Anticipating the Colonias: Popular Housing in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, 1890–1923

Andrew G. Wood

The visitor who arrives in El Paso with the idea that it is a barren waste, desert-like, where, of course, nothing green, like flowers and trees grow, is subjected to an immediate disillusionment.

El Paso Times, May 25, 1922

Today along the U.S-Mexican border, popular settlements known as colonias are growing at a rate of approximately 10 percent per year.1 Located at the periphery of large cities, these settlements host an array of improvised shelters fashioned out of plywood, tarpaper, old bricks, discarded garage doors, and found scraps of tin. Water and electricity are often scarce, and many areas have little or no access to urban services of any kind.2 Yet although life in the colonias may be shocking to observers today, a look at the history of popular housing along the border during the first decades of the twentieth century shows that the task of securing adequate shelter along the border has long been a difficult one for many. In what follows, I briefly describe the housing situation in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez during the early decades of the twentieth century, as well as some early attempts at urban reform.

Border Boom Towns

Beginning in the 1880s a mining boom in northern Mexico helped spark a period of dynamic growth in transportation, agriculture, and commerce between Mexico and the United States. At that time, border towns grew as the prospect of jobs and a better life attracted migrants from both the interior of Mexico and the eastern United States. Subsequently, revolution in Mexico (1910–1917) and Prohibition in the United States (1918–1933) accelerated rates of exchange and settlement.

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Between 1900 and 1930, the population of cities on both sides of the border increased sharply (see table 1). Not surprisingly, rapid rates of urbanization during the first three decades of the century posed certain problems. One of the most troubling was the housing situation in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez (see figure 1).

Table 1. Border City Populations, 1900–1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City and State</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1920</th>
<th>1930</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matamoros, Tamps.</td>
<td>8,347</td>
<td>7,390</td>
<td>9,215</td>
<td>9,733</td>
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<td>Brownsville, Tex.</td>
<td>6,305</td>
<td>10,517</td>
<td>11,791</td>
<td>22,021</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reynosa, Tamps.</td>
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<td>1,475</td>
<td>2,107</td>
<td>4,840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McAllen, Tex.</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5,331</td>
<td>9,074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuevo Laredo, Tamps.</td>
<td>6,548</td>
<td>8,143</td>
<td>14,998</td>
<td>21,636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laredo, Tex.</td>
<td>13,429</td>
<td>14,855</td>
<td>22,710</td>
<td>32,618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piedras Negras, Coah.</td>
<td>7,888</td>
<td>8,518</td>
<td>6,941</td>
<td>15,878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eagle Pass, Tex.</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3,536</td>
<td>5,059</td>
<td>6,459</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ciudad Juárez, Chih.</td>
<td>8,218</td>
<td>10,621</td>
<td>19,457</td>
<td>19,669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Paso, Tex</td>
<td>15,906</td>
<td>39,279</td>
<td>77,560</td>
<td>102,421</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nogales, Son.</td>
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<td>3,117</td>
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<td>Nogales, Ariz.</td>
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<td>5,199</td>
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<td>Mexicali, B.C.</td>
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<td>462</td>
<td>6,782</td>
<td>14,842</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calexico, Calif.</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>6,223</td>
<td>6,299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tijuana, B.C.</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>733</td>
<td>1,028</td>
<td>8,384</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Diego, Calif.</td>
<td>17,700</td>
<td>39,978</td>
<td>74,683</td>
<td>147,897</td>
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</table>


Figure 1: House in El Paso, Texas, circa 1910. (Courtesy of University of Texas at El Paso Library, Special Collections Department)
During the summer of 1910 a reporter for the *El Paso Morning Times* anticipated difficulties in the local rental housing market, writing that the city "was filling up rapidly and soon there will be a shortage of houses." Similarly, a spokesperson for the real estate firm of J. H. Smith estimated that "if the demand kept up . . . there would not be a vacant house in the city by the first of September." Citing a flow of migrants from Mexico and elsewhere in the United States as the cause of the increase, another resident declared "there are fewer desirable homes in El Paso now than there have [ever] been." Anticipating that all available homes would soon be rented out, some imagined that latecomers to the city "would have to build their own residences or live in tents this winter if they wished to be enrolled among the residents of El Paso" (see figure 2).³

These and other observations suggest that the supply of affordable housing in the city had become scarce. With affordable housing increasingly scarce, many crowded into a south-side neighborhood known as Chihuahuita. As a rapidly growing district of El Paso around the turn of the century, Chihuahuita quickly became the area where the majority of Mexican immigrants settled after crossing the Rio Grande.⁴ Not surprisingly, elite and middle-class El Pasoans viewed the neighborhood
with suspicion, considering the neighborhood a dangerous place where disease and social pathologies lurked. Soon reformers took action in an effort to “clean up” Chihuahuita and comparable working-class areas across the border in Ciudad Juárez.

