The other side of the tracks

By Brian Levinson

Carlos Omar Solano Manzo, 18, sits with his mother on a park bench in the Analco barrio of downtown Guadalajara. They are flipping through the crime pages of a daily newspaper. The day before, a store owner of German descent was knifed to death by a drug addict during an attempted robbery. "This happened right around the corner," Solano Manzo says matter-of-factly. "Around here, you have to have eyes on the back of your head."

In front of them, a beautiful domed gazebo sits in the middle of the tree-lined Jardin San Jose, and school children have fashioned a soccer field between statues of two Aztec emperors. Casting shadows from the south side of the plaza is the grandiose Templo de San Jose. Franciscan friars built the 16th century church as a way to convert Analco's first residents, indigenous peoples from a village called Tetlan, who had been brought here to work for the Spanish colonists.

Residents of Analco play basketball in the center of Jardin San Sebastian. The Iglesia San Sebastian, in the background, is one of several churches in the neighborhood, and only blocks away from the Templo San Jose. Following the gas explosions of April 1992, the San Sebastian church served as a community support center for victims.

The indigenous and Spanish had more than just language separating them. Analco was cut off from the rest of the city by the San Juan de Dios river. "From the beginning, the river represented an ethnic and cultural divide," says Jaime Olveda, a Research Coordinator at the Colegio de Jalisco. Bridges would later span the river, but only to facilitate an easier commute for the indigenous going to work at the Spanish houses and haciendas.

There are no more indigenous people living in this area, but 500 years later Analco maintains a reputation as a tough, middle- to lower-class barrio. In the United States, it might be referred to as "the other side of the tracks." But Guadalajara residents employ a more exacting phrase, one that carries geographic and historical weight. They will tell you that Analco and surrounding neighborhoods are part of "la Calzada para alla" — meaning they are located on the other side, the eastern side, of the Calzada Independencia.

The Calzada, a major thoroughfare running down the heart of the city, has — literally — cemented the division between the two sides of town. Originally designed as an elegant European-style boulevard, the Calzada was constructed in 1908 upon the old San Juan de Dios river. But it slowly became one of the ugliest parts of the city. To this day, excessive automobile traffic pollutes the air, and unpleasant smells from the underground river — now a massive sewage drain — waft to the surface.

The Analco side of the Calzada, only a 15-minute walk from the picturesque center of Guadalajara, is a very different world. Rents are so low that you are almost afraid of the bargain. There is little public and private investment. Solano Manzo says that he witnessed a robbery a couple of months ago, called for the police and they never showed up. "Nothing is safe around here. There are many gangs." He added that crack and cocaine have become popular drugs in recent years.

That such urban problems remain concentrated in a certain area is not unusual. Incomes, real estate values and crime rates have a way of fluctuating together. But other problems are a mere twist of fate. Guadalajara's biggest disaster, the April 1992 sewer line explosions, was entirely located in the "la Calzada para alla," including a sizable part of Analco. On that day, explosions fueled by a massive gas leak ripped apart six miles or about 20 square blocks of city streets. The government conceded at least 200 dead, but countless unidentified victims were probably buried in the rubble. Amazingly, the death and destruction went no farther west than Calle 20 de Noviembre, just short of the Calzada Independencia.

By most accounts, the government did a very good job rebuilding and restoring the area. But April 22 left untold emotional damage. Juan Jose Martinez Macias, who lives farther north in Sector Libertad, was working only 300 meters from the explosion. "It was a frightening horrible visual display. The worst thing I've seen in my entire life." He remembers seeing a van sitting on the roof of a building. The force of the explosions had lifted it there.

A (misspelled) funeral announcement for Klaus Jurgen Bender is posted on his closed storefront at the corner of Constitucion and 28 de Enero. Bender, a German, died in a violent exchange with a 19-year-old drug addict who had attempted to rob the store.

In a neighborhood where people rarely move, where families keep the same home for generations, April 22, 1992 ripped the social fabric. "Some people eventually returned to their old locations, but others did not," notes Beatriz Nuñez Miranda, an expert in urban growth and development. "All of this daily life that had developed over time was now changed, modified, broken down."

Much of this community life still does exist, however, and its benefits are not to be overlooked. "Here we have a form of living that is more united, a family of neighbors," according to Martinez Macias. He has been living in Sector Libertad for all 43 years of his life, and remains friendly with many of the same people he grew up with. "On the other side of the Calzada it is more commercial, people worry more about work and sales. They are more unsociable, and prefer to stay in their homes."

Back in Jardin San Jose, Carlos Omar and his mother, Susana Guadalupe Manzo Garcia, are talking about the "The Crime of Padre Amaro," a Mexican movie about a Catholic priest immersed in a love affair. "Yes there were people disillusioned by that movie," says the mother. "And it was a true, a lot of priests are like that."

Ricardo Nuñez Vera, comes over with a wet towel and plastic bucket to join the conversation. Asked what he does for a living, Nuñez Vera jokes that he is the city's police commandant.

"The commandant of car washers, more like it," says Manzo Garcia. She has lived here 40 years and says the barrio has declined very much. "There is less security, it was more tranquil back then, more like a pueblo." She says that having a community of friendly neighbors is a luxury, but only up to a certain point. "Look what happened to that German store owner yesterday. What good were neighbors for him? Killed during the plain of day and nobody saw a thing." ❑