

CORRIDOR DESIGN: Lower Rio Grande Valley

Regional Urban Design Assistance Team
A Program of the American Institute of Architects

April 1988



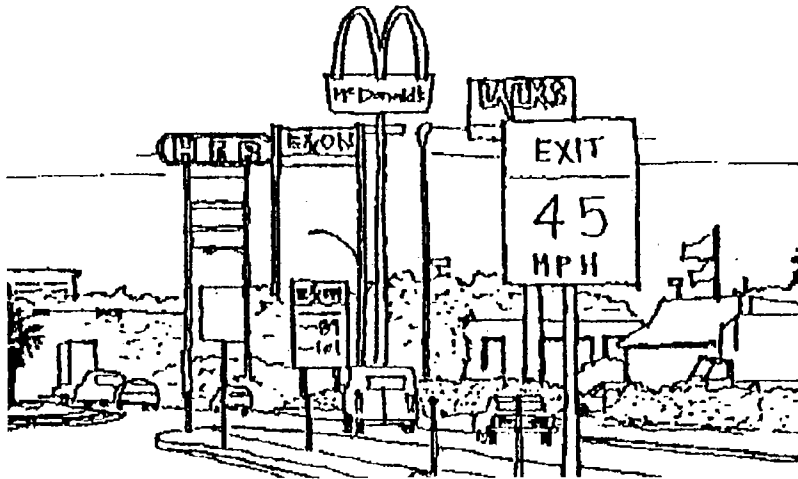
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1988

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Overview



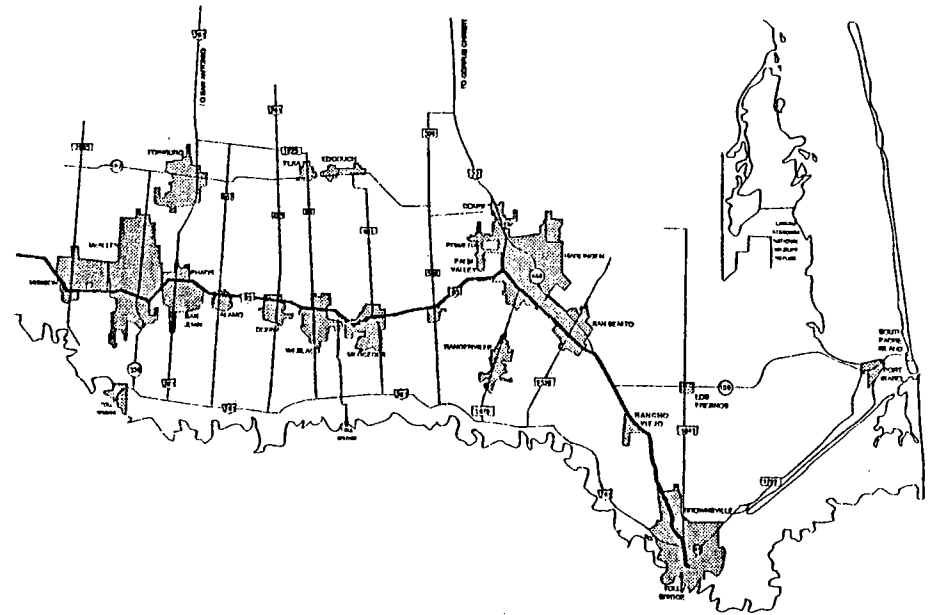
"For many people in the Valley, 'beautification' is seeing a McDonalds."

"...the individual cities seem unconcerned by the visual impact of development adjacent to U.S. 83. The result is a jumble of temporary and permanent structures... No sense of order emerges; few memorable images are retained."

"...the Valley Expressway is more than a mere passageway for passenger and commercial carriers; it bears the responsibility for presenting the image of the Valley to travelers along its path and for reinforcing a sense of regional identity among Valley residents."

