MEMORIES AND MIGRATIONS

Mapping Boricua & Chicana Histories

Edited by
Vicki L. Ruiz and John R. Chávez
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2. *La Placita Committee:*

*Claiming Place and History*

One day in April 1967, Alva Torres unexpectedly became a historical preservationist in her hometown of Tucson, Arizona. During the course of a routine schedule that revolved around her three children, she ran into an elderly Rodolfo Soto. They were related by marriage and their families had known each other for generations. Like many established families whose labor had built the desert city, both Torres and Soto referred to themselves as *tucsonenses.* Soto possessed a keen knowledge of history, and, in fact, descended from one of the city's founding families who had inhabited the Spanish presidio in the late eighteenth century. Noticing his distress, Torres approached Soto with concern and in the hope of providing comfort. He lamented to Torres, "Ay, Alvita, como estoy triste de lo que están haciendo en el centro" ("I am saddened about what they are doing downtown"). Torres asked, "¿Por qué, Señor?" ("Why, Mr. Soto?"). "Porque se les va a olvidar donde empezó el pueblo, se les va olvidar todo. Están tumbando La Placita, y el Barrio Libre y no se van a acordar de nosotros y nadie le va importar" ("Because they are going to forget Tucson's origins, they are going to forget everything. They are tearing down La Placita and Barrio Libre and nobody's going to remember us and nobody's going to care"). Caught off guard, but feeling compassion for her lifelong friend, Torres consoled Soto and assured him that his fears were unwarranted.

A coalition of local boosters and elected officials initiated the transformation of the downtown area. It came under the guise of a national
La Placita Committee

policy of urban renewal. This approach radically changed the physical and social landscape in Tucson and in cities across the United States. Urban ethnic communities became targets for eradication in an era that proposed to improve poor people's quality of life by destroying their communities. In 1966 Tucson voters approved Arizona's first urban renewal project, the Pueblo Center Redevelopment Project. The centerpiece would be a new civic center complex, the Tucson Community Center (TCC). Designed to be close to downtown, construction of this new expansive structure required that the city's oldest barrio be destroyed. Most Tucson residents knew this area as Barrio Libre, or simply as el barrio.

Torres's conversation with Soto kept resurfacing, and soon she too began to feel Soto's panic and sense of loss. She felt that something needed to be done to prevent the destruction of Mexican American space in a city where Sonoran culture had always thrived. Torres began to question the motives that underscored urban renewal policy and "the city's attempt to show that an area was devastated, [to] get their hands on money and build a community center." Unfortunately, by this time much of the barrio had already been destroyed. City officials had already relocated most of the residents and destroyed most the area's homes and businesses. The only site that remained intact, and which Torres considered irreplaceable, was the area known as La Placita. It, like numerous plazas throughout the Southwest, symbolized revered historical and spiritual communal space. Infused with memories and cultural meanings, it represented the intersection of place, community, and identity to much of the tucsonense community. As the focal point and public square of the barrio for close to one hundred years, it fostered deep feelings of belonging in Tucson. La Placita also continually reminded tucsonenses of their long history in the area.

Alva Torres calls her conversation with Soto and her revelations regarding urban renewal's agenda her "baptism with fire." She changed her entire life and vowed to devote all her time and efforts to saving La Placita. Torres came to understand that the loss of tangible evidence that testified to and confirmed a long history of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the area would ultimately distort historical memory. Alva Torres initiated a public battle not only to save a place, but to preserve an essential part of southern Arizona history. At the core of the debate lay the fate of an aging Tucson landmark. An examination of historical preservation efforts to save La Placita provides insight into crucial issues of conflicting visions of the past that Tucson residents wished to celebrate and the future they hoped to construct. The Society for the Preservation of Tucson's Plaza de la Mesilla, known as the La Placita Committee, a
group composed mostly of women, emerged to challenge the cultural arrogance that lay at the heart of urban renewal policies. Led and organized by Torres, the committee waged a battle over space and memory. This grassroots organization, armed with their collective memory of the past, rallied for social change. Mexican American women's voices appealed for the right of tucsonenses to control public space and history.

Historical preservationists such as the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association have long been recognized as the traditional women's historic preservationists. An examination of the La Placita Committee, a Mexican American historical preservationist movement that contested the possibility of being forgotten, or further marginalized, complicates historians' understanding of layered claims to space. The historical preservationist movement demanded that Mexican and Mexican American contributions be recognized and that tucsonenses' collective connection to the past also be openly acknowledged. Like women from the DAR, the committee recognized the need for the public sites that testified to their, and the barrio's, significance in history and to the area's development. The power of place, which historian Dolores Hayden calls "shared time in the form of shared territory," formed the glue that bonded La Placita Committee members as they rallied to gain support. Their history, however, was one that urban renewal advocates hoped to minimize. It challenged the local narrative that highlighted Anglo Americans, dude ranching, military exploits that triumphed over Apaches, and cowboys. An examination of the committee's actions, recorded minutes from their meetings, and public statements indicate that they recognized the importance of historic representations to identity formation and to the construction of positive or demeaning perceptions of Mexican people. In this case, they demanded that a slice of history that highlighted their ancestors' extensive tenure in southern Arizona be preserved. Despite bureaucratic obstacles, and lack of institutional support, the La Placita Committee claimed a dignified place for Mexican Americans in the local and national imaginary.

