

ALAZAN APACHE COURTS

A San Antonio Historical Landmark



Original caption from USHA's pictorial supplement: The buildings at the top of the picture are soon to be demolished in preparation for the building of Apache Courts—an extension to Alazan Courts. The crowd shown above is listening to music by the Mexican Orchestra. | Note: The crowd gathered for the inauguration ceremonies of the Alazán-Apache Courts on June 28, 1940. They viewed demonstration units of the Alazan Courts afterwards. “Los Courts” are the oldest public housing in San Antonio and are among the first authorized public housing in the nation.

Editor's Note: As the Westside Preservation Alliance researches the history of “Los Courts” in San Antonio” we will keep Voz readers informed of our finds. In the July/Ag 2016 issue of La Voz, Sarah Zenaida Gould's photo essay, Before the Courts provided a look into conditions in the area where the Courts were built. In the same issue, Donna Morales Guerra introduced us to life in the Westside of San Antonio from the 30s to the 50s with a photo essay that highlighted social actions that church and community centers provided for the neighborhood. In this issue we examine the building of the Alazan-Apache Courts with information found in the document, A Pictorial Supplement to the 1939 Annual Report filed by the Housing Authority of the City of San Antonio, Texas for USHA, The United States Housing Authority.

PUBLIC HOUSING in the United States was born with the transformative and utopian ideal that it could alter people and places. A core aim was to create liveable communities in spite of the social and cultural forces working against poor and working class people.

Los Courts in San Antonio standing for more than half a century until today did create a sense of a self-contained community and created pride in its residents. However, eventually, the social conditions of poverty, social exclusion and segregation marginalized those living in public housing.

By the millenium, changing social policy, urban renewal and the demise of the “inner city” further made “Los Courts” undesirable options for young families who would, instead, leave the westside barrios for suburbia.

In the global present, affordable housing continues to be a pressing social concern nationwide. San Antonio is today a minority majority city with a deepening economic disparity between white and communities of color. For the majority Mexican American society, education, jobs, transportation and environmental concerns remain core issues of contemporary urban life.

Can there be new and revolutionary ideas to replace the commonplace trope of inevitable decline in public housing or will people's needs be subsumed by market greed in the 21st Century?

Projects for safe, healthy neighborhoods must balance economic development with the cultural heritage and history of local communities. The Alazán-Apache Courts remain a vital resource of human values and cultural assets. Across time, the Alazán-Apache Courts have harbored generations of poor and working class families who created a community of resilience and solidarity. Many current and former dwellers, as well as neighboring residents have many stories about “Los Courts” that demonstrate the power of place and memory. “Los Courts” are an integral part of San Antonio and United States history.

—Tomás Ybarra Frausto



During the 1930s more than 100,000 Mexican Americans lived in San Antonio, many of them in little more than shacks with tin roofs, dirt floors, and scrap-material walls. These dwellings had no indoor plumbing, and sanitation was primitive. In 1937, during the Great Depression, the United States Housing Authority was established. San Antonio began its own San Antonio Housing Authority on June 17, 1937. Among the five SAHA commissioners the one most responsible for promoting the Alazan-Apache project was the Italian-born Father Carmelo Tranchese, pastor of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. In September 1937 the USHA agreed to fund the San Antonio housing program. Five projects were scheduled: Alazan and Apache Courts for Mexican Americans, Lincoln Heights and Wheatley Courts for blacks, and Victoria Courts for whites. Many of the nearly 500 landlords who had to be bought out, however, demanded compensation beyond that allocated. Angered, the USHA administrator ordered the projects stopped in early March 1939. Eleanor Roosevelt intervened, and work began on the Alazan project in July with the demolition of the 929 substandard structures that occupied the site.

Alazan opened some of its units in August 1940 and the rest by early 1941. The project cost nearly \$4 million. In less than a year the smaller, adjacent Apache Courts was scheduled for completion at a cost of \$1,116,000. The USHA requirement that union labor be used for construction prevented local Mexican Americans from working on the project and added to its cost. The total cost of the five housing projects was over \$10 million. The federal government loaned 90 percent of the necessary funding, while the required 10-percent local contribution was raised through a bond drive. All debts were repaid through rents. By the end of 1942 the 2,554 single-family units in all five projects were open for nearly 10,000 tenants, including 4,994 tenants in the 1,180 single-family dwellings in the Alazan-Apache projects. The carefully constructed buildings contained multiple single-family dwellings, which ranged from three to 6½ rooms each, including private bathrooms and kitchens. All were equipped with modern appliances. On-site services included library facilities, health clinics, and social, recreational, and educational programs. The cost of the utilities and services was included in the tenants' rent, which ranged from \$8.75 to \$14.00 a month. Eligibility for the housing was determined by minimum and maximum annual salary limits, which varied depending on family size. United States citizenship was required by the SAHA as one way of reducing the number of applicants, who far outnumbered the units available. The occupants of the Alazan-Apache Courts formed a tenants' association to maintain the project, and their courts were judged by some observers to be "the best maintained housing project in the United States." The success of the projects led to demands for more. Tranchese headed the cause. Lack of funding, however, and the developing World War II made the effort unproductive, and public housing development in San Antonio ceased until the 1950s.

—Excerpts from *Handbook of Texas Online*, Donald L. Zelman, "Alazan-Apache Courts," accessed 08.12.16, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/mpa01>.



Artists Perspective of Typical Block in Alazan Courts. Separate back yards. Play areas for small children. Separate sanitary facilities for each family. Permanent construction — for low repairs and low maintenance.





