

Art, Activism, & Culture

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SPEAKERS

Albert Pulido, Lucas Cruz, Philomena Lopez, Darlene Schlueter

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Darlene Schlueter 00:00

Welcome Tritons to Triton Tools and Tidbits. I'm your host Darlene Mendez Schluter and this week our episode is about how UC San Diego honors Cesar E. Chavez through art, activism, and culture. Featuring UC San Diego doctoral candidate Philomena Lopez. Dr. Albert Pulido and Lukas Cruz from the Chicano Park Steering Committee. We are excited to have you here to experience our podcast. Let's dive in. This year marks the 20th anniversary of UC San Diego's community celebration of the life and achievements of Cesar E. Chavez. A community organizer and civil rights activist, Chavez champion the rights of farmworkers and civil liberties for Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The month long celebration features numerous free virtual programs centered on the theme 50 years of Chicano Movement, honoring the legacy and struggle. In this segment, you will hear from Philomena Lopez, doctoral candidate in art history theory and criticism program at UC San Diego.

Philomena Lopez 01:09

Thank you for being here today. Chicano Park was established by Chicano activists on April 22, 1970. Chicano Park has received international recognition as a major public art site for its commanding rural paintings of Mexican and Chicano history. The park was recognized as a San Diego cultural resource by the San Diego Historical Society in 1980. I want to begin with asking you a question about the conservation and maintenance efforts of Chicano Park. Whenever I visit the park, I am always amazed by the great conditions of the murals. The murals are vibrant, and I don't often see vandalism or other indications of damage. Could you elaborate on what attributes to the preservation of the park? Both technical and community efforts.

Albert Pulido 01:57

Hi, everybody. Again, it's a pleasure to be here. Thank you, Philomena, for your support and Darlene. In terms of your question, I just wanted to offer a little bit more to the context. And just briefly, that I hope everybody realizes that the park was very much a community struggle and very much a response to an erasure of community. And you can tie that to the building of Interstate 5 and the Coronado Bay Bridge. And you have a neighborhood that went from 20,000 residents to 5,000 in a matter of 10 years. I just want to provide that context in addressing the power of the murals, because it's an extension of the struggle. And I think art is a reflection and representation of that through the work of incredible

artists over time. And so, I very much like to see the mural work as a form of resistance, and a reinscribing of a neighborhood in a very, very powerful way. You know, taking pillars and making them works of art is just an amazing narrative that very few people can claim. So, within that and in addressing your question Philomena, I think that there's always been a deep respect for the murals. I mean, in my years of working with the steering committee --and I've been asked to sort of lead the tours, which unfortunately we have shut down with COVID. I've never really run across anything that's serious. And I would attribute that to the active work of artists. And I am thinking in terms of your expertise and your work and trying to get at your question. There is a technical manual that exists in terms of the creation of the art and the preservation of the art. There was a whole restoration movement that occurred. And even in the early days, it was a mural movement that took place. And I guess all I'm trying to convey is that there's always been this integrated, collective movement to really preserve the murals. And it hasn't really followed any kind of law or any kind of narrative. It's been basically the will of the community. Lucas, I'll hand it over to you.

Lucas Cruz 04:27

Thank you all again, for having us. And thank you as well, for honoring us. I just want to highlight that piece about the community respect because one, they understand that it's their park. You know, it's our park. It's ours, it's like our home. And we treat it as such, whether it's with Danza [Azteca], whether it's with the activities that we have ongoing in the park. And just that constant presence. Some murals will go up and they're there, but to have all these murals with all this activity around them constantly and for them not to be tagged on or defaced. To me, that's just that respect because also with the mural process and the projects that go, it's not just one artist doing it. It's not one artist coming in and just saying I'm gonna do it. They bring in the community, they bring in the team, and they have people working together. So, there's that sense of ownership as well. One of the latest murals I want to highlight is one of the bathroom murals. That artists Giovanni and Patricia put together. They brought in teams, they had -- Patricia worked with the team of women. And Giovanni worked with a lot of the neighborhood guys to kick it in the park all the time. And it was their chance to actually paint in the park, it was their chance to add names to the mural.