In the politics of place, La Placita Committee's activism recognized and appreciated the importance of communal space in cultivating and maintaining the social networks that strengthened the ethnic cohesiveness of tucsonenses. In an era of burgeoning social movements, the committee recognized the importance of community space for civic identity and potential political mobilization. That they chose to stage a battle over La Placita denotes an astute political consciousness. The committee did not seek to save a site associated with a famous person, but concentrated instead on a place recognized by tucsonenses as important shared
public space. These grassroots historical preservationists understood the dangers that underscored urban renewal directives, which could foster a sense of "placelessness" in future generations. Historian David Glassberg delineates the link between place and identity that underscores the importance of the past. He argues that "a sense of history locates us in society, with the knowledge that helps us gain a sense of with whom we belong, connecting our personal experiences and memories with those of a larger community, region, and nation."12

Urban planners, however, had designed a major thoroughfare to traverse and destroy the plaza area. The Pueblo Center Redevelopment Project not only called for the destruction of the old placita, but also proposed to replace it with a multimillion-dollar new La Placita Village. According to the approved plans, this modern concrete shopping, office, and restaurant complex would best complement the city's new vision and its celebrated civic center. Although city officials framed their project as a "community effort" designed to benefit all Tucson residents, their actions suggest that they deemed the barrio a local eyesore. Boosters and city officials hoped to infuse the former "slum" with Anglo American culture. In contrast to the barrio's distinctive ethnic ambiance, urban renewal proponents envisioned their project as creating a new place "where singers, athletes, Boy Scouts, square dance people and others can come."13

La Placita, initially known as La Plaza de la Mesilla, dates back to the Mexican period. In the mid-nineteenth century, early Anglo American newcomers desired the presidio area, and they began to take over this coveted space. Displaced tucsonenses began to establish homes and business southward in the direction of La Placita and toward Barrio Libre. The exact date of La Plaza de la Mesilla origins remains uncertain, but it appeared in the first map of Tucson commissioned by Major Fergusson of the Union Army in 1862, only six years after the final evacuation of Mexican troops. After the Tratado de la Mesilla, better known as the Gadsden Purchase, which made southern Arizona part of the United States, this plaza became the social hub of tucsonenses, who represented the majority population until the turn of the century. It also marked the final stop of a wagon trail route that connected Tucson to Mesilla, New Mexico. Typically, La Plaza de la Mesilla marked the end of the trail that drew people to the area to meet passengers, hear the latest news, gossip, and speculate why each new arrival had chosen the desert town as their destination.14 Transportation advancements, first the railroad, and later the automobile, eventually brought hundreds of thousands of people to Tucson. These newcomers' insistence on simulating their former social and physical environments dramatically transformed southern Arizona.
Around 1863 the rapidly displaced tucsonense community desired and felt the need for a new church in their newly established neighborhood. This inspired them to construct one in La Plaza de la Mesilla, on present-day Broadway and Church Streets. Firmly committed to the project, wealthier tucsonenses provided the funds, but the faithful of all classes helped build the new church. According to Ana María Comadurán Coenen, "After each morning’s religious services the community made the adobes. . . . The entire church was built by the people of the parish.” Anastasia Santa Cruz Hughes adds more detail and remembers that “the men made the adobes and the women carried water in ollas on their heads for the mixing of the adobe dirt. The finished adobes were also carried by women, who fashioned a ring of cloth and placing it on their heads, placed the adobes on it and carried it to the men, building the walls.” This San Agustín Church, named after Tucson’s patron saint, was completed along with an adjacent school by 1868. The open courtyard or plaza that stood in front of the church became known as La Plaza de San Agustín after the newly erected church and in time became recognized simply as La Placita. Many small, Mexican-owned and -operated businesses that catered to the Mexican American community arranged themselves around the perimeter of the church’s plaza. Most notably, it denoted a unique place that tucsonenses created to encourage face-to-face exchanges and a space to celebrate their Sonoran traditions, particularly as they experienced hardship and downward mobility due to the growing Anglo American presence.

Most of Tucson’s major celebrations took place in La Placita. The yearly celebrations of Tucson’s patron saint, San Agustín, lasted for more than two weeks. Anthropologist Thomas Sheridan describes this festival as beginning with a mass at the church, “followed by a procession around the church plaza, the old plaza de la Mesilla. . . . It was Tucson’s celebration of its Catholic heritage, its rural heritage, and above all, its Mexican heritage.” He also asserts that San Agustín festivals died out in the early part of the twentieth century when “a part of Tucson’s Sonoran soul died.” Sheridan overstates his observation because tucsonenses have always remained closely affiliated with Sonora. He also overlooks the importance of memory and the strength of the oral tradition within the Mexican American community. A festival of this magnitude, and the old church itself, continued to be remembered by subsequent generations of tucsonenses, and it became one the main motivating factors that inspired and fueled the La Placita Committee’s historical preservation efforts.

After becoming a part of the United States, southern Arizona also fell under the command of the Diocese of Santa Fe. Catholic Church officials
increasingly took control and decided that "the old church ceased to serve its community." Father Peter Bourgade sold the old church after a new cathedral, St. Augustine's Cathedral, currently located on Stone Avenue, had been built. In 1898 the old church became the San Augustine Hotel and eventually deteriorated to a brothel. The old San Agustín Church was demolished in 1936. When Frank C. O'Rielly, the last owner of the property, was asked what was to be done with the remaining stones, he replied "Dump them into the nearest bank of the [nearby] Santa Cruz River." In the coveted downtown, La Placita that symbolized a Mexican past posed a problem for mid-twentieth-century boosters. In order to justify urban renewal, city leaders increasingly began to construe the barrio as a dangerous place that had deserved to be obliterated for decades. These boosters believed concrete and steel high-rises represented a contemporary city and considered the barrio's Sonoran architecture and its large tucsonense population in the midst of an urban environment as belonging to an earlier era. Boosters identified themselves and their visions as forward-looking ones that exemplified progress and used urban renewal as an opportunity to solidify the city's identification as an "American" place. In turn, they sought to raze a community that conflicted with the imagery and notions associated with a cowboy fantasy heritage. They encouraged entertainment, excursions, and a lifestyle based on an exaggerated and manufactured western past. This resulted in the proliferation of dude ranches, a rodeo extravaganza, and the creation of Old Tucson: The Motion Picture Locations and Sound Stage. Established by Columbia Pictures in 1939 for the filming of "Arizona," the studio intended to "build a replica of the real Tucson of the 1860s." It incorporated a masculinist viewpoint typical of the cowboy fantasy heritage. In the studio's imagined past, "If you weren't a dangerous hombre or a shopkeeper, you probably became a rancher." This movie set and the films that it produced never presented a realistic portrayal of the area. In 1860, before Arizona received territorial status, fewer than one thousand people lived in Tucson. The 168 Anglo American residents at that time composed less than 20 percent of the population, and Mexican Americans still composed the majority population, numbering 653 residents.

