural and socioeconomic assimilation for the Mexican-American population as a whole (pp 8, 13). He also suggests that "more limited immigration would allow Mexican-Americans to consolidate social and economic gains derived from assimilation (italics mine) somewhat faster" (p. 2). It is like Mexican-Americans keep renewing their ties with the past and their own kin rather than turning outward to the non Mexican-American world.
NEIGHBORLY RELATIONS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Similar to everywhere else, relations with the next-door neighbors range from formal nodding to a very supportive collaboration which might include car-pooling, child care, house-sitting during migration season, and sharing of water and electricity. At the same time, however, most of my informants listed family members as the first individuals they would ask for financial help. From my observations, the role played by the family in this Mexican-American community is very relevant and an entire section of this chapter is dedicated to its detailed description.

When a strong family circle is present, friends might assume a secondary position but, they can also be valued as much as family members, independently of the lack of blood relations. The attitude of openness and friendliness that this Mexican-American culture encourages, facilitates the widening of the social circle to a level that other more private and nuclear oriented cultures could hardly reach. Neighbors and friends have been indicated by a number of my informants as key help in overcoming the difficulties of daily routines as well as of emergency situations.

ENVY, JEALOUSY AND FATALISM

The positive effect of such receptiveness and spirit of cooperation is, at times, contradicted by widespread sentiments of jealousy and envy for others' success. Competition and ambitiousness are considered offensive toward others and interpreted as a way to shame them. Gossip might start, criticisms can affect a person's acceptance within the group and enemies might even act
in retaliation. One can find him/herself in a double-bind between the Anglo-Protestant work ethic emphasizing material achievement and success and the more relaxed attitude of the Latin-Catholic ideology based on a humble and more fatalistic existence. Particularly in the case of people in transition between very different cultural worlds, this opposite value judgment might develop into very stressful internal conflicts.

This strong belief in fatalism I registered during some of my conversations with the colonia residents might become a further obstacle for Mexican-Americans in acquiring status in the Anglo-speaking world. While a blind faith in God's will is helpful for bearing uncommon difficulties and sacrifices, it also produces a resigned attitude toward a so called "predestined" fate. Planning is almost viewed as presumptuous and unpleasant situations are justified and accepted rather than fought against. The old say "help yourself that God will help you" might be forgotten and replaced by a lack of motivation and commitment to improve an unwelcome situation. During some of my interviews I noticed a tendency to submit to "luck" and to withdraw accepting that " God decides what will be of myself". However, this extreme attitude was more the exception than the rule and, even though God was often referred to as the final planner of existence, most of the people interviewed expressed the willingness to fight the odds to improve their lives and to guarantee a better future for their children.

**FAMILY**

The family is considered the pillar institution of the Mexican-American society. During my interviews I noticed that it permeates every instant, action
and thought of each individual. It is from this continuous familial concern that a person seems to find not only him/herself but his or her role within the group. The value of family ties is thoroughly recognized and continuously renewed in each instance in which social, emotional and financial support is shared. Particularly within a community afflicted by extreme poverty and social conflicts, strong family relationships compensate for the lack of basic services and social cohesiveness typically found in mainstream U.S. communities outside the colonia.

In Cameron Park, most of the individuals find themselves sharing the community with a number of their kinsmen. Initially, a close or even a more distant relative might have left his native Mexican town and, not only kept in touch but, later on, facilitated the relocation into the new community of the other relatives left behind. Within years or even just months, parents, siblings, cousins etc. are offered temporary accommodations and help while building their own house or looking for a job in the new "promised land". Later on, at their turn, the latter might do the same for other relatives in order to settle together in the same community. Others will stay for a while, maybe while pregnant so that the baby will be born in the U.S., or while work is available, or to take care of a house while the original residents migrate North.

Accommodations and housing arrangements are very flexible and in most of my informants' homes, I had a hard time assessing the number of residents; even direct questions turned out to be misleading because did not consider a temporary renter, a visiting cousin or a seasonal arrangement. At times an individual considered "family" were not a relative but somebody they
grew up with or maybe someone that lost a parent and became literally adopted within the host family.

I observed in colonia homes a marked household flexibility; a very dynamic way of handling relationships and an ease in dealing with people that non-Latino, Western Anglo cultures rarely match. Since childhood, young people not only develop the capacity to interact with a number of siblings but also with an almost consistent presence of various relatives. A great deal of time is spent visiting, sharing chores and meals, baby-sitting each others' children, organizing communal events, etc. The structure of the nuclear family is continually broken down and reconfigured to allow the development of a more extended family, whose members are each assigned very specific positions within the newly redefined kinship configuration.

During my stays with families in Cameron Park I observed a large number of situations where different generations came in contact with each other regularly. This age integration is so strong that older family members are not kept to the side but rather lovingly attended to by youngsters who have been taught to respect and obey them since early age.

At the same time, it is also true that younger generations have been strongly influenced by outside ideas and have absorbed some of them. This acceptance of new values is often in clear contrast with the traditional values supported by the elders, increasing the gap between generations. Particularly, gender role differentiation is the source of strident generational tensions where women fight for more emotional and economic independence, and men often try to react to maintain the traditional high status assigned to the Latino male. More on this topic is presented in the following section.
In the Mexican-American community children are very much desired and loved. Most of my informants' families include a large number of children and in only one case there was a single child. However, compared to my informants' parents it seems true that families are getting smaller. Children are often one of the main reasons colonia residents left their Mexican hometowns and either crossed the border or, if already in the U.S., decided to stay permanently. Their future is a major concern for the parents whose goal is often to present their offspring's options they themselves did not have available.

Sons, grandsons and nephews are colloquially called *hijos* (sons) causing a great challenge assessing the number of children of each couple or the exact kinship between them. The couples are often young (in their early twenties) and it is difficult to determine the generation each individual belongs to. Also, the large number of youths in each household and the common practise of sharing children between relatives and neighbors, make it impossible for the casual observer/visitor to distinguish who the parents of each child are.

Finally, the strong religiosity of this community allow the status of Godfather and Godmother to occupy a very important rank. These individuals enter the relationship through a Catholic ritual and commit themselves to mutual emotional and economic support practically becoming part of the extended family. These fictive kin ties become particularly important, for example, in special events such as a girl's *quincinera* (fifteen birthday) where a number of sponsors are necessary to share the expenses and organizational requirements for the celebration.
GENDER ROLES

The colonia of Cameron Park, even with its geographical and cultural isolation, is continuously affected by the social events unfolding around it and by the rapid changes happening in the larger society. The redefinition of gender roles in the mainstream society has also touched the dynamics of the Mexican-American family which is following, even if at a slower pace, the overall trend of equality between genders. Still, during my visits, I often observed especially among older informants with a closed and conservative background the passive role of women in their marital and familial relationships.

Machismo is an extreme behavior which emphasizes the position of dominance of the male over the female. It seems particularly common among Hispanics and some other Mediterranean cultures and is based on a double standard of expectations and roles between the two genders. It develops into explicit behavioral differences even between pre-teens and later on, "macho" attitudes become even more marked and with a clear sexual component.