Change envelopes the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The rich rural landscapes of the past may soon give way to relentless corridors of homogeneous commercial development. Urban growth is rapidly overshadowing what was once an agricultural region of great beauty and character. Views about urban growth vary widely. Some embrace it with open arms in any form; others worry about its effects on the regional quality of life. One thing seems clear, however. A region that anticipates the impacts of future growth in advance will reap the benefits of that growth, and reduce its costs to the community. A coherent PLAN is in the public interest--it benefits everyone.

The centerpiece of the Lower Rio Grande Valley region is Expressway 83. To date, little has been done to establish a clear relationship between the freeway and the economic well-being of the region. R/UDAT believes this relationship can become the driving force of the new regional economy. Tourism, retail and wholesale commerce, industrial, and foreign trade zone activities are housed mainly in the valley's cities. Corridor design does not refer only to the physical look of things along the freeway; it speaks to the way towns integrate with the expressway. Better freeway --town linkages can bring direct benefits to the region's economy. At the same time, regulation of urban growth can help preserve valuable farmland. The built landscape of the valley can be designed both to enhance community identity and promote economic development. This, then, is a region of many possible futures.

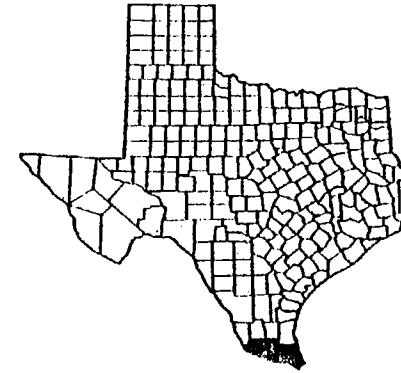


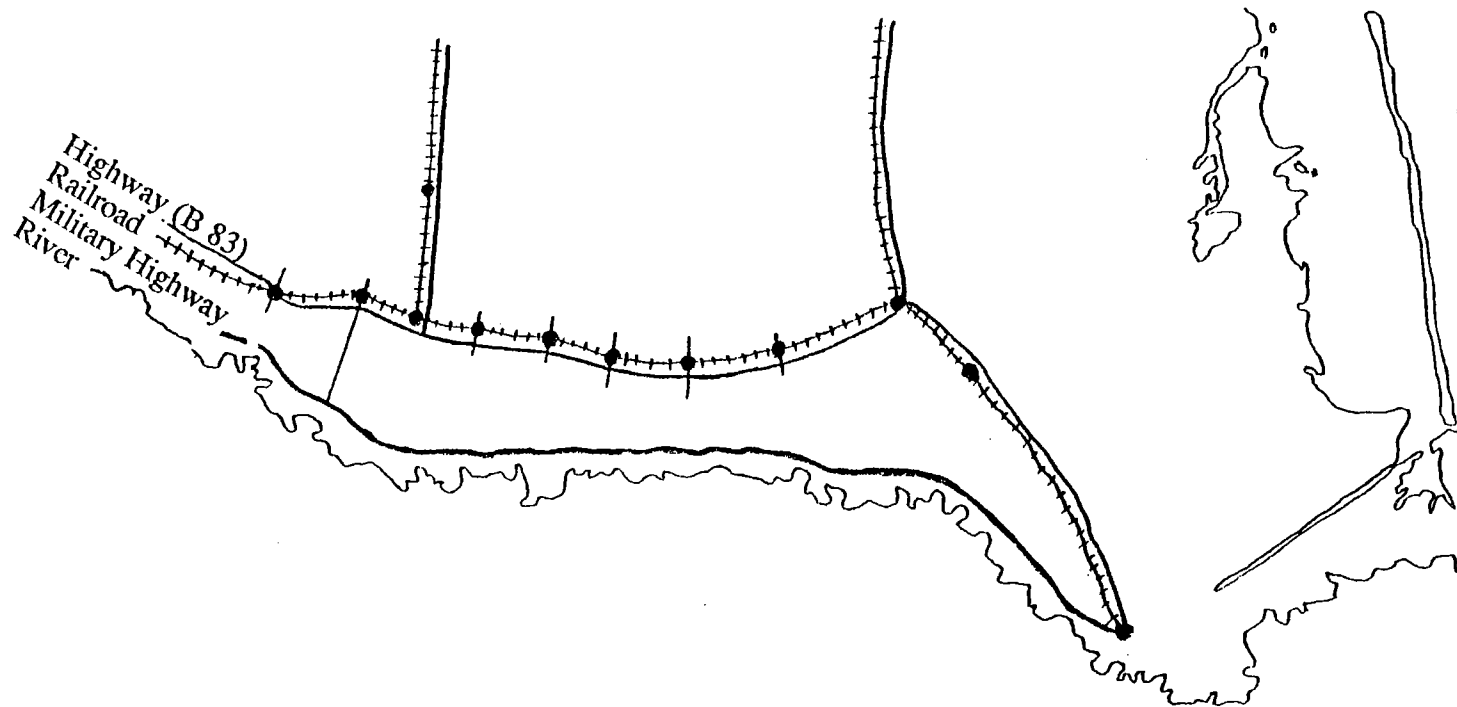
THE REGION

The Lower Rio Grande Valley is one ecological region. Its more than 4,000 square miles encompass a corridor running some sixty miles from Mission in the west to Brownsville in the east. It draws its regional identity from a constellation of forces. Physically, it is wedged into the southern tip of Texas, surrounded on two sides (south and west) by the Mexican border, and on a third side (east) by the Gulf of Mexico. It is geographically isolated from the heartland of Texas, being some 250 miles from the nearest large city (San Antonio), and over 300 miles from other major urban centers (Dallas, Houston). Ecologically, the valley encloses a common physiogeographic area, typified by the scrub forest, marshland and tidal flats, on the one hand, and the irrigated farmlands on the other.

Historically, agriculture unified the valley. Two forces-- the subtropical climate and the proximity of irrigation water from the Rio Grande-- allowed for an unusually long growing season. As a result, the valley eventually became a major food production area. Early on, the area's strategic location led to its emergence as a zone of transshipment. During the Civil War, Confederate cotton was exported out of the U.S. through the valley. The use of Mexican ports initiated a long standing pattern of economic and functional interdependence with Mexico that continues today. At the turn of the century, the introduction of railroads and irrigation technology opened vast new acreage for farming. The region's comparative advantages laid the groundwork for a boom in agriculture. The area soon bore the promising title "The Magic Valley", a phrase coined by local businesses seeking to attract new settlers.

Today, the Lower Rio Grande Valley faces an uncertain future. There is considerable unemployment and economic depression, despite the fact that the economic base has been dramatically transformed in the last thirty years. Farmland is being replaced by more intense land uses--mainly commercial and industrial. Tourism has become a major force in the region. Brownsville has a growing industrial base and a good deep water port. McAllen has developed a substantial foreign trade zone and a growing retail economy that serves the region. An increasingly complex network of economic and region ties with Mexico continues to evolve.



