

CULTURAL ASSETS FOR LATINO  
COMMUNITY BUILDING IN  
EAST PALO ALTO

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# CULTURAL ASSETS FOR LATINO COMMUNITY BUILDING IN EAST PALO ALTO

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## INTRODUCTION

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Latino residents play an important role in determining whether East Palo Alto develops into a strong, united community that acts together to achieve common goals and solve common problems. Along with African American residents, they have become the focus of Wildflowers Institute's initial organizing efforts in this city. While both groups are marginalized economically, socially, and politically on the affluent Peninsula, they have had trouble finding common cause and often compete for political control, space, and other valuable resources. Wildflowers Institute recognizes that in order to help build productive interfaces between these two groups, we must first help each group explore and strengthen its own cultural formations. Facilitation of this process in the Latino community in East Palo Alto is made easier by reviewing a few key cultural characteristics of the group, which in turn allows us to understand its particular centers of gravity (natural gathering places), cultural assets, and potential organizing challenges.

What is essential for building community in this cultural context? What is it about the cultural values and historical experiences of this group that affords them a unique way of approaching "community"? This broad question can be broken down into three simpler ones: How do we define the Latino cultural context for East Palo Alto? What institutions have played constitutive roles in this culture and how are they interconnected? What does community mean to this group and through what cultural processes are communities built and maintained? Answering these questions from the viewpoint of community members is the first step toward facilitating the organization of a strong Latino community in East Palo Alto.

## BUILDING LATINO COMMUNITY: DEFINING GROUP AND CULTURE

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Who is the Latino community in East Palo Alto? The 2000 U.S. census showed that over 60% of the population of East Palo Alto is Latino, replacing African Americans as the majority ethnic group. While the census defines Latino as those people who identify themselves as natives of Spain or Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas (or their descendants), this group is also quite diverse in terms of regional origin, generation, and socioeconomic class, among other important factors.

Most of the Spanish-speaking residents of East Palo Alto share personal or family experiences of immigration to the United States. The majority hail from Mexico, but others are originally from Central American countries such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. The experience of pulling up roots from their former homes and families and journeying to East Palo Alto in an attempt to rebuild their lives and reroot themselves is usually motivated by economic necessity or flight from violence and war, and is often punctuated by temporary stays in other places along the way. For many, the process of immigration is an important component of their identity and can serve to either unite them with or divide them from other Spanish-speaking immigrants. In the search for common elements of a “core” culture that can unite the Latino community, it is important to be aware of the diversity that exists within that community and of the ways in which certain unifying elements (like the immigrant experience) may also be potentially divisive.

One important division stems from differences in point of origin. Apart from the cultural differences between Central American countries, much cultural regionalism exists within Mexico itself. While many of the Latino residents of East Palo Alto hail from the state of Michoacán, there are also a good number from Zacatecas, Mexico State, Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, and other states, all of which have distinct histories and cultural features. While most Mexican immigrants to the Bay Area used to come from Michoacán and the state of Mexico, which have long histories of immigration dating back to before the days of the Bracero Program, an increasing number are arriving from isolated states with little or no history of immigration, such as Hidalgo and Guerrero. These new immigrants, with limited access to established immigration networks in the United States, are far more economically and legally vulnerable than their predecessors. Even within individual regions themselves, there are cultural distinctions between country and city people, indigenous and mestizo, which must also be taken into account.

In addition, we find differences in generations of immigrants, a distinction closely linked to class. Immigrants who arrived in earlier waves of immigration not only experienced the process itself differently, but also encountered different opportunities for putting down roots and achieving some measure of economic stability and political voice in East Palo Alto. For example, immigrants who arrived in the 1970s, before the technology boom in the Bay Area, were more likely to work in agriculture-related fields and to achieve home ownership

over time. More recent immigrants, arriving in an era of high housing prices and unstable, service-oriented employment, may hold less stake in a community they see as inhospitable to their future dreams and goals. Older immigrants may be more empowered where local and national politics are concerned and are more likely to speak English or acquire legal residence in the United States, while younger generations are likely to feel less empowered, speak less English, and are less likely to have legal immigrant status. These gaps must be taken into account when we talk about Latinos in East Palo Alto as a “community.” These differences show distinct threads in the common immigrant experience and lead to differences in goals and visions for the future, which can make group organizing and consensus building difficult.

In order to talk about Latino “core culture” in East Palo Alto, then, we must do two things: we must paint it with broad-enough strokes to find common key cultural points, and we must attend carefully to the definitive role of the immigrant experience. The next section discusses several key institutions and ideals that help constitute a common core culture for the Latino community in East Palo Alto.