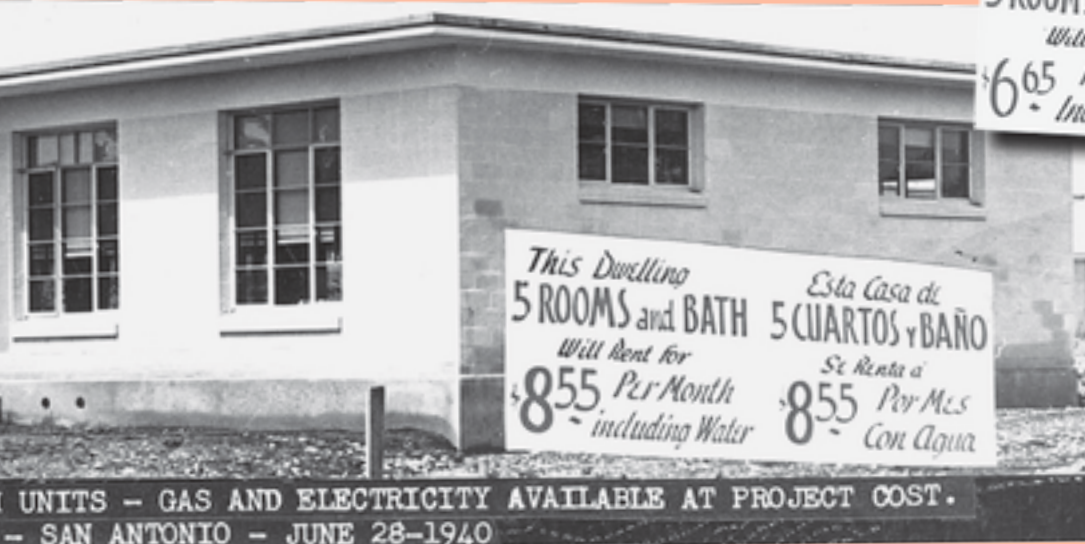
...all children, large play areas for young and old. Good drainage, sidewalks. Ample ventilation and sunlight. rents.



<i>This Dwelling</i>	<i>Esta Casa de</i>
4 ROOMS and BATH	4 CUARTOS y BAÑO
<i>Will Rent for</i>	<i>Se Renta a</i>
\$7.50 Per Month	\$7.50 Per Mes
<i>including Water</i>	<i>Con Agua</i>

Alazan Courts apartments came in a variety of sizes and prices. They were not furnished but borrowed furniture was used to promote its sales. Pictured rooms include a typical living room, kitchen with metal shelves, and bedroom.

<i>This Dwelling</i>	<i>Esta Casa de</i>
3 ROOMS and BATH	3 CUARTOS y BAÑO
<i>Will Rent for</i>	<i>Se Renta a</i>
\$6.65 Per Month	\$6.65 Per Mes
<i>Including Water</i>	<i>Con Agua</i>



FATHER CARMELO TRANCHESE



Father Carmelo Tranchese is recognized during the inaugural ceremony “as the leader and father of the development.” An extract from his remarks:

“Mis queridos amigos, hoy estamos muy felices. Esta felicidad nace de una nueva vida familiar. Ustedes saben que por muchos años yo he trabajado en interesar al Gobierno en un proyecto de viviendas en San Antonio. Hoy, tal proyecto esta por ser terminado.

Dentro de poco, algunos de ustedes tendrán la oportunidad de mudarse a estas bonitas, limpias y saludables habitaciones. Traten a estos espacios mejor que sus propios casas. Embelliscan sus patios, hagan uso del edificio comunitario y de todos sus servicios. Estoy muy agradecido a todos los que han animado y

ayudado a la Autoridad Local en esta empresa...”

English translation: My dear friends, today we are all very happy. May this happiness, brought about by a new home life, continue. For years, you know how I have struggled—how we all have struggled—to get our Government interested in a Housing Project in San Antonio. Today, a Housing Project is nearing completion.

Soon, many of you will have the opportunity to move into these nice, clean and sanitary buildings. Treat these places better than you would your own homes. Beautify your yards, use the Community Building and all its facilities. I am grateful to all who have encouraged and assisted the Local Authority in this undertaking

In 1932, Father Carmelo Tranchese became pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and soon became a supporter and defender of his Mexican America congregation as they mobilized for better wages and working conditions. Often at their side, Father Tranchese established relief centers when workers were laid off their jobs. He was very involved in projects to improve health and sanitary conditions.

Equally significant, Father Tranchese revitalized the oral traditions and folk customs of his parishioners, particularly those related to Catholic religious cycles like Christmas, Easter and All Saints and Souls Day. He is noted for maintaining the presentation of la Pastorela (a medieval Spanish Shepherds’ play) that has been continuously presented at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and at Mission San José.

One of Father Tranchese’s top priorities was to bring affordable public housing to San Antonio and he was selected to serve as one of five Commissioners on the San Antonio Housing Authority. In 1953, after suffering a nervous breakdown, Father Carmelo Tranchese took residence in Louisiana where he died of a heart attack on July 13, 1956.”(See citation below*)



COMMUNITY BUILDING ON ALAPACHE PLAZA FOR ALAZAN AND APACHE COURTS WILL PROVIDE RECREATIONAL AND SOCIAL FACILITIES AND PROJECT OFFICE. SPACES FOR CLINIC, LIBRARY, BOYS’ CLUB, ETC. FOR THE COMMUNITY. LEAD YOUTH IN WHOLESOME ACTIVITIES AND OUT OF CRIME POSSIBILITIES.

* Father Tranchese’s vision for westside development was realized with the construction of the Alazan and Apache Courts.

Footnote: Donald J. Zelman, “Alazan Apache Courts: A New Deal Response to Mexican American Housing

Conditions in San Antonio in Southwestern Historical Quarterly, The Texas State Historical Association, Vol. xxxvii no. 2, October, 1983.

