

The Banality of Dispossession—part I

The Creeping Gentrification of the Westside



An Architectural drawing for Apache Courts . Artist: Don White , Architects N. Straus Nayfach & Gordon M. Smith, SAHA pictorial supplemental , 1939 annual report

By Sam Stoeltje

On July 16 , what seemed to be a garden variety meeting of the zoning committee of the city of San Antonio was about to get under way. Then, the people started to show up; all at once, the lobby was crowded with San Antonians who live and work on the Westside, a neighborhood with deep historical and cultural significance to generations of Mexican-American and Latinx families and communities.

Apparently in response to the surprising numbers of would-be speakers, the city officials in the lobby announced that speaking times would be reduced to two minutes, as opposed to the standard three. I was there to yield my time to someone's expert testimony, but as I made my way to the front of the line, I was questioned about which case I wanted to speak on. An official gave me the impression that if I didn't know the case number, I wouldn't be able to speak. Fortunately, an intern at the Esperanza Center had signed me up already, protecting me from behavior that registered, to some present, as not-so-subtle efforts at obstruction and intimidation.

All of these people had shown up on a Tuesday afternoon to speak against a planned re-zoning of multiple lots on the Westside, from MF33 to ID23. This re-zoning would serve as a small but crucial part of the plan, by the San Antonio Housing Authority (SAHA) along with real estate developers NRP Group, to construct the Alazan Lofts, as well as, eventually, to demolish one of San Antonio's first housing complexes, the Alazan Courts.

For over an hour, residents of the Westside presented the committee with a litany of reasons – practical, political,

emotional – as to why this redevelopment plot should be, if not halted entirely, then at least slowed down. The community, it was argued, had not been adequately consulted about the latest plan for the Lofts, released only in January. Representing SAHA, Lorraine Robles responded with claims of having held 17 meetings, a number that misleadingly included general info sessions at all stages of the Lofts project, open to the public, but without opportunity for neighborhood feedback; the number of authentic meetings featuring attempts at community dialogue regarding the new plan was, in fact, two.

SAHA and the developer were seeking the re-zoning of the lots, from MF-33 to IDZ-3, a move that would be necessary to construct sufficient parking lot space for the residents of the new lofts. This was one objection raised: the parking lot would be yet another expanse of poured concrete, contributing to the neighborhood's already severe drainage issues, and producing the "heat bubble" effect, no doubt familiar to residents of cities that experience increasingly extreme summer temperatures. On this point, at the careful suggestion of a committee member, the developer was able to pivot and agree to construct the parking lot from a surface more permeable than concrete, and to reduce its footprint. The strategy is a popular one for projects that rely on bureaucratic approval: keep things fast and loose, be ready to make superficial concessions, always commit to as little as possible until the time comes to break ground. It is a strategy that will fail to inspire much trust in effected communities, and it has characterized the Alazan Lofts project from the very beginning.



Gloria Rios with her mother and daughter in front of the home she grew up in, at the Alazán Courts. She left as a teenager to perform in Mexico City where she became known as "La Reina del Rock n Roll/The Queen of Rock & Roll."

A Tale of Two Courts

Built in 1939-1941, the Alazan-Apache Courts were the first public housing project in San Antonio. Due to a common set of institutional and historical pressures – most notably redlining and consequent racist disinvestment – the neighborhoods surrounding the Westside’s “Guadalupe Corridor” were impoverished, with low rates of homeownership and inconsistent access to amenities like modern plumbing.

Following the approval and funding of the United States Housing Authority, the recently created San Antonio Housing Authority began to develop a plan for a public housing project. As obstacles emerged, Father Carmelo Tranchese, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church on the Westside, wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt for support. The First Lady, stirred by Tranchese’s words, traveled to San Antonio and met with the priest. In a journal she was keeping at the time, Roosevelt wrote,

“The moving spirit in this housing project is Father Tranchese, who shows his deep interest in the real social questions of his people by his determination to see a change in the surroundings in which they live.”

With Roosevelt’s support, the Alazan-Apache Courts were completed, offering Westside residents private bathrooms and finished floors, not to mention a majestic view of downtown San Antonio, just beyond the two historically significant waterways (Alazan and Apache Creeks) that were their namesake. Consisting of over two thousand family units, the Courts offered income-based housing to working-class San Antonians, more or less entirely of Mexican descent. The Courts would become home to a vibrant community from which emerged internationally successful artists such as Eva Garza, Rita Vidaurri, Lydia Mendoza, and Blanca Rodriguez.