Increasingly, after the beginning of the twentieth century, various booster organizations actively became invested in revising negative perceptions of the city, particularly recurring claims that the area was too "Mexican," or "backward" and "uncivilized" evident in various stages of the state's development. In 1931 a local newspaper article titled "Good bye America—hello Mexico" alluded to crossing the international border, but only metaphorically. Instead, the article highlighted
what boosters had long tried to conceal, that steps away from downtown
thrived Meyer Street, the barrio’s main commercial fairway where “the
same sensations . . . are felt [as] when crossing the International line at
Nogales. Geographically we may be still in the United States; but in
every sight and sound and every varied impression we’re in the heart
of old Mexico. As we proceed down this bizarre old world rialto we re­
alize that we have left the land of the hot dog for the land of the chile
corned; the land of the go-getter for the land of mañana [sic]. . . . And
to think that America is up there, a block away on Congress street.”27
Promotional literature frequently referred to Tucson as “the gateway to
Old Mexico,” but advertisements carefully situated the city as uncondi­
tionally American, free of any Mexican influences.28 Boosters committed
themselves to the concept of a “gateway” because it clearly outlined the
geopolitical boundaries that placed Tucson on the American side of the
“gate” while also heightening the distinction between a modern city and
conditions in Mexico. An examination of the tourist industry literature
indicates that boosters, in collaboration with city officials, manipulated
ethnocentric and nationalistic ideas of Mexican “backwardness,” stasis,
and poverty as a construct to highlight the “Americanness,” modernity,
and prosperity of the city. Ideas advanced by boosters and historians re­
veal the cultural assumptions shared by local economic and intellectual
elites. Historian Matthew Frye Jacobson argues that “public images and
expressions [have] the power to articulate and to influence racial concep­
tions.” An examination of boosters’ tactics reveals that they did more
than manipulate images and silences. They also used “race [as] a kind
of social currency” and selectively sought to recruit a certain race and
class of people, in this case moneyed European Americans, to the city.29
The actions of the boosters and urban renewal advocates demonstrated a
refusal to recognize Mexico and Mexican-origin people as vital members
of society and of its history.

Their biggest problem, however, derived from the fact that Mexi­
can Americans in Tucson refused to disappear or to appear only when
summoned. Tucsonenses not only claimed the barrio and La Placita as
their space, they also claimed the popular downtown area. Inevitably,
tourists ventured to the city’s central business district and witnessed
for themselves the large tucsonense presence. Reducing these types of
encounters required more than sophisticated misrepresentations in local
cultural productions. It required the eradication of the barrio. Urban re­
newal forced a large number of tucsonenses to relocate away from the
downtown area and destroyed irreplaceable historical cultural spaces in
the late 1960s. In their quest to “rehabilitate” the city’s image, however,
local leaders wielded substantial power to transform the urban landscape but encountered unexpected resistance in their attempts to destroy a vital Mexican American landmark, La Placita.

As the focal point of the barrio, the La Placita area defied and inverted the local economic and social hierarchy. Since its inception, it emerged and remained the barrio’s main commercial and ceremonial center for more than one hundred years. La Placita and its surrounding businesses provided tangible evidence of a place that survived and thrived because of the Mexican people’s patronage, solidarity, and loyalty. The bandstand, or kiosk, which sat at the center of the plaza, was added in the 1950s. On the perimeter of the plaza stood the Belmont Hotel, El Charro Restaurant, Ronquillo’s Bakery and El Edificio de Piedra (the stone building that housed some small shops), Rosequist Gallery, Zepeda Shoe Shop, and Half-Moon Chinese Food—all operational in 1967. This space projected Mexican American success and entrepreneurship. The La Placita Committee tried not only to save the kiosk and the plaza, but also prioritized saving the surrounding businesses. They urged city officials to preserve the older structures and surviving businesses instead of destroying them. No other area in Tucson served as a focal point for Mexican and Mexican American culture, history, and economic advancement as did La Placita. (See figure 2.1.)

The desire to defend Mexican American space and memory compelled Alva Torres to take action. The media had openly debated and discussed the urban renewal issue, but Torres remained unaffected. At first, she trusted the city’s press campaign that affirmed that preserving historically significant sites was an integral part of the urban renewal agenda. Unfamiliar with politics, Torres claims that her family responsibilities kept her too busy to notice the changes and destruction occurring in the city’s oldest sections of downtown. Torres, however, had strong ties to the barrio. While Anglo Americans painted the barrio as a place to fear, Torres never felt afraid and often shopped and socialized with family and friends who lived in the barrio. Before her marriage, she had worked at Lyric Outfitters, a clothing store, on Meyer Street in the barrio. Torres attended local schools and graduated from high school in 1950. She also married Arthur Torres, an electrician, that same year. Unusual for Mexican Americans of her generation, Torres attended the University of Arizona and received a two-year liberal arts degree. She lived in the Armory Park area a few blocks from the barrio for decades before she became a political activist. She also belonged to a Mexican American women’s social club that had met in the barrio since she was fifteen. When I interviewed her, she recalled the numerous fiestas at La Placita, noting that she often coordinated booths for her club there. These
fiestas meant more than fun; they strengthened personal and community bonds. Tucsonenses, and all Tucson residents, celebrated feast days of the saints, Mexican Independence, and the Fourth of July, but they mostly celebrated themselves. Torres had always considered the barrio a vital part of Tucson, and La Placita indispensable.32

Sociologist Mary S. Pardo defines grassroots activism as that which “happens at the juncture between larger institutional politics and people’s daily experiences. Women play a central role in the often unrecorded politics at this level.”33 It is not surprising that the most visible and effective resistance to urban renewal arose from the leadership of an inexperienced activist from the Mexican American community. Torres combined the private role of mother with the more public role of social and political activist.

