

CONFLICT, CULTURE & COMMUNITY

The Future of La Bodega & Gentrification in Barrio Logan's Art District

By Roberto "Rob" Camacho

It goes without saying, 2019 was a watershed year in-regards to discussions surrounding gentrification and urban displacement in Barrio Logan. With Barrio Logan having seen more and more affronts on the character and integrity of the area in recent years, conversations regarding gentrification reached a fever pitch in the final year of the decade.

In fact, there has perhaps never been a time where so many outside forces have so very desperately wanted into the neighborhood, ravaging and altering its identity in an effort to completely remake it to their own liking and benefit.

Needless to say, this new wave of revitalization has brought newfound attention to the neighborhood in addition to the highly polarized discord in its wake. While Barrio Logan has seen a cultural and economic rejuvenation in recent years that has shifted some perceptions of the neighborhood, this recent shift has not come without its costs.

As more and more affluent outsiders have been drawn to the neighborhood due to its rich history and vibrant culture, long-time residents/businesses have largely been the ones to bear the brunt of gentrification in Barrio Logan. Last month, the neighborhood took another blow when La Bodega Gallery and Studios announced after a mammoth rent increase that their lease would not be renewed and they had until the end of December to vacate the building, effectively making them the latest business to be gentrified out of the neighborhood.

Prior to the start of the decade, Barrio Logan had been largely overlooked by both developers and investors in favor of real estate closer to downtown. However, with the neighborhood's newfound popularity (due in large part to venues like La Bodega) the neighborhood is swiftly becoming unaffordable for the businesses and residents that sowed the initial seeds and laid the



Photo by Mike Sumoto.

foundation for much of the newfound prosperity and rejuvenation the neighborhood has enjoyed. Sadly, La Bodega now joins a growing list of businesses and art staples in the community driven out of the neighborhood who have suffered the same fate.

La Bodega was the brainchild of La Neta editors and Barrio Logan residents Soni López-Chávez and Chris Zertuche who first opened the venue six years ago in 2013. Even prior to opening the gallery, both Zertuche and López-Chávez had extensive experience in the local art scene. López-Chávez had been curating group art shows in San Diego since 2009, while Zertuche helped out at other galleries such as Voz Alta and The Roots Factory, as well as co-founded House of Elements. Likewise, the pair were also part of The Spot on Main Street, collectively bringing a plethora of experience in the local art scene between the two. Eventually, in 2013 Zertuche and López-Chávez decided it was time to go out on their own and manage their own space, choosing the corner of Sampson and Logan Avenue.

The warehouse which housed La Bodega has



stood in the neighborhood for decades and dates back prior to World War II. Over the years it has changed face various times, having been home to the Bank of Italy, a boxing gym, a fruteria, the Barrio Station, Porkyland's and even a church at one point in its long existence. However, when Zertuche and López-Chávez leased the building in 2013 the aging premises were lying vacant with one tenant who had allowed the space to deteriorate into a dismal state.

Logan Avenue was also a far cry from what it is today. With many buildings either sitting vacant or boarded up, the avenue was a vastly different place than the cultural arts district it is now. López-Chávez recalled the gallery's early days and the contrast between the neighborhood now and at the turn of the decade saying, "there was almost nothing on the block, a lot of businesses were boarded and it was still kind of a scary place to come to, but we took the gamble and thought let's just try it."

López-Chávez also recalled some patrons' reluctance to venture into the neighborhood saying, "I remember when we first opened for the first six months to almost a year, we would have people that would tell us that the taxis wouldn't pick them up and drop them off in the area so they

wouldn't come. We thought it would be very difficult to get people to come to this area, so we were fearful that we weren't going to succeed."

These fears, however, quickly dissipated. Not long after La Bodega opened its doors Border X Brewing and ¡SALUD!, the gallery's next-door neighbors, soon opened. Border X later moved across the street. Fast forward six years later and La Bodega has hosted over four hundred events including bi-weekly art shows, art classes, open mic poetry nights, musical events, pop-up shops, and even video releases.

Outside of La Bodega, Zertuche and López-Chávez have also been tireless advocates for the neighborhood, with Zertuche currently sitting on the board of directors for the Barrio Logan Association and Vice President of the Logan Avenue Consortium. Conversely, both have also been instrumental in running the Barrio Art Crawl, a monthly self-guided tour that consists of open art studios, shops, restaurants, and galleries. In fact, along with the art crawl, Zertuche and López-Chávez were also key advocates that helped Barrio Logan gain its 'Cultural District' status when the California Arts Council traveled from Sacramento to San Diego to assess and sur-



vey the neighborhood.