Lucas Cruz 05:29

And to just have that sense of the park belonging to all of us. So, when we talk about like graffiti, we don't really get any. And that's also to because of the community. When we say we were treated as our home, I mean, we regulated like our home too. If anyone comes into the park and we see them putting their foot on the mural, if it ain't myself, somebody's quick to go up to them and tell them to take their foot off. Or if we see someone on the kiosko, we're quick to run up to the kiosko and tell them they need to get off. And we don't do it in a rude way, we do it in a way where we're trying to educate them to say, "hey, this park is your park, this park is our park, why are we going to deface it? Why are we going to disrespect it?" It's just those ongoing struggles. And then with the city, I'd be more concerned with the city doing something to the murals before I am more of a community member. You know, that's for sure. Because the city has no respect for what we try to do. And they'll tell us a nice story that they recognize us now that were national historic landmark. But to me the landmark status, that's one thing for the ongoing preservation, but what matters to me is the community respect that we have. Because that's what's really protecting the park. And right now, we're just trying to focus that shift to the community.

Philomena Lopez 06:32

Thank you for your answers. Both of some beautiful responses. My second question follows up on this. How is the youth being mobilized to understand the importance of the park?

Lucas Cruz 06:45

Yeah. As the Chicano Park steering committee, we always try to have ongoing activities in the park. The thing is, we can talk about politics, we can talk about issues. But honestly, some people don't care about that, you know? Or they're not engaged in that way. So, we try to engage people and meet them where they're at. We'll do a lunch program, we have cleanups in the park, we have things that people are easily able to step into. And then we'll start having those conversations gradually, with the youth. Start in "hey you know, maybe you're not interested now but down the line, if you want to learn more, we have the Toronto partner museum coming up." Or when we're doing the cleanup, some people asked me about murals. What is this mural mean? Or what does this represent? And when they have that sense of knowledge and understand that it's their history, that's where we start getting these people in. Even with the lunch program. some people will come, they'll grab a lunch, then they'll leave and that's fine. That's all good. That's what it's for. But there's some they'll come in and they'll ask that question, who are you? Why are you doing this? And that's when we start having these engagements, you know.

Lucas Cruz 07:39

And one of the things we're doing before COVID was we had community gatherings, where we would give out free food, we gave out free clothes, we would raffle off bikes and scooters, and everything was free. Because the park when its inception, it was for the community. So, everything we do within the park has to be accessible. If we're ever going to charge anything, it has to be donation based. That way someone doesn't have it, they can still be a part of it just as equal as someone else. When we were doing the gatherings, people would come, they get free food, and then they would be more inclined to ask. Because we would invite different orgs in the community to. They're doing the work, like Renewing the Barrio, Brown Berets Aztlan, Brown Berets national organization, PSL [Party for Socialism and Liberation]. And they'll come -- they'll share what they're working on. And when you're engaging in that way, that's what really brings people in. Because we can talk academically to people. We can talk, but that comes off as a sense of like, you're better than somebody you know. And we got to just know, because these are the people. The people are the power and without the people, there's no park. So, we just meet them in that way and say, "hey, you know, you want to help us, it's you. That one hour, you can give us. That 30 minutes, you can give us. That 10 minute you can give us, that's what makes the difference." So, we try to engage them where they're at.

Albert Pulido 08:44

I would just want to recognize brother Lucas, because he's been centered very clearly on the role of youth and the role of the next generations that are coming. And has been doing some very, very important work in this area. I would just add to one of the things that also I know Lucas was very involved with one of our other members, Jesse Constancio. And that was organizing people in the neighborhood. Organizing them as to what our park has to offer, bringing in people who may not know about the history, people who may not want to get involved, but teaching them and making connections for them about their neighborhood. The challenges of things like gentrification and how can we as a park, be a space for gathering and attempting to address these very, very important issues. The one

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thing I would add -- and I see this more as my role as an educator -- is both Lucas and I are founding members of the Chicano Park Museum and Cultural Center. And one of the things that I'm just holding on with a lot of anticipation is we would very much like to start a docent program for our youth. In that once we have our space and once we have our museum, and once we're up and running, to actually have formal Museum. I should say formal tour presentations, and actually have our youth be those docents speaking of their community and of their part. And organizing it in a way where it's just speaks to them knowing the history. And it's just a very, very exciting idea for me. But we need the foundation of the museum space. Right now, we just give tours and this is, again, pre COVID. People contact us we meet at a certain time at the park, and then we go have the tours. We could do this in a more formal way now with a museum space, even ask for a small donation to continue to do the work that we do. While at the same time empowering our youth.

