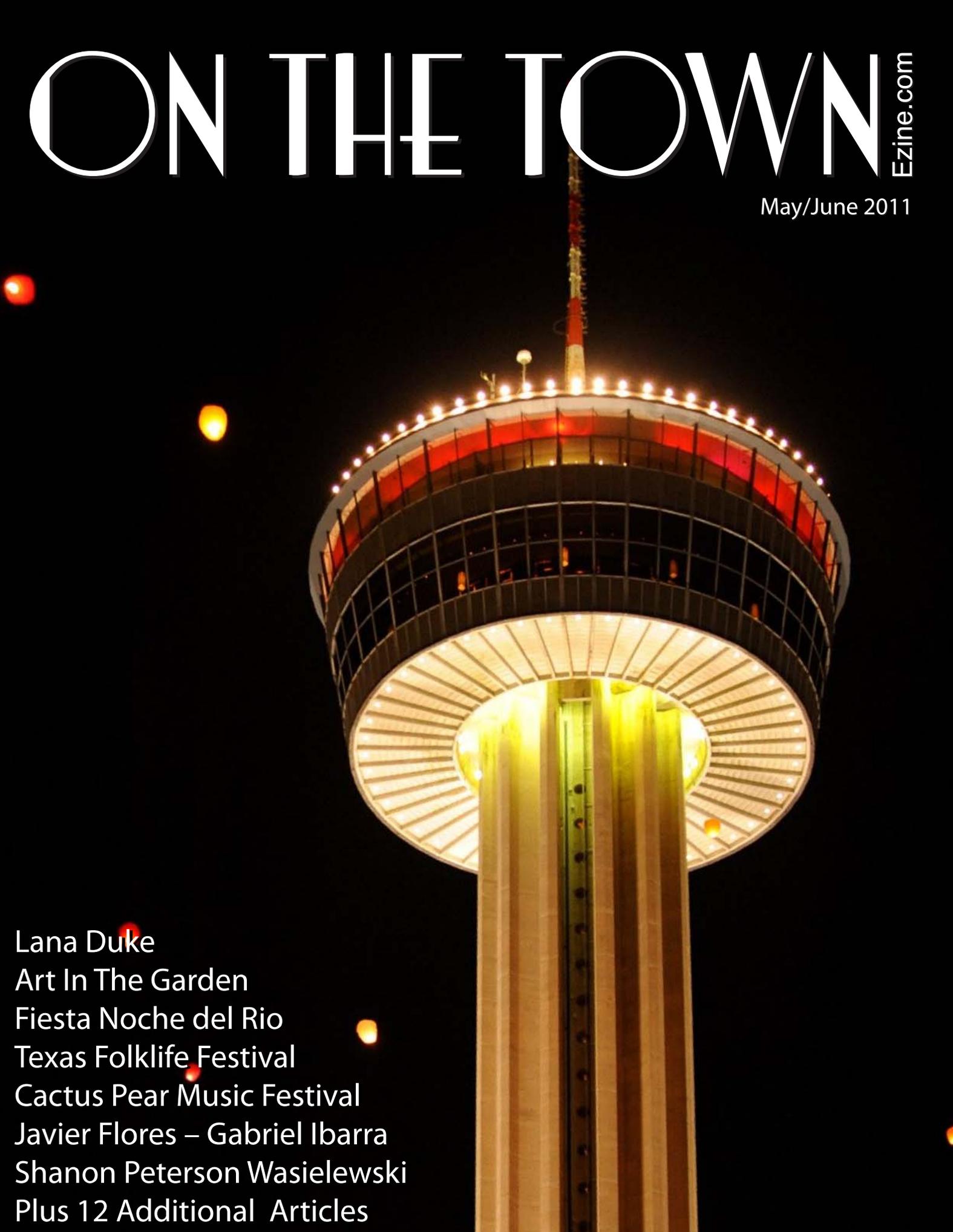


ON THE TOWN

Ezine.com

May/June 2011



Lana Duke
Art In The Garden
Fiesta Noche del Rio
Texas Folklife Festival
Cactus Pear Music Festival
Javier Flores – Gabriel Ibarra
Shanon Peterson Wasielewski
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SHANON PETERSON WASIELEWSKI:

ENTRUSTED WITH SAN ANTONIO'S HISTORIC PRESERVATION

By Michele Krier

Photography Cynthia Clark

may is National Historic Preservation month, a cause *célèbre* in San Antonio where locals long have reaped the benefits of historic preservation.

