

HISTORIC PRESERVATION ON SAN ANTONIO'S WESTSIDE: WHY ISN'T IT HAPPENING?

by Graciela I. Sánchez

Editor's note: The following address was delivered at the San Antonio Latino Legacy Summit that focused on the future of Latino heritage and historic preservation in Texas. It took place on Saturday, Feb 15th. Graciela, Director of the Esperanza, attended as a member of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center and the Westside Preservation Alliance.

My abuelita Francisca and my Tata lived at 910 Santiago. My brothers and sister and I grew up at 914 Santiago. Before that, my great grandmother, Teresita, lived a block down on Chihuahua. On my Dad's side, my abuelos lived a block north on Vera Cruz.

All of those houses were bulldozed in the 1970s for so called "better housing" for us, "poor Mexicans".

The reality? Zachary and other contractors made millions of dollars. Hundreds of poor and working class families were driven out of the neighborhood and hundreds more were forced to move to new cheaply constructed houses.

My family, for example, lost two sturdily built wooden houses, approximately 2400 sq. ft. made with long-leaf pine, a wonderful wood that is now largely extinct. They were moved one-half block north to a cement house, approximately 900 sq. ft. that was made by Zachary, now permeated by mold.

In the downtown area, on Laredo St., a neighborhood existed that was known as Laredito. It, too, is gone.

Economic development? The Vista Verde project took away Doña Natividad's house and the Ramos' Maternity Home, the partera's two-story, 20-room house on Matamoros St. That street doesn't exist there any more.

We lost so many tienditas — Don José's on Chihuahua, El Pelón's on Vera Cruz and Cibolo, Arevalo's by the Matanzas and Don Antonio's on Sabinas. We had tienditas at every corner where we'd return empty glass soda bottles for a nickel and, in turn, buy raspas or assorted five cent candies.

Beautify the neighborhood? We also lost thousands of fruit trees and jardines medicinales as well as shot-gun homes with our version of picket fences.

The beautiful Spanish mission revival Christian church down the street, gone... and the outdoor nichos and grottos with the Virgen de Guadalupe, el Santo Niño de Atocha or any one of a number of assorted saints that our neighbors favored — all gone.

Urban renewal devastated our communities, separated families and uprooted children. Yes, our streets are now paved, but our communities are disrupted, our family businesses are shut down and our children are left to fend for themselves as their mothers and fathers now travel far from home to work in big box



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stores on the northside.

Has everything changed for the better from those bad old days? Are we in the midst of enlightened historic preservation?

Urban renewal has hurt us by dislocating families and destroying historical landmarks that are the visible reminders of our cultural past. Sadly, most current plans for "neighborhood improvement" or "economic development" or "gentrification" are having the same impact on our ever more vulnerable communities.

We, the survivors of Urban Renewal, have grown up. We have studied Chicano history and literature classes. Some of us run cultural centers, some of us have PhDs in history and cultural studies and for those of us who have been gathering the oral histories of our abuelitas and abuelitos, we have gotten our barrio PhDs as well.

Because of this, we have committed ourselves to stop the destruction of our communities, the dispersion of our families, and the erasure of our histories.

When La Gloria, the 1928 two-story building on Laredo St., was threatened, hundreds of folks came out to try and save this building.

We met with councilmembers. We marched in the streets. We

showed film clips of Mexican and Black men playing trumpets and trombones — while women, some dressed like 1920s flappers, danced on the roof-top of La Gloria. We attended city council meetings to try and stop the destruction, but lost because city leaders were more interested in economic development over our history.

When we filed a temporary restraining order to stop the demolition, we ran into a racist judge who didn't want us to talk about equal protection. Didn't want Ann McGlone to testify in court that the reason there were no buildings saved in the Westside WAS because of racism. That challenge was in 2002. The building fell. And we said no more.

We, Chicanos who lived or had lived or worked in the Westside, began to meet.

We began gathering oral histories to learn our unwritten history so that we could build up the community's self-esteem. So that we could learn to love ourselves, our people, our small and simple homes, our history, our culture, our dark-skinned color, our long names that many folks couldn't and don't try to pronounce.

In 2006, we hung photo banners using photos collected from people who were from the Westside. Suddenly, we saw major interest in being from this neighborhood. People who grew up north of Commerce, north of Culebra, people who grew up in the Jefferson neighborhood, suddenly claimed this neighborhood as theirs.

So, we succeeded on some level.

But, nothing changed at the policy level, at the bureaucratic level, at the level where decisions are made. And by 2008, we found ourselves working to save another building, "the pink building."

It was déjà vu. But this time, we were more prepared.

And because we didn't want to see another historical building come down on the Westside, the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center worked to bring together community residents and non-profit organizations to develop policy regarding historic buildings on the Westside.

