

Diálogo on the Border

Planning for Latino Communities in South Texas

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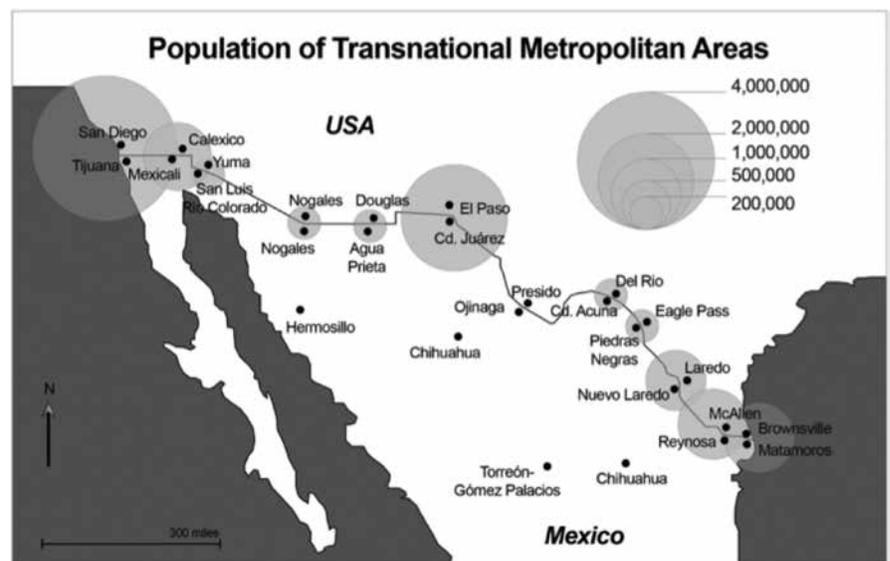
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ANTI-IMMIGRANT PROPAGANDA in the United States focuses on the US-Mexico border as a forbidding space to be heavily fortified. A *Diálogo on the Border* (dialogue in Spanish) was organized in 2013 to bring together – under the umbrella of planning – a number of organizations and individuals from the border region and outside the area to discuss current issues facing border communities. Here we attempt to present the main lessons learned on how to facilitate meaningful public dialogue with and between people living on the border. This can be an antidote to the views of the border as a hostile space.

The Need for *Diálogo*

The border planning debate is partially a reflection of demographic change. Between 2000 and 2011, the Latino population in the U.S. increased by 48%, and currently comprises about 17% of the country's population. Some regions, however, are increasingly populated by this ethnic group; the U.S.-Mexico border region, for example, is more than 70% Latino. Yet Latino planners represent less than 3% of all membership within the American Planning Association (APA).

Another element that fuels the



2010 Population of major transnational metropolitan areas on the U.S.-Mexico Border.

Source: Geo-Mexico, 2011

border planning debate is the relatively newly built physical barrier. With the passing of the Secure Fence Act of 2006, the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate commissioned the Department of Homeland Security to construct a fence to divide and, it is argued, protect the U.S. along the nearly 2,000 mile border with Mexico. This sharp divide raises many issues.

Diálogos, a 2005 initiative of the Latinos and Planning Division of the American Planning Association, strives to advance an agenda of inclusion through bottom-up channels of communication. The ultimate goal is to learn about the main issues affecting Latino communities. Several *diálogos* have been organized in the country by local communities. They originally focused on two overarching inquiries: What are the biggest planning challenges facing Latino communities? And what are the biggest challenges facing Latino planners?

The *Diálogo on the Border* has been the largest of these events to date, expanding the model's original scope and focusing specifically on border issues. It took place in Brownsville, Texas, a border city that has witnessed a transformation of identity as the building of a border wall reinforced its edge. Bringing the *Diálogo* to the border was an attempt to define and understand the "in-betweenness" that is embodied by the political, cultural and geographical transition of edge places. Some of the planning challenges for the border metro areas include issues of economic deprivation, urban growth, increased population, migration, border security and bi-national mobility.

Case Study: *Diálogo* on the Border in Brownsville

The *Diálogo on the Border* took place over two-days in April of 2013, and was sponsored by Texas A&M University, the University of Texas at Brownsville, and Texas Southmost College. The event drew over a hundred participants representing the disciplines of planning, architecture, engineering and construction management. It also drew elected city officials, participants from agencies and institutions from the local, state, national and international level, and involved community members and students from local high schools, the community college and universities. While the *Diálogo*



Border Wall in Downtown Brownsville, Texas.

model was originally designed to be a tool for planners to identify the most pressing issues for Latino communities, this event for the South Texas Border asked:

- How can planning cross disciplines, cultural borders and linguistic borders?
- What are the most pressing issues facing border areas and which should be prioritized?
- Who is involved now and who else should be involved in addressing these issues?

The *Diálogo* followed a traditional conference format with expert presentations followed by Q&A sessions, breakout workshops and keynote speaker sessions. One key concern organizers expressed was that a short interaction would not allow for the degree of trust that enables mutually enhanced learning. As a result, The *Diálogo* aimed to surpass the traditional conference by adding several novel strategies: the organizers did not put restrictions on the topics or techniques and insisted on providing an open platform for expression of local ideas and best practices. The organizers also actively reached out to include local stakeholders without restricting participation on the basis of age, occupation or academic affiliation. These yielded a wider, more diverse range of voices.

Three types of participatory techniques were applied.

Expert presentations followed by dialogue, question and answer were effective when the issues discussed were stripped of academic rhetoric. The audience was more willing to relate to the experiences of public

officials and researchers when they openly presented their fears and failures in planning at the local level. Giving the audience an opportunity to react was key.