With no prior experience in local politics or personal knowledge of dealing with city hall, Alva Torres approached the issue in a rather naïve and improvisational fashion. She first approached Bill Mathews, the editor of the local newspaper, the Arizona Daily Star, because Torres
La Placita Committee

felt he wielded substantial power. Torres recalls that Mathews was not particularly friendly, but he listened while she outlined her new mission. She proposed that “instead of destroying everything, why not at least save La Placita?” He informed her that a group called the St. Augustine’s Placita Committee or St. Augustine Committee was already in place to deal with concerns about that area. Mathews suggested that Torres talk to Don Laidlaw, the chief urban renewal officer at city hall. Recognizing Torres’s status as a political neophyte, he advised her to “tell him Bill Mathews sent you.” Without Mathews’s referral, Torres felt that Laidlaw would have ignored her. 34

As 1966 came to a close, Laidlaw felt that the proposed new La Placita Village’s objectives “appeared satisfactory to all concerned,” but a few months later, in May 1967, he met Alva Torres. At that meeting she outlined her ideas for La Placita. He later recalled this meeting in a memorandum: “She stated her understanding that the hour was late, but she added that she was determined to make every effort to see that certain other objectives were achieved . . . to retain substantially the same street pattern and almost all the buildings. . . . She stated that this was the Tucson Mexicans knew and stated further her belief that the area should be preserved more or less as it is.”35 At that meeting Laidlaw informed Torres for a second time that a committee already existed to deal with La Placita, and he suggested that Torres meet with the St. Augustine Committee. Torres recognized that she was “getting the runaround,” but the fear of impending bulldozers and the understanding that La Placita’s days were numbered convinced her to set up a meeting with the St. Augustine Committee. 36

Torres expected bureaucratic obstacles in her initial efforts to save La Placita, but she never expected to encounter blatant discrimination, and on such a personal level as she did in her experiences with the St. Augustine Committee. She received a telephone call from “a very un receptive and patronizing” chairwoman of the St. Augustine Committee, Dorothy Haas, who questioned Torres’s motives. According to Torres, Haas attempted to discourage and discredit her by saying “Who are you to get involved? Where do you get the authority?” Caught off guard by the hostile manner and tone expressed in the phone call, Torres responded by saying, “I was born here, this is my town, I have as much right as anybody else and I think I have a good idea.” This dismissive conversation made Torres keenly aware of her outsider status. Ultimately, the St. Augustine Committee rejected Torres and denied her access to their meetings, although a handful of other Mexican Americans, primarily from the Tucson elite, served on the St. Augustine Committee. 37
St. Augustine Committee never attempted to implement any plan or to garner community support to save La Placita. Their strong affiliation with St. Augustine’s Church prevented them from challenging urban renewal, since the church benefited from the removal of older structures located adjacent to the cathedral. Indeed, the Catholic Diocese worked with the city in order to acquire 77,000 square feet to expand the cathedral and parochial school as part of the Pueblo Center Redevelopment Project. 38

Although Torres had been brought up Catholic, her grandfather, a Methodist minister, strongly influenced her. She often referred to herself as “Christian,” preferring a more inclusive religious identification. Born in 1932, a fourth-generation tucsonense, her maternal and paternal ancestors arrived in Tucson in the early nineteenth century. Her father’s family traced its origins not to Mexico, but to Peru. After living in Tucson for many generations, and marrying into a Mexican community with whom they shared an ethnic background, they considered themselves *mexicanos*. Although not from the elite, Alva Bustamante Torres was well connected in the Mexican American community, and these people recognized her as being from an old tucsonense family. In a time of crisis, she turned to her staunchest allies, her large network of family and friends. 39

Feeling powerless, but not defeated, Torres formed a prayer committee. She shared her and Soto’s concerns with her family and friends and convinced them to pray to persuade God to get involved in saving La Placita. It must be noted that many tucsonenses, like Torres, never forgot the relationship between La Placita and religion. In 1967 a Greyhound Bus Depot stood in place of the old San Agustín Church, but many still considered La Placita to be linked to a sacred place. This understanding eventually prompted the La Placita Committee to push to have a chapel built on the old church site. With no other tools, this prayer group of Mexican American women (most were Catholic, but several Methodists took part as well) formed what would become the core of the committee. Armed only with the inspiration derived from shared religious beliefs, these women prayed so that God would intervene and grant Torres strength and direction. 40

Hoping to find a solution, Torres walked around La Placita in the spring of 1967. It was at this point that she understood that she needed to organize more than a prayer group. Understanding the limits of individual effort and living in a political era that promised change, Torres consciously recognized the advantages of a collaborative and collective effort. She made numerous phone calls and visits to friends and family members. The first meeting of the Society for the Preservation of Tucson’s Plaza de la Mesilla took place in Torres’s home. According to
La Placita Committee

La Placita Committee

Torres, this group was never elitist or exclusive in its assumptions. Anyone interested in saving La Placita was welcome to join. Torres never consciously intended for the group to be principally Mexican American, but she invited people she knew, and since she associated with mostly tucsonenses they made up the bulk of the group. Although committee membership hovered at only twenty, they became the city’s most vocal and public critics of urban renewal.41

Many angry and resentful barrio residents forced to relocate did so grudgingly, but they remained silent. In 1997 Leticia Jacobs Fuentes remembered that “We saw it all go down. It was bad. I didn’t want to see it.... People weren’t very happy. They’d been there all their lives. It was quite a trauma for us, for everybody. .. We were a happy family there. We lost that neighborhood.”42 Many others also felt betrayed by a city that had masterminded the destruction of their community. As they witnessed the eradication of irreplaceable historic space, still others, like Rodolfo Soto, harbored private feelings of fear, loss, anger, and disappointment. He, like many, shared these sentiments with like-minded or sympathetic ears, as he did with Torres. These nonconfrontational behaviors and sentiments characterize what James C. Scott calls “hidden transcripts.” He describes them as a “critique of power,” a “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders.”43 In this distressed and dislocated community, Alva Torres broke the silence and voiced a previously veiled but heartfelt discourse.

