



Building El Barrio: Latinos Transform Postwar Philadelphia

By Kathryn E. Wilson



Taller Puertorriqueño, 3049 North 5th Street, c. 1980. The Latino Project Papers, Balch Institute Collections.

Top: Puerto Rican workers deplaning in Philadelphia, 1947. These workers were headed for jobs as domestics and in canning plants. Bulletin Collection, Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.

Kate Wilson is director of education and interpretation at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Step onto 5th Street just above or below Lehigh Avenue in North Philadelphia and you will hear *salsa*, *merengue*, *cumbia*, and *bachata* pulse from Centro Musical. Storefronts in tropical colors advertise a multitude of goods and services, display artifacts of folk religion, and evoke the comforts of an island home. The smells of deep-fried *alcapurrias* and *tostones* emanate from small take-out cafes. Masked figures dance in primary

colors above a garden along the side of the Taller Puertorriqueño building. A banner above the intersection announces what you now already know, that this is *El Bloque de Oro*, the Golden Block, *el corazón del barrio*, the heart of the barrio.

The Golden Block is Philadelphia's identifiable Latino commercial district, situated in the heart of the city's largest residential concentration of Latinos. Wander

1948: First Spanish-speaking Boy Scout troop in Pennsylvania organized in Philadelphia
1951: Mexican group, Anahuac Club, is active

1950: 7,300 Puerto Rican-born Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia
1952: First direct flights between Philadelphia and San Juan

around its adjacent blocks and you see a brand-new school, Julia de Burgos, and the multistory headquarters of Congreso de Latinos Unidos, one of the largest Latino agencies in the country. For many new migrants and immigrants, *el barrio* is a place to seek out support, services, and culture in one's tongue. It is home to many of the community's largest cultural, social, and service organizations. For established Latinos, it represents a cultural heart and a center of activity.

It was not always so. Although Puerto Ricans (and other Latin Americans) had made Philadelphia their home since the 19th century, the creation of the Latino community as we now know it occurred primarily after World War II, with the influx of large numbers of Puerto Ricans. The barrio as we encounter it today is in many ways the result of the challenges these migrants faced, and their responses to those challenges—the self-conscious attempts on the part of

As early as 1946, the New Jersey Growers Association worked with the U.S. Employment Service to bring Puerto Rican workers to the area. The largest number arrived after 1950, and by 1952 the first direct flights between Philadelphia and San Juan began. Many of these early migrants came through contract work programs created during the “Operation Bootstrap” era, arriving to work as agricultural workers, factory workers, and domestics.

These migrants found what historian Carmen Whalen has called “a plethora of limited opportunities”—jobs in a secondary job market that offered low pay, poor working conditions, little security, and few avenues for advancement. This job market



Children's Festival, Puerto Rican Week Festival, c. 1980s. Council of Spanish Speaking Organizations (Concilio) Papers, Balch Institute Collections.

consisted primarily of manufacturing jobs in the cigarette, candy, and garment industries, and service jobs in hotels and restaurants.

During and after the war, for example, Latinos worked at Camden's Campbell Soup Company, at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and at Whitman's candy company. Within 20 years, over 40,000 Puerto Ricans lived in the city.

Many migrants settled in the neighborhood known as Spring Garden, just north and south of Spring Garden Street between 17th and 7th Streets, near the Catholic church known as La Milagrosa. Although the church provided vital support, the rest of the neighborhood was not always welcoming. Finding housing was difficult when many landlords would not rent to Latinos, and many Latino residents curtailed their movements between work, church, and home, avoiding being out on the streets so as not to encounter harassment. On July 17, 1953, the simmering tensions erupted into violence in the Spring Garden neighborhood at 16th and Mount Vernon Streets when fighting broke out in a bar, moved into the streets, and resulted in the invasion of the homes of two Puerto Rican families.

The 1953 incident directed the attention of social workers and city politicians to the recent influx of Latinos and the tensions associated with them. Concerned about the growing numbers of Spanish-speaking newcomers living in poor conditions, agencies such as the Philadelphia Human Relations Commission examined what became known as “the Puerto Rican Problem” to address the lack of Spanish-language services, crime, delinquency, and “anti-social behavior.” This attention, while well-intentioned, all too often was inflected by dominant cultural misconceptions which attributed many of the community's problems to its “Latin mentality.”

