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No walk in the park

What to do about a half-built intrusion on a landmark?

by **Deanna Isaacs**

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Humboldt Park's landmark stables building and new construction on January 7, 2023

Credit: Deanna Isaacs

Juanita Irizarry delivered a gut punch of a speech at the December 14 meeting of the Chicago Park District Board of Commissioners. You could say she hit it out of the park.

That's hard to pull off when you've only got two minutes to make your case.

But Irizarry, speaking as executive director of Friends of the Parks, also spoke from the heart. In the scant time allotted members of the public to comment, she took a clearly painful stand.

The subject was construction in Humboldt Park.

If you know Humboldt Park, you know that its 128-year-old Stables and Receptory Building on West Division Street is a pinch-me stunner. A sprawling, turreted, multi-gabled storybook retreat, it might have been lifted from the banks of the Rhine before it landed here—out of place and time—at the western end of the stretch of Division that is the Paseo Boricua, an area that was once home to German immigrants and is now the hub of Chicago's Puerto Rican community.

Designed by the Chicago firm of Frommann & Jebsen (also responsible for Schubas Tavern), this Disneyesque architectural cream puff was built to shelter equipment as well as horses, and initially included the office of landscape architect Jens Jensen, then the Humboldt Park superintendent. An official Chicago landmark, it's also on the National Register of Historic Places. The National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture has occupied space there since 2002, and in 2014 it was granted a 99-year lease with an annual rent of one dollar for the entire building. Standing alone against a backdrop of parkland lawns and paths, it's been a commanding presence.

But last summer, neighbors and preservationists say they noticed something surprising: some kind of construction was underway next to the stables. What was going on? A long trail of FOIA requests later, here's what they found: in 2020 the museum had been approved for a \$750,000 grant from the state to make repairs and to construct a modest, low-slung, 1,500-square-foot archives building nearby.

This was mystifying, because the building that was taking shape last summer was much larger. The people who researched it say drawings submitted after construction started show a two-story structure, measuring as much as 6,800 square feet, that would stand nearly 40 feet tall. By early fall, partially completed, it was already blocking views of the museum's landmark home and marring the pastoral setting. No city building permits had been issued, and, in spite of the fact that work was taking place on public land with impact on a publicly owned landmark property, there had been no public notice, hearings, or chance for community input. In September, after a 311 complaint, the city building department issued a stop-work order. In November, Humboldt Park residents Kurt Gippert and Maria Paula Cabrera (who had both unsuccessfully opposed state

designation of this area as a Special District to be known as “Puerto Rico Town”) posted a [protest petition at Change.org](#) that gathered nearly 1,400 signatures.

Gippert presented the petition to the Park District at the December 14 meeting and asked that the partially completed building be demolished. He was one of a half dozen protesting speakers, including Mary Lu Seidel, Preservation Chicago’s director of community engagement, who summed the situation up as “a gross abuse of their lease” on the part of the museum. “They applied for a state grant without CPD’s permission, dramatically changed the scope of that grant, did not amend the grant with the state, and started construction without permits, without approval from CPD, and without input from the public,” Seidel said.

So, how did this happen? Simple mismanagement? An ignorant but innocent screwup? That seemed to be what museum president Billy Ocasio was saying when he told Block Club Chicago in October that “some honest mistakes were made.”

But Ocasio, a onetime senior advisor to former Governor Pat Quinn, is a 16-year veteran of the City Council (where, to his credit, he voted against the infamous parking meter deal). The protestors say there’s no way he was ignorant of city and state permits and other requirements.

Here’s what Irizarry told the board: “The idea that they can start building illegally in a park is a dare to all of us to make them take it down.”

“Museum director Billy Ocasio and his team are not people who don’t know that they need a permit,” Irizarry said.

“I know these things as a lifelong Humboldt Parker who lives in the 26th Ward where Alderman Billy Ocasio was alderman for decades,” she continued. “I worked and volunteered with a number of nonprofits and committees that aligned with his policies. . . . I cochaired the committee that developed what became his affordable housing set-aside policy and participated on his affordable housing committee. . . . I tell this story as a donor to the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture and as one to whom Billy Ocasio has been very important personally, politically, and professionally.

“I want to make an important point knowing that oftentimes conflicts like these get reframed in all kinds of ways to distract from the actual issue at hand. You can be Puerto Rican, love the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture, be deeply engaged in organizing activism to keep our community in that space, and not believe this is an appropriate action. We urge you to respond accordingly.”

When Friends of the Parks noted in a December newsletter that they're considering legal action in this matter, I called Irizarry to ask about it. She said it would be a last resort, but her board has authorized it if necessary. She added that FOTP thinks demolition is in order. To let the building go on to completion "would represent terrible precedent," she said.

Gentrification is a divisive issue in Humboldt Park, and it's one of the ways that things can get reframed, but not the only one, Irizarry told me. "The other thing that is real is that a lot of the politics within the Humboldt Park Puerto Rican community break down in relation to people's politics about the status of Puerto Rico. If you believe in statehood for Puerto Rico versus independence for Puerto Rico, and you live in Humboldt Park, you end up on different sides of local political battles, based on those alignments."

"This is my community," she said. "I'm just trying to do this in ways that are least damaging. We need to pull together Puerto Ricans who are on the statehood side, Puerto Ricans who are on the independence side, Puerto Ricans who are happy to just stay a commonwealth. I've heard from a lot of independence movement folks who think that this is wrong. I'm trying to pull together folks across that spectrum to say, 'How do we lead through this with integrity and common care for our community and our culture?'"

The museum did not respond to requests for interview or comment, but on their website, they say this: "The park district approved a cutting-edge 5,000 square foot archives and collections facility that will mimic the architectural beauty of the Museum's building with the addition of a tranquil sculpture garden which will open in the Summer of 2023."

Alderperson Roberto Maldonado, who's represented the 26th Ward since he was appointed to replace Ocasio in 2009, also failed to respond to a request for comment; last Friday he withdrew his candidacy for reelection.

The Park District says it is "currently evaluating the proper next steps and will continue to work with all relevant agencies to determine the future of the project." 