

# Museo del Westside

## to showcase West Side history, culture

By Ben Olivo, *San Antonio Heron* | May 29, 2020



The former Ruben's Ice House will be restored and converted into the Museo del Westside. Article reprinted with permission of the author, Ben Olivo. Photo by Ben Olivo | Heron

After two years of planning, the Museo del Westside, a museum dedicated to West Side history and culture that's going into an old icehouse, cleared a major hurdle last week and rehab work could begin this fall.

On May 20, the Historic and Design Review Commission (HDRC) gave conceptual approval on plans to convert the old Ruben's Ice House at 816 S. Colorado St. into a museum. The 1,152-square-foot, wood-framed ice house space will be transformed into a gallery space. Then a second 1,286-square-foot gallery made of compressed earth block will be built behind the structure.

The project is part of the larger Rinconcito de Esperanza cultural arts hub owned and operated by the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center on Colorado just off Guadalupe Street.

The museum's director, Dr. Sarah Gould, said she hopes the first exhibit, which will cover women and activism on the West Side, can open next summer.

Esperanza has been working with architect Dwayne Bohuslav, a coordinator of the San Antonio College architecture program, on the project. The HDRC requested more info on the materials being used for the doors, windows and back addition before granting final approval, but

that's not expected to slow the project. The conceptual approval "allows us to move forward with pricing out everything, so we can move towards pulling permits," said Gould, who the Esperanza hired in 2018 to run the museum.

Since 2008, Esperanza, whose headquarters is on San Pedro Avenue near San Antonio College, has envisioned a museum on the West Side. Much of San Antonio's identity as a unique city stems from the cultural richness of the West Side—whether for its food and music or for its activism and blue collar demographic. The West Side was a part of town deemed "hazardous" for real estate lenders during the redlining practices of the 1930s.

The organization is pursuing grants, historic tax credits and individual donations toward its goal of \$2 million, the project's estimated cost. Gould declined to say how close to the \$2 million goal they are. She pointed out that Esperanza has a track record of making capital projects happen,

including purchasing and paying off its San Pedro building in six years; while also rehabbing two former homes and constructing the MujerArtes pottery studio and exhibit space, also made of compressed earth blocks, on the Rinconcito property. The organization is also converting the once-endangered Lerma's Nite Club on North Zarzamora Street into a cultural center with assistance from \$1 million in grant dollars from the city and county.

### Ruben's Ice House

The structure known as Ruben's Ice House dates back to the 1930s, when it was a home. Around 1950, it was converted into the M&E Grocery Store (named after Manuel and Elida Reyes),



Bird's eye view of the Rinconcito de Esperanza complex on South Colorado Street on the West Side. Courtesy Esperanza Peace & Justice Center



The former Ruben's Ice House (inside view) at 820 S. Colorado St. will be restored and converted into the Museo del Westside. Photo by Ben Olivo | Heron

according to Esperanza research. Around 1959, Reyes added the concrete block seating addition in the back and turned it into Ruben's Ice House, named after his son. It operated as an ice house and community gathering space until it closed in 1987.

At Ruben's, men sat in the front space drinking beer, while families gathered at picnic tables and ordered burgers from a sliding window in the back. The plan is to build the second gallery where families used to gather in the back.

"The front of the ice house was a very male space, so basically only men went in there to drink beer," Gould said. "Families and children who would come and maybe order burgers ... they would sit on the picnic tables. This was covered, screened in with a pony wall, so we're gonna stay within this footprint."

A smaller space in the front corner will serve as a gift shop. Even the old walk-in cooler in the center of the building will

stay in place. "They built the building around it," Gould said. "It just doesn't come out. It will be part of the interpretation of the building itself." The backroom kitchen, where the burgers were grilled, will be office space.

## Rinconcito de Esperanza

Since Gould was hired two years ago, Esperanza has held community meetings, asking neighbors and West Siders what they'd like to see in the museum.

Some of the ideas generated from those meetings include exhibits on why families settled on the West Side, historic dance halls such as La Perla and Buena Vista Gardens, and the Chicano civil rights movement.

Esperanza has also rehabbed Casa de Cuentos, a 100-year-old house that has held community meetings, musical performances, oral history gatherings, among other cultural gatherings. The restored 1920s Casita, a 200-square-foot home, serves as an example of a poor family's home during that era. And MujerArtes is the home of a women's ceramics collective where they make and sell pottery and related crafts.

Two adjacent homes will join the other structures. One will complement the museum as a research room where residents can view the Esperanza's digital photo collection, as well as peruse its oral histories—or record their own.

"We've been waiting for a while and we're really happy we got this done," Gould said. "It's our time now to really start with the number crunching and making it happen."

## In gratitude

Against the backdrop of the worst public health crisis since the 1918 flu pandemic and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, we have borne witness to what may be the most widespread civil uprising against racial injustice since 1968.

The heartache and the weight of bearing witness to policies and actions fueled by white supremacist ideology are unbearable. Nuestra comunidad has been here too many times! And yet, in the middle of all of it all, our Beloved Community has found time to speak up for our efforts to create a permanent and protected home for the Museo del Westside. Two weeks ago, with the support of the community, we received conceptual design approval for our architectural plans to rehabilitate Ruben's Ice House, and the Historic and Design Review Commission (HDRC) also approved our request to create the first historic district in the Westside at the Rinconcito de Esperanza. I want to thank everyone who reached out to HDRC to support these efforts. We know this has been a most extraordinarily difficult time when our very survival has required our full attention. Hope, peace, and justice have always been the driving prin-

ciples at the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center and it also undergirds the Museo del Westside's work. While we are collectively hollering out, we will not succumb to despair. We will live proudly and joyfully.

### ¡Basta con el racismo!

Sarah Zenaida Gould, PhD

Director Museo del Westside, June 5, 2020



Native plants at the Rinconcito include Turk's Cap growing next to Ruben's with a sign welcoming all people as neighbors. Photo: Kamala Platt