At first, problems were addressed by agencies outside the community. Organizations like the Friends Neighborhood Guild, the International Institute (now the Nationalities Services Center), and the YWCA aimed to promote the community's “adjustment” and “assimilation.” The Friends Neighborhood Guild hosted the Spanish American Circle, a social



Puerto Rican Day Parade, 1970s. José and Ramonita Rivera Papers, Balch Institute Collections.

businesspeople, artists, and community organizers to create a vibrant and visible sense of Latino community which transformed Philadelphia and its social, cultural, and physical landscape.

1954: Casa del Carmen opens

1959–1961: Cubans arrive in U.S. in large numbers due to political changes in Cuba

1954: CIA helps overthrow government of Guatemala

1962: “Freedom flights” arrive in Philadelphia from Cuba

club, and the first Spanish-speaking Boy Scout troop in the area. Casa del Carmen, founded by the archdiocese in 1954 at 7th and Jefferson Streets to meet the needs of the Puerto Rican community, offered health services, job referrals, recreation, and education. Churches such as the Spanish Baptist Church and La Milagrosa also played an important role in the lives of recent arrivals, offering clothing and food assistance.

Meanwhile, the community began organizing on its own to address problems as it defined them. At first these organizations, often part of a larger pan-Latino Spanish-speaking community, consisted primarily of fraternal associations and social clubs offering social supports and mutual assistance. Puerto Rican veterans formed a Latin American Legion Post.

The first organization founded to address issues collectively faced by the community was the Council of Spanish Speaking Organizations (Concilio), founded on October 1, 1962, by a group of Latino leaders. A confederation of various fraternal and other social organizations, Concilio sought to serve as a liaison between the Spanish-speaking community and the rest of the city, to strengthen local Latino organizations, and to create programs and activities to benefit the community. Early concerns included housing, bilingual education, discrimination, violence, and inadequate city services, such as trash collection. It established a committee to investigate residents' complaints of a lack of housing, advocated for Latino representation in city agencies, and challenged the school administration to provide bilingual education programs. Concilio was also concerned with public relations, with presenting a positive unified image of Latinos to the larger Philadelphia community. To this end, Concilio began the now-annual Puerto Rican Parade in

1963. Today Puerto Rican Week features not only the parade but other cultural programs, a pageant, mini-Olympics, *fiestas del barrio*, a multiservice conference, and a banquet and Concilio continues to work with city and community groups.

By 1968 the organization received funding from the Philadelphia Anti-Poverty Action



5th and Cambria Streets, c. 1973, the heart of the Latino business district. Spanish Merchants Association Papers, Balch Institute Collections.

Commission to expand its community development program, and thus became the first Latino-led service agency in the city. Efforts to improve Police/community relations, drug and alcohol programs, ESL classes, and employment, housing, and social services followed over the years.

At the same time the Latino community began mobilizing; its circumstances were in flux, reshaped by larger structural changes in the city. Between 1968 and 1985, "urban renewal" efforts had a negative impact on Spring Garden Latino residents. Displaced by gentrification, Latinos moved east and north, and small existing enclaves up 7th and 2nd Streets in northeast Philadelphia expanded and coalesced around the 5th Street corridor. Again Latinos met with resistance and sometimes violence from predominately white residents.

Factory work had been abundant in this area, but by the



Martinez Grocery neighborhood, 4000 block of North 6th Street. Spanish Merchants Association Papers, Balch Institute Collections.

time African Americans and Latinos began moving into this neighborhood in large numbers, industry was on the decline. By the 1970s abandoned

factories dotted the landscape, the manufacturing jobs they provided gone for good. The erosion of the neighborhood's economic base engendered blight. At the same time, so-called "redlining" practices of lenders prevented Latino residents from relocating to better areas.

The strategies generated by the community in response to these conditions led to a florescence of Latino organizations, and many of the community's foundational institutions had their genesis during this era. The Spanish Merchants Association, founded in 1969 by Candelario Lamboy, the owner of a furniture store, promoted community economic development. SMA provided technical assistance in areas such as banking, taxes, accounting, inventory controls, and financing to small Latino businesses. Other organizations also blossomed during this time. Asociación De Puertorriqueños En Marcha

1965: Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965
1973: CIA helps overthrow government of Chile

1969: Puerto Ricans from Philadelphia participate in national Poor People's Campaign
1976: Groundbreaking for Bloque de Oro/Golden Block

(Association of Puerto Ricans on the March) was formed in 1970; 1972 saw the birth of Norris Square Senior Center; Taller Puertorriqueño began in 1974; and Congreso de Latino Unidos, a health service provider, was founded in 1977.

