

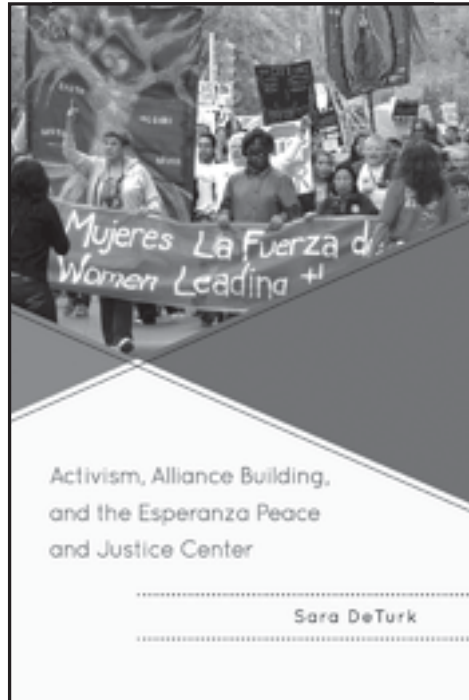
Esperanza as a Mother Ship to El Barrio: A White Paper

by Gilbert J. Murillo

Part 1. Introduction

In the sixties and beyond Chicano Movimiento or La Causa activists sought after the right order of society on the behalf of the Mexican American poor living in segregated barrios or neighborhoods. The loyalists gathered for endless hours and days at organizational meetings, workshops, regional meetings, etc., searching for the most humane and effective way to help la gente. These sessions were essentially reform (symptoms) versus structural (causal) debates. Though the landscape became dotted with La Causa-related organizations and projects, few were consistent in bringing about significant and long term improvements in the lives and social conditions in el barrio. Here in San Antonio, Citizens Organized for Public Service was an exception to the rule. COPS secured ample CDBG funds on their own for specific barrios during the 1970s and 1980s. Since then these funds have all but dried up.

The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center presently promotes La Causa a propos el barrio by serving as an intermediate organizational or “mother ship” in improving the social conditions in el barrio. It is anticipated that it will continue to do more. This scenario is based on 1) Esperanza’s commitment to the primary purpose of La Causa, 2) an interpretation of Esperanza’s social justice practice with la gente del barrio, 3) Esperanza’s and its allies’ experiences with the Mayor’s Task Force and 4) the “Post-Task Force Coalition’s” preparations for the COSA Housing Commission proceedings.



Part 2. Esperanza’s Practice of Social Justice in El Barrio: An Interpretation

Esperanza’s multi-issue approach promotes La Causa’s values and objectives by operating a large array of “think globally, act locally” programs. These include international and regional social justice issues, socio-cultural arts and educational programs, e.g. those related to the structural causes of gentrification. These learning experiences reveal the interlocking political-economic systems which perpetuate, by commission or omission, social injustices.

Such are Sara De Turk’s findings in the recent study: *Activism, Alliance-Building and the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center* (2015). De Turk’s book casts Esperanza as “an instructive example of a social movement organization ... (of) hard work, tactical sophistication and fidelity to its values ...” “Its central vision and strategies is (sic) especially worthy of note.” Esperanza’s numerous programmed activities infer the nature, limits, criteria, and validity of social justice practice in el barrio. I will draw selectively from these holdings so as to fashion a working definition of social justice practice vis-à-vis el barrio.

Natural Law depicts social justice as the sum-total of the virtues: “that moral, supernatural virtue, which inclines the will to render to others at all times what is strictly their due.” Esperanza’s priority among la gente’s many “dues” or human potentialities is clear: “[our] work helps individuals and grassroots organizations acquire knowledge and skills so that [they] can control decisions that affect ... day-to-day lives in a way that respects and honors shared goals for a just society” (De Turk, p. 3). Accordingly,

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Esperanza staff/associates address la gente’s unique gift of reflective reasoning, that is, the universal “natural right” to perceive, control, and choose. Reflective reason generates individual and communal (or cultural) meanings. Meanings are understandings, motivations, and actions that move us forward. Ultimately, our dearest meanings (conscious or unconscious) explain why we act the way we do. Esperanza helps resolve la gente’s identity, ethnic and classism issues by promoting programs such as oral history, family “fotohistorias”, and historic preservation. Additionally, staged events, art exhibits, “pláticas” and such, develops la gente’s multi-dimensional, spiritual-cultural role as history-makers.

In summary, Esperanza consistently nurtures la gente’s basic human nature to perceive, anticipate events, predict observations by others and manage future events. Hence, Esperanza’s fundamental practice of justice may be understood as a process that moves human potentialities along the continuum of becoming. How fully el barrio flowers its potential, the more la gente may realize theirs, and vice-versa. Or, more keenly: social justice practice is “bringing about maximum individuality within maximum community (Immanuel Kant).” Practically, the primary social justice action principle is: “Be all you can be as you help others be all they can be”.

