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CITYSPACE

Golden Opportunity



Stairway to Heaven: Kaisha Santiago (left), mother of little Kaisha Santiago (right), sit on a stoop in the Golden Mile.

HACE makes waste disappear on El Centro de Oro.

by Sue Sierra

El Centro de Oro, the Golden Block in the Fairhill neighborhood -- Fifth Street running from Lehigh to Allegheny -- has been the heart of Latino Philadelphia for decades. Over time, its fortunes have waxed and waned. The street is busy and noisy today, but in the mid-'80s, there were nearly 20 vacant buildings in El Centro de Oro, says Bill Salas Jr., president of the Hispanic Association of Contractors and Enterprises (HACE).

HACE was founded in 1982 in response to community requests to save a crucial neighborhood shopping mall. The HACE Mall now houses key community services and local businesses. Its vivid colors and waving banners make it an anchor for the distinctive look of Fifth Street.

Just the colors tell you you're in a unique neighborhood. The businesses that HACE has helped with façade improvements have burnt-orange, mint-green and bright-yellow highlights. HACE's headquarters building, a few blocks away, has an intense jade band of tile around the front. There are brilliant murals on almost every block -- postcards on a deep aqua background, an animal-headed figure in a yellow-and-black checked bodysuit, advice (in Spanish) to read the Bible daily.

Taller Puertorriqueño, Philadelphia's groundbreaking Latino cultural workshop, is one of the key cultural institutions clustered along the Golden Block. The side of their building is a colorful gateway to Fifth Street; the dog-headed man in the center is a "vigilante" whose role in Puerto Rican folklore is to frighten bad spirits away. HACE believes good design and Latino arts and culture support commercial revitalization.

Andy Toy, who heads up Philadelphia commercial corridor programs for the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), agrees. "Most successful neighborhoods have a sense of place," he says. "HACE has used building façades and cultural heritage -- the colors and design -- to sustain that on Fifth Street." LISC, the nation's largest community development support organization, has worked with HACE and provided funding to help the Golden Block's renaissance.

With the strong cultural organizations on the Golden Block, Salas sees arts and culture as the neighborhood's niche, and wants to make Fifth Street a destination as recognizable as Chinatown or the Italian Market. HACE recently helped an art gallery to open in a building they own at the corner of Fifth and Lehigh. A new program of arts events on the second Friday of each month showcases Latino artists who otherwise wouldn't have a chance to exhibit their work. The Asociacion de Musicos Latino Americanos (AMLA) is planning a new performance space just a block away. The annual neighborhood festival, Feria del Barrio (to be held on Sept. 7 this year), draws up to 20,000 people to dance salsa, check out local Latino bands and sample Latin American cuisine. Headlining this year is The Spanish Harlem Orchestra, which HACE's Fifth Street manager, Juan Gutierrez, describes as "Harlem's answer to the Buena Vista Social Club."

In the '80s, when Fifth Street was depopulated, HACE brought nonprofits into storefronts to build foot traffic. Gradually, the number of customers has grown to the point where retail can thrive and businesses like Dunkin' Donuts have now opened on Fifth Street. The 20 vacant storefronts on El Centro de Oro when HACE was founded have been reduced to one or two. In the past year, 18 new businesses have opened their doors. Salas sees corporate America's interest in the Golden Block as another sign of success.

Salas says that producing housing and commercial development within a targeted area is the basis for HACE's strategy to rebuild the neighborhood. The association has developed 400 units of housing within walking distance of Fifth Street, and believes its work has provided customers for the stores on the Golden Block and contributed to the Latino population boom.



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Philadelphia? If you care about the future of our city, it's hard not to be
people we've suffered in the last half-century. Mixed in the doom and
growth. Although we lost 10 percent of our population in the past
more immigrants than we did 10 years ago.

Immigrants and migrants from other regions have always provided the growth and energy of American cities. Our
problem isn't that people in our highly mobile society are leaving Philly. Our problem is that we need to attract even
more immigrants in order to replace the people who leave. The flourishing community centered on the Golden Block has
helped to draw tens of thousands of new Latino residents to Philadelphia in the past decade. The future of our city may
depend on supporting places like El Centro de Oro and helping other thriving immigrant communities to grow.

*Sue Sierra is the policy coordinator for the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations, whose 80
members work to rebuild neighborhoods across Philadelphia.*



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