

IDEAS MATTER

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A Two-Fold Message for Barrio Viejo

This statue, to the right, is a relatively small bronze by Luis Mena. Its placement is important, but it also shows that we can not build the Tucson that we deeply hope for, without art. Art builds emotion, adds value to our times and in times afterward. Art remembers when we tend to forget.

As a personal note, this is my favorite statue in the city of Tucson and I search the world for a better. My opinion is deeply personal and difficult to explain, even to myself. Art does that like no other area of Human expression.

I often drive by or visit on foot just to remember that whatever we build for our community, there are those who object to the demolition of community.



La Vida de Nuestros Barrios Unidos
-- Luis Mena --

Elections, Urban Renewal and the Demolition of Barrio Viejo

The actions of government within the American Experiment always begin with elections. The tally of electorate opinion is core to our democracy. Here is a tale within my memory with additions learned though a life and time that many will see as ancient or where most were never here to see.

First we must get into the Elective weeds. Here are some basic numbers:

- Election November 5, 1963 (Mayor & Wards 1, 2 & 4)
Mayor - Davis (R) wins, +4142 votes (54.9%)
Ward 2 - Corbett (D) wins, citywide +1491 (49.3%) , loses within Ward 2, -902
- Election November 7, 1967 (Mayor & Wards 1, 2 & 4)
Mayor - Corbett (D) wins, +247 votes (50.3%), loses his home ward (2), -1865 votes
Ward 1 - Woods (R) wins, +1043 (51.2%), loses within Ward 1, -748
Ward 2 - Joyner (R) wins, +6658 (57.5%), wins within the Ward 2, +3091

Considering these numbers, please note first that in the 1967 Mayoral election of James Corbett would be elected by the city, but he would lose his home ward in that election after one initial term on the City Council when he had also lost his ward. His former Ward 2 would flip to Joyner (R) by 3091 votes within that ward. Corbett failed in the eyes of his constituency, but was elevated to the Mayor's office where he would have one storied term both citywide and nationally. He would lose election in 1971 to Lew Murphy (R) by 2902 votes and lose his home ward again by 3180 votes. If you are seeing what I see, we have a stark example of the failure of our at-large election system. A single district system would have weeded out this candidate before he ever took office.

Cutting to the chase, Jim Corbett (D) was the Mayor who oversaw the destruction of over half of Barrio Viejo and by 1969 west side Wards 1 & 5 had Republican Counsels who had lost their wards. Tucson's citizens of Barrio Viejo had no representative in government to stand up for them and object. Even in a political loss, an objection is notable and the people are at least represented.

GOOD, FAST, CHEAP -- WE ONLY GET TWO

In terms of art, I'd like to point to a past Tucson band, "The Mollys" and their piece, "Mi Casita".

The Displacement of a People

According to the US Census, the population of Tucson in 1950 numbered just above 50,000. 69% of that population spoke a language other than English, yet since 1929 there had been none of those citizens on our City Council. There hadn't been a Mayor of this group since the 1880's. By 1960, with the post war migration into the city from the east, Tucson would number near 125,000. There has always been a migration issue in southern Arizona. It has historically come from the east. We are a free country and freedom, unlike liberty, is about the freedom movement. In our modern times, though, we often forget where we come from and ignore where we have come.

In terms of a growing city, the displacement of an estimated 700 or so citizens and the destruction of their neighborhood and culture could turn into a small historic footnote. Mayor Corbett would be quoted as not understanding why people were upset about the loss of the barrio. It was only, he said, "a red light district".

Sometime unfortunate decisions must be made by those placed into leadership. Thus, it is important to note that there was a counter plan. In this plan, the railroad lines would be placed underground in the area before the main rail yard. The new city center would be placed on the other side of the tracks to coin a phrase. If we look at that area today, there is still little that would be disturbed. Certainly, not a historic neighborhood that was here before the great migration from the east.

The voices could be heard at the time, but no one who was in power to make better decisions would listen. The argument was that the city center should be near an interstate that had already divided the historic neighborhoods of Tucson. Then, it was hoped that people passing on that interstate would be inspired to move to this modern, vibrant and growing city. Well, they did.

Tucson has had a bad habit of forgetting its history. The wonder of art is that it helps us remember. "La Vida de Nuestros Barrios Unitas" stands at the Southwest corner of their neighborhood, pointing in, to remind us of this past with hope for our future. If we wish for a better future, we should listen.



Barrio Viejo, May 9, 1969. Mada's Mother and Child point toward what was.