Among my informants, social heavy drinking in male-only groups and prowess are viewed as the most common "macho" expressions. A number of women I talked to, not only acknowledged these obnoxious behaviors among their male relatives but often justified them, assuming a very fatalistic attitude. Some women viewed machismo as a natural thing: an almost genetic conformation of the male physiology. They were actually quite grateful that their men, at least, come home and bother to put food on the table and buy clothes for their family. I observed a sort of resignation to this practise that,
given the women's economic (and probably emotional) dependency to their man, they do not have any power to stop.

One informant hopes her son will not follow the role model offered by her husband and had asked him not to show himself at the house unless sober. Another woman, because two of her closest male relatives indulge in regular social drinking told me not to come to her house and asked to be interviewed somewhere else. Some younger female respondents, however, clearly indicated that they would not tolerate an alcoholic husband and one even made such statement in his presence.

Common expressions of macho behavior include defending the family's honor (particularly the women's), acting manly (being fearless, independent, unemotional) and showing sexual prowess. This strident sexual dichotomy between a brave male and a passive and domestic bound female is a major source of friction in younger couples.

As in the case described below, wives who decide to adopt a more modern sexual morality might end up disappointed for not receiving an equality the Mexican culture does not reserve for them and even young males might have a hard time offering. Growing up surrounded by examples of the traditional gender double-standard, young Mexican men too have difficulty in adjusting to their wives' request for more freedom. I am convinced there are cases where males might become deeply torn between adjusting to their wives' expectations and maintaining the traditional mores of older generations.

Such awareness is even more evidently increasing among the second and third generation Mexican-Americans which have been in contact with the Anglo culture if not for much longer, definitely more intensively. For
youngsters, English, together with Spanish, is a primary language and
television heroes, "X caps", baggy pants and untied sneakers are common
denominators shared with the Anglo youths. Among the second and third
generations Mexican-Americans I observed about half a dozen of young
women whose life styles and choices reflect the effect of these changing times:
here are a brief summary of their stories.

CASE STUDIES

Maria

Maria is a 25 years old, divorced woman. She has a 5 years old son
from a marriage with a Mexican-American man her age. This young mother
has a good job with a local business. She drives a company car, has a car
phone, dresses business-like and meets with different and mostly wealthy
clients every day. She consider herself "a woman of the 90's": self-confident,
successful, fluent in English, who can easily "pass" for Anglo. She is a modern
Mexican-American woman with a developed cosmopolitan style, an income
and well in touch with the world outside her domestic walls. At the same time
she is not willing to accept a subordinate role, she demands an equal
partnership in household decision-making and expects an active social life
including dining, nightclubs and traveling.

Her now, ex-husband is a school teacher and an extremely jealous man.
He is a victim of these rapidly changing times; he is not ready for all of these
new, non-traditional ways of thinking and acting. He loves his classy and
independent wife but is not able to give her the freedom and power that come
with being non-traditional. He imposed a double-standard in the marriage where he had allowed himself extra-marital affairs which his wife patiently accepted. Furthermore, she was not easily given permission to see her own family and was forced, at times when he was drunk, to have intercourse with him against her will. This troubled union lasted for years but now Maria is not willing to put up with her "immature" husband any longer and asked him to leave and filed for divorce. She has already "set eyes" on a wealthy Anglo engineer she met through work and she is hoping, this time, for the life-style her young Mexican-American husband was not able to offer her.

Rosie

Rosie is a young woman, 23 years old. She comes from a large and very socially involved family, situation which had made her generous and naturally caring. She is fluent in English and works a full-time job. She gives part of her income to her parents who have agreed to let her live in a trailer nearby in order to be able to still receive government compensation for her father's illness. Even though she has her own home she spends a lot of time at her family's house sharing meals, doing laundry and visiting her parents and numerous siblings.

Rosie drives her own car, has her own bank account and manages her own time. But even though she is a grown, mature woman, her parents are very concerned about her and she always has to tell whoever is at the family house where she is going and at what time she expects to return. She views this reporting of her activities, not as a form of familial control but as an honest and justifiable parental anxiousness for her well being. For this same
reason, as a child, she was not allowed to go swimming because of the danger of drowning or roller-skating for fear of injury. However, even within this limits, she is an unusually independent woman particularly in a community where traditions are strongly held.

She is the only young woman that I met that is not married and that lives alone. In Cameron Park women leave their parents' house to move in with their husbands, usually at a young age, when teenagers or in their early twenties. Rosie knows she is an exception and has already noticed people's reactions when they find out she moved out not to marry but to live by herself. Among those surprised are former high-school friends her own age. She is not in a rush to find a husband but rather to advance herself through a job she likes and an independent financial situation.

Lourdes

Lourdes is quite new in Cameron Park. She is 23 years old and recently married to Israel, a Mexican-American ex-Marine officer. Lourdes grew up in San Luis Potosi and has unusually modern thinking parents. She left home at age 16 to work in Port Isabel and stayed there until she met her future husband with whom she moved to Cameron Park. She is very happy with Israel, who has been able to avoid the traditional stereotypes on how a good Mexican wife should behave and who is able to accept her wife's needs for autonomy. He gave up his military career to take care of his mother and sisters and now works as a store manager. He is supportive of her attending U.S. history classes to pass the tests for naturalization. He does not mind her
conducting her activities outside the house while he is at work and they love to spend time together jogging, dancing and shooting pool.

The couple is temporarily living in Israel's mother's house, together with her and her daughters. This arrangement is creating some friction between his family and the newly formed one. His mother and sisters do not seem to agree with his wife's non-traditional behavior and it is quite possible that he is finding himself between two opposite forces; tradition represented by his mother and sisters and the new, represented by his modern wife. The young couple is planning to leave Cameron Park soon.

I imagine that his past experience in the Marines has been the key to his exposure to an open-mindedness toward outside realities. His trips to Europe and the Middle-East, together with being in close contact with Marine companions of very different backgrounds, have possibly given him an understanding of the world and people that goes well beyond that of an average individual born and settled within the same community for an entire life.

Morena

Morena just had her second baby. The first one is a little boy whose father was too much into drugs and drinking to bother to settle down and commit himself to being a father. This young mother very proudly raised him by herself with some help from her family. She then met Wayne at the Mall where she used to work. It was love at the first sight and this young African-American man asked her hand and moved with her into her mother's house in Cameron Park.
She is very comfortable here, her family welcomed Wayne like they would a Mexican-American man and she has not made much progress in entering the American world, nor bothered to learn English. Most of the efforts to make this complex union work came from Wayne; he is struggling to learn Spanish in order to communicate with his wife and is accepting, even though not very happily, living in his wife's community. He is resentful of her taking for granted his adjusting and is quite vehement about Morena attending English courses. He is also skeptical about the future of the colonia residents and sees such extreme lack of services, infrastructures and a multicultural environment as major hurdles for his child and stepchild's social success. He is positive an Hispanic (or African-American) ghetto are not the solutions for a mixed couple nor for acceptance of his children. He is firm on the need to move out of Cameron Park but his wife might not be ready until she gains some confidence in seeing herself away from her people. Mastering of the English language and occurrences of her children's rejections by other Hispanic children might be factors that will contribute to changing her mind and to accepting relocating in a more mixed neighborhood.

