Chicano Park

This Land Is Not Your Land, It’s Our Land

Fifty one years ago in the sunny month of April, Mario Solis, a then San Diego City College student was strolling casually along Logan Heights, a predominantly Mexican-American community in the heart of San Diego. As he was walking through the community, he came to the plot of land that was promised to the residents by the City of San Diego to become a community park. He approached the bulldozers and construction machines and asked how the nature of the work being undertaken was coming along so far, only to have the tall man sitting on the bulldozer laugh and snap back at him.

“Ha! We’re not building a park! We’re building a California Highway Patrol Substation!” Solis, working off of his shock and anger, went door-to-door to spread the news about the construction. Back at City College, he alerted the students of Professor Gil Robledo’s Chicano Studies class about the broken promise to the community and they immediately assembled and congregated at the park.

This is where the story of Chicano self-determination begins. Logan Heights, a community who’s demographics are for the large majority filled in by Latinos, is a working class neighborhood located just south of downtown San Diego. In the mid-1940’s, junkyards and toxic businesses began to move into the neighborhood, creating a toxic and poisonous environment for the residents at the time. Through the years of 1969-1979, the deep effects of Eminent Domain were in the spotlight when it caused the population of Logan Heights to nose dive from 20,000 residents to 5,000. In other words, 15,000 residents were displaced and left homeless because of the damaging implementation of Eminent Domain. In an area already shattered by the demolition of hundreds of homes to make way for both the Interstate 5 and the Coronado bridge using the practice of Eminent Domain, the fact that the once-promised parkland was shifted for city use was beyond a broken promise. It was a stinging slap in the face for those who’d advocated for the empty plot of land to become a community park.

When the community was informed of the City’s plans to build a Highway Patrol Substation instead of the community park, word spread rapidly. Residents from all over the community arrived at the plot of land and formed human chains to prevent the bulldozers from constructing the station. There were many generations of young people, parents and elders at the protest, all fighting for a common cause. People brought their picks and their shovels, their trees and plants and they began to build their own park. The occupation of what’s now Chicano Park lasted for twelve years while community members and city officials held meetings to negotiate the creation of the park. Not trusting the City and fearing that abandoning the land would be equivalent to conceding defeat, The Chicano Park Steering Committee was founded by community activists, Josephine Talamanzat, Victor Ochoa, Jose Gomez along with others to fulfill their mission, to remain “the stewards of the park”. During that period of time, groups of people came from Los Angeles and Santa Barbara to join the occupation and express solidarity with the Logan Heights community. When the crowd rapidly grew to 250 protesters, construction was finally called off and the eight acres of land was rightfully given back to the Logan Heights community.

A common saying in Spanish is, “Vale la pena luchar por lo que vale la pena tener.” What is worth having, is worth fighting for. That’s what the community resembled when fighting for Chicano Park.

Chicano Park’s Symbolic Recognitions and Designations

As defined per its website, a National Historic Landmark is “a building, district, object, site or structure that is officially recognized by the United States government for its outstanding historical significance”. Because of the magnitude and historical significance of the murals, Chicano Park, a symbol of community unity and Chicano activism for decades, was designated a National Historic Landmark in January 2017. Thanks to the effort of then San Diego City Councilman David Alvarez, California Congressman Juan Vargas, and community activists and leaders Josephine Talamanza and Manny Galaviz, Chicano Park got launched into the public eye by being designated as a National Historic Landmark.

In order to designate Chicano Park as a National Historic Landmark, Talamanza described Chicano Park as a “validación to the Chicano-Latino-indigenous community of the San Diego/Tijuana border region and the nation as a whole. This commemoration recognizes the local Chicano community’s efforts at self-determination”. Let that sink in for a moment.