## CONSTITUTIVE CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

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Broadly speaking, we can say that most Latino residents of East Palo Alto, regardless of the many divisions we have briefly highlighted, recognize a common set of key cultural institutions as being important in their lives. While many of these institutions derive their importance and longevity from their roots in the sending cultures of this group, they have in some ways been remade through the immigrant experience and are constantly being adapted to interface with the mainstream American culture that group members confront daily. These institutions nurture important collective ideals, values, and symbols, providing a common cultural language through which individual positions (whether in conformity or resistance) can be expressed. These key institutions all come together in the town plaza, a geosymbolic structure born of the Spanish conquest of the New World. The composition, location, and function of the plaza, and its relationship to the pueblo (a Spanish word that refers to both a town and the people who constitute it), are crucial to ideas of community and belonging for Latinos in East Palo Alto.

## The Plaza

The plaza, or town square, is the cornerstone of New World colonial urban planning. The plaza and grid street system that extended outward from it were designed by the Spanish conquerors to inculcate a new social order in their indigenous subjects. Plazas were often built directly on top of preexisting indigenous ceremonial centers and always included the four pillars of contemporary European society: church, state, commerce, and the elite classes. They were meant to serve as the social, economic, political, and cultural center of a town, to create a physical environment that reflected and reinforced colonial culture. The plaza, serving as the heart and soul of a reinvented pueblo, is tightly tied to Latino notions of community, of the mutually constitutive identity of a people with a place. Over the centuries, the plaza has become a cultural center of gravity that is a physical reminder of this relationship, not only between people and place, but also among the people themselves according to categories of race, class, and social status. It is a site where notions of community and of the individual's place within it are constantly reproduced, as well as reworked through struggle.

Ideally, the plaza is located in the exact geographical center of the town and bordered on each side by one of its four most important buildings: the church, the town hall, the bank, and the mercantile house. It is often a parklike setting featuring trees, flowers, and benches, as well as statues in honor of national and local heroes. Its center is usually marked by a fountain or bandstand, and the upkeep and improvement of the plaza is a point of pride for civic groups and city government alike. The city grid extends outward in all four directions from the plaza, reflecting a system of special segregation. Downtown is usually a mixed area, housing prominent shops and restaurants as well as the homes of important citizens. Middle-class neighborhoods are located in adjacent zones, with poor neighborhoods in the outer rings. Outside the cities lie isolated rural ranchos, home to the peasants who supply food and other raw materials to the urban areas. Traditionally, most communication with the outside world was routed through the center of town, where political, economic, and social power was concentrated.

The plaza functions as both a ceremonial center and a common recreational space. In times of war and uprising, the taking of the main plaza marks the taking of a town; its defense is its salvation. Political rallies and protests are almost always held in the plaza. Campaign speeches are made from the bandstand and important visitors to the town are officially welcomed there as well. Religious processions on important church holidays often circle the plaza, which is also the site of the annual *feria del pueblo*, or town festival. On *días de plaza*, or market days, the plaza is transformed into an open-air bazaar offering everything from produce and herbal remedies to clothing and furniture (where, despite even the encroachment of Wal-Mart Stores, the majority still shop). On a daily basis the plaza is also the town's most popular leisure space. People of all generations come here to stroll, sit on benches, read the newspaper, eat ice cream, and watch street performers and musicians. It

is simultaneously an after-school hangout for kids, a courting spot for teenagers, a meeting place for businesspeople and politicians, and a venue for retired folk to gossip in the shade. The plaza is especially crowded on weekend afternoons, when the entire pueblo turns out to see one another and be seen. In many ways, it provides a link between generations that many Latinos feel is missing in East Palo Alto, where recreational spaces are normally segregated by age group. In short, the plaza, apart from imparting a sense of social order in the pueblo, also serves as its most important site of interpersonal interaction and community building. The next sections further examine several important cultural institutions important to the significance of the plaza and the life of the pueblo.