Philomena Lopez 10:57

Thank you. My next question is about the Turning Wheel Mobile Classroom Project. Could you share more insights into how the initiative arose and perhaps share how the community has responded to like any particular like specific projects?

Albert Pulido 11:13

Wow, that's one of my favorite subjects Philomena. It's that philosophy. Bringing the platform to the community and not necessarily the knowledge. Because this is what was presented in my introduction, I'm very much against this sort of Ivory Tower, highbrow, academic, theoretical, work. You know I'm saying that as an academic, but my world has -- my life has been cyclical. I'm back to where I started. I went through the whole academic thing. I did all that work. And now as a middle aged Chicano, I'm back to where I started. And that's where the source of knowledge is. It's not in the ivory towers of higher ed. It's not in the archives. It's in the lives of people and it's in their struggles. And so that is the vision that I bring in. I borrow that very respectfully, from Chicano studies and ethnic studies, because that's how we started. And I can make a pitch for this as being with the UCSD crowd here, you know, I'm an undergraduate at Third college. Third college doesn't exist anymore. Lumumba-Zapata college. Those were the early movements of what is now what was used to be third college was because of people organizing. And I was there not at the beginning, but a little bit later. And it had such an impact on me, it was our space. But it was knowledge that came from outside of the academy, it wasn't coming within the academy. So anyway, all that to say that, that's the work we do with Turning Wheel. To be very honest with you, I literally woke up one day -- I spent a lot of time thinking about dreams. And early morning spent a lot of time reflecting and meditating. And it came to me one morning that we needed a bus, I'm being serious. It wasn't anything more than that.

Albert Pulido 13:07

And what had happened is our institution, they were giving out monies for grants to do innovative projects. And I applied and we got the money. It would take two hours for me to explain to you the process from actually getting the money to get in the bus. It was quite an adventure. We could talk about it another time, but thank God it all came together. What was cool about our bus is that we found a few artists in Ohio, believe it or not, who were able to do the wrap on the bus. And basically, what we sent them was multiple images of the murals of Chicano Park. After asking permission of the artists and getting their support, then we were able to put this around the bus. We take it out. We've done art shows. We've done community summits around gentrification. We now have Wi Fi. This is a big thing

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now that we have Wi Fi because of the issues of inequalities with regards to people getting access to Wi Fi in our communities. And then our latest event is that we recently helped to vaccinate 300 People in Logan. So, anything that the community needs, we're flexible. As long as I can get my driver because I can't drive the bus because last time I drove it, I crashed it. So, I've got a driver. And as long as we can get gas, we'll roll and we'll meet. And we love to use Chicano Park as a space because people come to it. The neighborhood refers to it as the barrio bus. So now people are starting to recognize it. We're willing to do that. We're willing to do collaborations. Kind of an invite to UCSD if there's anything that you can see some work where we could collaborate. Not being the separate institutions, but working together in an attempt to help our communities but by all means, let's keep doing that. So yeah, go ahead, Lucas.

Lucas Cruz 14:59

I was gonna say man that Turning Wheel is great, because it just goes back to that idea of the park being accessible to everybody. When me and Jesse Constancio, we're doing our outreach to the community and organizing with the different youth, we would do what we would call House meetings. Because Jesse Constancio used to work with the farm workers. So, he learned from Fred Ross senior about how to do exponential growth outwards. He would do a house meeting with three people. Then we invite them to each bring two of their friends and we meet with them individually. So, we're getting larger like that. We were doing that. One of the things is when we're going out to San Ysidro or Chula Vista, or National City, it was the people didn't have much transportation. And the good thing is with this bus is we could bring the park right to them. We could bring the park. We could bring the history. Before COVID, the art shows we're doing. And now when we talked about accessibility, the Wi Fi that we have, it's really important because the community here in Chicago Park -- like when I was doing the lunches, a lot of the youth were just hanging out. And I would ask them, "hey, aren't you supposed to be in school right now?" And they're like, "well, I can't. I don't have WiFi at the house or my laptop is not working or it's one thing or another." And for us to be able to have this opportunity to bring the bus to bring the Wi Fi to them to the park, to Chicano Park at the bay. You know, it's a beautiful thing.