Chicano Park, among many other highly honorable recognitions, has been officially designated as a National Historic Landmark. In an interview with journalist Gary Warth from the San Diego Union Tribune, Manny Galaviz, a volunteer with the Chicano Park Steering Committee commented on the lack of representation when it comes to communities of color being represented on high podiums. He said, “the inclusion of Chicano Park as a National Historic Landmark is important because today, less than 8% of the 2.500 National Historic Landmarks represent ethnic and minority groups”. He further illustrated his point by adding “This indicates that ethnic minorities have not contributed to the making of the United States; authorities, he was beaten, tortured, suffocated, taxed several times and poisoned with mephathamine by border agents until he stopped breathing. Although he was revived and remained on life support for
Resistance Creates Beauty Continued... 

several days later, he passed away on May 31, 2010. None of the agents involved in the fatal attack were disciplined or fired. This mural draws major attention to the violence and brutality that immigrants experience that’s invoked by ICE agents.

Chicano Park Murals Painted on the Pillars

In 2014, the City of San Diego agreed to install overhead lights so that the park would be well-lit during the evening and night hours as well as contributing to a more family-friendly environment for all of San Diego to enjoy.

Chicano Park's Symbolic Recognitions and Designations Continued...

rather it is reflective of the limited access these groups have had towards claiming, conserving, and preserving their social history.

U.S Department of Interior Honorary Designation Placard, Southern Arkansas University

The absence and insufficiency for equal representation of Latinos in landmarks is devastating. When underrepresented populations are hard at work and making sure our country thrives, their contributions are overlooked and diminished.

The 83% of Latino farmworkers who work from sunrise to sunset to make sure you have fresh produce on your table? They are essential workers.

Janitors of color who maintain a sanitized environment in hospitals during a global pandemic? They are most definitely essential workers, especially in the time being.

Along with being recognized as a National Historic Landmark, Chicano Park has other honorable mentions under its belt. In 1980, Chicano Park was named a Landmark in the City of San Diego by the San Diego Historical Society. Less than a decade later in 1987, the San Diego Public Advisory Board officially recognized the murals as public art. Later on in 1997, Chicano Park was listed on the California Register, led by retired California Department of Transportation Cultural Historian, Dr. Jim Fisher. Josephine Talamanetz began the process of placing Chicano Park with its murals on the National Register in order to prevent the City of San Diego from damaging the murals in any way while undergoing the process of retrofitting Coronado Bridge. In 2013, Chicano Park was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in tribute to its connections with the Chicano Movement taking place in the 1960’s. As elaborated before, in 2017, Chicano Park was honorably designated as a National Historic Landmark.

Sharing the honor with other recognizable National Historic Landmarks such as the Brooklyn Bridge in New York and Balboa Park, which is also located here in San Diego, shows the deep importance of Chicano Park for the United States as a whole.

The fact that Chicano Park was designated as a National Historic Landmark, shows that we have come a long way, yet there is so much more needs to be achieved. Our ancestors began to clear the trail for us. They walked, so that we could run and our future generations can soar high.

What Does Chicano Park Mean for YOUth

Expert psychologists say that internal and external identities begin to form in adolescents around the ages of 12-18. Our identities are formed from what we interpret from sources such as entertainment, literature, and consumerism. When those sources don’t reflect our identities and experiences, we begin to think that we aren’t worthy, that we don’t fit in and above all, begin to believe that we don’t have a place in society.

Racial profiling. Stereotyping. Cultural appropriation. Microaggressions. These are experiences that either directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, Latinos unfortunately pass through at a certain point of their lives because the world often cringes at our differences rather than embracing them and learning the beauty and story behind them.

When we are exposed to these kinds of experiences in our youth, we tend to carry them like a weight on our shoulders throughout the rest of our lives. For me, reading a book, watching a show or even listening to a podcast of someone who’s had the same victories and achievements as me as a Chicana eases the pressure trapped inside my chest. I begin to realize that I’m not alone with my cultural identity struggles and that there’s other Latinos out there who share the same thoughts and experiences as me.