## The Church

The role of the Catholic Church in community life cannot be underestimated, even among Latinos who do not describe themselves as particularly religious. Beginning with the Spanish conquest, the church has attempted to remake indigenous social and spiritual life in Latin America in its own image. For example, local patron saints brought over by missionaries and the churches in which they were worshiped (built according to Spanish designs with native labor) came to be identified with specific pueblos, becoming important components of local identity. Many towns are even named after their patron saint, and the town's yearly fiesta is celebrated on his or her special day. The worship of local and national patron saints provides symbols of community and connections to one's origins, which become important to the immigrant experience as well. Many immigrants in the United States set up sister congregations or hold parallel celebrations to mark the fiestas of their hometown saints (if they are unable to make the pilgrimage back home). The Virgin of Guadalupe, the patroness of Mexico, is a crucial symbol of Mexican identity for many immigrants in the United States, appearing in a variety of forms from home altars to car decals and tattoos.

The church is the font of several important cultural values as well as the site of several key cultural practices. Key life changes are all marked by church ceremonies: baptism, presentation before God at age three (end of babyhood), first communion, confirmation (the marker of religious adulthood), *quinceaños* (for women, to mark the end of childhood and availability for marriage), weddings, and funerals. Important annual festivals are also celebrated in the church: Christmas, Easter, Día de los Muertos, as well as the fiestas of patron saints. Yearly pilgrimages to sacred spots also mark major life events by offering thanks to God and the saints for favors granted and praying for their intercession. Thus the church plays an important role in the marking of cyclical time as well as life-cycle progression.

The church influences gender relations and family life. Women in particular are admonished to follow a model of self-sacrifice and submission to fate (seen as God's will or the will of husbands or male family members) centered on the example of the Virgin Mary. They are responsible for instilling the Catholic faith in their families and for keeping church mores in their homes. The church is also the center of social work and charity in many communities,

giving women an outlet for gaining authority and a role in public life by serving their parish and community through a variety of projects.

Throughout the immigration experience the church remains important to most Latinos as a place of spiritual renewal and a social center. As Father Joseph Gordon of St. Francis Church in East Palo Alto explained, the church is a refuge for recent immigrants, because there they can find several resources to help them adjust to their new lives that are absent in the broader community. Here they are welcomed by a community of other Spanish speakers with whom they can celebrate important life events and saints' days in much the same way as they would at home. In fact, the church has become an important contact point and nexus of community building for Latinos from different sending regions. Having a church that they can call their own is, in and of itself, a grounding experience. It helps them to mark their space within the larger community. But the church alone cannot serve as the cultural center of the community: there are many who do not attend, and there are others who find themselves increasingly attracted to a series of smaller evangelical churches in the region, a phenomenon that is also popular among the poor in many Latin American regions. Finally, St. Francis Church itself has become a point of friction between some African American and Latino residents. Fr. Gordon explains that while ten or even five years ago his parish was predominantly African American, Latino parishioners now vastly outnumber African Americans, some of whom feel that they have been displaced by the newcomers. There are currently more masses said in Spanish than in English at St. Francis, which Fr. Gordon says reflects his parish's changing demographics. Thus, while the church is one of the possible interface sites for these two groups, it is also a site of potential tension and feelings of competition.

### **The Town Hall**

The presence of the house of government on the plaza, usually opposite the church, gives a clue to the relationship between church and state. These two powers have historically competed for dominance in Latin America, with the pueblo often caught in between. While the church imposes moral authority from above, the state attempts to organize popular consent from below to support elite projects. In Mexico, this is accomplished through a dual system of corporativism and clientelism that was perfected during seventy years of one-party rule by the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). Corporativism refers to a model relationship between the pueblo and the state: society is divided into a number of sectors according to economic function (for example, peasants, workers, bureaucrats, etc.), each of which has an implicit social contract with the state. The state relates to citizens not as individuals but as members of a sector, and vice versa. Corporativism is a means for the state to control citizens, but also grants citizens certain rights and concessions from the state. In Mexican political culture, corporativism has traditionally been coupled with clientelism, a personalistic method of distributing scarce resources within a hierarchical power structure. The Mexican system has often been described as a pyramid, with a small number of powerful leaders on

top controlling a large base (the aforementioned sectors) by granting state support of sector interests in exchange for cooperation with state projects. For example, peasants might be given certain small economic perks in exchange for going along with a free-trade agreement that will eventually lead to their ruin while aiding large businesses in the city. This sort of benefit is referred to as a *huesito*, referring to the small bones commonly thrown to howling dogs to prevent them from stealing meat at outdoor feasts. Huesitos and other political spoils are distributed through patronage networks of personal ties between leaders, middlemen, and members of the base. In the last ten years many attempts have been made to reform this system, but it has proven difficult to change such deeply entrenched ideas about and methods of governing. Despite reform efforts the culture of corporativism and clientelism continues to influence the way politics is done in Latin America, on both national and local levels. While it may complement or conflict with indigenous decision-making processes (see the later section on *acuerdo* and *asamblea*), this political culture definitely affects notions about leadership and community organization.