A younger generation of Latinos became involved, opening a Philadelphia branch of the Young Lords (a national organization with chapters in New York City and Chicago) in 1970, which promoted a new, more radical approach to Latino community activism. The Young Lords adopted a grassroots, community-based service approach, which fostered ethnic pride and also advocated the independence of Puerto Rico. The young activists organized clothing drives, worked as interpreters at health clinics, offered free breakfast programs at the Lighthouse and St. Edwards Parochial School, and pursued antidrug activities. They drew attention to police brutality and critiqued “the system,” even while retaining close ties to their families, culture, and the Catholic Church. Their radical ideology, with its collective approach to leadership, changed Puerto Rican politics in the city by breaking ranks with established agencies like Aspira and Concilio, which supported the Democratic Party (and thus Frank Rizzo) and sought to work within the city system. Although short-lived, the Young Lords nurtured the development of a second-generation of political leadership in the Latino community. Several members went on to found the Puerto Rican Alliance in 1979, which eventually helped place several members in public office, including long-time city councilman Angel Ortiz.

In addition to providing basic services, these organizations worked together to improve general conditions in the area. These efforts focused on marshalling creative talent within the community to improve the appearance of the

neighborhood and instill cultural pride. The Spanish Merchants Association undertook several projects throughout the 1970s to spruce up the commercial district, including a Hispanic mall project and a plan for the Golden Block, which broke ground in 1976.

The association’s mural and banner project was designed to beautify the Golden Block and its surrounding area. An important partner in the project was Taller Puertorriqueño. Established in 1974 by Latino artists and activists in the North Kensington area of Philadelphia, Taller’s community-based graphic-arts workshop provided cultural-training alternatives to local youth. In addition to banners that were hung along the business district, the project facilitated the creation of several murals, including *Nuestra Sangre* (Our Blood), the second

corner of 5th and Cambria, during Puerto Rican Week, at the annual *Feria del Barrio* hosted by Taller Puertorriqueño.

Today, murals throughout the neighborhood replicate island landscapes, celebrate women, showcase culture, advocate for an end to U.S. military presence on the island of Vieques, and memorialize those whose lives were lost to urban violence. Community gardens reclaim vacant lots for community activities. In less formal ways, Latinos, many of whom are migrants from rural areas, bring country sensibilities to the city by transforming vacant lots and side yards into miniature gardens and farms, keeping roosters and chickens and goats, and planting vegetable gardens. One culminating project is the Norris Square Neighborhood Association’s *casita*. Here, amidst community garden plots, a *casita* (a little house patterned after the traditional *jibaro* homes on the island) serves as a community center for young and old. Nearby, the Norris Square Civic Association’s *El Mercado* sells fresh American and Caribbean produce.



Golden Block Mall groundbreaking ceremony, 2921 North 5th Street, April 18, 1977. Spanish Merchants Association Papers, Balch Institute Collections.

Latino mural in the city. The mural, designed by artist and community activist Domingo Negrón, drew on tropical colors to depict the diverse Indian, African, and Spanish origins of Puerto Ricans. Underwritten by Girard Bank and produced by Taller Puertorriqueño and Graficas 5000, the work was, in Negrón’s words, a “legacy” to the community and an effort to create a “bright and effective visual impact in the heart of our commercial district.” The mural was dedicated in 1979 at the



Domingo Negrón painting mural *Nuestra Sangre*, 1979. Courtesy of Taller Puertorriqueño, Eugenio María de Hostos Archives Photography Collection.

1981: *Contra war against Nicaraguan civilians*

1982: *Latino organizations begin to redevelop and revitalize el barrio in North Philadelphia*

1984: *Fuego Latino, a Philadelphia GLBT organization, first marches in the Puerto Rican Day Parade*

EXPLORE LATINO PHILADELPHIA

Taller Puertorriqueño

2721 North 5th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19133

215-426-3311 www.tallerpr.org

Taller Puertorriqueño preserves and presents Puerto Rican and Latin American artistic and cultural traditions through education programs, a bookstore, and gallery. Each year Taller sponsors the *Feria del Barrio* and *Feria de Libros*.