**Magdalena**

Magdalena is a woman in her early twenties from Central America with two children; a young girl and a baby boy. The couple lives in one of the poorest dwellings I have visited during my field-work in Cameron Park. She had been living in Houston with her family and moved to this community after she married 3 months ago. Their shelter sits in a dusty lot surrounded by tires, furniture and bales of hay. The square structure is divided in two areas and in
one of the corners of the "living/dining" room there is a mountain of full
garbage bags up to the ceiling. There is no water available, the toilet is outside
in the backyard and her neighbor passes her the water from a hose. Dog
excrements, toys, clothes lay all around and a sheep moves freely within the
lot.

She does not have a job, in fact, she is not even a legal resident and is
too busy with the children anyway. She does not like to talk much and I feel
she is talking to me because her friend/neighbor told her to do so. Her
husband is sleeping so we cannot visit the other part of the house used as a
bedroom. She does not seem to mind her situation and says that in Houston or
in her country it was not any better. Except for the neighbor that gives her the
water, she does not know anybody and feels she does not have the time for
developing any friendship. She admitted that, in the few months she had been
living in Cameron Park, she only left the house to get an application form for
going connected to the water system and to have her children vaccinated at
the community center.

**Enriqueta**

Enriqueta is a Mexican-American woman, also in her early twenties and
mother of two children. She used to work in other people's homes but now
has to stay home and take care of her children. She was quite talkative with
me until her husband came home. Then she left to wash clothes while he sat
with me and took over the rest of the interview.

He works for the Port Authority but is serious about going back to
school and get a college degree. He wants to give a chance to his children and
understands that education is the way to do that. The couple lives in the "back" end of the colonia and is surrounded by relatives and friends for whom he often works doing repairs to their houses. He is also always working to improve his home so they might be able to sell it and move out. He replaced the wood walls with bricks and added a fence all around so that his children and the dog would not run into the streets.

He is more critical than she is about the need for changes within the community. The need for paved roads seems the major concern but street lights, public transportation and safety are also important concerns he listed. He is very upset for paying so much property taxes to live in a community where even basic infrastructure is missing. He knows of residents of other colonias paying similar taxes and getting much better services. My impression was that he acted very close to his children but also that he occupies that role of the paternal "provider" I have observed in most of the older couples. They seem like a traditional Hispanic couple following that gender role dichotomy where the man is the outside breadwinner and the female is in charge of the house and the children.

OTHER PECULIARITIES

Calle Juanita seems to mark an internal break splitting the community in two sections (Figure 2). Just before summer, while reviewing my work, I noticed that most of my informants lived in the "front" part of Cameron Park, nearest to the frontage road, Paredes. I also identified a number of subtle, maybe not so subconscious, references to a subdivision of the colonia between "front" and "back". Some "front" residents referred to the "back" as the place
where "shootings happen" or where "people involved with drugs live" or where "it is really dangerous to walk by yourself".

One of the few residents I interviewed who lives in the "back" section described the consequences of the absence of police security in Cameron Park. She confirmed a large presence of undocumented migrants and "transients" and indicated that the main drug dealer of the community is her next-door neighbor. Another informant told me of a number of violent incidents where people got stabbed or shot during robberies or other drug related businesses. He was also personally intimidated and added that it is because of the widespread practise of intimidation and extortion that other residents do not come forward to press charges against people they know or have witnessed being involved in criminal actions.

Even though some interviewees strongly denounced the existence of a network of organized crime in Cameron Park, my limited number of informants makes impossible to verify the validity of the above statements. However, once proven this widespread perception is actually reality, it would be quite interesting to investigate why it is the "back" part of Cameron Park more dangerous and more densely populated by illegals, criminals or transients. In depth research could not only confirm if the splitting of this colonia in two zones characterized by different levels of safety is realistic, but could also determine the dynamics at play. More importantly, verification of such splitting of the community would further confirm the need for facilitating residents integration through the CffHUD community center activities or through other forms of social intervention.
HOUSING ISSUES

THE CHOICE OF CAMERON PARK

The responses obtained during my interviews indicated two major factors as the reasons why Cameron Park was the chosen location for settling there: cost and freedom. Confirming the results of CfHUD (Rogers et al., 1993) and the data from the Colonia Factbook (TDHS, 1988) most of my informants said they chose to live in this colonia because of the affordable price of a plot of land. With an average monthly household income of $594 (Rogers et. al. 1993) nothing in the city, or even in better serviced colonias, would have been available. Here, instead, potential owners had to put down a couple of thousand dollars and pay the rest in, usually, 30 years. Furthermore, the lack of enforcement of building codes and zoning restrictions typical of this rural, unincorporated subdivision, allowed them to build dwellings much cheaply and without concerns for minimum standards, licences or permits.

This lack of enforcement of housing regulations allows for the widespread use of "incremental housing". This strategy consists of adding rooms or other parts or stories to a building a little bit at the time (Figure 7). I have seen staircases built to access a second floor not yet existing and, for now, ending at the ceiling or a roof with the foundations sticking out from the floor ready for the addition of another level.

The second most cited reason for living in Cameron Park was the freedom allowed. While it is true that the lack of basic infrastructure was a major source for complaints, my informants were quite content with the idea of owning their own plot and home, no matter how small and humble. They felt
that nobody could impose on them any regulation which usually characterize
low-income urban housing or public housing in nearby cities.

Finally, in line with the findings by Rogers et al. (1993) quoting 55
percent of the respondents agreeing on the importance of living near relatives
or friends, some of my informants cited the fact that their spouse was already
here or that other family members or friends were here and offered to help
them to find a lot for sale or to build a house. This continual stream of
temporary migrants or permanent immigrants is characteristic of this
community. Houses with the windows blocked by wood boards are a usual
sight in Cameron Park during the summer (Figure 8); they usually suggest a
seasonal migration of the household to the North where there are agricultural
job opportunities. Another type of migration movement instead originates
from nearby Mexican cities. A sophisticated network of communication and
information among and between families facilitate the channelization of
newcomers into the U.S. Finally, a few informants also noted that they feel
comfortable living next to their "own kind" and that the city life would be too
dangerous and lonely.

SELF-HELP HOUSING

Self-help construction is a strategy very peculiar to colonia settlements
which is made possible by the lack of strict housing codes and is further
facilitated by what seems a traditional knowledge of house building. A good
portion of the males present in the households I visited confirmed to be
knowledgeable enough to build at least the structure of a house. However,
most projects involve a supporting network which include mainly family
members (brothers and sons) and sometimes neighbors who had more experience, for example, in masonry or plumbing.

The timing for self-help improvements is strongly related not only to the economic and financial constraints but also to the type of employment and the flexibility of the job schedule of the principal builder. Migrant families make money during the agricultural season up North and, by the end of summer, they have saved enough to buy material and start the work around the house. Men involved in the construction business are off from work during the rainy season but the weather might also limit their ability to work around their own house. Generally, most informants indicated they find time for their own home improvements during week-ends and evenings. Many times, especially on week-ends, during my tours along the calles of Cameron Park, I noticed groups of men occupied in some construction activity from ground level or around a section of pre-existing homes.