High-tech tools for planning engagement proved to be difficult in convincing the audience of the strength of general applications due to potential technical failures.

Hands-on workshops as dialogue-stimulating mechanisms were the most effective tool to break the ice.

We argue that a fourth technique, the act of *listening*, served as the underlying tool for engaging the audience in a discussion of planning issues. Perceived challenges in engaging hard-to-reach populations are prevalent in the planning literature. In the case of the border, being able to engage local residents is typically a challenge as there is a stigma of authority and fear of persecution by local residents. The *Diálogo* model, however, showed that it is indeed possible to reach them, allowing people who would otherwise not be in the same room to connect and learn about each other's perspectives.

A number of crossovers resulted in rich discussions about what it means to plan for the border. Through these interactions we saw a shift in the perception of the place after an individual interacted or was exposed to the role of others in the room. The work of Dr. Manuel Medrano and his students at the University



Photo: Edna Ledesma, 2013

Local Brownsville residents participating in James Rojas' *Place It!* Workshop on Placemaking.

of Texas at Brownsville is one example. The "Los Abuelitos Project," an oral history project, asked students to interview their grandparents in an attempt to capture the unrecorded histories of Mexican Americans of the region. Video excerpts that were presented brought a number of participants to tears, as many could relate to similar anecdotes in their families. Collecting these individual stories into a larger shared narrative helped planners see the connections and the potential of their work to promote social justice.

Lessons Learned: Critique and Limitations

The biggest lesson learned was the power of approaching planning from a humanist dimension. It was only after people were able to relate to issues of self-motivation, validation and civic pride that we experienced a shift in open engagement. We attribute this to the diversity of people, the range in the discussion topics and the sequencing of the events. Through the dialogues, five key themes were revealed, representing the role of planning and development on the border:

- (1) the human experience,
- (2) cultural legacy,
- (3) placemaking,
- (4) public-private-community partnerships and
- (5) economic revitalization.

South Texas Latinos are predominately of Mexican heritage. Many believe that this heritage, for a long time, has influenced the local political environment to be generally male dominated, aristocratic and corrupt. As a result, there has been a general tendency to disengage from the politics of local planning. South Texas, however, is at a turning point. In recent years, the planning environment has witnessed an increased transparency in local government and an evolution of the role of community development and social welfare. The post-recession era has seen a resurgence of grassroots movements that address issues such as the need for affordable housing and local economic development. Additionally, the area has seen an influx

of regional, state, and national NGOs that aim to alleviate local disparities by working hand-in-hand with local governments.

The *Diálogo* gave local municipalities an opportunity to share their cross-sector partnerships in ongoing efforts for community development. Out of these interactions emerged a cross-pollination of ideas influencing change in planning policy for other municipalities. For example, efforts by the city of Harlingen to preserve and revitalize their historic downtown, presented at the *Diálogo*, influenced the City of Brownsville to appoint a local planner from the city that participated at the *Diálogo* as the new chief heritage officer. The representative remains in a dialogue with Harlingen to learn from their work and strengthen Brownsville's historic districts.

Part of the impact that progressive processes for participatory planning such as the *Diálogo* have on communities like South Texas is that they are vehicles to facilitate dialogue between the community and those in positions of power. They are vehicles that help foster transparency and have begun to change planning politics at the local level.

A *Diálogo* is one in a series of many necessary steps for inducing change in planning. In the context of South Texas, change began with a shift in the psychology of political activism in the planning field. While the *Diálogo* provided a platform for conversations, one critique of this model is the need for improved continuity. The impact of the process is highly reliant on local momentum. Therefore, the *Diálogo* model needs to evolve to include a feedback loop and follow up sessions. It is crucial to begin the conversation, but the need to follow through on set agendas that arise through these conversations is an important aspect of – a survey of sorts – of what they have to bring to the table. The dual exposure of academics to local stakeholders and stakeholders to best practices helped steer the planning policy conversation forward. The engagement of local residents stimulated a sense of empowerment in students and community activists, but a larger and more diverse representation of the local voices should be involved. A significant impediment to the active involvement of groups is the language barrier.

The use of visual communication during the workshops focused on allowing the participants to work with their hands during the planning dialogues as a means to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. This was a key lesson for how to broadly communicate the language of planning to constituents of all professional ranges. The event participants were predominantly bilingual. While the *Diálogo* was run in English, Spanish was not excluded from the conversation; however we later recognized that this planning model must include bilingual discourse and an integration of Spanish into the conversation. Informal translations for Spanish-only speakers were facilitated but greater language crossover is necessary.

The *Diálogo* Continues

In the end, the goal of prioritizing issues of development on the border was not directly achieved, as it is challenging to address broad planning issues and achieve a high degree of resolution from a single event. The aim was not to arrive at solutions but to provide a platform for discussion of key issues. Although change is happening post-*Diálogo*, it is difficult to assess if the discussions that began in the *Diálogo* are the sole contributors in stimulating changes in the planning process for Brownsville.

Planning for Latinos in the United States means breaking conventions of traditional plan-making processes. An integrated community needs to build trust, relationships and respect even though distinct stakeholders might have competing interests. The *Diálogo on the Border* intended to bring diversity to the table not to make a plan but to have a conversation about what people of the border do well, what they want to improve upon, and how to build partnerships for building a stronger border community. Ultimately, the *Diálogo* revealed an important lesson for bottom-up approaches to planning for Latinos in the United States: the key to connecting with communities on the border is to integrate human experiences into the planning discourse. **P²**