Grounded in resentment and feelings of powerlessness, Torres turned the hidden transcripts into a public issue. City officials called for a special meeting in 1967 to address “the situation ... [because a] good deal of controversy is being generated over the questions of preserving La Placita.” The “situation” they referred to was Torres’s La Placita Committee. This underscores the committee’s effectiveness in contesting urban renewal’s designs and its efforts to raise the public’s awareness of the changes taking place downtown. Torres came to understand that the erasure of Mexican American space and history amounted to blatant historical misrepresentation, and that many in Tucson as well as future generations would suffer the cultural consequences of this exclusion. Through her leadership and actions, the preservationist concerns of many tucsonenses finally found public expression.44

The committee employed a personal approach to reach the community. They sent invitations to influential officials and friends announcing the dates of forthcoming meetings. Invitations read, “We hope to make a coordinated community effort to preserve this historic area in Tucson and would appreciate an opportunity to discuss it with you at
this meeting.” The group’s secretary, Ann Montaño, personally signed each letter. It proved an effective strategy, for more than one hundred people attended a large community meeting at El Charro Restaurant on Friday, August 11, 1967.

It was unsurprising that the local papers, which had jumped on the urban renewal bandwagon, chose not to cover the activities of the La Placita Committee. The press even ignored this persistent and visible group of women who stood on various downtown street corners, gathering signatures in 100-degree-plus temperatures. They worked at street corners, at grocery stores, and at numerous gatherings during the hot summer months, gathering support and signatures. Asserting their right to petition and appeal to the state, they convinced a large number of Tucson residents to support their cause and demand that the city implement their plan designed to save the La Placita area. Altogether, they collected more than 8,000 signatures, mostly from Mexican Americans, evidence that the committee had significant backing from the community.

The committee’s demands are best outlined in its “Plan for the Preservation, Restoration and Uses of the Plaza de la Mesilla Area, within the Pueblo Center Redevelopment Area.” Committee members presented this plan in 1968 to the mayor and city council along with their petitions. The following summarizes the highlights of the four-page plan, which included complicated details on the subject of street boundaries. The La Placita Committee first demanded that the city declare the Plaza de la Mesilla area and its surrounding structures a “Historic Area for the City of Tucson, Arizona.” Second, it demanded that the city “provide for authentic restoration.” This demand specifically stated that only structures that dated back to the nineteenth century should be restored. Committee members always recognized the importance of religion to the area and called for the construction of an “inter-faith chapel” and museum in their plan. They insisted that the plaza remain an open area so that the festivals, celebrations, and public meetings would continue and that a “perpetual restriction against any buildings” be enforced. This plan mandated that only the kiosk, the new chapel, and museum be allowed in this open area. As part of the new construction, the committee requested that the city include a “750 seat theatre suitable for both movie and legitimate theatre productions in Spanish.”

The La Placita Committee insisted that its plan be “considered as a whole, a unified plan. . . . It must be added that it is critically important to save everything authentic in such a uniquely historic area, continuously successful for over 100 years.” As boldly as the committee outlined its plan, it was clear that it did not have the funds to take on or to even assist
in the rehabilitation of the old structures. The committee's intent was to make its demands known, get as many people as possible to support the plan, and force the city to adopt its proposals for La Placita. This was made clear in its "Plan for Restoration," which urged city officials "to explore fully all possibilities for the use of Federal, State and Foundational Funds available for historic restoration and development." This was not an improbable request, as city officials had enthusiastically supported, with substantial funding, the restoration of the "Fremont House," named after territorial governor John C. Frémont, an icon of western expansion and Manifest Destiny.

Torres's conviction that place shapes identity corresponds with the view of historian Dolores Hayden, who argues that "Identity is intimately tied to memory: both our personal memories (where we come from and where we have dwelt) and the collective or social memories interconnected with the histories of our families, neighbors, fellow workers, and ethnic communities." Urban renewal not only threatened to eradicate La Placita, but by this time had already obliterated the largest repositories of Mexican American memories, including the Alianza Hispano-Americana building. It had housed a prominent mutual-aid organization designed to help Mexican Americans as they increasingly lost economic and political power at the turn of the century. The Alianza began in Tucson and grew to be a national organization. The Alianza Hispano-Americana building, along with grocery stores and clothing stores—not to mention entire streets—disappeared, as did most of the barrio.

Part of the La Placita Committee's tactics consisted of a letter-writing campaign to influential politicians. In a letter to Congressman Morris Udall, Torres cited the indifference of local officials and identified the city's hidden agenda by stating, "It is not enough that many citizens of Mexican descent who have lived in the area for many years are being relocated and being caused some financial hardships since most are pensioners, but it appears to us that the main effort is to destroy once and for all any identification with the Mexican-American community."

Various tucsonenses also wrote letters of support to the committee. Local supporter Irma Villa wrote that "for years it has been proven that people were supposed to be proud of their cultural background, but if symbols of this cultural background are destroyed in the name of progress there is very little that the people of today and our future generations have to be proud of. There are many instances in our history where some of the greatest cultures became extinct because the very symbols of this great culture were destroyed in the name of progress. A very good example is what happened to the great Aztec culture."
Despite community criticism, the city refused to deviate from its blueprints. Alva Torres summed up the situation by stating, "The problem at heart centers around the alignment of a street." With the help of an architect, the committee devised an alternative route for Broadway that would circumvent the La Placita area. This plan required that the location of the proposed new hotel for the civic center be modified. Torres continued to insist that if Broadway were moved only "ten feet to the north," most of the plaza would be saved and a new chapel could be built on the site where the old San Agustín Church once stood.

Since their inception, Tucson's urban renewal plans called for a special retail complex that stressed "quality development" in contrast to the old placita. City-approved plans described the new La Placita Village as "retail specialty shops, personal or business service establishments, offices, art exhibits and sales including on premises creation of artifacts and handicrafts, restaurants and places serving food and drink." In response to the committee's proposal, city officials insisted that "the street pattern as presently designed is necessary to meet requirements for vehicular and pedestrian safety." These considerations took precedence over community concerns and preserving Tucson history.