We wanted to avoid having to save historic buildings one at a time. So we invited Westside community members and folks who once lived in the neighborhood and folks who work in the neighborhood, non-profits like the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, Inner City Development, NALCAB, the Avenida Guadalupe, the Office of Historic Preservation and the San Antonio Conservation Society to come together. Soon, the Westside Preservation Alliance came into existence.

In addition to developing policy regarding historic preservation on the Westside, we would "concientizar" the community and power brokers of this city and would work to stop further demolitions of peoples' homes and communities.

However, for all our proactive actions: 2000-plus signatures collected door-to-door and at surrounding churches; meetings with elected and appointed officials and heads of non-profits; creating short testimonio videos of community members requesting that the building be saved; powerpoint presentations; researching historic Sanborn maps; interviewing 90-plus-year-olds who remembered the building or Guillermo Maldonado; and on and on — we still found ourselves in the same place.

Internalized racism made some community members insist that it was old and should be torn down. Racism kept the Office of Historic Preservation (OHP) from championing our work and sitting with us

to strategize on how to save this building as should be when preservationists work together. We couldn't even get meetings with the Office of Historic Preservation's administrative staff.

From our research of Casa Maldonado, we learned that the 1986 Villa de Guadalupe Historic Resources Assessment prepared for the City of Antonio had declared 71 buildings from Guadalupe to Tampico to be of social and cultural significance. Unfortunately, less than 20 of those structures survive today. The city approved all of the demolitions.

When we had to go before the Historic Design and Review Commission, we weren't allowed by city staff to present the project. We weren't allowed the time to explain the historical significance of Casa Maldonado. We were only allowed to have our 3-minute presentation.

We barely won historic designation and then lost the battle with the zoning commission and the city council. But we didn't stop. We pressured the mayor to meet with us. And since there was no big developer or a big corporate powerhouse behind the project, the Mayor found \$500,000 to give to the Avenida so that they could preserve the building. We won outside of the system.

Finally in the fall of 2012, there was the Univision building... Same story, shorter time frame. By February, 2013 the building was demolished.

SO...WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO TO SAVE LATINO LEGACY, HISTORY AND OUR SACRED SPACES?



1

First, learn from the horrors of Urban Renewal:

a) Make sure that the **first question** asked of every proposal is: How many houses will be lost and where will those families be relocated?

b) The **second question** must be: What impact will this have on the property taxes of other families in the neighborhood and what will be done to keep those families from being driven from the neighborhood?

c) And the **third question** must be: What impact will this have on small and family businesses? It is not enough to say that Zachery and others will make a lot of business or that those construction companies will offer some temporary jobs to our people. THAT is NOT “economic development” — that is “economic exploitation”! As has been noted, we are not people being “left behind” by economic development, **we are the ones being robbed.**

d) A **fourth** and equally important **question** must be: What impact will this project have on the buildings that are the “visible reminders” of the cultural and political history of our people?

2

Learn to be Buena gente- good people. What does this mean?

a) Greet all your allies with a hello, a smile, a handshake and maybe an abrazo after you’ve worked with them more than a month. I find it hard that after working with some folks for over 5 years that they can totally ignore you, especially if you’re in a meeting trying to save these Latino structures.

b) Give us credit for the work we do. As the Westside Preservation Alliance, we discuss and educate ourselves about the issues, we share our knowledge and insights with one another and then strategize and act on those strategies. It is disappointing that although we do so much of the work, we are erased by our government allies in the struggle.

c) Remember: most community activists don’t get paid for the work they do, or get paid relatively little — how arrogant for those of you with a government salary to take credit for our work.

3

Learn to work in coalition:

a) If partnering with us, then add our names to the list.

If the Conservation Society had named all the groups who were working to Save Univision in their paperwork, rather than going it alone, then all named groups would have had standing in court and we could have made a unified fight. Instead, the Conservation Society, out front on their own, hired a young white attorney with little, if any, experience on historic preservation who argued against the Westside Preservation Alliance. His explanation, in private, was that the Conservation Society is the brains and the Westside Preservation Alliance is merely the “passion” for historic preservation.

b) Share resources:

(i) Share contacts and entry into state and national folks. With Casa Maldonado, we found ourselves calling various folks at the Texas Historical Commission — and none of them seemed to be the right person to talk to. Or, they weren’t interested in changing their mind once we submitted to them the hundreds of documents we had collected. People offered to set up meetings with the WPA and the Texas Historical Commission but then never followed through.