The Spanish established five 18th-century missions which form the historic Mission Trail. La Villita, one of the first Spanish settlements in San Antonio, is still a lively gathering place, hosting A Night in Old San Antonio during Fiesta, and offering shops and entertainment throughout the year. Canary Islanders established San Fernando Cathedral, the oldest sanctuary in the United States, in 1731. King William is a national register historic district known for its graceful Victorian homes and for best-selling author Sandra Cisneros' infamous purple house. And the most famous San Antonio landmark, the Alamo, attracts millions of visitors annually to San Antonio and, along with the River Walk, makes San Antonio the top visitor destination in Texas.

Shanon Peterson Wasielewski, director of the city's Office of Historic Preservation (OHP), is at the helm of all this history. Initially, she planned to pursue a career in nonprofit management, but an internship at the Smithsonian, and a class in preservation at Texas A&M University, convinced her that she could pursue a career in historic preservation. She came to San Antonio after working in the historic preservation field in Fort Worth and Tennessee.

"Part of the reason visitors come to San Antonio is directly related to what we love about our city's history -- historic neighborhoods provide us with a sense of place and character. They are unique, walkable and people-oriented rather than car-oriented," Wasielewski said. "Preservation is really about how to make historic buildings a part of our life -- adapting them for our uses and for working, for the way we live today. Whether we are living in them or working in them, the important aspect is that we use them."

The OHP protects the historical, cultural, architectural and archaeological resources that have come to define San Antonio, with staff members hosting many preservation events and producing a monthly newsletter.

"We want people to understand and want to be a better resource for others who are interested in preserving historic buildings and houses," Wasielewski said. "Outreach is an important part of educating the public about historic preservation. We now have HPTV, a 30-minute monthly show focusing on historic preservation issues, which airs on TVSA Channel 21." Lectures, workshops and events are planned to highlight Historic Preservation Month in May.

"Our top priority for preservation for the city is



getting the right incentives in place and disincentives removed to encourage the revitalization and reuse of our central city, both in our neighborhoods and our downtown. For me, it's about economic development and a neighborhood revitalization tool," Wasielewski said, adding that HemisFair Plaza redevelopment is one of Mayor Julian Castro's priorities. "Whatever happens at HemisFair impacts all of downtown."

Wasielewski's key priorities include planning, zoning, historical resources, education, outreach and economic development. "City Council adopted a strategic historic preservation plan in 2009 that gives us direction," she said.

More good news? It's economically viable to bring buildings up to code. Wasielewski points to Hotel Indigo as a successful recent example. "Historic buildings can be energy efficient," she said. Education and outreach are equally important in getting out the message that preservation is important.

Rehabilitation efforts mean more money will be paid to people, not spent on supplies. "So the multiplier effect is greater -- one more benefit from historic preservation," Wasielewski said. "Historic preservation is really about sustainability -- economics, environmental and cultural sustainability. Studies show that tax incentives leverage a lot more than they give out compared to new construction, and the heritage visitor stays longer and spends more visitor dollars."

What's on her wish list? The means to do more actual rehabilitation, which requires funding, volunteers and sponsors. "We work on 13 houses each year through the S.T.A.R. project to keep them from being demolished or from further deterioration for under \$10,000 with the help of student volunteers from UTSA's School of Architecture. Not a dime of city money is spent on this program -- all of it is sponsored," Wasielewski said.

The biggest challenge remaining is deterioration, which leads to demolishing homes. "It's better to reuse the fabric of the neighborhood. King William, LaVaca, Monte Vista, Tobin Hill and Dignowity Hill have all benefited from historic preservation efforts. And then we tend to see more people working on their houses. That's what's happening in Dignowity Hill. Preservation is contagious," she said.