Yet while the Alazan-Apache Courts were valued by many residents for their modern amenities, they were not immune to the familiar problems of public housing projects in decades to come, which multiplied as socially progressive government spending fell out of fashion. Even with home ownership gradually increasing, the Westside continued to suffer the consequences of racial and class discrimination, and the Courts would become emblematic of these trends. Into the 21st century, the Alazan-Apache Courts continued to be neglected by policymakers, in some cases falling into disrepair. But what looks like municipal business-as-usual with regard to aging public housing complexes might appear more calculated in light of the Alazan Lofts project: SAHA has been able to exploit discontent about the condition of the Courts to argue that they are beyond the point of rehabilitation, thus clearing the way for demolition, and eventually, new construction on this newly valuable land.

The Silicolonization of San Antonio

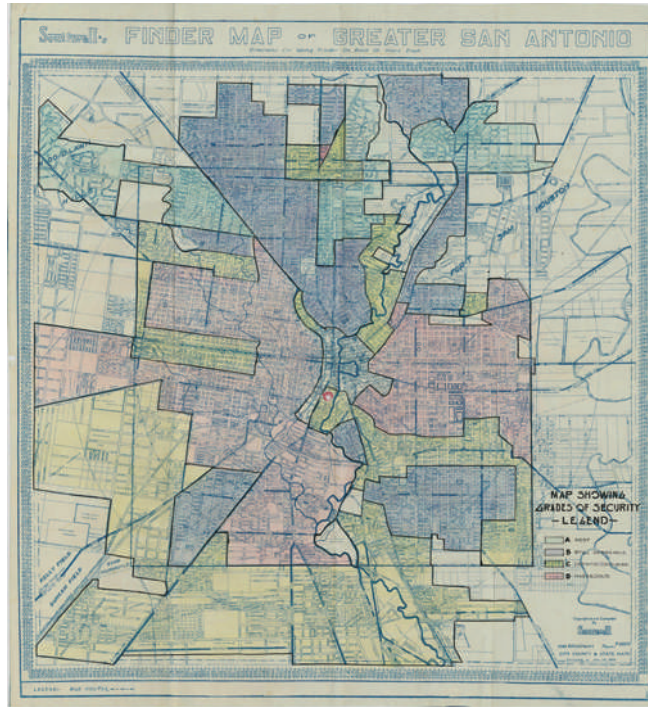
By all accounts, San Antonio is well into the beginning of a period of major growth. The population of the seventh largest city in the United States is expected to double by 2050, increasing strain on already-beleaguered public utilities and infrastructure. Due to factors like the success of San Antonio-based tech startup Rackspace, along with runaway (also largely tech-related) gentrification of “cooler” Austin to the north, San Antonio has been able to position itself as a desirable

place for a new generation of white-collar workers, with its comparatively low cost of living and property values. Another significant stimulus to this process has been the emergence of the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) as a major player in cybersecurity, an industry that shows no sign of slowing down.

With these pressures, neighborhoods in San Antonio have been transformed, seemingly overnight. This includes the city’s predominantly African American East Side, where another public housing project, the Wheatley Courts, was demolished in 2014. As an article in the *San Antonio Current* reports, “SAHA forced out the residents of the Wheatley Courts on the East Side to make room for the mixed-income East Meadows

development, which was spearheaded by a \$30 million Choice Neighborhood grant. SAHA officials took issue with some of those who characterized the plan as a displacement. Each household was given the much-coveted Section 8 housing voucher, and the option to move back into the newly built apartments. Less than a quarter actually moved back.” There is little reason to expect anything different from the Lofts project.

Gentrification can involve a predictable cycle of middle- and upper-class, typically majority-white, artists, students, and bohemians staking out a historically devalued neighborhood, usually home to communities of color; this is followed by businesses that cater to these new residents, and then, by an older, wealthier professional class seeking to move to a “trendy” locale. On the Westside, however, gentrification has taken on its newer, more speculative form, representative of real estate developers’ increasing shrewdness with respect to this cycle. Property values have started to rise, in some cases quite steeply, before a significant population of “gentry” (higher-income and/or white residents) has even arrived. Developers are buying up houses and land in anticipation of an increasingly inevitable transformation, creating a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy of displacement and dispossession.