Increasingly, city officials stipulated that the La Placita Committee come up with and shoulder a fiscal plan that would pay the costs of restoring and bringing the older buildings up to code. This placed an immense financial burden on Torres and the committee. After endless meetings with unresponsive city officials, the committee made a major concession by agreeing that "If Broadway MUST transverse the original Plaza site, then the street should be moved further North, if at all possible and certainly no further South." This dramatic shift marks the committee's understanding that the city would not deviate from its proposed plan. Coincidentally, Torres, the main force behind the La Placita Committee, began to be plagued with health problems. Despite the support garnered by the committee, the inflexibility of urban renewal officials on the location of Broadway, and the city's refusal to shoulder any fiscal responsibility for restoration caused the committee to abandon its plan. Overwhelmed, committee members increasingly pursued a strategy to preserve as much of the plaza area as possible. La Placita Committee's intervention, however, did result in the preservation of a small triangular patch of green grass where Congress and Broadway Streets intersect, which still exists. Torres calls it the "most attractive area downtown" in stark contrast to the surrounding concrete buildings. The committee's activism and intervention also forced the city to agree to leave the kiosk in the original spot where it stood in the old La Placita. The kiosk also
La Placita Committee

contrasts with the new La Placita Village because it looks old and its authenticity visually marks it as different from the surrounding structures. Moreover, some of the businesses, such as Ronquillo's Bakery, that stood near La Placita received assistance from the city to move to a new location. As she looks back on her struggle for historic preservation, Torres laments, "It hurts my feelings that when things come up [about historical preservation] they do not mention us. There is no permanent record of us. It is too painful. I think we failed. We were successful in making urban renewal a public issue. But we were not able to preserve [the] environment that made La Placita special, and we should have been able to save it." Torres's use of the "we" indicates that she spoke for the Mexican American community. (See figure 2.2.)

The intense energy Alva Torres put into the petition drive and into saving La Placita eventually made her physically ill. When it came time to submit the petitions to the mayor and city council, Torres could not attend because she was hospitalized. She never completely recovered from the battle to save La Placita. Even after her health forced her retreat, the demolition of each additional structure caused her great pain. As Torres recalls, "It was as if they were killing one of my kids."60

La Placita Village, a $10.2 million, three-acre complex that included 200,000 square feet of new office, shop, cinema, and restaurant space on five levels, "decorated in an authentic Southwest style," opened on May 3, 1974. Mariachis wandered through the new complex, as did jazz musicians, barbershop quartets, and clowns. If the defeat of La Placita Committee and the destruction of most of La Placita failed to remind those Tucsonenses who attended of their "place" or "historical erasure," then the staged conquest reenactments did. According to press reports the "highlight of the day was the re-enactment of the arrival in old Tucson of the Mormon battalion on December 16, 1846 [conquering forces that arrived during the U.S.–Mexican War], . . . [and] wandering throughout the sun-drenched La Placita for several hours were the authentically garbed Tucson Mountain Men showing interested groups what was worn by the stalwart explorers who first brought the sound of the English language to what is now Pima County."61

In the end, similar development projects designed to level large areas and displace communities could never happen again in Tucson as a result of La Placita Committee's activism. Members of the committee eventually forced the mayor to create a Tucson Historic Committee. The former "outsiders" lobbied for a place on the Tucson Historic Committee from its inception, eventually becoming "insiders" who affected local policy.63 Alva Torres served on this committee for six years. The roots of the
Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission, which currently remains an active and powerful voice in historical preservation matters, can be traced back to the efforts of Torres and the La Placita Committee. In 1972 committee members pushed forward and passed the Historic Zone Ordinance that currently protects older structures from destruction and dramatic alterations. Today, the kiosk that once graced La Placita, El Tiradito, and the Sosa-Carrillo-Fremont and Samaniego Houses, among others, have Arizona Historical markers that mention Mexican American
La Placita Committee

contributions to local history. Alva Torres claims that she insisted that the text on all historical markers be in both English and Spanish.65

The La Placita Committee disbanded after most of its members became part of the Historic Committee, but they remained friends and potential allies in historical preservation issues. When El Tiradito (Tucson’s old wishing shrine) stood in the path of the proposed freeway, they received telephone calls asking for help. Committee members joined the protests and helped guarantee the site’s survival. Some individual committee members also worked to save the home of a longtime and influential tucsonense family, the Samaniego House. Deservingly, Torres was selected as Woman of the Year by the Tucson Advertising Club in 1976. She was the first Mexican American woman to receive the award. Torres eventually became a journalist and wrote a popular weekly column in the 1980s for the local newspaper raising community concerns and issues. She also worked as director of the Legalization Amnesty program for the Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona and served on various charities and community boards. She remains a committed activist to this day, and in 2002 Torres received the YWCA’s Lifetime Achievement Award for Women Who Make Tucson Better.66

Representations of the past are important for how individuals and communities construct their present and envision their future. Alva Torres and most of the members of the La Placita Committee forged a common identity that centered on a shared investment in the past and hope for a more inclusive future. The culture, environment, and history that La Placita represented had shaped generations of tucsonenses, making it an important place in Chicana/o identity formation.67

Although Alva Torres and other members of the committee never self-identified as Chicana or Chicano, they formed an important and unrecognized component of the early development and ideology of the unfolding Chicana/o Movement. Historian Rodolfo Acuña argues that “by the late 1960s, there was no defined Chicana ideology. Nor was there a defined Chicano ideology for the total community. Anger and reaction to an unjust system, whether macro or micro, was being acted out. There was a call for Chicanismo that took on different meanings to different people. Generally, it meant pride of identity and self-determination.”68 Using this heterogeneous standard, the La Placita Committee’s historical preservation efforts embodied an unrecognized, but vital, component of Chicanismo.

