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## NEWS

## Fight over decrepit Maldonado Building about honoring Westside soul

by Michael Barajas



Photo by Michael Barajas

Will Casa Maldonado (right) get the La Quinta treatment of AGA (left)?

Half-century-old newspaper accounts chronicling the story of Casa Maldonado drum up not-so-distant memories of racial segregation and an impassioned fight for social justice growing out of San Antonio's west side. For many, the pink two-story house on the corner of South Brazos and Guadalupe, once a Westside hub for political and community activism, holds an important place in the broader legacy of this often-overlooked slice of the city.

But the house is falling apart. Crumbling paint chips give off a muted pink, and years of neglect have left the house a shell of what it once was. Gaping holes in the siding have made it vulnerable to flocks of birds that now nest inside, and panes of

broken glass hide behind chain link and barbed wire fencing that encircles the property.

Though hundreds in and out of the neighborhood now claim the building as one of San Antonio's cultural treasures, the owner, the Avenida Guadalupe Association, calls it an eyesore that stands in the way of economic progress and job creation in the Guadalupe Street corridor, one of the Westside's main commercial thoroughfares. And with Avenida's decision to raze the building, Casa Maldonado has now grown into a stark example of how efforts to bolster development can clash with cultural and historic preservation.

Ignoring loud cries from the community to preserve and repair Casa Maldonado, also known as the "Pink Building," Avenida wants to level the two-story house to make way for a new 20,000-square-foot complex as part of the group's Promesa Project, an endeavor Avenida claims will bring much needed jobs and job training programs to the Westside.

City Council last week put a small kink in Avenida's plan to demolish Casa Maldonado, voting unanimously to start the landmark designation process after listening to dozens who showed up to plead for the building.

The Esperanza Peace & Justice Center, the Westside Historic Preservation Group, the San Antonio Conservation Society, and hundreds of Westside residents have fought for two years to keep the

building around, garnering at least 1,700 signatures for a petition to save Casa Maldonado. But what ultimately may save the building is a newfound community passion for documenting the Westside's history and protecting its cultural landmarks from neglect, disrepair, and demolition.

Early this year, hoping to identify and protect historic structures before they are demolished or have deteriorated, the city's Office of Historic Preservation launched a cultural resources survey asking Westsiders to pinpoint their own cultural treasures — an unprecedented step on this side of town. Deeply angered by the 2002 demolition of Westside dance hall La Gloria, many of those hoping to save Casa Maldonado say their effort is part of a larger fight to force urban redevelopment efforts to work in tandem with historic and cultural preservation, not against it.

"There's this large effort now to save these older buildings, buildings that are real pieces of our neighborhood's history," said former District 5 Councilwoman Patti Radle. "It's a relief to many of us that there's this move to protect and care for these places that mark our neighborhood. ... We're hearing Avenida's plans and it seems obvious to us that [those plans] can be accomplished while saving and refurbishing this building," she said. "We don't want to turn [the building] into a museum. We want an active building businesses can use."

Virginia Van Cleave with the San Antonio Conservation Society said the destruction of another historic Westside building would "not only add to the loss of history to the neighborhood but to San Antonio as a whole."

Susana Segura, an activist with both Esperanza and the Westside Historic Preservation Group, said the community had demanded Avenida use some of its grant money to help save the Pink Building. "They (Avenida) don't have to stop the Promesa Project, we just want them to incorporate the Pink Building restoration into their plan," she said.

## **'The Pink Building'**

Casa Maldonado was built sometime between 1919 and 1924 and became a focal point for Westside political action in the decades that followed. Bill Maldonado, who managed the Mexican-American Progreso baseball team out of the house, became one of the first Mexican-Americans to seek Democratic Party nomination in the 20th century, running for County Commissioner in the 1940s. The Pink Building was later the Westside headquarters to the Adlai Stevenson campaign in 1952, and in 1954 Maldonado used the house to stage a Westside campaign to recall the mayor.

The building served as many things over the decades, including a bar, meat market, and local fruit market, and was eventually managed through the 1970s by Cecilio Martinez, the lead plaintiff in a 1974 lawsuit that led to the creation of single-member Council districts in San Antonio, the beginning of the end for the so-called Good Government League, a coalition of mostly monied Anglos controlling local politics.

Avenida purchased the house in 2004 and by 2009, after the group landed two federal grants totaling \$2.3 million to fund the Promesa Project, architectural drawings began to surface that wiped away any vestige of Casa Maldonado, though the group now says its plan incorporates design themes that "honor" the Pink Building.

Avenida voted to demolish the building at its January board meeting, voting 10-1 for demolition despite staunch community opposition. Former District 5 Councilmember and current candidate for that seat, Lourdes Galvan, was the board's sole voice of opposition.

"Is it a deteriorating building? Well if it is, we should say, 'How do we raise money to fix it?' not, 'Well, it's going to have to come down then,'" insisted Esperanza director Graciela Sánchez. "Let's not be like other cities where these historic homes of working-class people just get razed in the name of development."

Sanchez and others have claimed they felt misled by Avenida and its CEO, Oscar Ramirez, throughout the Promesa planning process. For years, Sanchez said, Avenida and Ramirez asked elected officials, local businesses, Avenida tenants, and community groups to support Promesa while neglecting to mention the project would mean leveling the Pink Building.

Regardless of how much some in the community value it, Ramirez insists Casa Maldonado is simply unsalvageable. He's quick to point out that the Texas Historical Commission has reviewed the property and deemed it ineligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. "We're all about preservation, but this particular building is beyond preservation," he said.

