



Centro Cultural Aztlan bringing its arts to the Deco District

Web Posted: 09/26/2006 07:33 PM CDT



(Photos by Robert McLeroy/Express-News)

Malena Gonzalez-Cid, executive director of Centro Cultural Aztlan, pauses in the entry hall of the center's new home, the renovated Deco Building at Fredericksburg Road and North Zarzamora Street.

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Moving is nothing new to Centro Cultural Aztlan.

Since its inception in 1977, the organization has had four locations, its longest residence being at Las Palmas Shopping Center, where the Latino arts organization became a fixture for more than 19 years. But with a move to the bustling Deco District this month, and with founding program director Ramón Vásquez y Sánchez preparing to step down, Centro Cultural Aztlan may be at a turning point in its history.

The organization will celebrate the grand opening of its new site Saturday with "El Gran Día de los Artistas." The daylong event inspired by *Desfile de los Locos*, a tradition in the Mexican town of San Miguel de Allende, includes a masked parade from the H-E-B grocery store at 2118 Fredericksburg Road to the organization's space in the newly renovated Deco Building at 1800 Fredericksburg.

Executive director Malena Gonzalez-Cid and Vásquez y Sánchez, who postponed his retirement to see the organization through the move, both say they have some sadness about leaving their deep West Side location.

"At the same time, it's almost like Aztlan comes home to its ancestral route," says Gonzalez-Cid, referring to the fact that the Deco Building sits on the historic Old Spanish Trail. "When the Indians would come to trade and go to the missions, this was it."

It is less than five miles from Las Palmas to the Deco Building, but in some respects the distance is greater. The grassroots organization founded in 1977 as an outgrowth of the Raza Unida Party is leaving one of San Antonio's poorest and most Hispanic areas — in a sense, its target audience — for a relatively affluent, culturally mixed part of the city

Thanks to revitalization efforts spearheaded by neighborhood associations and a corresponding influx of young professionals, the Deco District is on the upswing. And the mint green Deco Building, with a deco-style botanical mosaic mural on the façade, is at the center of it all.

Nearby, there is more evidence of the area's rebirth in the form of the renovated Woodlawn Theatre. Farther up on Fredericksburg Road, Bihl Haus Arts is approaching its first anniversary.

Given the economy and state of funding for the arts, the comparative prosperity of the Deco District could be crucial to the fortunes of the organization, which this year has a \$350,000 budget.

"We don't count on heavy donors — on the *crème de la crème* of San Antonio — or foundations that are still funding less than 1 percent to Latino arts on a national level," Gonzalez-Cid says. "(So) we need to be able to tap into a little healthier base, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that, because competition is fierce out there."

But along with quaint stucco and limestone homes, there also are "*casitas humildes*" — humble homes — in the area, Gonzalez-Cid and Vásquez y Sánchez say.

"All you have to do is go look at the student body of Jefferson (High School)," Gonzalez-Cid says. "*Es pura raza.*"

And many of the artists who regularly show at Centro Cultural Aztlan live in the surrounding neighborhoods. According to Vásquez y Sánchez, about 300 artists in the organization's database hail from the area.

One of them is painter Rita Maria Contreras, who sees the organization's move as a positive thing.

"I really like the fact that anybody who went to pay their CPS bill there at Las Palmas could go in the gallery," she says. "But I feel like a lot of folks will be able to walk into the gallery now, too. This area is still largely Hispanic, although I think there's fair mix. I feel like they'll be serving the neighborhood very well."

Certainly, Centro Cultural Aztlan will be missed in its old neighborhood, where it drew audiences from around the city with signature events such as the Día de los Muertos altar and ofrenda exhibit.

"It's sad to see any organization have to leave a community they've been working in for such a long time, but sometimes things are inevitable," says Manuel Castillo, executive director of San Anto Cultural Arts.

The move was inspired by necessity. Centro Cultural Aztlan began looking for a new home after the proprietor of Las Palmas Shopping Center, who had been renting space to the organization at a reduced rate, suggested they "put out feelers," Gonzalez-Cid says.

At the same time, the Jefferson Woodlawn Lake Community Development Corp., the nonprofit organization created to help revitalization efforts in the Deco District, was interested in having an arts organization in the city-owned building.

"One of the things in their planning and their vision was to have a cultural center here," Gonzalez-Cid says. "(And) they heard we were looking for a space. So it was god-sent. It was the spirits. It was something that put us together."



The building's partly tiled facade has a mosaic mural framing the front doors.

Paul Stahl, president of the neighborhood organization, is counting on Centro Cultural Aztlan to attract people to the Fredericksburg Road corridor inside Loop 410.

"That's what makes them a very attractive tenant, and that's what's going to make them a good neighbor," he says.

So far, so good. The organization had a packed house for "Witnessing, Still," an exhibit for Fotoseptiembre USA in the entrance hall of the Deco Building.

"Our audiences are coming with us," Gonzalez-Cid says. "What's so wonderful about being here is the opportunity to enhance new audiences."

In preparation for El Gran Día de los Artistas, Vásquez y Sánchez and project director Deborah Keller-Rihn hit the pavement.

"Me and Deborah have been walking the blocks like we're politicking, telling the people that we're here," Vásquez y Sánchez says. "We're doing a lot of outreach."

Vásquez y Sánchez plans to stay on about another month. Then Denise Cadena, who began working with Centro Cultural Aztlan as an intern in 2002, will take the position of program director.

"Seeing this place develop all over again, I get giddy," Vásquez y Sánchez says.

"But it's like I need to let the baby go, let him fly off. They should go in a new direction with this thing."

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San Antonio Express-News publish date Sept. 27, 2006

Online at: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/metro/stories/MYSA092706.1P.aztlan.cfdf0.html>