Clearly, “pride of identity and self-determination” characterized the committee’s organizational ideology. This Chicana/o historical preservation movement challenged an urban renewal agenda intent on mar-
ginalizing and fragmenting the Chicana/o community and struggled to integrate Chicana/o history into the historical record and into Tucson’s public spaces. Members of the La Placita Committee never betrayed their roots, culture, or heritage. Their plan demanded that city officials embrace and celebrate their ethnicity, and they went as far as demanding the construction of a Mexican American museum.

Other than allowing the kiosk and some of the green area that surrounds it to remain, the new La Placita Village complex planners failed to include any major recommendations made by the La Placita Committee. The new complex turned out to be a commercial disaster and a virtual ghost town. According to Torres, “They cheated everybody and built something that for years did not make them money because they did not do it right. When you do something wrong it comes back to you and that’s what the city did. La Placita would have been a natural asset to the city. People could have come out and seen how the city once was. Our grandchildren and tourists would have loved it. It’s like we had a little diamond and we gave it away for a zirconium. I love Tucson, and the buildings are not the people, but they are part of a story that you try to save.” What remains of La Placita stands as testimony to Chicana/o resistance in the city’s quest for progress and represents a collective effort toward controlling space and self-determination.

Even after the La Placita Committee abandoned its plan, Torres continued to walk the area and monitor ongoing construction. In 1970, when another historic building again faced demolition, she wrote city officials a letter. Her words echo her extraordinary historical imagination and reveal why the city never felt invested in preserving the area: “It is the last remaining edifice in Tucson where many of us often went to enjoy ourselves with our loved ones. Not one other building standing in Tucson is of as much value in a non-monetary way as this one . . . . Personally I place a great value on intangibles. Intangibles are after all the only indestructible forces or energies left to us . . . . Please do not begin to measure in money what it would cost to restore the ‘El Charro’ building, otherwise you will probably give up . . . . In order to save an important spirit in the ‘Old Pueblo,’ first you must love it—if you do not, I doubt that anything I can say will make you want to save it.”

In 2002 the National Register of Historic Places, known as the “nation’s official list of cultural resources worthy of preservation,” lamented, “Considering the enormous impact that Hispanic culture has had upon the United States, especially in the Southwest, West, and lower Southeast, it is surprising to learn that Hispanic cultural heritage is under represented in the National Register.” Apparently, what occurred in Tucson
La Placita Committee took place throughout the Southwest because of urban renewal policy and ethnocentric historic preservation goals. As of 2002, of the 67,000 properties listed in the Registry, only 73 were nominated for representing "Hispanic ethnic heritage."73

Notes

1. Ethnic and racial classifications are often issues of contention. I use “Mexican” or “Sonoran” to refer to the strong cultural influences that forever will continue to transcend borders, endure, and flourish in the United States. Unless I am referring to the Mexican period in southern Arizona, I try to avoid referring to Mexican people simply as “Mexican(s).” Documents, oral interviews, and a variety of promotional literature indicate a strong Anglo American preference and persistence in classifying all Mexican people as “Mexicans,” regardless of citizenship status. Additionally, I use “Mexican people” to refer to the aggregate population of Mexican origin people, Chicanas/os, Mexican nationals, and those from earlier generations who may have identified as Spanish. I often use “Mexican people” and “tucsonenses” interchangeably. Ethnic Mexican Americans, some whose families had lived in southern Arizona before it became a part of the United States, and who claim Tucson as their home, then and now, refer to themselves as tucsonenses. A multilayered and linked relationship between region and ethnicity form the main constituents of this distinctive and unifying identity, which at the core denotes a strong historical, geographical, and cultural connection to Sonora. See Cynthia Radding, Wandering Peoples: Colonialism, Ethnic Spaces, and Ecological Frontiers in Northwestern Mexico, 1700–1850 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); and Thomas E. Sheridan, Los Tucsonenses: The Mexican Community in Tucson, 1854–1941 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986), for more on this regional identity. Tucsonans refers to all the people who live in Tucson.


4. Generally, the barrio destroyed in the late 1960s was known as Barrio Libre, although some former residents resented this label. Before urban renewal, this area, the city’s principal barrio, was simply called el barrio. For simplicity, I too will refer to it as such. Parts of an adjacent barrio called El Hoyo were also leveled. A small section of the barrio, south of 14th Street, still remains today and
is known as Barrio Histórico or Barrio Viejo. Currently, nearby South Tucson is increasingly being referred to as Barrio Libre by locals.

5. Torres interview.

6. According to Bonnie Newton, *Pueblo Center Redevelopment Project, 1967–1969* [Tucson: City of Tucson, Department of Community Development, Urban Renewal Division, 1969], 7–8, urban renewal destroyed a total of 269 structures, many of them multiple-occupancy dwellings and businesses. The “official” record indicates that the city managed to relocate “118 individual householders, 142 families, and 105 businesses.” This is a vast undercount, particularly since census records indicate that this was the most densely populated area in the city. Many barrio residents did not seek or refused relocation assistance for a variety of social and economic reasons.


8. Torres interview.

9. I use Susan A. Crane’s notions of collective memory and historical memory outlined in “Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory,” in *The American Historical Review*, December 1997. Crane defines collective memory as that which people remember, or their personal “lived experience.” Accordingly, historical memory is the “preservation of lived experiences” that are institutionally and professionally commemorated or remembered through museums, exhibits, texts, historical place markers, and the like. La Placita Committee members rallied to save a particular memory of Tucson. Collective memory inspired their activism. Likewise, what remains of La Placita in downtown Tucson has a historical marker denoting its historical significance. Newcomers gain knowledge, despite the severe limitations, from the information provided by commemorative inscription. This is an example of historical memory. I also refer readers to Iwona Irwin-Zecky’s *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* for a richer analysis of these discursive issues. She claims that “a ‘collective memory’—as a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past—is located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share.”