On June 16, 1910, members of the El Paso City Council heard Dr. J. A. Samaniego complain that heaps of trash had collected in several Chihuahuita streets and alleys. Interestingly, he told public officials that city engineers rather than local residents were to blame for the accumulation. “These people may be poor, but they are human beings, entitled to humane treatment” Samaniego argued. In response, Mayor Robinson and Alderman Clayton initially claimed they had no information on patterns of city trash disposal. Later, however, the two municipal officials indicated that they would look into the matter and conceded that “now is the time to inaugurate a cleaning crusade in the south side.”

A month later the El Paso City Council again discussed the southside neighborhood. This time officials made plans to pave several streets and expand water service in the area. According to reports, however, difficulties between the water company and the city soon resulted in delays. Meantime, inspection teams sent by the El Paso Health Department counted more than five hundred dwellings in the city that were “crowded and in extremely poor condition” (see figure 3). Relaying this information to municipal officials, a local health official proclaimed, “what a deplorable condition exists when almost one-half of these houses are marked uninhabitable.” To this he added, “taking into consideration that there are five persons to each house and usually more, you have over two thousand persons living in houses not fit for animals.” To remedy the situation, it was recommended that the city sewer system be extended south “as far and soon as possible” and that property owners rather than tenants he held accountable for housing conditions. By mid-September 1910, health department officials had determined that 1,500 houses on the south side should be torn down. Shortly thereafter, city officials asked police for help in relocating renters.

With the housing stock for residents diminished, a story published later that fall documented a growing housing crisis in El Paso and elsewhere along the U.S.-Mexico border. In a November 19, 1910, article titled “Passage to Texas” published in the Survey, Francis H. McLean, field secretary for the Charity Department of the Russell Sage Foundation, commented on the condition of popular housing in several Texas
cities: “From El Paso, with its miserably damp and dark Mexican adobes fringing the international boundary along the historic Río Grande, to the opium shacks in the bottoms of Dallas, there is in every one of the five cities a need for some rudimentary housing regulation.” Yet McLean continued by describing how El Pasoans had prepared for a visit by U.S. and Mexican Presidents William Howard Taft and Porfirio Díaz earlier that year by simply building a fence to hide the various dilapidated shacks from the politicians’ view:

There is an amusing yet sardonic tale of the time when the presidents of the United States and Mexico were to meet at the Río Grande. It was discovered that a most irreverent, unreasonable and utterly miserable group of so-called houses border[ing] the line of progress refused to hide itself. What easier than to hide it with a huge fence! That is the logic which El Paso used.7

While simply hiding the unattractive housing of the urban poor from visiting elites may have been a temporary solution, McLean’s account leaves little doubt that urban reform measures were needed. Attempting another quick fix a few years later, General “Black Jack” Pershing sent troops from nearby Fort Bliss to Chihuahuita in 1914.

Still, the city’s housing problems—at least in the Mexican neighborhood—had not been resolved. A local report produced in 1915

Figure 3. Women in a yard, El Paso, Texas. (Courtesy of University of Texas at El Paso Library, Special Collections Department)
suggested, “Probably in no place in the United States could such crude, beastly, primitive conditions be found as exist in Chihuahuita.” The following year, El Paso leaders decided to deal with the matter by simply tearing down much of the popular housing in the area. Many of those Mexicans displaced by the action were forced to make their way back across the Río Grande to Juárez.8

Meanwhile, housing in El Paso continued to be in much demand. Commenting on the situation in early 1922, Real Estate Board President W. K. Ramsey noted the city’s lack of surplus rental housing. Talking with a staff member from the El Paso Times, Ramsey said “cottages and close-in stuff” as well as “bungalows of the ‘far-out’ sections” of town had all been rented out.9

U.S. and Mexican labor representatives who gathered in El Paso in mid-April sent a petition to the Texas State Federation of Labor demanding that the issue of rental housing be addressed immediately. On Saturday April 22, 1922, the El Paso Times announced that a resolution declaring affordable housing a matter of “public utility” had been passed unanimously. Over the next few months, however, no follow-up to the labor-backed proposal appears to have taken place. Instead, city officials took to publishing delinquent tax rolls in the Times during the hot summer months.

