

## Whose History?

### The Politics of Historical Preservation and Urban Removal in El Paso



**A Forgotten Neighborhood: Stormsville, circa 1920. (Courtesy of UT El Paso Special Collections Library.)**

*“Since it tends to designate the stately mansions of the rich and buildings designed by famous architects, the [New York Landmarks Preservation] Commission mainly preserves the elite portion of the architectural past. It allows popular architecture to disappear. This landmark policy distorts the real past, exaggerates affluence and grandeur, and denigrates the present.”*

—Urbanist Herbert Gans (quoted in Dolores Hayden’s *The Power of Place*)

FEW ISSUES PROVOKE DEBATE about the historical significance of a city’s neighborhoods as plans for urban development and demolitions do. In El Paso, the city council’s Downtown 2015 Plan—that targets 168 acres as the site for future private commercial projects and the potential razing of scores of century-old buildings in downtown and the Segundo Barrio—sparked such a controversy. Although the controversy surrounding this urban removal project has to do

primarily with displacement, dispossession and political exclusion, the issues of public memory and history have also been an integral part of the discussion. Many have asked why some neighborhoods and buildings are considered worthy of historic preservation, while others are targeted for destruction.

If the City's redevelopment plan for downtown El Paso, the Segundo Barrio, Magoffin and the Union Plaza/Chihuahuita neighborhood is put in place, many buildings that are important to Mexican American community will be razed. In the Segundo Barrio, the Pablo Baray Apartments—where the first novel of the Mexican Revolution, *Los de Abajo*, was published in serial form by Mariano Azuela in 1915—will be bulldozed. (According to the Central Appraisal District archives, part of the building that is standing there today was constructed in 1910.) On South Oregon Street alone, several historic buildings will be demolished if the city plan is realized. The building where there is a plaque dedicated to "Mexican Joan of Arc" Teresita Urrea—healer, newspaper editor, saint, revolutionary and beauty queen—is within a zone that will be turned into a "green space." That property was owned by the first mayor of El Paso, Ben Dowell, in 1877. The site originally housed a Custom's House, a Lady's Hospital, and Aoy Elementary School. In 1907, it was refurbished by a Frenchman named Pierre Cazenabe—alias Felix Robert, from Marseilles—who managed bull-buffalo fights at the Juárez bullring. In 1919 and 1920, the El Paso city directory showed that the first African American graduate of Westpoint, Henry Flipper, lived there. Abelardo Delgado, author of "Stupid America," lived on Oregon and Fifth Street (today's Father Rahm Street) during the 40s when there was still a large African American community there. On 203 E. 7th street stands the birthplace of Don Tosti, a child prodigy who at the age of 9 played violin with the El Paso symphony orchestra then went on to play with swing greats such as Jimmy Dorsey and Les Brown and occasionally also jammed with Charles Mingus. His album "Pachuco Boogie" set in motion a whole new Chicano perspective on American pop music during the 40s and 50s. If the PDNG plan is realized, his birthplace will be torn down to build a big-box retail store. Ironically, his last recording was part of Ry Cooder's *Chavez Ravine*, where he warned the barrio of the upcoming demolition of a Chicano neighborhood. Also on Oregon Street, within the zone targeted for major demolitions, stands a beautiful structure that housed the *El Paso Times* in the 1890s and then became the Labor Temple and the printing press for the *Labor Advocate* newspaper from 1919 to 1962. In the old Chihuahuita-Union Plaza district, developers have targeted a home where Pancho and his brother Hippolito Villa hid during exile. Also within the redevelopment zone is a fire station that was built by Henry Trost in the 30s. The Magoffin Street home of Dr. Ira Bush, the author of *Gringo Doctor* who established the Insurrecto Hospital during the Battle of Juárez, is also threatened. The list of buildings that are rich with history and played a huge role in our community's past—but that are in the way of planned "big-box retail stores," Lifestyle Outlet Malls and other private development projects—is indeed long.

The local media outlets that are heavily subsidized by the Paso Del Norte Group—an exclusive consortium of binational developers, businessmen and politicians who designed the redevelopment plan—have minimized this history on their editorial pages. *El Paso Times* columnist Joe Muench mockingly asked why anyone should want to save a building just because "Pancho

Villa's horse took a [dump] there." "History should not get in the way of progress," declared one member of the Paso Del Norte Group executive committee. El Paso politicians behind the plan have also contested the significance of many of these sites and have argued that only the larger, architecturally-ornate buildings in the downtown business district should be protected from demolition. Yet the same politicians who minimize the importance of the history and buildings in the working-class sections of South El Paso pushed for the preservation of the Albert Fall Mansion house in the Golden Hill district—a mansion once owned by a former New Mexico senator jailed for his part in a national corruption scheme involving bribery, oil and public lands known as the Teapot Dome scandal. Thanks to these politicians' efforts, as well as those of the El Paso County Historical Society, the mansion was placed on the top ten list of endangered sites in the state by the Preservation Texas organization. Unfortunately, not a single site from South El Paso threatened by the city's redevelopment plan is on that list. This inevitably leads to the question of whether commemorating the history of the local ruling class, "los de arriba," is more important than preserving the memory of "los de abajo," the city's Mexican American working class.

