

The Banality of Dispossession—part 2

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

EDITOR’S NOTE: *This is the second part of an article on gentrification of the Westside of San Antonio by Sam Stoeltje. The first part was published in the October 2019 issue of La Voz de Esperanza.*

If author John Phillip Santos is correct that San Antonio has always been a “secret Mexican city”, the heart of that city is the Westside. On the narrow roads south of Guadalupe Street, tiny, colorfully painted casitas cluster together, their yards and porches often host to the esoteric, recycling-based aesthetic sometimes called (both fondly and pejoratively) *rasquachismo*. Chimes, artificial flowers, Marian statuettes and fountains proliferate, small pockets of sacred space distributed throughout the neighborhood. Further east, in the Alazan-Apache Courts, the houses are bigger, the lots more suburban, indicating the direction post-war real estate would take in the decades following their



Lucy and Ray Pérez stand in front of their home on Elvira St. in the Westside decorated with stuffed animals and swirling pin wheels.

construction. Yet the Courts maintain a kind of fenceless intimacy and walk-friendliness, far removed from the sterile non-culture many in the U.S. now associate with the word “suburb.”

The Alazan Lofts, in their current iteration, would be something else entirely. San Antonio has seen similar projects before; perhaps most conspicuously, the massive development along Broadway,



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adjacent to the equally massive Pearl Brewery complex, which is of course called the Broadway Lofts. Strolling through the Pearl Brewery, one can observe a surreal pseudo-Brooklyn willed into existence, as it has been in so many other cities, complete with boutique coffee shops, cocktail bars, and franchises offering a mix of new and vintage goods. Here, longtime San Antonio residents and recent transplants can experience a simulacrum of the cosmopolitan lifestyle. On the other side of the highway, the four-story, gargantuan Broadway Lofts presents a flat, unyielding face of brick and glass rectangles, a new construction that clumsily mimics a repurposed industrial building.



Alazan Lofts will be built at South Colorado and El Paso Streets, adjacent to the Alazan Courts. Half the units will be public housing, eight will be market-rate apartments and the remainder allocated for renters earning a fraction of the area's median income. bit.ly/alazan_elevation

SAHA proposed the Alazan Lofts in 2017. While the Housing Authority owns the land on which the Alazan-Apache Courts and other public housing projects are situated, it purchased the lots for the new lofts, at the perhaps surprising figure of 1.2 million. If this seems high for 2.9 acres in what is still a working class community of color, it merely reflects the skyrocketing real estate values of the Westside, symptomatic of aggressive speculation. For the same reason, the land that SAHA already owns has become similarly valuable, which has put the historically underfunded organization in a new position. SAHA has been incentivized to develop its current properties – including the Alazan Courts – for potential revenue; a source quotes SAHA director Lorraine Robles as having said, “We’re not in public housing anymore. We’re in real estate.”

When the Alazan Lofts project was first announced, members of the community responded, vigorously, that this would be a disaster for the Westside. Vertically dense, loft-style new constructions send a clear symbolic message: “This is now a trendy neighborhood, ripe for investment.” Even worse, the original plan was for a complex whose 88 units would all be offered at market rate prices. Due to public outcry, SAHA was eventually pressured to update the plan, which currently has become majority affordable/area median income, though 8 units are still slated to be market rate. While the Alazan Lofts have been rebranded as a place to relocate current residents of the Alazan Courts before they are demolished, there are 501 units in the Courts; optimistically,

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residents will be able to afford at most 40 units in the Lofts. The rest, as in the case of East Side redevelopment and the Wheatley Courts, will be given Section 8 vouchers: with nowhere left to go near the city center, they will have been displaced.

A key voice in the effort to mitigate the effects of irresponsible development on the Westside has been the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center. Such advocacy is consistent with the commitments of the organization to housing justice and anti-gentrification efforts, but for the Esperanza Center, the Alazan Lofts is a particularly contentious issue. This is because Casa de Cuentos, Esperanza’s Westside building (with which some readers may be familiar) is located directly across from the site in question, on the other side of Colorado Street. Casa de Cuentos offers a home for Westside organizing, arts programming, and Esperanza’s new Museo

Del Westside, a tribute to the many songs and stories that have been the legacy of this unique community. If SAHA succeeds in the kind of construction it wants for the Alazan Lofts, Colorado Street will resemble nothing less than a battlefront, between one vision of the Westside that celebrates the past, and another that seeks to erase it.

Hope for Another Future

The structure of a meeting of the zoning committee gives a certain benefit to the applicant for re-zoning: they are allowed the

last word before the committee makes its decision. SAHA and NRP used their time wisely, manufacturing a sense of urgency. SAHA had failed to secure a CHOICE grant for the Alazan Lofts two years in a row, and was now seeking a tax credit from the State of Texas. Due to a deadline, they insisted, the re-zoning needed to happen now, or they would miss their opportunity.

Responding to the rhetorical pressure applied by Robles, Commissioner John Bustamonte, as quoted in the San Antonio Heron, remarked “I certainly never like to make a decision where I feel that (I’m) sort of being forced into it.” All the same, Bustamonte cast the first vote in favor of re-zoning, and 7 other commissioners expressed a somewhat performative-seeming disapproval before following suit. Despite two dissenting votes

(perhaps significantly, from the committee's two women of color), the application went through, and SAHA and NRP were one step closer to realizing the Alazan Lofts. A little over a week later, it was announced that the planned development had been awarded the tax credit from the state capitol.

Gentrification, displacement, dispossession; as in so many other neighborhoods and cities across the United States, these are not dangers, but imminent realities for San Antonio's Westside. San Antonio, it should not be forgotten, was founded as a colonial enterprise, an 18th-century extension of New Spain. And while the tactics and surfaces of colonization have changed form, its role in advancing the power structures of global capitalism and white supremacy remain the same. To think about gentrification as a form of colonization is to imagine the possibility of solidarity, between the poor, the indigenous, African-descended and Chicana, and the possibility of a new relationship to land built upon consensus and respectful coexistence.

Imagining new futures, though, must not occur at the expense of dealing with the realities of the present. Activist organizations like the Esperanza Center and community members will no doubt work together, in the coming years, to shape and manage the inevitable changes coming to this neighborhood, and to mitigate the worst effects of gentrification. As a graduate student and aspiring academic, I am often dismayed to see the callous indifference with which so many institutions treat their surrounding neigh-

borhoods. The responsiveness and involvement of UTSA will be particularly important, as it finds itself in a position to either reproduce the typical consequences of rushed campus expansion, or to work, sincerely and honestly, toward a different, more responsible relationship with its host community.

As a volunteer for the Esperanza, I spent a few hours canvassing on the Westside for the "Mi Barrio No Se Vende" coalition. One woman opened her door to us, and when we began discussing the impending destruction of the Alazan Courts, she reminisced about how, when she used to live closer to the area, she would give out tacos to some women that lived in the housing project. She began to tear up at the memory, not, it seemed, out of sadness for the women; but rather out of nostalgia for the opportunity to perform that particular act of human kindness. It may sometimes feel as if we have lost our capacity for such passionate selflessness, seeking instead to insulate ourselves from others. In this particular Westside resident, though, the neighborhood was clearly still very much alive.

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.

Casa de Cuentos offers a home for Westside organizing, arts programming, and Esperanza's new Museo Del Westside



Future home of the Museo del Westside



MujerArtes Compressed Earth Block Studio



Casa de Cuentos, the first building comprising the Rinconcito del Esperanza