(ii) Share information on potential demolitions, on upcoming meetings and conferences, on changes in policies, and on job opportunities so that we can get folks with more knowledge and skills to do the work

(iii) And, if there are funds at any level, share and better yet, contact your connections at those funding institutions to urge them to learn more about our work so that it’s easier to access the limited funds. And sit with us to develop strategies to find new funding for a Latino Historic Preservation Initiative at the federal, state and local public and private levels.

(iv) Teach us how the system works. According to the Office of Historic Preservation, none of us should have applied to the Board of Adjustments in the Univision case. If they knew this, then they should have alerted us and we would have followed a different plan of action.

c) Stand in solidarity with community-based historic preservationists. Be courageous.

(i) Although Univision was eligible for designation under three national criteria — the OHP staff did not recommend approval. If we can’t count on the local Office of Historic Preservation, who can we count on?

(ii) Don’t take money from lobbyists and developers such as Kauffman/Killeen and Greystar to underwrite an event such as *Power of Preservation San Antonio*. These folks were the lobbyists and developers who were the forces behind the





Isabel Sánchez at 910 Santiago in San Antonio's Westside.

demolition of Univision. Taking money or other resources from these guys separates you from community-based allies.

(iii) Hire staff with decision-making power that speak Spanish and are sensitive to community concerns. Learn to speak Spanish as well. Learn about our history. Take Chicano/Latino 101, 201, 301 and beyond. We can also work to identify folks at the various universities who are the best scholars to learn from.

(iv) Listen and learn. When community preservationists offer suggestions, take them seriously. For example, when you host a meeting in our communities and we suggest that an elder from the community should be the first to speak, allow it. Don't ignore us.

(v) If you want our help generating interest in meetings, larger gatherings, or tours, let us work with you to develop the idea. Don't come to us months after you developed the project. Goals and objectives will be different after the fact. We don't just want to help you bring in the brown folks after the fact.

(vi) Tell us about national conferences and then find funds for us to go to national, local and statewide conferences. Since many of us are doing this work as volunteers and/or, often, the organizations we work for do not have funds set aside for travel and registration fees, we can't attend those conferences. Often, too, partial scholarships for registration may not be enough. Open up spaces for us to speak at these conferences. Don't simply speak for us.

(vii) Get "Passionate!" Remember, when we get jailed, we are preservationists, as well as activists. We are people who do the research, who think, analyze and follow the rules. And when all else fails, we take to the streets and, if necessary, do civil disobedience. Don't go home to sleep when one of our historic buildings or entire blocks are marked for imminent demolition. Stay with us. Call your attorneys and stay up all night writing and filing the temporary injunctions. Don't expect us to make noise so that you can step in as the grown ups. It is hard on our bodies and distressing to our families when we have to resist at that level. You can join us and put your lives on the line too.

d) Finally, BE SMART ...

(i) If you want community participation — mail hard copy invitations to community folks. Most of our people are working class and poor. We do not have computers, much less internet. If you're interested in bringing nuestra gente to the conversation, dollars should be set aside to get them more engaged. For this event (Latino Summit), Esperanza paid for designing, printing and postage of a flyer for 4000 folks from **this** neighborhood. We weren't asked to do this, but we noticed that no one else was going to do this and we had to at least reach out in a more accessible way.

(ii) Implement guidelines that incorporate vernacular architecture of working class and poor people. And, in San Antonio, we should be focused on Latinos. We were blown away when the City's most recent design guidelines included German vernacular, but made **no mention** of Mexican vernacular.

(iii) Don't hire outside consultants who have no understanding of the local latino community and its culture and values — or have barely worked with Latinos and other communities of color. Hire, instead, progressive latino cultural historians in your organizations.

4

Help us preserve our communities but avoid the potential gentrification that tends to take place post historical conservation of neighborhoods.

5

Help us move new policies forward that don't just landmark latino historical buildings, but also work to find funding for our low socioeconomic and working-class folks to fix up their home.

And again, don't post the application forms on-line because we won't know that this funding is available. Make sure it's written in English and Spanish. And hire someone to do community outreach so that people know that the resources are available to them.

Our communities fear historical designation because they feel that our neighborhoods will be gentrified and taxes on our homes will go up. And they're right. So, how do we create policies that don't create that scenario?

We lost La Gloria, the Municipal Auditorium, KEDA, Univision and thousands more. But the work continues.... Hemisfair Park, the HEB at Nogalitos, and designating the entire near Westside as historic.

Don't avoid us and go talk to other Latinos who will agree with your point of view. We need to have the difficult conversations and grow. We need to accept that racism is still alive and that communities of color are generally ignored and suffer from self-doubt and all of the other maladies of internalized racism.

Don't be afraid of us. In general, we're on the same side. Will you work alongside us or against us? Respect and honor our work and we will save Latino history and U.S. history. ♦