15. See Bernice Cosulich, “Chapel Was Important Part of Presidio: Established by Spaniards Here in 1776,” *Arizona Daily Star*, no date available, in Ephemera:


17. C. L. Sonnichsen, Tucson: The Life and Times of an American City (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 67–68. Note that there were many different churches, functional in different periods, named in honor of San Agustín in the Tucson area. The presidio’s full name was Presidio de San Agustín del Tucson. A small military chapel within the presidio was also called San Agustín. That Mexican people chose to build their new church within walking distance of their homes testifies to the marked racialized demographic shift taking place in the town. Built in 1896, the current St. Augustine’s Cathedral (note the Anglicized spelling) still stands at 192 South Stone Avenue and is the only remaining church with this name that has survived. Tucsonenses usually refer to it as “La catedral.”


21. Sheridan, Tucsonenses, 151 and 163. For example, my grandmother shared stories of the huge San Agustín festivals with my mother who in turn related the stories to me. During her interview, Torres also shared her recollections of the festivals with me. Many of La Placita Committee’s demands centered on incorporating and re-creating the area’s religious and festive past.


25. These statistics are garnered from Thomas E. Sheridan, Tucsonenses, 37
and Appendix A, 259–262. Although Sheridan is credited as the author, this book is the culmination of a larger local community effort of predominantly Mexican Americans who actively participated in recovering their history, called the Mexican Heritage Project, housed at the Arizona Historical Society.


30. Torres interview.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.


34. Torres interview.

35. Donald H. Laidlaw to Committee on Municipal Blight setting a meeting date of October 4, 1967, MS1134, Torres, Alva, box 2 of 4, f.17, Plaza de la Mesilla—Correspondence, 1967, Arizona Historical Society. This letter, written on City of Tucson letterhead, is not dated.

36. Torres interview.


38. Diocese of Tucson to Donald Laidlaw, December 21, 1967, in City of Tucson Archives, City Clerk, box 2 of 2, M/C History File, binder #5, Report on Planning Proposals, Code No. R-214. The church bought 77,000 square feet to locate a “diocesan structure on the land between Corral, Stone, McCormick and Convent Streets.”

39. Torres interview.

40. Ibid.

41. The following people, at one time or another, served as members of La Placita Committee: Alva and Arturo Torres, Ana Montaño, Viola Terrazas, Grace Esperon (acting chairman when Torres was unavailable), Carlitos Vásquez, Alberto Elias, Ruben Villaseñor, Aileen and Paul Smith, [Alva’s sister and brother-in-law] Julieta and Ernest Portillo, [Alva’s brother] Miguel Bustamante, Arturo Soto, Rodolfo Soto, [Arturo Torres’ brother] Alberto Torres, and Felizardo Valencia. The following people were listed as members on subsequent lists: David Herrera, Eddie Jacobs, Natalia Nieto Slana, Albert Montiel, Mr. Illeano, Tito Carrillo, Sybil Ellenwood, Louis Barassi, Cheto Valencia, Lorraine Aguilar, John Gabusi, Clarence Garett, Basilio Morrillo, Dr. and Mrs. Marrow, Dr. Floyd Thompson, Kieran McCarthy, and María Urquidez. Aileen Smith stands out because of the
strong relationship she forged with Alva Torres. She rallied endlessly for historical preservation and other social causes through La Placita Committee and in other groups through the city.


44. Laidlaw to COMB [undated], MS 1134, Arizona Historical Society; and Torres interview.

45. The letters read, “Members of the Society for the Preservation of Tucson’s Plaza de la Mesilla would like to extend a cordial invitation to you, and hopefully to several members of your group to attend a meeting.” Ann Montañó to Mrs. Walter Fathauer, August 30, 1967. MS 1134, Torres, Alva, box 2 of 4, f.17, Plaza de la Mesilla—Correspondence, 1967, Arizona Historical Society.


47. Torres interview.

48. From Society for the Preservation of Tucson’s Plaza de la Mesilla to the Honorable Mayor and Council of Tucson, Arizona. No date on document, but the petitions were presented to the mayor and council in September 1967. MS 1134, Torres, Alva, box 2 of 4, f.17, Plaza de la Mesilla—Correspondence, 1967, Arizona Historical Society.

49. Ibid.

50. I refer to the Fremont House in quotes because the territorial governor’s connection with the house continues to be matter of debate. It was renamed the Sosa-Carrillo-Fremont House in 1992.

51. Hayden, Power of Place, 9.

52. Undated letter, Alva Torres to Congressman Udall, MS 1134, Torres, Alva, box 2 of 4, f.17, Plaza de la Mesilla—Correspondence, 1967, Arizona Historical Society.


54. Undated letter, Alva Torres to Congressman Udall, MS 1134, Torres, Alva, box 2 of 4, f.17, Plaza de la Mesilla—Correspondence, 1967, Arizona Historical Society.


57. Donald H. Laidlaw, urban renewal administrator to Alva B. Torres, August 10, 1967, MS 1134, Torres, Alva, box 2 of 4, f.17, Plaza de la Mesilla—Correspondence, 1967, Arizona Historical Society. In their effort to preserve the “Fremont House,” the Tucson Heritage Foundation, a group of well-connected, mostly European Americans, offered to purchase the house. The mayor and council willingly complied and set in motion a title transfer in exchange for about ten cents a square foot. The mayor even directed the city’s lobbyist in Washington, D.C.,


59. Torres interview.

60. Torres interview.


64. Ibid.

65. Torres interview.


69. In 1967, in what would later be recognized as the Chicana/o Movement in Tucson, generally younger, more militant college students started to organize. Salomón “Sal” Baldenegro had just founded the Chicana/o student association (MASAI) at the University of Arizona. Baldenegro, Guadalupe Castillo, and Raúl Grijalva became the city’s most visible self-identified Chicana/os. They formed the Chicana/o Liberation Committee. This group organized walkouts at local high schools and demanded Chicano history and studies courses in the high schools and at the University of Arizona. They used more confrontational tactics to force the city to convert the El Rio Golf Course, located in the heart of a Chicana/o neighborhood, into a community center in the early 1970s. Francisco A. Rosales, Chicano! The History of the Chicana/o Civil Rights Movement [Houston: Arte Público Press, 1996], 211.

70. It should also be noted that La Placita Committee never furthered the idea that Mexican people should pursue a “white identity.”

71. Torres interview.


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