Overall, nobody seems to be in a hurry to finish, first because of the limitations dictated by both meager finances and an inflexible job schedule, and second because here it seems quite normal to have parts of the house not yet completed. This practise might be linked to the one in Mexico of leaving constructions not terminated in order to avoid taxes.

Needs for more domestic space are often dictated by the increased number of family members, usually children, or for their reaching an age when boys and girls need to be separated or are expected to have their own bedroom. Women might also insist for the building of a second bathroom or a laundry room which, in large families, are very important parts of the house.
Even when needs are recognized, unemployment and minimum wages were blamed as the main reasons why residents have hard time to find sufficient funds for home improvements. As indicated by Rogers et. al. (1993), the average main wage earner in Cameron Park only works 23 hours a week. Considering he is often employed in an underpaid occupation and is usually the only earner of a large household, it becomes evident why self-help housing plays a fundamental role in the life of colonia residents.

This strategy creates an opportunity for low-income households to become home-owners while providing them with an asset which increases in value. Differently from the "American way", my informants strive for financial independence as clearly indicated by their preference for a debt-free situation and ownership without mortgages. Last, but not least, self-help housing allows them to continually work toward improving their living conditions while possibly increasing their sense of self-worth and fulfillment.

To confirm the permanency and the popularity of the strategy of self-help building in Cameron Park one has only to drive around the community and observe the use commonly reserved for back-yards (Figures 9 and 10) or count the number of junk-yards (Figure 11). Similarly to shops, storage areas and sheds, colonia back-yards often contain all kind of imaginable materials and objects which are recycled and sold locally or, one day, used by the owner for his own house improvements or for other projects.

FROM HOUSE TO HOME

Even though self-help housing grows out of immediate financial and economic restrictions, it becomes reasonable to assume that the creation of a
house from its foundations might reflect its makers very deeply. Particularly because of the financial struggle and sacrifices involved in such endeavor, the building of a house is often viewed as a major individual and familial achievement. The elaborate fencing I have seen surrounding a lot of the houses in Cameron Park can be given a number of interpretations. The most immediate could relate to residents' concern in marking their territory "conquered" with so many sacrifices. Fencing might also include reasons of safety in terms of controlling the transition between the owned space and the public one: inward, to avoid strangers coming into the property; outward to halt children or pets running in the streets. Finally, high fencing/walls obstructing the view (Figures 12 and 13) could also symbolize the social distance and distrust felt by some residents.

All my informants have indicated a high level of pride and satisfaction for their self-help built home. More that one person called to my attention that everything around was owned and entirely paid for. They also felt particularly good being able to leave something behind for their children, even if they might end up leaving Cameron Park. In the meantime, they themselves are experiencing the security of owning a property they have the freedom to sell, rent or change at their own pleasure. Even the three most humble dwellings I visited represent a capital investment that counterbalance the economic "downtime" often experienced among this mainly underemployed population. "Shacks" characterized by a leaking laminated roof, dirt floors, plywood walls, lack of water and sewage and, in one case, less space than a four by four meters housing 7 people, were all perceived as improvements from what was available before.
The presence of a porch is part of the traditional Mexican architecture and marks the transition between the private domestic space and the public street (Figure 14). Porches are the preferred place for entertaining guests when there is no breeze inside the house, for supervising children while playing outside, or just for sitting and watching the street life. In Cameron Park it is not uncommon to see people walking in the streets coming or going to the bus stop, children on their way to or from school, or friends going to pay a visit to their neighbors. Porches also reflect the taste of the owner and often present features similar to the inside of the house.

A yard is considered an extension of the house itself and is also often a source of pride for its owner. In the torrid, but rainy climate of the Rio Grande Valley, some residents of Cameron Park have been able to create islands of luxurious vegetation. I have seen all kinds of fruit trees, palms and tropical plants, cacti; vegetables, herbs and the most colorful flowers including roses. One informant told me that a Mexican credo states that "if there are flowers in the yard, there is a good woman in the house".

Approachways, porches, gates and entrances provide areas for marking property lines. A very powerful element commonly used in Cameron Park is a metal-worked nameplate, the *placa* (Figures 15 and 16). This personalized ornamentation includes a written part with the address of the house and the name of the family. This written part is usually bordered with leaves, flowers or animals but more often include sacred figures or symbols such as a cross, a saint or angels. More that anything else, *placas* seem to summarize
the owner pride for his propriety, his religious concern, and esthetic value all at
the same time.

During most of my interviews, my request to visit the whole house was
happily met and in only a couple of cases it was declined with the excuse of
"messiness". During the "tour" people would lead my attention to
improvements just finished, some already planned or those still "in course".
They would tell me the origins or meaning of specific objects and it turned out
that often, apparently insignificant ornaments had very interesting stories
behind them. Some of these I had the opportunity to capture as photographic
records and are presented in the Appendix section of this thesis. One of them
are wood picture frames made by inmates of the Matamoros prison (Figure
17). My informant had a relative that spent some time in jail during which he
learnt how to make these delicate objects. The frames are made of mosaic like
splinters of different kinds of wood and are arranged together to form a variety
of patterns. My informer had about ten frames and each was different in either
design or color pattern. Another display that attracted my attention was a pair
of paintings hanging in the living room of one of my informants from Mexico
City (Figure 18). The paintings were given to her by her mother and are about
50 years old. They represent the Indian legend of the origins of the two
volcanoes behind Mexico City (the Popocatepetl and the Ixtlachuati). The
paintings show a young woman dying in the arms of her beautiful Indian lover.
Her resting body resemble the shape of the two mountains whose names are
the lovers' name. This same informer also showed me a rosary holder shaped
like a box. On it there is a cross with a miniscule sphere on top whose
reflection, when viewed at a specific angle, shapes the image of the Virgin.
More often, however, it is the ensemble of a room which conveys not only the individuality but often the Mexican heritage of a household.

It is difficult to describe interior ornamentation without somehow expressing a value judgment or falling into generalizations. I grew up in the Northern part of Italy but I remember seeing in some old widow's house of Southern Italy a taste for interior decoration very similar to what I saw in Cameron Park. A Sicilian living-room, for example, would be cluttered with pictures of relatives, kitsch, old mementos of Christenings, first Communions and weddings, plastic souvenirs and a large number of religious icons such as crucifixes, Madonnas, and a variety of Saints. I was told a similar pattern exists all over Latin America.