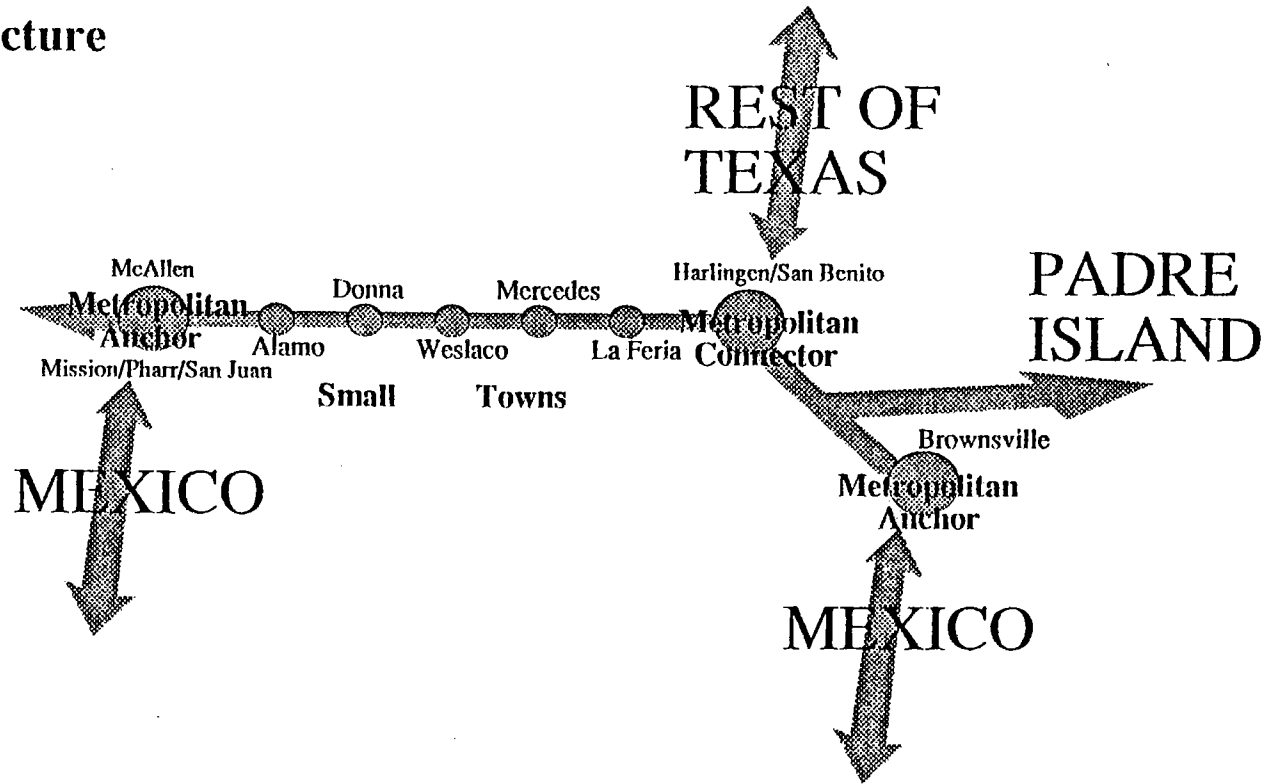


ANATOMY OF THE REGION'S SETTLEMENT STRUCTURE

Population centers evolved in the lower Rio Grande Valley in response to the development of transportation technology. In the 1840's, a military road was built from Fort Brown (Brownsville today) north along the border. This gave way in 1904 to the construction of a rail network connecting Corpus Christi to Brownsville, and west up the Rio Grande valley through Mission. Settlements evolved along the rail lines as emerging irrigation projects intensified agricultural output at selected

points along the rail corridor. In the 1930's, a highway (now Business 83) developed parallel to the rail line. The ecology of settlements around the rail and highway arteries took on a new form: developments began to follow the roads perpendicular to the rail and to highway 83. The towns grew in a north-south direction. In the 1940's, Business 83 took on the all too familiar form of a strip-developed corridor.

Current Structure



REGIONAL STRUCTURE TODAY

The pattern of population distribution across the valley is clear. The two large urban centers, Brownsville and McAllen, play the role of dynamic regional economic centers, and anchor the region. They house the greatest diversity of economic activities. McAllen to the west anchors the region's links with Mexico through the foreign trade complex, trucking and its role as regional retail trade nucleus. On the eastern flank, Brownsville plays a similar role: it anchors the valley's growing linkages with Matamoros, Mexico through trans-boundary retail trade, labor market exchanges and trucking. Harlingen lies in the middle, and performs the important regional function of connecting the two halves of the valley, and providing a transport link into the state highway system. Harlingen will likely house the region's main airport.

The two sub-regional corridors, east (McAllen-Harlingen) and west (Brownsville-Harlingen), play important complementary functions in completing the regional structure. The western corridor between Harlingen and McAllen-Mission is more urbanized. Towns lining the expressway perform secondary functions within the regional system. Pharr is an important trucking center, relieving some of the pressure from McAllen. Weslaco has built a new retail complex, providing shopping at a midway point between the two larger cities, McAllen and Harlingen. Smaller communities (Donna, Alamo, Mercedes) become the locations of new tourist activities such as mobile home parks that add to the dynamism of the region.

