

LOGAN SQUARE, HUMBOLDT PARK, AVONDALE

Humboldt Parkers Want City To Tear Down Unauthorized Building Next To Landmarked Museum

Neighbors say the partially built National Puerto Rican Museum of Arts & Culture project blocks views of one of the area's oldest-surviving buildings.

Mina Bloom 7:32 AM CST on Nov 11, 2022



Credit: Mina Bloom/Block Club Chicago

A half-finished cinder block structure next to the landmarked stables building in Humboldt Park.

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HUMBOLDT PARK — Humboldt Park neighbors have launched a petition in hopes of demolishing an unauthorized construction project next to a landmarked museum in the neighborhood's namesake park, saying "parkland is under siege."

Husband-and-wife neighbors Kurt Gippert and Paula Cabrera are behind the petition, which had nearly 300 signatures as of Thursday afternoon.

Neighbors and preservationists were shocked earlier this year when construction on a cinder-block building next to the National Puerto Rican Museum of Arts & Culture, 3015 W. Division St., started without any notice. The project was an unsanctioned effort to establish an archives and storage building for the museum, run by former Humboldt Park Ald. Billy Ocasio.

The ancillary building was going up mere feet from the museum's home inside the historical Humboldt Park receptory and stables, one of the oldest-surviving structures in the neighborhood.

City officials stopped work on the project. But Gippert and Cabrera, who live a couple blocks from the park, said they want the partially constructed building torn down and moved away from the landmarked stables.

"If the public intervenes now, we may be able to get this project moved to a more suitable location," they wrote in the petition.

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Credit: Mina Bloom/Block Club Chicago

No city building permits were pulled for a project directly next to the National Puerto Rican Museum of Arts & Culture, a Chicago landmark.

The city's Department of Buildings put the kibosh on the cinder-block project in September, ordering Ocasio and his team to stop work on the building because museum leaders didn't obtain proper permits.

Ocasio, who served as 26th Ward alderman 1993–2009, acknowledged the museum missed some steps of approval in an interview with Block Club. Ocasio is now the museum's executive director.

“Some honest mistakes were made, and we're trying to correct them,” Ocasio previously said. “We're working with the city, we're working with the state and we're working with the Park District on them.”

The city's stop-work order, issued Sept. 25, was still in effect as of Thursday, city spokesman Mike Puccinelli said.



Gippert and Cabrera wrote in the petition neighbors need to demand a public review process before anything else happens with the project.

“We cannot trust this to work itself out and this is the time to let our voices be heard,” they said.



Credit: Mina Bloom/Block Club Chicago

A half-finished cinder block structure next to the landmarked stables building in Humboldt Park.

Gippert, an antiquarian book seller, said he supports a museum expansion that will bring more archival and preservation work to the institution and the neighborhood — but not at the expense of the landmarked building and the park, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The partially-built structure blocks views of the Queen Anne-style receptory and stables building and detracts from the innate beauty of Humboldt Park, Gippert said.



As a former alderman with years of political experience, Ocasio should've known better than to launch a project without public input and city and state approvals, Gippert said. City, state and federal officials are also to blame for not getting involved sooner, he said.

“Corruption is pretty standard in Chicago. Most people accept it,” he said. “This exceeds the corruption I can tolerate. It’s a failed relationship with all departments — local, state and federal.”

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Founded in 2000, the National Puerto Rican Museum of Arts & Culture is “the only self-standing museum in the nation devoted to showcasing Puerto Rican arts and cultural exhibitions year-round,” according to its website.

The museum secured \$750,000 in state capital funds in 2020 to build a climate-controlled storage and archives building, an expansion Ocasio said is “very important” to the museum’s future.

Ocasio said they received approval from the state grant office before kicking off construction earlier this year. But city and Park District officials said the museum did not secure the needed city and state approvals to build on parkland so close to a landmarked building.

The Humboldt Park receptory and stables is a Park District-owned building that was built in 1895 for horses and as storage for wagons and landscaping tools. The turreted 1890s building, which was also the office of renowned landscape architect and then-park Supt. Jens Jensen, was designated a Chicago landmark in 2008.

Ocasio didn’t return a message seeking comment about the petition Thursday afternoon. He said in October they’d move forward with the project, even as concerns were swirling.



Gippert said Ocasio should be required to hold a public meeting if the project proceeds.

“This matter requires public input. We must demand it,” he said in the petition.



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