Lucas Cruz 16:12

Because it's always just about how can we help out our youth. How can we help our community make it accessible? The vaccine event that was the real beautiful one right there, to see the bus transformed in that way to become a vaccine station. And then in front of it to have the different vaccine outposts and vaccinated 304 people in the community. It was beautiful. I mean, one of the oldest people that came to get it was 85 years old and he was able to get his vaccine there. And it's that accessibility again, being able to bring the bus out, and making an academic institution accessible as well. Because I like what Alberto said, I just want to highlight that again -- that's why I respect Alberto too -- because when we talk about academics, you know, I think about what Corky would say. You know, Corky Gonzales -- sorry about that, how he would talk about academics and these Chicanos, they go into the institution. And they're working hard to get their white picket fence to say "I came from this." But it's like, well, what's going on now? What's going on in the neighborhood? And it's important for us to bring these tools and this knowledge back to our communities and not be sellouts. Not be sellout to our people. Not turn our back to our people, because the whole point of us going to school and these institutions is to bring it back. And those who it may not be accessible for, to make it accessible or at least be that point of contact to help them if they need anything. Not to just say what we did and this is what we do. And

we're Chicanos here, but I'm gonna be Latino over here or Latinx, whatever. It's like, if you're a Chicano, you gotta represent Chicano in all spaces. And carry that with you everywhere.

Philomena Lopez 17:47

How can our listeners learn more about the initiatives and stay informed?

Lucas Cruz 17:54

They can -- we have social media. We have Instagram. We have Facebook. If there's any questions, they can contact us on that. Our Instagram is at ChicanoPark_official. Our Facebook is Chicano Park Steering Committee. And we also have a website, the website is more just for informational purposes. But for direct contact, they can always send us a message. Or they can email us at CPSC Chicano Park at SBC global.net. You know, if there's any questions, if there's any people that might have an idea of what they want to collaborate on, we're always open. And we're always willing to work with the community. As long as we can have that dialogue. You know, we have a lot of issues with people that want to come and use the park. And they just start setting things up taping things on the mural. And that's when we got to go and crack down. We can avoid all that if you just work with us and collaborate with us. Because our goal is to make the park accessible. We want to help out in whatever way we can. We just asked you give us that respect, reach out to us, let us know, before you try to utilize any activities in the park.

Albert Pulido 18:53

I would add that hopefully soon, we're going to return to our in person meetings. And those are always the last Sunday of the month at 3pm. We currently have those meetings via zoom. But hopefully, maybe by the summer, we'll be able to go back to our meeting space. And one of the interesting things about it, it's out in the open air in the kiosko nothing, nothing fancy. We're just out there trying to address some very, very important issues. And we only ask that if people are coming to make a presentation or a proposal, that they please notify the steering committee before they do that. And of course, any event that they're wishing to do, not just show up at the park and think that they're just going to be able to do it. They need to really check with the steering committee. Because remember, even though the city of San Diego has a hard time understanding this, we are the stewards of Chicano Park. And that needs to be understood and respected as a collective. It's open, but we want you to join us in that work and not just kind of do work on your own.

Philomena Lopez 20:03

Well, thank you so much brother Pulido and Lucas for your time. And for sharing so much information about the importance of Chicano Park and how the community can be involved and stay tuned for Chicano Park. We can also -- Training Wheel and the initiatives of Chicano Park City steering committee. Thank you.

Albert Pulido 20:27

Thank you very much.

Lucas Cruz 20:30

Thank you.

Darlene Schlueter 20:32

Thank you. And I would like to thank each of our panelists for their contributions to today's discussion. If you would like to learn more about Chicano Park, please visit Chicano-park.com. And for additional resources about Cesar Chavez celebration at UC San Diego, please visit diversity.ucsd.edu I hope you all have a great week. And we will see you back next week on Triton tools and tidbits