The eastern corridor between Harlingen and Brownsville is less urbanized than the western side. It serves as a passageway for tourists going either south to Mexico, or east to the beach (South Padre Island).

Regional Dynamics

There are many issues that have a common impact on the entire Lower Rio Grande Valley. These become elements that unify the valley. These issues also create problems that need solutions and it follows that the solutions will require regional cooperation. The design of U.S. 83 becomes only the first the first of a series of regional efforts - an important first step. Other steps are:

1. Winter Texans - A regional effort at tourism coordination.

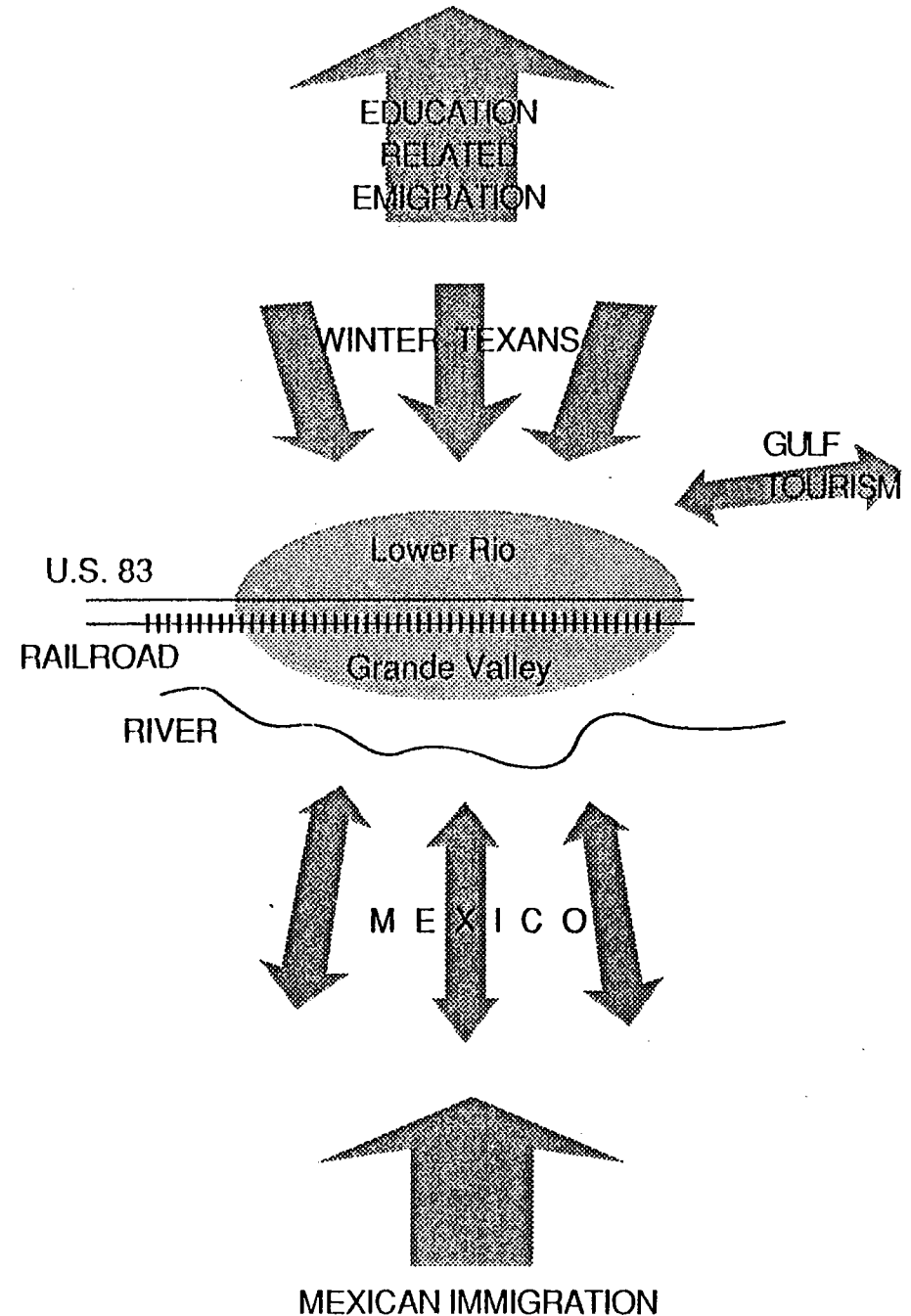
2. Mexico connection - The plan for each town to have it's own bridge to Mexico makes no sense. Instead there needs to be a regional plan to attract and serve Mexican Commercial traffic and a regional plan to deal with immigration and relations with Mexico.