This description is pretty much what can also be used for a typical sala (living-room) in Cameron Park. I saw entire walls covered with photos (Figures 19 and 20) or else hung at a certain height all along the perimeter of a room. Baby pink or blue plastic birds together with plastic golden angels, flowers, leaves, fruit, boats, cars, and a variety of animals including tigers, elephants, deers, fish also seemed to rate as the preferred wall ornamentation (Figures 21, 22 and 23). Dolls, shells, ribbons and lace in various patterns followed in this list of popularity (Figure 24). Sacred images and particularly crucifixes are the omni-present component of any home, however, contrary to a colleague of mine who visited another colonia, I have not seen any altar. This absence of altars might be used as an indicator for a change of preferences among Cameron Park residents. Finally, real luxuriant plants as well as fake ones add the final touch to this often rich interior ornamentation.
Individual rooms instead, would reflect more the personality of its user: boys might have sport trophies, posters of athletes or bands. Girls might have collections of dolls, cats, furry animals and posters of waterfalls or singers. Overall, I found the sala to be the most revealing part of the house which is reasonable considering that, throughout this community, there is lot of "visiting" and social entertaining among family members, neighbors or friends coming locally or from "across the bridge" (mainly Matamoros, but more generally: Mexico).

DOMESTIC LIFE PATTERNS AND HOUSEHOLD DYNAMICS

It is obvious that each household has different strategies for coping with its daily needs and routines depending upon the specific present conditions. The main variables affecting household mechanisms for survival include: number of adults, children, their ages, physical ability and nationality, the presence of private transportation, work schedules, type of employment, availability of drinking, cooking and cleaning water, household income, network of resources including extended families and neighbors, education and culture. Each of this factors determines the characteristics of daily patterns including care for the elders and the infants, division of household chores, carrying on of errands within and outside the colonia, meal schedules, transportation, medical care and social visiting.

The most common arrangement among colonia households is, for the women, to give up their jobs and outside activities to take care of the infants and, for the men, to provide financial support through outside employment. After children are born, usually women become automatically in charge of child
care and of all house chores. Given the numerous members in most families, women occupy a fundamental role not only for the practical well functioning of the household but, more importantly, for the maintenance of family values. Their contribution is vital and shapes the entire household subsistence strategy. As it might become evident among younger and more innovative couples, modification of such gender-related economic patterns can have major consequences on the entire household.

Sometimes, the limited local job market forces men to accept occupations far from home, maybe in Houston or in Mexico. This might imply that the couple actually lives together only on week-ends or during part of the month, job permitting. In the meantime, while the woman is sent money, the burden of all daily routines falls completely on her shoulders. This is quite a difficult time especially when the children are too young to be sent to daycare or school and the woman is new in the community and might not have developed an efficient support network.

Alternatives to such strenuous situations include sharing the baby-sitting needs with another mother so that either part of each day, or alternate days will become available while the children are cared by the other person. This help is commonly offered by older relatives or Godmothers but their not living close enough often make this option unfeasible. A limited budget is usually the main reason why a paid baby-sitter is not even taken into consideration especially considering how often the available jobs are underpaid and might not even repay for the price of a baby-sitter.

To complicate an already strenuous day, the household might not have water available for drinking, cooking and washing. Inability to drive a car or
the lack of private transportation render the woman even more dependent upon others and she might have to wait for the husband to come home from work and bring back the only medium of transportation available. Often, I have seen women having to manage to go to the store by bus while handling a number of children together with the shopping bags. Once back to the colonia, they might also have to walk for a mile in inches of mud or under a 100 degree sun.

While it is common for the working men not to come home for lunch, it is a common habit to share the main meal at home with the rest of the family during dinner time. By then, older children are back from school and most of the household chores are hopefully completed. The evenings are time for relaxing, watching television or maybe just catching up and getting ready for the next day. More that one woman told me the only time she had for herself is early in the morning when everybody is still asleep and the day has not started yet. For others, with older children, it is when they are in school and the husband is at work. For some unlucky ones, their "own" time will happen in a few years to come, when the children will be old enough for pre-school or maybe when an older, female relative will decide to come visit and stay for a while.

Even within these extreme conditions I encountered women who made children's care their reason for living and do not feel any anxiety about not having any time to themselves. These ladies actually reprimand those young "modern" mothers who erroneously expect their children to grow up as good persons without giving up any of their time and making sacrifices for them. Consistently with the concept that it is the duty of the woman to take care of her children and that is what God ordered women to do, colonia women seem
very fulfilled in the role of mothers and rarely feel unhappy for having to give up their own time. Even about this issue, I noticed a fatalistic tendency to accept these motherhood restrictions as part of the natural course of life against which it has no sense struggle for a change. Young women, however, appeared more anxious to reach their own goals, both in terms of school and work achievements, and start considering later marriages together with the postponing of motherhood.

The week-ends are characterized by different routines from the working days. It is quite common for Cameron Park residents to have relatives in Matamoros and the week-end is time for visiting. While there, the women often go to the market to buy food items which, on this side of the bridge, just do not taste the same or are too expensive. At times they also have special requests for items that can not be found in the U.S. from neighbors and friends that cannot go across the border. Usually this inability to go to Matamoros is dictated not only by time or lack of transportation (there are buses, and lot of people cross the bridge by foot) but by lack of legal residency to come back to the U.S. or the $3 necessary for the toll.

Week-ends are also the time when men work around their own house or get together to help another family member or a neighbor. On week-ends, particularly Friday nights, men might go out drinking or bring their spouses to the dance. Birthday parties, quincineras, weddings or just barbecues are often scheduled on Saturdays. On Sundays the family spends the morning at church unless they went to the Saturday evening Mass in Matamoros, while visiting.

The concept of vacation and holiday is not strongly felt among my informants. I assume this is mainly due to their financial and economic
restraints. It is more common to plan a once a year long week-end visit to relatives in Mexican cities further away from the border such as Monterrey or Veracruz. Furthermore a large number of residents in this colonia migrate North during the summer to work some agricultural job in Indiana, Nebraska, California and Florida (all these states are considered "North" no matter their real geographical location) and that leaves even less time for vacationing.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

My interviews brought to light the fact that, even though most of the residents share ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and often religion, kinship, and socioeconomic status, their perceptions of Cameron Park as a community can be quite disparate. Some feel a strong sense of "belonging" and added they are very comfortable surrounded by their own kind who share the same way of thinking and doing things. These informants often have a large number of relatives living nearby and that might further reinforce their feelings of community togetherness and security.

Others are more skeptical about this alleged presence of a "united" community and an efficient support system. They might not have any relative living closeby or little opportunities to socialize with the neighbors because of the demands on their time by small children. Some told me that most Hispanics are very envious and suspicious of others and described to me instances where people considered friends turned their backs to them. Particularly when lives of people improve, it seems that jealousy and envy can become a factor in breaking up friendships.
A woman told me that because she is new in the community and is very poor, she feels that even most of her husband's relatives do not want to help her or care to be her friends. One young woman attributed her lack of friends in Cameron Park to the fact that her way of thinking is more non-traditional and she does not have much in common even with ladies her own age.

The presence of the new CiHUD community center has been cited by some informants as a good way to develop a sense of community in Cameron Park. The presence of a focus where activities and services are organized for the benefit of the residents seems to enhance their feeling of "belonging" and willingness to participate. Most of the women, if not already involved, showed a positive reaction to the presence of the center and some even regretted that they had young babies to care for and could not attend some of the courses offered. Among these courses, particularly the ones in English language and nutrition were considered the most useful. The former because most of my informants identify English as a marketable skill, as a tool facilitating their success in the "outside" world, and as a status-symbol; the latter because of the increasing awareness of health issues and concern for the effects of a diet rich in carbohydrates.

NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

Here I was, insisting on the phone my coming to visit with my absolute first informant who was trying to warn me about the inaccessibility of the roads nearby her house. "I have a car, do not worry: I will be there in no time!" I kept saying, unwilling to give up what was to be the interview-initiation of my field-work in Cameron Park. So I left the house and by the time I got in the
car I could not even see my shoes which, within a walk of few steps, were completely covered by mud. The opening of the gate became another endeavor and, after driving just a few yards, I decided I did not want to take the chance of getting stuck in inches of mud and have to leave the rental car in the middle of Calle Gregory. I turned around and, defeated, I called back my wise informants and postponed the interview to a later time, weather allowing!

This brief story quite well summarizes one of the major problems the residents of Cameron Park have to face everyday: unpaved roads. During the rainy season, inches of mud block the residents indoor; cars cannot always make it either, school buses have to stop outside the colonia and children are unable to reach the bus stop. During summer, a lack of rain and the intense heat dry up the roads and dirt is carried around with the lightest breeze. I have seen residents blocking their exposed windows with wood boards in the attempt to limit the amount of dirt entering the house. Nothing is spared and cars, as well as furniture, clothes, and food are covered by dust, no matter how clean they are kept. Early in the morning, a County water truck drives in the colonia to water the streets but, by ten o'clock, they are dry and dusty again.

The second most named problem is the limited safety. There are no street lights and residents have to pay $9 a month get their own outdoor light. While entire families move North in the summer to get work in the fields, it is not uncommon to be robbed of what is left behind in the household. For this reason, people prefer to leave the house to a family in order to decrease the chance of being robbed.

The police rarely service the community and, even though most of the houses in Cameron Park are built of wood, there is no fire engine available to
the community. Similarly, there are no medical services and, when the road conditions are bad, no service truck of any kind could access the interior of the colonia. One of my informants told me that they were able to find only one pizza store which will deliver in Cameron Park.

Some of my informants do not have water in the house and for drinking they buy it at the store, while for washing they pay a neighbor about $5 a month to pass the garden hose to them. A similar arrangement is made when the electricity is lacking and the neighbor helps by providing an extension cord. The sewage is another major concern but, this past year, money was generated by the County and the State to install a system in Cameron Park. Still, each household will have to pay from $200 up to $400 to get connected and such expense cannot be afforded by everybody. In the meantime most of the households dispose their waste in outdoor pit privies or, more rarely, in indoor facilities both draining in septic tanks or cesspools.

My informants also complained for the lack of public transportation within the colonia and, some of them, for having to take long walks between the bus stop on Paredes St. and their house. Finally, a few noted that the most numerous businesses in Cameron Park are junk-yards while groceries and other stores are limited in number and often charge higher prices.

A number of informants pointed out that they pay as much in property taxes as residents of other communities but certainly do not get the services everybody else receives. They told me they are one of the very few colonias left in the area without paved roads. Because of this lack of services, a couple of residents I talked to are improving their houses in order to sell and move to another community. One informant attributed the absence of basic
infrastructure to the fact that this colonia is mainly Hispanic, but most people
felt it is just a matter of politics and, because Cameron Park is so large and
poor, that it would require lot of money to fix all the existing problems.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY

This research is based on qualitative field-work conducted in the colonia of Cameron Park, north of Brownsville, Texas. The theoretical goal consists in developing a better understanding of the residents' cultural perspectives, particularly, of characteristic patterns and emic interpretations in the use of domestic space. However, my research goes a step further by making specific suggestions on the need to increase the social infrastructure in this community and on the role the CfHUD community center can play to facilitate this development. Social infrastructure accounts for "non-material" sociocultural structures such as a sense of belonging to a community or the reach between residents through communication, interaction and active participation.

While I believe Cameron Park is a community not completely socially mature, it is also true that it is emically perceived as a legitimate settlement and not as a temporary, "refugee" like camp. My informants rarely showed desire for relocation and the majority of them expressed the intention to stay there permanently. The strength of these sentiments is, in my view, enough to justify and support all kinds of initiatives aiming to colonias social improvement and individual well-being.

At the same time I carry on basic research, housing strategies commonly practiced are also pointed out for their potential implications with
current or future legal issues concerning building options. My results aim to
call the attention on the fact that a building knowledge that is traditionally
Mexican is still passed to younger generations of Mexican-Americans and that
such knowledge could clash with the limiting effect of the U.S. housing codes.
External factors such as legal codes and zoning regulations can have immediate
negative effects on the options available to colonia residents. The evaluation
of such options is strongly dependent not only upon the immediate economic
conditions of each household but, not less importantly, upon the cultural
preferences of the group as a whole and how that can be expressed within the
surrounding social and legal limitations. General cultural perspectives and
daily strategies for survival are described in order to furnish to private and
public efforts involved in colonias a better understanding of the peculiarity and
uniqueness of these communities.

A qualitative approach, based mainly on participant and non-participant
observations and interviews, was adopted to describe the life-style in Cameron
Park and to give a voice to the residents who became directly involved with
this research. In concordance with my choice of using a methodology
supporting strategic flexibility, mine was a "working research" whose details
were remodeled each visit, upon reaching a deeper understanding of the
colonia culture.

The CIHUD community center, especially during the first phase of my
work, functioned as a focal point where both ideas and individuals converged
to form a rational plan of action. From the center activities I gathered clues of
what was vital and relevant in this community; from its people I learnt to
appreciate the uniqueness of each individual and his/her story. Throughout this
thesis, the primary source of data came from my informants and, only secondarily, from my own experiences accumulated during my visits. Finally, data collected on colonias by other sources (CfHUD, TDHS and others) further add knowledge to my field-work results.

House to house interviews were conducted in a friendly and flexible format and they often turned out more detailed and personalized than expected. The length of most interviews limited the quantity I was able to carry on but I am certain such trade-off only improved the quality of this research. Last, but not least, my staying 3 to 4 days at the time with a family in the community further sensitized me to this little known sub-culture.

CONCLUSIONS

During this research, and to my surprise, it soon became clear that this community is very much liked by its residents who perceive this opportunity for home-ownership as their lifetime chance for a better future. Even though culturally prepared for life in a very different situation, my informants pursue a daily struggle to adapt to an environment they were not initially raised to cope with. A large number of Cameron Park households include manual laborers who might carry with them a world view more in keeping with their rural origins and which they are having to adapt to their present urban setting. Self-help housing, for example, is a major example of how traditional knowledge is passed on through generations and applied within this new living context.

The clash between what my residents were, are now, and, eventually hope to become, has been recorded throughout my conversations and involves divisions between genders, generations, individuals, people with different
education, expectations, and openness to new ideas. Nonetheless, there is also a strong desire for social integration, a trait which is traditionally held high within the Hispanic culture. In fact, the lack of rituals and socialization events experienced by some of my informants is often compensated for by their solid attachment to the Mexican holiday calendar. Many of my informants use to visit Matamoros, especially during occasions which command social solidarity and that are absent on the U.S. side such as patron saint's day, Mexican Independence day or the many other religious celebrations.