Going back to what it means for YOUth. Yes, YOUth. Much too often, Chicanos-Mexicanos are left out of the narrative and are forced to sit silenced on the sidelines of history. When you begin to consume projections that imply you aren’t worthy as a person of color, it immediately grinds you on the inside. As I mentioned before, our youth is a time where our identities are highly comparable to wet clay on a potter’s wheel. It’s very delicate and any small move can throw you off and discourage you from continuing on with your vision. However, with the right resources and people to mold us in our early stages, then the process of making your piece of art continues to be stable. In the end, the final product becomes a role model for others to rely on and look up towards.

If we as an academic community begin to implement equal representation at a time where we are forming our identities, we can take those visions with us as we continue down the path life decides to walk us through. It’s critical that early in our developmental stages, we see ourselves equally represented so that we feel equally seen, heard, and valued in the future.

The Activism Behind the Chicano Park Museum

Chicano Park is an open air museum granting the general public firsthand access to experiencing the continuing history of pride, self-determination and social activism. In this Chicano-Mexican community through the vessel of mural art. At the base of the Logan Heights and under the Coronado Bridge, you’ll find yourself face to face with the largest collection of Chicano murals in the world.

In October of 2019, in an episode of Destination San Diego, the local San Diego cable network, YurView California, interviewed Mario Torero, one of the original Chicano Park muralists, and drew attention to the importance and symbolism of Chicano Park. In regards to how Chicano Park represents the past and present activists, Torero explained, “Chicano Park has given us a sense of participation, it keeps us alive. We keep painting and we’re active [in preserving the park’s history]. ‘We’re not just living in the past but very much in the present’. He then added on “It’s not just a Chicano thing, but it’s a San Diego thing.”

An original photograph of the Chicano Park Takeover. The community rallied at the park and fought to rightfully get their land back, La Prensa San Diego.

In honor of preserving Chicano History, the Chicano Park Museum and Cultural Center is set to open to the public in late 2021. In an official statement written by the Chicano Park Steering Committee directed to San Diego City Council and then San Diego mayor Kevin Faulconer, the committee describes the Museum and Cultural Center as “a nonprofit focused on exhibition, research, interpretation, collection of contemporary and traditional art and to provide educational seminars and workshops focusing on Art, History and Science, as well as serving as a visitor/information center for San Diego’s most recent National Landmark Chicano Park”.

The San Diego City Council unanimously approved a 20-year lease that would allow for a museum and community center to be located adjacent to Chicano Park. Previously, the 9,890 square-foot building located at 1960 National Avenue housed the César Chavez Continuing Education Center, an adult education center. In an article with the Times of San Diego, April McCusker with the Real Estate Assets Department explained that the Chicano Park Museum and Cultural Center would have great public benefit considering its unique alignment with the character of Chicano Park and the surrounding community.

I sat down with the leading force of the Chicano Park Museum and Cultural Center project, Josephine Talamantez, for a Zoom interview in late January 2021. When I asked her what resources the museum center has to offer for people in middle and high school, she explained that the museum has many assets to contribute to the development of youth in the community. “They’ll be a historical archive, they’ll be some art classes, some printmaking classes and maybe even some ballet folklorico classes! Many different kinds of art and history classes will be offered.”

Considering the negative stereotypes that are attached to the word “Chicano”, I asked Ms. Talamantez how the new museum could potentially replace those stereotypes with equal and accurate representation. She expressed that “the museum, with an archive and exhibitions that are all rooted in history” will further advance the concept of equal representation of Chicanos-Mexicanos in large spaces, such as the soon-to-be opened Museum and Cultural Center.

This space allows for the history of Chicano Park and Logan Heights alike to be magnified on a larger scale so that others can learn more about the experiences and struggles of Chicanos and at the same time, take the time to appreciate the contributions and endless hard work of Chicanos Mexicanos in both the past and present of our local and national communities.