3. Demographic Trends - The Rio Grande Valley is losing it's greatest resource, it's home grown young minds. Local education must receive the highest priority.

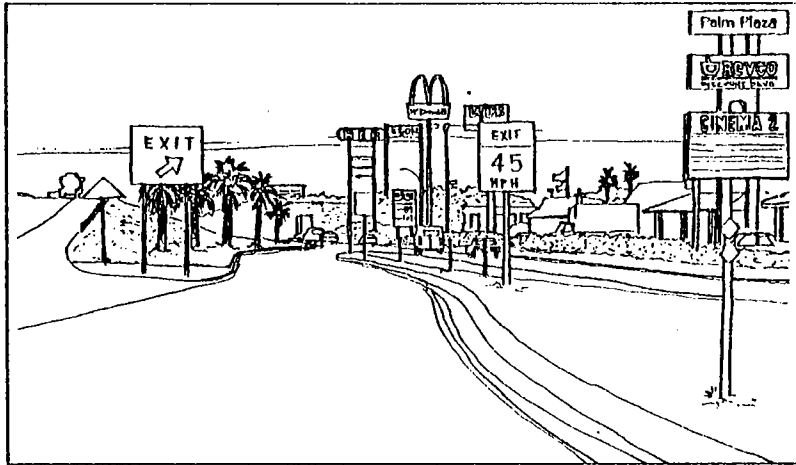
4. Beach Tourism - A greater cooperative effort needs to be made to capture the Gulf Tourism of Padre Island.

5. The Rio Grande - The river is a national scale natural resource that must be preserved as a wildlife and vegetation refuge.

6. The Railroad - The railroad remains the oldest unifying element in the valley and needs to be successfully shepherded into the 21st Century.

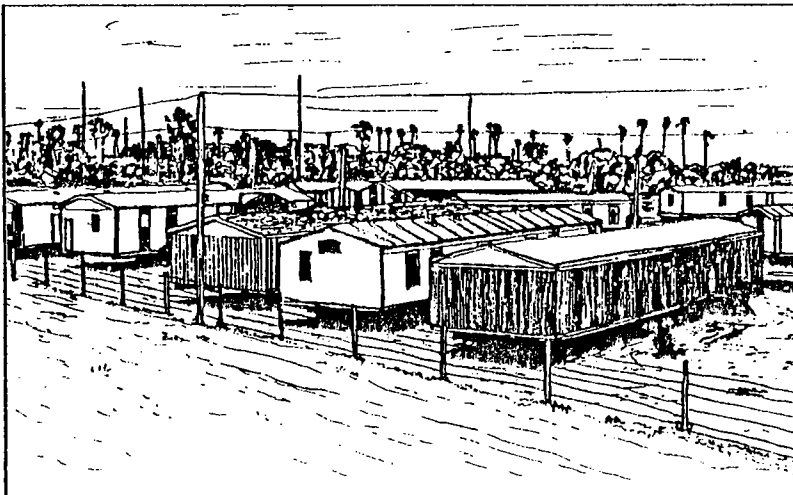


Major Problems of the Corridor



1. DESTRUCTION OF REGIONAL IMAGE

The image of the positive elements of the Rio Grande Valley - its friendliness, its connections to Mexico, its semi-tropical climate, its agricultural heritage - is being systematically eroded.



2. DESTRUCTION OF VISUAL QUALITY

As the visual clutter accumulates along the highway, the highway no longer serves its communication function; it is ugly as well as confusing to use for travel, tourism, and commerce.