The internal division I have noticed within Cameron Park, together with the presence of individuals not very socially connected suggest a gradient of integration at the individual level and even between geographical sections of the colonia. This observation suggests the fundamental role the CfhUD community center can play to lessen the decreasing levels of communal cooperation. In this sense my research becomes strategic in recommending a more sensitive community development procedure. This could enhance opportunities for social integration at the horizontal level between residents and among colonias and vertically, with authorities, service providers, agencies, etc.

The data collected and analyzed in the previous chapter was divided in a number of sections and organized under two main parts: general culture and housing issues. For consistency, the conclusions pertinent to each specific topic are presented in this chapter following the same order of the previous one.
GENERAL ISSUES

Heritage

- The residents of Cameron Park I interviewed professed a strong attachment to the Mexican culture. They displayed this heritage in a number of explicit and more subconscious ways, both ideologically and materially.

- A number of informants were openly concerned about being able to pass on the culture of their elders to the youngest Mexican-American generations.

- Interviewees often acknowledged being discriminated against because of their origins but rarely consider the option of concealing their background or denying it.

Acculturation

- My informants demonstrated different degrees of acculturation depending upon a number of factors including: gender, age, years in the U.S., English language proficiency, education, employment and personal qualities.

- Older generation women who had little or no work experience outside the house and/or education were rarely proficient in English. They were also the ones who expressed the most traditional values including a
strong acceptance of the subordinate position of women. Their main role was as mothers and guardians of the home and they showed a skeptical attitude towards younger generations and outside influences in general.

- Time residency in the U.S., residency status, and employment stability are factors which facilitate contact with other cultures and often force some acceptance of the outside society, or at least, the development of a minimal ability to function in it.

- First and second generation Mexican-Americans who seem to have assimilated many traits of the dominant culture do so mainly through the avenue of school or a military career. Furthermore, children not of working-age, whenever their family migrate North for 4 to 5 months, have to attend summer school in other states such as Nebraska, Indiana, Ohio, California etc. This opportunity of being exposed to a different school system often becomes a setting for further acculturation.

**Jealousy, Envy, and Fatalism**

- Jealousy and envy are viewed as feelings that easily hamper friendship and trust among colonia residents. They were indicated by some residents as traits quite common among individuals of Mexican origins.

- Fatalism permeated many conversations I heard during my stays in Cameron Park. Many informants recognize God's supreme will against which
any individual effort is considered unreasonable. However, most people also attribute God a benevolent will which, hopefully in a near future, will become evident.

- Overall, the majority of my informants displayed a strong will to improve their quality of life and struggle against a not always favorable destiny.

**Family**

- The family institution is the foundation for a strong supportive network particularly helpful in this conditions of extreme poverty.

- Kin integration, based on a close knit, extended family becomes a major survival strategy providing not only immediate goods but also compensating for the societal isolation many colonia residents experience.

- While children are the "apple of the eye" in every household I visited, a strong age integration allows the elderly to receive ample regard and respect from all generations.

- Socialization between family members is very intense and consistently exposes individuals of all ages to one another, further facilitating age integration.
Gender Roles

- Machismo is a major component in gender differentiation. It includes patterns of behavior and ways of thinking such as: a marked sense of honor, pride in not having obligations to outsiders, social and male-only "display", heavy drinking, decision-making without taking others' views into consideration and being the family provider.

- A number of households I visited experience the emotional stress of dealing with an alcoholic male member. Heavy drinking is often accompanied by other attitudes such as violent behaviors and, sometimes, spouse abuse, which my informants described as very common "macho" behaviors.

- More younger couples are breaking the traditional pattern of a marked gender role division.

- Education, employment and outside influences are becoming more and more relevant components in the lives of young Mexican-Americans of both genders. For example, young women start to value their own life outside motherhood; some delay getting married or, if married, to have children.

- A number of young mothers suggested that the CfHUD community center should have childcare available for those interested in following a course but that have no way to accommodate their children while in class.
- Young men are sometimes caught between the traditional values they witnessed between their parents and the needs of their wives for an increased equality and communication between genders.

- Like all transition times, social changes and new economic perspectives modify gender roles while the colonia environment tends to preserve much of Mexican traditions. Acculturation and domestic strife can lead to emotional confusion and, in some cases I witnessed, to unresolvable conflicts.

**HOUSING ISSUES**

**The Choice of Cameron Park**

- The main reason residents chose Cameron Park is because of cost. This rural, unincorporated and poorly serviced subdivision offers for sale small lots which are affordable to low-income people.

- Freedom from housing regulations and independence from landlords and other tenants are the other reasons residents preferred a house in Cameron Park to alternatives such as low-income urban housing.

- Some residents also had other family members already in the community who helped them find a lot and to settle down.
From House to Home

- Self-help housing allows residents to build their own house with scavenged, traded or cheaply bought material a little bit at the time, whenever finances and work commitments permit.

- Self-help housing is based on building the main structure in a short time and often with the help of other relatives first, and then making small, continuous improvements thereafter.

- Most of the men in the households I visited claimed construction abilities. They usually develop these skills by watching and helping others rather than through formal training.

- Residents admitted they often had to compromise on the quality of their house but showed a strong pride and satisfaction for the improvements they achieved in their housing conditions.

- Architectonic and aesthetic choices such as patios, wall colors, interior design and ornamentation often reflect preferences typical of the Mexican culture.

- Alternative preferences are often colonia residents' interpretation of the Anglo, middle-class, suburban taste.
Domestic Life Patterns and Household Dynamics

- A list of factors determines the daily patterns of each household including: number of adults and children, presence of infants or elders, type of employment, income, education, culture and individual preferences.

- Women are more often in charge of domestic chores and child care; men, whenever possible, contribute to the household through outside occupations, house repairs and car maintenance.

- Migrant families move North during the summer months to work in agricultural jobs and have either friends or family to take care of their homes. This seasonal house availability frees units for a transient "shadow" population. A less preferred alternative is to board doors and windows and close the house completely.

- Week-end routines often include visiting relatives, house improvements, social events and, on Sundays, Mass.

Community Development

- Perception of Cameron Park as an homogeneous and supportive community is not universally shared. Years in the colonia, income level and social network help define supportiveness.
- Lack of relatives nearby, short residence time and a different, maybe more Americanized perspective on things, are the main reasons why some informants do not experience a feeling of belonging in Cameron Park.

- A non fully developed social infrastructure in Cameron Park favors the maintenance, among some of my informants, of a strong attachment with the Mexican side. Family ties and an active participation to communal events such as fiestas and religious celebrations compensate for the absence of social activities within their own U.S. community.

- Limited basic infrastructure, increasing taxes and scarce opportunities for a better future are factors a few individuals identified as good reasons for desiring to leave this community.

- Overall, a large number of my informants are satisfied with their present conditions and plan to stay in this community indefinitely. This widespread sentiments of stability justify efforts which facilitate the development of a sense of communal belonging throughout the community.