Sadly, despite these contributions, La Bodega's untimely fate has not come as a surprise. After negotiations for renewing the gallery's lease soured, Zertuche and López-Chávez began preparing themselves for the fact that they would likely be forced out of the space by the end of the year. Both say the rent increases imposed by the building's landlord are cost-prohibitive to most businesses in the neighborhood.

Zertuche lamented that rental rates in the neighborhood are increasingly catering exclusively towards businesses that have liquor licenses like breweries or restaurants, steadily becoming less affordable for art spaces.

"Landlords are starting to charge prices like the Barrio is Little Italy or downtown and the neighborhood is nothing like that, so a lot of businesses here still struggle," Zertuche said. "That's why places like Little Italy are now composed of mostly restaurants and bars, because those are the only places that can afford it."

Needless to say, when news broke last month that La Bodega would be closing, the outpouring of support was swift. Thousands of tributes from across social media poured in from residents, artists, and patrons alike voicing their support and condemning the rent hikes.

Cesar Castañeda, owner of Chicano Art Gallery

which also closed its doors last summer after a similar rent hike, voiced his dismay over La Bodega's closure. "It's very sad and discouraging to see all of this hard work, trying to build something somewhere that adds value to the building or land and then money-hungry owners come in and kick us out...displacing not only the tenants like Chris and Soni, but all the artists and people that contributed to such a beautiful cause."

Angelica Gonzalez who runs her own studio at Art Hub also shared her thoughts on La Bodega's closure, "When I first found out I was in complete shock. What made La Bodega special was Soni and Chris' heart that poured into those walls all those years and the artist's passion that came through. Wherever they go their magic will follow, a new world will be created."

For Zertuche and López-Chávez the outpouring of love in wake of the announcement has been both profound and humbling. Zertuche expressed his gratitude saying, "It's been a true blessing and it overwhelms us with love and joy just to see the support that we've been receiving, it confirms the importance of why we were here and that we were doing the right thing."

As of today, over 5,000 people have signed an online Change.org petition to save La Bodega. However, while Zertuche and López-Chávez have decided they don't wish to remain in the same building anymore, they have no intentions of leaving the neighborhood.

Zertuche and López-Chávez have met with District 8 City Council member Vivian Moreno, who the two say has expressed her full support to help expedite permits and says she even wants to help with fundraising for La Bodega's new location.

"It's great to see support from the city as well," Zertuche said. "It just confirms that we need to get this done the right away. La Bodega is no longer just Soni and I, it's grown beyond us and become a place for the community."

While Zertuche and López-Chávez had originally planned to take anywhere from a six month to a year break from the gallery, following the flood of support in the wake of the announcement they both knew they could not delay relocating im-



mediately.

“We’ll be back, we’re here to stay,” Zertuche said adamantly about La Bodega’s return. “We’re going to come back bigger, stronger, better and nothing can stop us if we remain as a community space. We’re going to fight for the art scene, we’re not just going to give up.”

A GoFundMe account set up by Zertuche and López-Chávez has amassed over \$10,000 in donations which will go towards leasing La Bodega’s new home inside “The National” on National Avenue starting early next year.

While the future of La Bodega looks optimistic with a new home secured, many are still left wondering what the future holds for Barrio Logan’s art scene. With the gallery now effectively relocated, foot traffic for the Barrio Art Crawl will undoubtedly shift. Having a trickle-down effect on neighboring businesses that generally see slower commerce during the weekday but benefited from the large crowds and foot-traffic generated by La Bodega’s steady line-up of events.

Venues such as La Bodega, Chicano Art Gallery, Border X, and ¡SALUD! were arguably the greatest catalysts that helped revitalize Logan Avenue and made it what it is today. With Chicano Art Gallery gone, and La Bodega narrowly escaping

the same fate, Barrio Logan’s Art District seems to be at a crossroads.

Now, artists, galleries, and other businesses are faced with the daunting task of somehow creating thriving art scenes and communities that can grow and bring prosperity to the neighborhood without gentrification ultimately boomeranging back and causing more harm to residents and small businesses.

Nobody who truly loves Barrio Logan wants to see it turned into a shallow husk of its former self. Reduced to a soulless, upscale, and ultimately unaffordable neighborhood, turned into yet another playground for the wealthy with bland modern home renovations and the same problems of places like North Park, Pacific Beach, and Little Italy.

While change is inevitable in any neighborhood, it’s up to residents to organize and decide what is best for our communities, which includes protecting art and cultural spaces. Art not only grants peace of mind, it touches our soul, both motivating and inspiring us. And venues like La Bodega provide a space for the community to come together and show the importance and power of our art. We cannot afford to treat our art like an afterthought, and it’s vital that we protect it now more than ever.