## Land and Work

Farmland and those who work it are usually located outside the plaza, but in many ways their absence is constitutive. The products of the countryside make city life possible. Land issues have fueled both colonial and postcolonial political conflicts all over Latin America, and many Latino immigrants in East Palo Alto carry with them not only the legacy of country life but also social memories of work and struggle on the land that forms an important part of their identities.

In the early twentieth century, Mexico underwent a long, complex, and bloody revolution, a conflict rooted in a rural inequality that led to the breakup of the hacienda and the freeing of the peasants who had worked there as semislaves. After twenty years of fighting, Lázaro Cárdenas, the new president, attempted to rebuild the war-torn nation by organizing it into sectors and forging a new social pact between each sector and the state. His agrarian reform programs redistributed land to peasants in the form of *ejidos*, communally held (and sometimes communally worked) plots that could never be sold, remaining forever tied to the community across generations. Across Mexico, the process of organizing into groups, applying for land, and establishing new settlements marked the beginning of a different era for peasants who had formerly lived as slaves. In a subsistence agricultural society, the struggle for the land, and the land itself, became even more closely tied to people's identity and sense of community.

Neoliberal reforms enacted in the 1980s and 1990s devastated the Mexican countryside, leaving increased poverty and political instability in their wake. Rural society is now crumbling under the pressure of successive national economic crises and structural reforms that have deprioritized traditional farming practices and communities in favor of urban industrialization and export processing schemes. The signing of NAFTA (North American Free Trade

Agreement) in 1994 along with a constitutional reform that ended land redistribution and government support of ejidos appeared as the final blow to a marginalized agrarian sector already beset by ecological degradation and shortages of land and capital. Fewer and fewer rural people are now able to make a living by farming, resulting in a huge flow of immigrants into large Mexican cities and across the border into the United States. Even after leaving, many immigrants continue to identify themselves with the land, working hard to maintain their ejido parcels through family or hired labor. A large number of the immigrants leave only with the intention of building up capital to make their farms more productive.

For many Latino immigrants, especially the majority who hail from agricultural regions, their identity and sense of community are closely tied to the land of their birthplace, through both the agricultural process and the process of struggling for land and establishing communities. When people grow their own food on the land, when they are born and buried on it, they become part of the land in a profound way. As one peasant explained to me, “The land here does not belong to me. I belong to the land.” People are rooted in a particular place through a history of working and living there. The administration of the ejido was and in some places still is an important form of self-rule, involving all households in a community in communal work and decision-making processes (see the later section on *acuerdo* and *asamblea*). The experience of struggling for and working the land is also a source of crucial ideas about equality, democracy, and good leadership. Ideally, every member of an ejido (and by extension a community) should be *parejo*, equal in rights, voice, and access to resources. Everyone should put in his or her part in communal work situations. Leaders work well politically in the same way as they work the land well, leading with actions instead of words, convincing through results. Agricultural labor runs on a model of gender complementarity, where men are responsible for growing the raw materials outside the home (crops, animals, etc.) and women are responsible for turning them into finished products (food and clothing) through work in the home. Likewise in the political sphere, men and women are seen as having separate interests and often meet in separate committees to plan and perform communal work.

Obviously, immigration to the United States changes one’s relationship to the land. Many Latino immigrants I spoke with in East Palo Alto felt out of place in their new homes, isolated and unattached. Some had little stake in developing the community, as they felt they didn’t belong there or weren’t sure they wanted to stay. They felt conflicted about their identities, their work, their families, and their futures, and some sought refuge in the outdoors, where they sought out places of natural beauty. Many also enjoyed cultivating flowers and plants in pots in their yards, a common practice in rural Mexico that speaks to the “rootedness” of a family in its home. One of the ways Wildflowers can do effective work in this community is to address this changing relationship with the land and widespread feelings of uprootedness and lack of “place.”

## Family and Home Life

The family is another cultural institution that remains important despite changes brought about by the immigration experience. In rural Mexico, as in other agricultural societies, the family has long been the unit not only of social and cultural reproduction, but of economic reproduction as well. Family survival and success strategies have been based on the participation of all members, and contribution to the household economy has been an important source of solidarity and identity. Hence, changes in the family due to immigration are a significant source of tension for Latinos in East Palo Alto.

