

IN THE SHADOW OF THE PEARL

Updates and Intros by Marisol Cortez

In August of 2012,

I attended the city council meeting in which the council voted unanimously in favor of the Alamo Brewery project,

pending its approval by the federal and state agencies that granted the funds used to restore the Hays Street Bridge. I went to that meeting to speak in support of the Hays Street Bridge Restoration Group in their fight to protect the bridge as both historic landmark and public right of way, and to preserve the open space around the bridge for development as a community park, as the Group had intended in its

years of collaboration with the city. At that meeting, however, the city voted to essentially give the land, originally donated to the Restoration Group for the park idea, to brewery developer Eugene Simor—offering him a grant in the amount of the land sale. In addition, Council voted to give Simor an incentives package worth \$794,000, and approved licensing agreements that would allow him to use the land beneath the bridge for events, to place tables and chairs on the bridge deck, and to attach a skywalk to the bridge approaches.

These details aside, what struck me at that meeting was a comment by one of the project's proponents, who drew parallels between redevelopment at the Pearl and Simor's proposed microbrewery project. Like the upscale breweries and restaurants at the Pearl and Blue Star, she said, the Hays Street Bridge project would stimulate the development of new residential living spaces downtown, beautifying an area long neglected and blighted. The logic feels impeccable when couched in these terms. Who doesn't want to beautify what is ugly, to revivify what has been neglected and underutilized? Yet I found myself feeling anger at her words.

My father grew up in the neighborhood east of N. St. Mary's and south of Josephine, just north of downtown, in the shadow of the Pearl Brewery. As a child, when we would visit my grandparents, that's where we would go: a short dash down 37 from our



Bridge neighbors and community members gathered at the Hays St. Bridge in December, 2012 before boarding buses to City Hall to announce a lawsuit against the City of San Antonio.

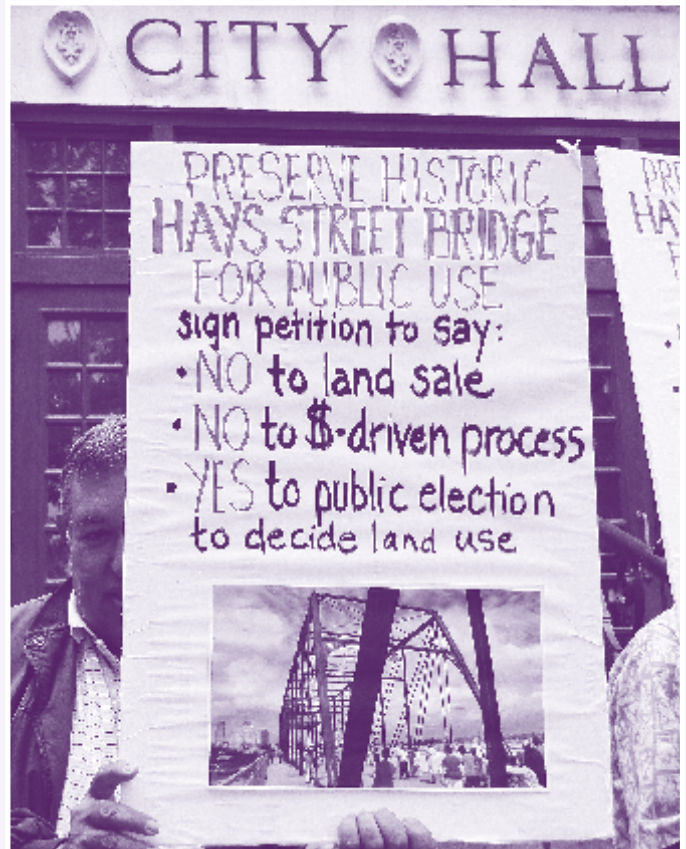
house on East Mulberry, then exit Josephine, then right on Euclid. Back then, in the 1980s, when the Pearl was still open as a major employer, the area was a mix of residential and commercial uses. Crossing the San Antonio River on Josephine, you would pass the leaning Liberty Bar, then Hawthorne Elementary, where my mom worked as a special ed teacher, then the Royal Crown bottling plant, just a few blocks from my grandparents' house. Driving past the plant, I would fantasize about finding soda sitting outside in unopened glass bottles—cola or 7Up or Orange Crush—free for the taking. Other distribution centers dotted the modest working class, largely mexicano neighborhood of my grandparents: there was the Borden bottler with its smiling cow logo, smelling sourly of milk as we would drive by; there was the fenced-in concrete pad that served as storage site for a local sign company, across the street from where we would park on Myrtle Street.

By the time of my own childhood, many of these businesses, like the Pearl, were soon to close. Back in the 50s and 60s, when my dad and his siblings were growing up, the area was something of a commercial corridor, some of it industrial scale and some of it local. In addition to RC, PepsiCo also operated a bottler in the neighborhood; in addition to Borden, there was Foremost. Besides the milk companies, there was an ice cream factory. Across from the RC bottler on Josephine St. was a large cleaners that spanned

the river. Across from my grandmother's house stood a printing and electronics shop. One of their neighbors, a friend of my grandmother's, ran the Tacoland before it became the music venue made infamous by Ram Ayala's shooting death. Across the street from the Tacoland was a local BBQ place where workers from the area would go for lunch; everyday at 12 noon, the whistle would blow at the Pearl to announce the lunch break, a sonic stamp in the landscape of my father's memory. He and his brothers would fish in the river and raid the dumpsters behind the ice cream factory for discarded five gallon tubs, amazed to discover so many free frozen treats. My father also remembers the sight of green discharge flowing into the river from one of the milk factories. Back then, the city had not yet constructed the diversion channels that steered the river clear of the central business district downstream in times of flooding. "It was just a plain river," my dad remembers. "It went right through town." At the end of the street was a little grocer on the corner of E. Myrtle and N. St. Mary's, the Red and White where my grandmother would send my father and his siblings on errands, armed with a list.