Centro Musical

464 West Lehigh Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19133

215-425-7050

Centro Musical carries Latin tapes, CDs, musical instruments, and concert tickets. The store can also help patrons find Latin DJs and musicians.

AMLA

P.O. Box 50296, Philadelphia, PA 19132

215-223-3060 www.amla.org

Asociación de Músicos Latino Americanos (AMLA) is a nonprofit arts organization dedicated to promoting Latin American music in the Philadelphia region. AMLA sponsors music and dance classes and special performances throughout the year. Call them to book a local Latin music performer or group.

Raices Culturales

P.O. Box 60662

2757 North 5th Street, 1st Floor Rear, Philadelphia, PA 19133

215-425-1390 www.raicesculturales.org

Raices Culturales Latinoamericanas is a coalition of 19 dance and music groups and other performers representing 21 countries in Latin America. Raices's e-mail newsletter offers a wonderful summary of Latino events in the region and can be accessed at

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/raicesnews>.

Mural Arts Program – Latino murals

These murals, created through MAP, represent some of the many Latino-themed murals in the city:

Tribute to Diego Rivera, 617 N. 17th Street

Wings of Hope, 2102 Hancock Street

Puerto Rican Woman, 427 W. Dauphin Street

Recuerdo de Nuestra Tierra Encantada (Memories of Our Enchanted Land), 2249 N. Howard Street

Puerto Rican Statue of Liberty, 1701 Mount Vernon Street

History of Puerto Rico, W. Susquehanna Avenue & N. 2nd Street

History of Puerto Ricans in America, 2211 N. 2nd Street

Paz Para Vieques, 503 W. Dauphin Street

Tribute to Puerto Rican Culture, 2124 N. 2nd Street

El Yunque, 2626 N. 5th Street

The Life Cycle of Women, 3439 Hutchinson Street

(Source: Mural Arts Program, muralBase,

<http://cml.upenn.edu/murals/default.asp>)

Congreso de Latinos Unidos

216 West Somerset Street, Philadelphia, PA 19133

215-763-8870 www.congreso.net

Congreso provides bilingual/bicultural health and social-service programs that support and prepare families to live better lives. Congreso sponsored a recent *casita* installation by artist Pepón Osorio.

Concilio

705-709 North Franklin Street, Philadelphia, PA 19123

215-627-3100 www.elconcilio.net

Concilio currently offers a range of services for the Spanish-speaking community and sponsors the annual Hispanic Fiesta at Penn's Landing and the Puerto Rican Day Parade.

Housing projects with adobe facades and red tile roofs evoke a Spanish feeling. These spaces are the result of efforts to transform a blighted landscape and create safe, culturally meaningful spaces for the community, particularly for youth.

Despite these efforts and their successes, the struggle, *la lucha*, of Philadelphia's Latinos continues. Blight, high drop-out rates, drugs and violence, and language barriers remain serious challenges. Economic development remains an abiding concern, as do education and youth services. There is also the need to serve new and emerging Latino constituencies as immigration and migration to the area diversifies and

grows with the arrival of Dominicans, Colombians, Mexicans, Venezuelans, Guatemalans, Peruvians, and others. However the Latino community addresses these and other concerns in the future, they will do so by carrying on past traditions of art and activism to build *el barrio* anew. ❖



Tomasita Rivera working in the Las Parcelas garden, 2003.
Photo by Tony Rocco.

This article was produced with research assistance from Joseph Gonzales and Maria Möller.

Sources include: Carmen Whalen, *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia: Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economies* (Philadelphia, 2001); Carmen Whalen, "Bridging Homeland and Barrio Politics: The Young Lords in Philadelphia," in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, ed. Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez (Philadelphia, 1998), 107-23; Puerto Rican Week Festival papers and Concilio papers, Balch Institute Collections, HSP; and Friends Neighborhood Guild papers, Nationalities Services Center papers, and *Bulletin* archive, Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.

1989: The U.S. invades Panama

2003: Pepón Osorio's casita is dedicated on Congreso premises

1999: Panama begins sole operation of the Panama Canal