An engineering report commissioned by Avenida from mid-December says the building's studs have rotted through and that the foundation would need to be partially, if not completely, replaced. The report, by Lundy & Franke Engineering, concludes that, due to extensive damage to the house, repairs needed to bring the building up to code would not be "structurally feasible."

"My board has even said nobody is going to be able to go inside that building now because of the liability," Ramirez said. (The *Current* requested access to the inside of the building last week, but as we go to print, Avenida has yet to grant or deny that request.)

Ramirez claimed it would cost at least half a million dollars to bring the building up to code, and continuing to delay the project, he said, puts Avenida's federal funds, which are tied to a 2013 completion date, in jeopardy. "We look at that \$2.3 million and we're worried," Ramirez said. "We're not talking about chump change. We're talking large federal grants."

Sanchez claimed Avenida simply doesn't want to include the building in its overall plan for the Promesa Project, and claimed she's approached other engineers who say the repairs, while costly, are entirely doable.

## La Promesa

Despite touting local job growth and economic revitalization, it's still unclear exactly what kind of businesses Avenida plans on drawing to its new building. Ramirez said Avenida has already lost two potential tenants due to delays in the project — both were in "the health care arena" and would have been anchors for the building, he said. The new complex would consist primarily of office space, Ramirez said, though Avenida has also discussed bringing in some sort of retail.

At last week's Council meeting, Avenida and its supporters insisted the Westside desperately needs

jobs and redevelopment, something they say trumps any desire to keep Casa Maldonado standing. Jessica Torres, an Avenida staffer, told the Council, “Tear it down, it looks ugly. Make something there that looks pretty, makes more jobs, something better for our community.”

Other Avenida supporters called the building a “blight” on the neighborhood, and many in support of the group’s plans pointed to high poverty, high unemployment, and low education that mark the city’s historically underserved and neglected west side.

Recent market analysis by the Westside Development Corporation shows that of the 107,000 people living in the 15-square-mile area known as the Westside, 54 percent don’t hold a high school diploma, while 32 percent have failed to pass even the ninth grade. Only 2.3 percent hold a bachelor’s degree, compared to a citywide 14.8 percent. The median household income in the Westside was about \$26,000 in 2009, dramatically lower than the \$46,000 per household average for greater San Antonio, and the area’s unemployment rate hit a staggering 15.3 percent in 2009, compared to a citywide rate of 9.3 percent.

“Of course everyone wants to see job creation on the Westside ... because it’s clear that we really need it,” said Ray Flores, WDC executive director. Still, Flores believes historic preservation and economic development cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive. “It can be a huge challenge, but you can’t just say, ‘Development is all that matters,’ or, ‘Only preservation matters,’” he said.

Flores hopes proactive steps by the Office of Historic Preservation to identify significant Westside landmarks can provide some type of rubric for how to go forward with development in the area while protecting the Westside’s cultural heritage. If the community deems something culturally or historically important early on, he said, the WDC, the Conservation Society, the preservation group, and other community partners have a better shot at ensuring that economic development happens alongside those landmarks — not on top of them.

Though the WDC has steered clear of the contentious Pink Building debacle, the group has played a crucial role in trying to save another Westside cultural landmark, the legendary conjunto nightclub Lerma’s. Still, Lerma’s is a starkly different example, a case in which the owner is actively trying to save the building, not demolish it.

## What’s left

For those hoping to save the Pink Building, it’s a fight to preserve what little the Westside still has left. Much of the Guadalupe Street corridor, which developed quickly as a Mexican-American hub as immigrants flooded the area during the Mexican Revolution of 1910, has been razed over the past half century. Within a small five-block area surrounding Casa Maldonado, only 12 of 143 buildings identified on a 1952 map are still standing. And only 20 of 71 buildings deemed historically or culturally significant by the city in 1986 remain in the Guadalupe district.

“We know that in the ’60s and ’70s urban planning was about destroying and building new, but that’s just not what people are saying anymore,” said Amanda Haas, an Esperanza staffer. “I’d like to see anybody go to Monte Vista or Beacon Hill and tell them that buildings need to be torn down because they’re causing blight.”

Former Councilmember Maria Berriozábal, whose district once included the Pink Building, remarked, “When progress comes, a danger for ethnic neighborhoods like the Guadalupe neighborhood is that the valuable history that’s there will be lost. ... The challenge to those interested in developing and revitalization is not simply to eradicate all that was there but to work with what is still there that represents our past.”

Since Avenida opposes making Casa Maldonado a local landmark, the debate now moves to the city’s Zoning Commission, said Shanon Peterson Wasielewski, the city’s historic preservation officer. Council will ultimately vote on whether to make the building a landmark in the eyes of the city, she said.

Expect those who already consider the building a landmark, and those who call it an eyesore, to pack every public hearing along the way.

**The city’s Office of Historic Preservation plans to continue its Westside cultural resource survey at 9 a.m. Saturday, May 7, at 816 South Colorado. To contact the office, call (210) 207-0066, or go to [sanantonio.gov/historic](http://sanantonio.gov/historic).**

- Esperanza Peace & Justice Center, (210) 228-0201, [esperanzacenter.org](http://esperanzacenter.org)
- Avenida Guadalupe Association, (210) 223-3151, [avenidaguadalupe.org](http://avenidaguadalupe.org)
- San Antonio Conservation Society, (210) 224-6163, [saconservation.org](http://saconservation.org)