Map demonstrating redlining, used by the Home Owners Loan Corporation in the 1930s. Source: Coates Library, Trinity University (bit.ly/coates-redline)

Juanita R. Delgado August 21, 1915 – August 30, 2019



Juanita R. Delgado has left her earthly home into at the tender age of 104. She celebrated her birthday on August 21st surrounded by familia and mariachis at Mi Tierra. Born in Gonzales Co. in 1915, she was born into a family of farmers who settled in Flatonia, TX where she met her husband, Pedro Delgado. They married in 1935 and came to San Antonio. As a newlywed, Juanita worked at the Elizondo Flower Shop owned by her husband's family. She later worked as a sewing machine operator for several factories, including Jay-N that was located in the historic Basila Frocks Building. Juanita and Pedro raised 4 children, Marta, Mary Jane, Rachel and Ruben in the house they built themselves— now landmarked as a visible reminder of the culture of a community. Pedro and Juanita were founding members of St. Augusta Catholic Church now St. Jude's. Juanita was one of the original Gualupanas at St. Jude and remained active there. She loved working in her yard and knew a lot about plants and herbs that she shared with her neighbors. Juanita



was known as the Church Lady and the Plant Lady. A great hostess, she entertained visitors up to the last days of her life offering them a drink. She loved outings to have Lockhart BBQ. The Esperanza staff, board and Buena Gente share in the family and community's sentiments at this time. Our heartfelt condolences especially to Rachel Delgado who has shared her mother's memories of cultura and comunidad with the Westside Preservation Alliance, Fotohistorias

Project and the Corazones de Esperanza meetings on Second Saturdays at the Casa de Cuentos. The Esperanza's Museo del Westside hopes to honor the stories of community members such as Juanita. *Doña Juanita, presente!*



Often complicit in this process, whether intentionally or not, is San Antonio's Office of Code Compliance, whose officers respond to reports of code violations and patrol neighborhoods, issuing citations for violations such as refuse in front yards, or (commonly) overgrown vegetation. The *Current* quotes a city official: "before 2012, about 80% percent of code enforcement cases were from people who reported violations, with the other 20% percent of cases from officers finding violations while on patrol. Those percentages are now reversed." This suggests that as developers have been buying up property on the Westside, Code Compliance has become drastically more aggressive in issuing citations, often to residents that are already in precarious financial positions.

The Westside as a target of real estate speculation is not mere coincidence. With gentrification processes already well underway in San Antonio's East Side and Southtown neighborhoods, the Westside constitutes the next most-downtown-adjacent residential area, and a logically desirable place to live for the next wave of transplants, techie and otherwise, seeking an "urban experience" in San Antonio. And it is already becoming visible: Like a military outpost, tech workspace Geekdom has taken over a rehabilitated warehouse just down the road from Lanier, the Westside's long underserved high school. But easily the biggest force of imminent change on the horizon is the planned expansion of UTSA's downtown campus, into the Westside, which will present yet more challenges to these already vulnerable residents and the

culture they have kept alive.

Under the auspices of President Taylor Eighmy, UTSA intends to quadruple the size of its downtown campus, extending it into the Westside. This expansion reflects the university's general demographic growth and specifically the rising profile of its School of Business, which includes the Cyber Security degree program. Setting aside the question of academic complicity with a high-tech "arms race" mentality, UTSA's expansion threatens to extend the university's historic shortcomings in serving and empowering San Antonio's Latinx young people from less privileged backgrounds. As UTSA professor Enrique Alemán Jr. wrote, in a letter to the editor recently appearing in the *San Antonio Express-News*, "Students and families in San Antonio deserve a public university that is engaged authentically and reciprocally with its neighbors, one that invests and works side by side with communities that have been left out of the educational pipeline for generations." Without concerted effort on the part of UTSA decision-makers, communities like those on the Westside will continue to be left - or worse, pushed - out.

BIO: Sam Stoeltje was born in San Antonio and is currently a graduate student in the department of English Literature at Rice University in Houston. Part of their academic and research focus is the intersection of activism and alternative spiritualities or metaphysics.

NOTE: Look for Part 2 of this article in the November *La Voz*.