Immigration itself is intimately tied to family dynamics. Most immigrants make the initial decision to leave Mexico either to take care of already existing families (provide capital for the family farm, to buy land or a house, to educate children) or in anticipation of founding new ones (usually to provide the capital necessary to set up a new household or invest in a business). Many of the social networks that facilitate migration are also based on family ties. Migrants with more experience and access to resources like jobs or housing typically sponsor the immigration of relatives and close friends, often establishing sister communities here in the United States. A large and ever-growing number of Mexican households are sustained by remittances from relatives working in the United States.

Apart from losing contact with extended families, the nuclear families of immigrants also undergo important changes. Outside an agricultural setting, the household is no longer a unit of economic production. Parents must now work outside the home, leaving children alone for longer periods of time. Generation gaps widen as children of immigrants experience an entirely different sort of schooling and upbringing than their parents did. Many people I spoke with in East Palo Alto complained that they felt the family was breaking down under the pressure of immigration and adjustment to American life. Above all they cited the growth of individualism as the culprit in this change. Individual survival strategies come to replace family ones, and *cada quien va por su lado* (everyone looks out for him- or herself) instead of working together toward a common goal. This individualization is compounded by individual work arrangements and the isolation of recent immigrant families. While people remain very emotionally loyal to their families, and many continue to see their life goal as improving their family's future, individualism is a growing threat to older values of cooperation and equality.

### Locating a Plaza in East Palo Alto

Today, Latinos in East Palo Alto already possess many of the components that make up the traditional community structure, such as a main church, residential neighborhoods, businesses, and centers of government. Other components, such as a strong relationship with the land and a common social center, are missing. But for the community, the plaza signifies more than a sum of its parts. There can be no pueblo here as long as individuals remain disconnected from one another and from the place. There can be no community without a harmonious relationship between space, place, and identity. The plaza itself is what is missing in East Palo Alto. Without it, residents feel their community is *desordenado* (out of order) and *desubicado* (out of place). People are not connected to one another or to East Palo Alto in a way they find culturally coherent. Yet filling that lack is a difficult challenge. East Palo Alto cannot be physically rearranged, so community members must look for creative ways in which to reproduce the function, if not the form, of the plaza for themselves. The following section presents a series of cultural assets specific to the community, which may prove useful in organizing for change as well as presenting a few potential challenges.

## LEADERSHIP AND GROUP ORGANIZATION: CULTURAL PROCESSES THAT BUILD AND REINFORCE COMMUNITY

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Many Latinos feel out of place in East Palo Alto, which is in turn seen as out of place, and therefore vulnerable, on the wealthy Peninsula. However, residents I spoke with felt that there is enormous potential for progress in their community if certain obstacles, such as ethnic conflict, lack of access to resources and information, and the need for newcomers to take ownership of and responsibility for the community, can be constructively overcome. People are proud that Latinos are now a statistical majority in East Palo Alto and feel the time has come to organize their community for change, but they are often not sure how to go about doing so. This section presents a series of cultural processes and practices that link the institutions above, helping to build a sense of community identity and unity. They are processes of communal decision making and leadership development that should be considered when working to help this community both strengthen itself and construct productive interfaces with other communities.

### Acuerdo and Asamblea

The process of arriving at acuerdo is common to indigenous and peasant communities all over Mexico. A culturally specific method of making and enforcing group decisions, acuerdo is rooted in the colonial missionization experience, which stressed social harmony among villagers and which they later developed as a counter-hegemonic strategy to keep outsiders out of community affairs by presenting a united front.

There are several English words that approximate the meaning of acuerdo, such as “agreement,” “accord,” “resolution,” and “consensus,” but none of them is an exact translation of the social meaning of the word. Acuerdo is a process of decision making that usually involves the entire community. When the community needs to make important decisions, everyone is called to gather at a central location, such as the municipal hall, central plaza, church, or ejidal meeting room, to discuss the matter. This gathering is called an asamblea, or assembly, and is meant to convoke if not all members of a community then at least a number of representatives from all sectors of society. Community leaders, who present the issue along with some of its context and possible ramifications, open the meeting, and then the floor is opened to anyone and everyone who wishes to state an opinion. These statements and who gives them are often regulated by local norms, and sometimes one person will speak as the representative of an entire group. Hence, some consent is often manufactured and some politicking usually takes place before the official event. By and large, however, a solution is hammered out in the meeting itself. It is the task of community leaders to listen to all speakers and to slowly weave together a solution that accommodates everyone (a solution that all can live with, if not love). Great care is taken to consider everyone’s positions and interests, striking a balance between individual interests and the interests of the whole. Producing an acuerdo is a long and arduous process.