There is nothing necessarily scientific about these sights, these smells. They are just memories, just words relayed to me, the thread that tethers me to a sense of place: but this is what I think about when I hear the words of the woman at the council meeting. The coded ugliness creeping around the edge of her praise for the Pearl's redevelopment—blighted, vacant, beautified—prising apart a gulf between her knowledge of the neighborhood and mine, what she thinks she knows and my memories. Just an ordinary neighborhood. Just people working, living, even after the factories began to board up and leave. How dare you suggest that what remains is blighted. How dare you say that what has replaced it now is an improvement on what was there. Who dares to say which lives and modes of living have more value and which have less. Who dares suggest that what and who came before were the wrong sorts. I want to tap her on the shoulder and tell her this. I want to look up her name and send her an email. But I don't.

Since the land sale and bridge licensing at that August city council meeting, much has happened in the fight over the Hays Street Bridge in a relatively short period of time. After the vote, we learned of a state law that protects public lands like parks—whether designated, used, or understood as such—from their sale to private developers without a prior public election. This is the same law the city is now trying to skirt in the case of HemisFair's redevelopment, and it gives registered voters a way to petition local government for an election in the event that a city does sell park land. On the basis of this statute, the Restoration Group and supporters began a petition process calling for a public election on the land sale. In about six weeks, we collected over 2800 signatures, which we submitted to the city clerk's office on October 1st. Around the same time, we learned that the Federal Highway Administration had weighed in against



Above: A press conference on the steps of City Hall announced the lawsuit against the City of San Antonio. Below: Gustavo Sánchez holds a sign at a press conference convened to submit petitions against the city's land sale.

the project, stating that the city's plans fell outside the scope of the funding's original intent to restore the bridge as a public right of way, and that "the Federal government is not in the practice of funding projects for the benefit [of] a private developer."

Predictably, the city responded that the petition was invalid and that the statute did not apply, given that the land had not been officially designated as a park, despite its donation for that purpose and despite the long process of collaboration between the Restoration Group and the city toward developing the land to that

After several community discussions, we therefore decided in November to file a lawsuit against the city –not only for its use of the letter of the law to betray the spirit of the law protecting public lands and public space, but for its breach of contract with the Restoration Group, which raised funds and solicited the land donation in order to obtain the \$2.89 million in federal matching funds used to restore the bridge.

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To do that, though, it is imperative that we understand the wider issues at stake. Press conferences and lawsuits are not ends in themselves, and they are useless if they do not serve the wider purposes of organizing and educating ourselves as community –so that we can more effectively educate those with the power to make decisions that impact our lives. As District 2 councilwoman Ivy Taylor herself said at the August 2nd city council meeting, the spectre of gentrification lurks behind the struggle over the bridge, and it is time for a more substantive, community-based discussion of this issue. For instance, the words of the woman at the council meeting suggest a number of ideas I have heard repeated throughout this campaign, and which suggest the need for a deep-

er historical and sociological analysis of these contests over urban space. Chief among these ideas are three: 1) Gentrification is a synonym for revitalization –taking a blighted area and making it beautiful and desirable again; 2) Gentrification is simply a neutral process of neighborhood change over time; as such, it is natural or inevitable; and 3) This struggle is simply about buildings; those who fight to preserve features of the built environment in historically neglected parts of town care more about buildings (or bridges) than people.

It is my hope that this series can begin to explore these issues over the next few months, in tandem with what we hope can be a vibrant movement to preserve not just public spaces that belong to us, but the commons to which we belong. The argument I want to develop is that in the transformation of my father’s childhood neighborhood at the edge of downtown, and in the current transformation of neighborhoods like it –like Dignowity Hill where the Hays Street Bridge sits –we can see the outline of broad historical and global economic shifts rendered local. The shift from industrial bottling to boutique microbrewing and from stable working class neighborhoods to pricey downtown lofts speaks a global shift from monopoly to neoliberal forms of capital and governance, manifested before our eyes in the urban landscape. Through this series, I want to explore the deeper histories that have shaped these present-day contests over land, and their implications for our ability to construct more democratic

and ecologically just relations to urban space as nature, a nature that has disappeared in plain sight.

The ultimate horizon of this exploration is to question the concept of development itself as a taken for granted good, challenging the overly simple idea that the public subsidy of private investment brings benefits to working class communities –the very trickle down strategies critiqued by Mayor Castro on the national stage, even as they are implemented locally. We need to talk about the global and national histories that inform local decision making over land use, simply because these broader dynamics mean that the struggles we see in San Anto over water, land, and sky are not isolated or unique. That they are not means, too, that collective solutions are already underway that we might connect with –what many have called the movement to demand a “right to the city,” a right not only to “participate democratically in the production of urban space,” but also the right to produce space that prioritizes the needs of inhabitants. In the words of Gihan Perera and Connie Cagampang Heller, this means affordable housing, living wages, quality education, and universal health care; in other words, this means a “re-designing and running [of] cities as if women matter.” ■

Editor’s note: In the Shadow of the Pearl is the first installation in a 4-part series that will include: Thinking Hays St and Hemisfair in an Era of Neoliberal Urbanism (Mar 2013), Right to the City, Rights of Nature (Apr 2013) and Beyond Development: Alternatives & Tactics (May 2013).

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