Beyond the question of whether specific sites possess the requisite amount of historical significance to be put on a "Do-Not-Demolish" list, however, we must ask a broader question. Why does the entire Segundo Barrio, one of the oldest neighborhoods in El Paso, not have a historic district designation while relatively newer and more affluent neighborhoods such as Sunset Heights and Kern Place do? El Paso's Segundo Barrio is seen by many historians as the Ellis Island of the border. It has tremendously significant stories to tell about the Mexican American experience in this country including narratives of immigration, the Mexican Revolution, the Cristero Rebellion, the Pachucos and the Chicano movements of the 60s and 70s. We are not arguing that predominantly upper-middle class neighborhoods shouldn't be declared historic or that the mansions of the rich shouldn't be saved. The question, instead, is whether issues of race and class determine why certain neighborhoods and buildings are given priority for historic preservation efforts by city government (with the use of public monies), while others are not.

There is a long history of working-class neighborhoods in El Paso that have suffered major demolitions or have been erased from the collective memory as a result of development plans, road constructions and other urban removal projects. A working-class neighborhood on what is today's Rim Road was razed down by the city after the "El Paso Plan" of 1925 targeted this zone for redevelopment. For the most part, this part of town once known as Stormsville has been completely obliterated from public memory. When the local historical preservation society holds tours along Rim Road today where the adobe homes of the past have been replaced by luxurious homes and mansions, the history of Stormsville is left out of the tour guide's talk.

Historically, the politics of racial and cultural erasure has often played an integral part in the transformation of the city's architectural landscape. After the railroad was constructed in 1881, the local Anglo newspapers called for the razing of every adobe building in downtown El Paso. The fact that City Councilman O.T. Bassett, owner of a local lumber yard, had a private interest in replacing adobe with wood also helped speed things along. By 1883, the *El Paso Times* wrote

triumphantly: "The removal of the ancient adobe with all their bad associations means a new life for El Paso." "Bad associations," of course, was a euphemism for "poor Mexicans."

In 1916—in the name of "progress" and "cleaning up South El Paso"—El Paso's Mayor Tom Lea Sr., with the help of Pershing's troops, sent the demolition squads to the Segundo Barrio hand-in-hand with health inspectors whose job it was to delouse and fumigate the Mexican American residents. When the residents of Chihuahuita rebelled and began shooting at the demolition squads, Tom Lea provided rifles to the health inspectors with orders to "shoot to kill." At the end of it all, Tom Lea's avowedly Progressive administration demolished hundreds of adobe homes. Photographs in the *El Paso Herald* of the Second Ward in 1916 show city blocks that seemed to have suffered bombardments or the devastation of war. In a sense, they had.

There are many other stories of displacement and El Paso neighborhoods that haven't been fully told—such as the construction of Paisano drive in the 40s, the I-10 interstate freeway in the 50s, and the removal of South El Paso families as result of the Chamizal Treaty in the 60s—that need to be recuperated as part of the city's public history. In a sense every building in El Paso tells a story that, as social historian Camille Wells puts it, "can be understood in terms of power or authority—as efforts to assume, extend, resist, or accommodate it." The Border Public History website provides a participatory space for the community to help recuperate these forgotten histories of El Paso's neighborhoods and to discuss many of these issues surrounding the politics of historic preservation.

We invite our readers to share the history of their neighborhood. We are particularly interested in the parts of the collective story that are usually excluded in top-down renditions of history; renditions that usually focus exclusively on the doings of politicians, businessmen and city elites. We would like to know about the every-day lives of working people in your community who have usually been seen as peripheral to the official history of their city. We want to know about the public and private places—schools, homes, parks, stores, churches, etc.—that have played an important role in your community's past.

*"I still remember my first sight of New York. It was really another city when I was born—where I was born. We looked down over the Park Avenue streetcar tracks. It was park Avenue, but I didn't know that Park Avenue meant downtown. The Park Avenue I grew up on, which is still standing, is dark and dirty. No one would dream of opening up a Tiffany's on that Park Avenue, and when you go downtown you discover that you're literally in the white world. It is rich—or at least it looks rich. It is clean—because they collect the garbage downtown. There are doormen. People walk about as though they owned where they are—and indeed they do. . . . You know—you know instinctively—that none of this is for you. You know this before you are told. And who is it for and who is paying for it? And why isn't it for you?"*

—James Baldwin, "A Talk for Teachers," 1963.