When a potential decision is finally reached, a vote may be taken as the final sanction of the suggested solution, but this is not always necessary. Then the decision is documented, notarized, and treated as an official expression of the collective will. Social sanctions are imposed against those who continue to violate the terms of the *acuerdo* after it has been reached. On a smaller scale, *assemblea* and *acuerdo* processes are also common within social movements, NGOs, and other groups in society. The idea is also frequently repeated in the expression *ponerse de acuerdo* (to come to an agreement, reach consensus), which may be employed in a variety of situations, from a group of friends agreeing on what movie to see to a popular description of high-level political conspiracy. Misunderstandings around the concept of the *acuerdo* have created conflicts in East Palo Alto in the past, at meetings of multicultural organizations such as One East Palo Alto when members of other ethnic groups attempted to reopen debates on issues Latino members had considered agreed upon and settled. They felt further discussion prevented the organization from moving forward on issues, bogging them down in more talk rather taking concrete action, and disrespecting the effort involved in reaching the original decision. These types of misunderstandings have frustrated potential Latino community activists and discouraged them from participating. They also contribute to the perception that there is a lack of effective leadership in such organizations.

### **Leadership Development**

Good leaders in this cultural context are those who are skilled at producing *acuerdos* that accommodate the whole community, including everyone and leaving aside the leader's personal interests. A good leader is able to produce *acuerdos* and has the power to convoke *assembleas* because he or she has first gained the trust of the community. This is achieved by demonstrating a long-term commitment to community service, communicating well, and knowing the community's needs and finding the resources to meet them.

Leadership requires patience and respect for others, the ability to speak to people in popular terms but without talking down to them. It also requires some degree of free time and relative financial security, a rare combination in a poor immigrant community. Leaders recognize and honor the efforts of others and understand that projects that do not deliver tangible results in a reasonable amount of time will not enjoy community support. They make changes slowly but surely and never promise more than they can deliver.

Finally, good leaders are good mentors. They have a personalistic leadership style and are skilled at finding potential community workers, mentoring them, and placing them in positions of responsibility. They seek out juniors with potential and take them under their wing, teaching them little by little how to lead and gradually giving them more responsibility as the young leaders gain more experience and judgment. Often, the election of officers to a committee is an official sanction of the unofficial process of selection and mentoring that has prepared them to take office in the first place.

## Using Latino Cultural Assets to Build Community in East Palo Alto

The plaza concept is a powerful tool for understanding how Latinos in East Palo Alto approach ideas of community. It embodies both social order and cohesion and roots community identity in space, place, and everyday practice. Taking into account the above leadership and decision-making processes can facilitate the work of helping Latinos organize themselves to re-create the sense of community traditionally associated with the plaza. In itself, the process of reimagining a plaza in East Palo Alto and then making that vision a reality could serve to unify the community.

Some community members I spoke with in East Palo Alto suggested that the Latino community needs a physical center, a concrete place where individuals can go to receive the support they traditionally found in other institutions. They need a space to mentor individuals for leadership roles, as well as to guide them through the immigration process and the difficult task of putting down roots in an unfamiliar landscape. Other community needs include English classes and help in navigating social services and the school system; legal aid; and the ability to seek political as well as economic solutions to their problems, a step that requires learning a whole new political system and achieving citizenship within it. They also crave a marker that legitimates their being here—a monument, a building, a space that they can claim, a “plaza” of sorts that belongs to them and to which they can belong. They envy the African American community its communal spaces, its sense of the history of their place in East Palo Alto, and the way its heritage is written into the landscape.

I see this need as an opportunity to organize the community and to develop a collective identity. A claiming of space needs to take place, but it needs to be done with the participation of everyone, by both working and celebrating together. The practices of *acuerdo* and *asamblea* should be fully present in this process, and careful attention should be paid to finding the right leaders to mediate it.

Strengthening and uniting the Latino community in East Palo Alto is a first step in helping the community to interface successfully with other local groups. An important part of this work will consist of grounding and centering the community in its new space by finding ways to replace the function and feeling of the traditional plaza. Organizing to do so can bring the community together, especially if both culturally specific assets and challenges to the organizing process are taken into account. Wildflowers Institute will play an important role in facilitating the work of revisioning the community’s present and planning for a promising future in East Palo Alto.

## **WILDFLOWERS INSTITUTE**

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