**Improvements Needed**

- Basic infrastructure such as: a. paved roads, b. sewage, c. water, d. police and fire safety, and e. street lights were the improvements all my informants viewed as urgently needed.
- Others indicated improvements more specific to their own dwellings, usually: a. better ventilation, b. more insulation, c. tightly sealed windows and doors to avoid dirt coming from the streets and, d. more living space.

- Some mentioned their preference for brick houses (which is the preferred material in Mexico) due to their durability and less need for maintenance, but many admitted could not afford the cost for such material and settled for wood or other cheaper material.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis, while laying its foundation on basic research, more practically aims to pinpoint the limitation in describing colonias in terms that are exclusively materialistic. Colonias continue to be defined for what they are physically lacking (paved roads, sewage, potable water, police security etc.) rather than "socially". This list of missing items needs to be replaced with a terminology that does not mistake the objects for the subjects.

In my research case, people are not determined by housing but rather the houses become expression of themselves. Objects do not always have an intrinsic value but rather speak of their owner in the way they are used and through the meaning they are given. In this sense, housing is a manifestation of the social issues involved at the larger scale such as gender relations, generational tensions, etc. Moreover, the findings of this study tend to support the value of the intervention of the CfHUD community center, as it has a major potential to be a contributor to the process of increasing the sense of
community in Cameron Park and of reducing its residents' sociocultural and economic isolation.

Valuing the immediate, practical, daily knowledge practiced by colonia residents is a way to minimize their distance from mainstream patterns of existence. Recognition of their strategies might facilitate the understanding by urban planners of colonia housing issues beyond pure design. This more local and, to date, less documented knowledge is documented here to suggest the need for architects to create buildings compatible with their users, whose culture therefore needs first to be understood and acknowledged. In this sense, my research presents recommendations in conceptual terms that interested parties could develop into specific details beneficial to the people they aim to serve.

For example, the lack of codes enforcement in Cameron Park allows low-income people to become home-owners. The practice of a piecemeal construction strategy encourages owners limited by a tight budget to carry on improvements whenever finances permit it. The self-help construction strategy permeates most of the choices colonia residents are able to make when dealing with housing improvements. Furthermore, it is the culturally related presence of extended families and networks of neighbors which facilitate the actualization of the self-help building process. In this light, even extremely basic housing arrangements represent the first step in a path toward a higher quality of life. Residents of "shacks" made of wood boards and corrugated iron scraps have shared with me the same positive outlook to their future as the better offs.
Similarly, this same freedom guaranteeing the practise of self-help building, also allows for a unique use of yard space and storage areas. Filled by all kind of imaginable materials often coming from disassembled buildings, back yards become the site for plywood, bricks, cement bags, wood, corrugated iron scraps, left over pieces of fences, poles, old appliances, furniture and much more. This recycling not only represents ownership of materials potentially useful for further housing improvements, but also a strategical diversification of the household economy. This technique aims to split entrances between a variety of production modes therefore ensuring more economic opportunities.

Current code enforcement is nearly non-existent but present legislative initiatives to strictly enforce State and Federal laws might have drastic consequences on the dynamics of house construction within the colonia. How can the local builder apply his traditional knowledge and achieve a functional assimilation with the increasing number of regulations? For example, in the future, if incremental self-built housing becomes illegal, colonia residents (or potential ones) might be forced to turn to public low income housing with evident loss of empowerment and control over their surrounding environment. Or, colonias might further retreat from the reach of authorities into even greater isolation and with devastating cultural and economic consequences. Finally, and bleakest of all possibilities, we could also witness an increasing number of homeless people wandering around nearby Salvation Army shelters and churches donation centers.

It is by acknowledging colonia realities, rather than by undermining the role of the Mexican-American builder, that educators and service providers can
offer concrete opportunities to colonia residents. For example, CfHUD could play a fundamental role in relating housing issues to the difficulty colonia residents have in functioning in a highly complex bureaucracy and between often contrasting political interests. Developing the skills necessary to interpret legalities might help to find options and solutions for the residents to continue building their homes without losing respect for the building tradition of their forefathers.

Specific policies might need to be developed based on enforcing legal codes in a step by step manner. This strategy would allow local, traditional techniques to slowly adjust to the enforced regulations through an acculturation process rather than through a destructive replacement of the Mexican knowledge with a U.S. "normalized" one. Colonias are socioculturally complex settlements which provide a better alternative for an increasing number of people. More importantly, if developed toward further social integration, colonias allow individuals to create unique survival patterns which might counterbalance those external sources of stress and uncertainty they often experience.
REFERENCES


Patrick, I., 1990, *Quality of Life Perceptions among Residents of Rural Unincorporated Subdivisions in Hidalgo County, Texas*, College Station: Texas A&M University, Center for Housing and Urban Development.


APPENDIX

PHOTOGRAPHS
Figure 1. The Mexico–United States border area (from Hansen, 1981).
Figure 2. Map of lot subdivision in Cameron Park, Texas (from TWDB, 1992). Darker marks indicate sampled households.
Figure 3. Individual ideology and taste are here expressed in a T-shirt suggesting pride of the Mexican-American heritage. Note the red part of both flags bleeding into a common pool.

Figure 4. A small wood home; note the colorful and busy exterior.
Figure 5. A good size motor-home.

Figure 6. A two-story brick villa surrounded by a luxurious landscaping and a chain fence.
Figure 7. Incremental housing: the wood frame on the left suggests more work in progress.

Figure 8. Boarded houses are a common sight in Cameron Park, especially in summer when entire households move North.
Figures 9 and 10. Yards and porches are used for plants and flowers as well as for storing all kinds of material. Note that the house at the bottom, even though humble, displays the typical nameplate.
Figure 11. Car repairs and junk-yards are the most common businesses in Cameron Park.

Figure 12. Elaborate fences often surround Cameron Park houses.
Figure 13. A fence/wall whose height and explicit sign suggest due respect for the privacy of its owner.

Figure 14. Porches are typical features of Mexican architecture and function as transition areas between the private and the public domains.
Figures 15 and 16. *Placas* are metal plates usually hung at the entrance of a property indicating the name of the owner and the address of the house. The written part is often decorated with floral patterns, animals, and religious images.
Figure 17. Wooden photo frames made by the prisoners of the Matamoros jail.

Figure 18. Two paintings representing an Indian legend.
Figures 19 and 20. Photos are a major feature in interior decoration. Note also the use of highly ornated mirrors, plastic flowers, light holders, strings of gold, butterflies, gold leaves and, on the left in figure 20, a couple of coat hangers.
Figures 21 and 22. Gold plated, plastic ornaments are popular in Cameron Park homes. Bright colored walls are also commonly used for both interior and exterior.
Figure 23. Details of a gold plated wall composition.

Figure 24. This doll has been turned into a lamp. It has been covered with a veil kept open by a plastic plate. This is glued to a small diameter piping section inside which an electric wire is run. The wire is connected to a light bulb hanging at the top, just under the plastic plate.
VITA

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