**Tenant Action and Early Reform Campaigns**

Meantime, in the spring of 1922, collective action by tenants in several central Mexican cities (e.g., Veracruz, Mexico City, Guadalajara) inspired house renters in the northern state of Coahuila to issue demands for improved housing conditions and reduction of rents to 1910 levels. Similarly, tenants in the city of Torreón announced that they had formed a syndicate of renters and were busy negotiating with local landlords—many of whom had formed their own association (see figure 4).10

Then on May 4, 1922, renters in Ciudad Juárez announced that they were also in the process of forming a tenant organization. According to the San Antonio newspaper *La Prensa*, socialist Cástulo Herrera had called for a public meeting on Sunday, May 7 in the Plaza de Gallos, with the purpose of officially founding the Sindicato Fronterizo de Inquilinos (Border Syndicate of Tenants). In his communication, Herrera indicated that the Juárez syndicate “would be similar to those cre-
ated in Veracruz and Mexico City.” The Sunday gathering attracted nearly five hundred Juárez renters who, maintaining a peaceful and nonmilitant tone, elected a governing board for the new renters’ syndicate. New members were organized by neighborhood and paid a small fee to help fund the association. A week later, local landlords requested that syndicate leaders communicate their demands in writing. Following the example set by groups in central Mexico, renters requested lowering of rents to 1910 levels or by 75 percent for more recent constructions, improved housing conditions, legal protections against eviction, and recognition of tenant syndicates.11

Little is known regarding the outcome of renter lobbying in Juárez and other towns such as Piedras Negras, Coahuila. However, the nearly four thousand tenants in Monterrey who had come together under the banner of the Tenants Union of Nuevo León, as an important component of the Monterrey labor movement, managed a significant presence in the city. They claimed that housing costs ate up nearly half a typical worker’s salary. In one of their direct actions, renters invaded the state congress. Subsequently, their organizing efforts helped influence legislation that offered a tax break to property owners who cut their rates.12

Yet despite various grassroots organizing efforts, urban elites continued to view popular neighborhoods as “low life” areas that hosted criminal and other “dangerous” elements. In conjunction with various renewal projects intended to beautify border cities, local boosters stepped up campaigns to eliminate “unsightly areas” altogether during the 1920s. One such campaign came after the reorganization of the El
Paso City Health Department in the fall of 1922. Headed by R. E. Tarbett, sanitation officials initiated a new inspection campaign of tenements, apartment houses, hotels, and residences. For his part, Tarbett ordered that close attention was to be paid to a variety of critical issues including water supply, waste removal, and animal control. In a short article in late September, the *El Paso Times* reported, “Inspection of residences and tenements began yesterday under direction of the city health department. Three inspectors began work south of the tracks. They have orders to inspect every house in which people are living. . . . The work is expected to take six months. The condition of every residence, rooming house and tenement . . . will be recorded in the office of the city health department.” The article noted how inspectors would detail important information, including ownership, management, type of house, condition, number of rooms and inhabitants, water supply, availability and condition of toilets, provisions for garbage, and “number of horses, mules, cows, goats, rabbits or fowl on the premises.”

During the inspection, El Paso Mayor Charles Davis, various councilmen, and members of the planning commission toured sections of the city. Despite describing various plans for modifying streets, drainage facilities, and other public utilities to *El Paso Times* reporters, Davis nevertheless acknowledged that full realization of El Paso’s beautification program would take several years. Curiously, the newspaper reported nothing about official plans to address problems in poorer districts of the city.

**Across the River in Juárez**

Meantime, the advent of Prohibition in 1920 had sparked a significant increase in tourism across the U.S.-Mexican border to Ciudad Juárez. Concerned about what the trade meant for U.S. citizens, evangelist Bob Jones visited the northern Mexican town in September 1922 to heighten public awareness of the situation. In a series of public addresses reported on at length in local newspapers, Jones complained about the condition of Juárez and declared the city a vice-stricken “hell hole.” Shortly thereafter, Chihuahua governor Ignacio Enriquez told those attending a Chamber of Commerce banquet in El Paso of his plans to “clean up” the city. “Frankly,” he confessed to the audience, “we are ashamed of Juárez.”
At the top of the governor’s list were some seventy-five saloons he intended to close by the end of November 1922. In addition, Enriquez indicated that cabarets would be regulated and the city’s vice district brought under state supervision and moved to a western section of the city. Known gringo drug addicts were to be deported, while any Mexicans engaged in criminal activities would be rounded up and shipped off to Chihuahua City for trial. Those saloons allowed to remain open would not be allowed to tolerate “women of questionable character” loitering on or near their premises. Explaining the longer-term goals of the effort, Enriquez declared, “I want Juárez to be such a city that citizens of the United States and Mexico will not be afraid to go to with their family and friends.” Hoping to promote cooperative relations between the twin cities Enriquez claimed “El Paso is important to Juárez” because “it is the gateway to Mexico” (see figure 5). Hoping to build support for the campaign, the governor encouraged Juárez residents to appreciate the long-term effects of his initiative and not to give in to commercial interests who opposed his efforts to “moralize” the city.15