Only part of Esperanza’s modeling work fosters barrio gente’s well-being and barrio improvements. Esperanza shares resources with other groups because of public/private contractual agreements for operating established social and cultural events. This requires a

to two major events per month while maintaining three to four on-going programs and meetings with who knows how many walk-in individuals and groups. Yet their unsettling experience with the Mayor’s Task Force and the signs of the times beckon for more.

Part 3. Mayor’s Task Force on Preserving Dynamic and Diverse Neighborhoods

On May 15, 2014, after months of fierce opposition by Mission Trails Mobile Home Park community and allies that included the Esperanza, the San Antonio City Council approved the re-zoning of the area which allows for a 600 plus high-end apartment complex. The ruling swept away close to 300 long-time residents, the majority elderly and children, and vaporized their right to live in a meaningful world secured by affordable housing. The Mayor’s Task Force was established to prevent such a tragic displacement of la gente in the future.

Esperanza staff and organizational allies spent hundreds of hours at the Task Force hearings, read through hundreds of pages of background information, e.g., national best affordable housing practices, and held many strategic sessions. In April 2015 the Task Force handed its uncompleted task over to a newly created COSA Housing Commission. Mayor Ivy Taylor describes the Housing Commission purpose as creating “stable, accessible, mixed use, mixed income neighborhoods throughout the city”. Esperanza and its allies reject this pronouncement as it sidesteps the structural causes of gentrification and displacement, and the importance in resolving them. This, of course was the original purpose of the Mayor’s Task Force.

Esperanza and others will participate and monitor the activities of the Housing Commission. Preparations included: 1) encouraging gente to apply for positions on the Housing Commission, 2) identifying structural causes of displacement and sounding out their findings at the Housing Commission, 3) developing a priority system for achieving the Housing Commission’s major recommendations (see below) and 4) forming a coalition for follow-up tasks such as providing information re: resources to barrio groups.

The Post-Task Force Coalition understands the Housing Commission’s long-term mandates as:

- Conduct a Systematic Assessment of Policies, Programs, and City Boards/Commissions to Determine their Impact on Displacement, Loss of Affordable Housing, and Neighborhood Change.
- Explore and Implement Workforce/Affordable Inclusionary Housing Policies for Residential Development
- Develop a Plan and Timeline for the Issuance of a Housing Bond for the Rehabilitation, Preservation, and Creation of Workforce/Affordable Housing.
- Identify Ongoing Sources of Funds to be utilized by the San Antonio Housing Trust and Nonprofit Housing Providers for the Rehabilitation, Preservation and Creation of Workforce & Affordable Housing. (From Task Force Recommendations)

Part 4. Esperanza as an Intermediate Organization or ‘mother ship’ for groups engaged in improving social conditions in el barrio.

Esperanza (see De Turk) is a trusted haven for marginal groups: the place and space for information sharing and individual/group support. It is also an organization with ample political experience, resources, and contacts. It is committed to protecting el barrio’s interests in the face of public officials and profit-driven developers, and in providing la gente del barrio access to public resources. But given Esperanza’s many on-going multi-issue commitments, one must ask—who will actually do the necessary seeding and cultivating in el barrio? That is, who will devote the sizable time and energy it takes to improve social conditions in a

specific barrio? Who will do what, when and how is being weighted by Esperanza and members of the coalition.

The emerging objectives from discussions and notes taken are 1) to provide early warnings and assistance to el barrio, e.g., regarding re-zoning and other types of encroachments, and 2) to give information about available resources and how to enlarge the pie, e.g., new housing bond elections. Esperanza is already working with groups like West End Hope in Action and Fuerza Unida in advancing similar defensive and offensive objectives.

Various methods come immediately to mind about how this might happen: run a regular column in La Voz with a list of funding resources, develop a leadership course, set up a traditional and digital library, etc. But these are organizational decisions.

The reality is some group must direct a bottoms-up strategy for whatever good or indecisiveness comes from the COSA Housing Commission proceedings. Otherwise, we can expect more of the same COSA top-down planning. Hence, funding will continue to be based on a “get re-elected” political agenda at the District level. At the urban level it will remain focused on private/public economic development (read “cheap money” for private developers) based on the “trickle-down theory” that to date is a dismal failure in San Antonio’s poverty segregated neighborhoods. (see the 2015 COSA FY 2016-2020 Consolidated Plan and FY 2016 Action Plan especially pages 31-32 re: los barrios). Stay tuned for developments as the 2016 year begins.

Editor’s note: Observations and analysis expressed in this article are solely those of the author.