While the campaign proved difficult to sustain over time, immediate reports suggested that the governor’s plan had helped reduce crime,
with one account stating, “In contrast to before the measure, four days have now passed without any assaults, robberies or violent crime being reported in Juárez.” According to other reports, neighborhoods in Juárez had taken on a renewed tranquility after government agents had expelled “pernicious foreigners” and “any persons not engaged in making a respectable and honest living.” Still, the central streets of Juárez were filled—as they had been for several years—with tourists from neighboring El Paso who had come to “pass the day in the Juárez saloons and central vice district.” Noting the continued problem of vice tourism, the Chihuahua state legislature passed legislation containing elaborate plans for a new, regulated red-light district to be built outside of town. This, lawmakers hoped, would provide the necessary resources for the “moralization” of the city. In the following months, however, mismanagement of municipal and state funds significantly hurt reform efforts.16

Conclusion

With the acceleration of commercial activity along the U.S.-Mexican border around the turn of the century, towns such as Ciudad Juárez and El Paso grew significantly. Not surprisingly, rapid urbanization led to housing shortages, problems related to public health, and other social ills. In their responses to the situation, elites in both cities showed little sympathy for the urban poor. Instead of developing measures designed to remedy housing shortages, officials choose either to ignore the problem or to blame residents for the dilapidated state of many popular neighborhoods. Anticipating efforts by colonia dwellers today, residents in Ciudad Juárez organized a tenant union in the spring of 1922. Protesting high rents and substandard conditions, they lobbied municipal officials and local landlords for changes. Soon, renters in a few other northern Mexican cities did the same. While little is known about the outcome of their protests, it is important to note that collective action dedicated to improving the living conditions of the urban poor in cities along the U.S.-Mexican border has a long and still largely unknown history. 

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NOTES


4. Because the land was prone to flooding, some soon made their way to higher ground north of downtown, establishing an adobe tenement village called Stormsville. Martínez, Border Boom Town, p. 34.


6. Ibid., July 29, 1910; September 16, 1910. Having cleared the way for demolition of the south-side houses, councilmen then unanimously approved plans for the construction of a new meatpacking plant.

7. Survey, November 19, 1910, p. 291. Meanwhile, the El Paso Morning Times reported on November 20, 1910, that an anti-prostitution campaign had begun in the city.

8. Martínez, Border Boom Town, pp. 45–46. Attempting to deal with the situation, municipal leaders founded a Public Welfare Committee in 1918 and empowered members to find those individuals they deemed most destitute and provide them with shelter five days out of the week. Hoping to improve the overall sanitation of other residents, the Juárez Water Department also established public baths in several of the city’s poorer neighborhoods. The Spanish flu epidemic that year did much to reverse these efforts, however, as hundreds soon fell victim to the disease.

10. On the history of the renters' movement see Andrew G. Wood, *Revolution in the Street: Women, Workers and Urban Protest in Veracruz, 1870–1927* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2001). On the Torreón syndicate, see *La Prensa*, San Antonio, Tex., June 1, 1922. On February 16, 1922, *La Prensa* reported that landlords in Mexicali, B.C., had selected a new board of directors for the property owners' organization there. News of tenant action in Veracruz, Guadalajara, and Mexico City was reported in the same paper beginning in March and continuing throughout much of the spring, summer, and fall of 1922. Regarding Veracruz, see March 23 and 24; May 30; June 5 and 11; July 13, 17, 23, and 27; August 5, 7, and 24; September 23; November 2, 3, 7, and 9. Regarding Guadalajara, see March 27 and September 21. Regarding Orizaba, see April 4 and August 5. Regarding Mexico City, see April 11, 29, and 30; May 1, 2, and 9; and August 31. Regarding Tampico, see August 2 and 6 and September 1, 12, 13, and 19. Regarding Merida, see August 13.


15. Ibid., October 10, 1922. See also *La Prensa*, October 10, 1922, October 14, 1922.

16. Ibid. October 18, 1922.