

BUILDING A SELF-DETERMINATION GATEWAY: THE STORY OF PASEO BORICUA

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Paseo Boricua is the most densely commercialized Puerto Rican business district in the United States and is located on the West Side of Chicago, Illinois. This space serves as the epicenter of Puerto Rican Chicago and is often described as the Puerto Rican's *pedacito de patria* (a small piece of the motherland). Constructed of steel and made to arch over the entryway and exit of Paseo Boricua, the two large artistic representations of Puerto Rican flags function as the gateway for either side of the six-block corridor of Puerto Rican businesses, restaurants, affordable housing developments, and non-profit organizations. The strip that composes Paseo Boricua is considered by those living inside and outside of the area, both Puerto Ricans and non-Puerto Ricans, to be the "heart" of Chicago's Puerto Rican community.

Paseo Boricua is about half a mile long and it is marked by two monumental flags at each side of the corridor. The waving flags, designed by the architectural firm DeStefano and built by Chicago Ornamental Iron Co., each weigh about 45 tons and rise up 56 feet into the air, while spanning the 59 feet across the width of Division Street. They are the largest flags in the world that are not made of cloth and they have won seven awards, including the "Building of the Year Award" presented by the American Institute of Architects in 1995. They were made of strong steel to commemorate those Puerto Ricans who first arrived to Chicago and worked in the steel mills. The flags of Paseo Boricua make the area the only officially recognized Puerto Rican community in the United States.

In 1994, Billy Ocasio, with the support of individuals such as Congressman Luis Gutierrez, José López, and other Puerto Rican leaders, started to formalize the idea of having some kind of marker in the community. Ocasio, explains: "The flags, we needed them. I personally wanted some type of gateway. That was the task given to the architectural firm. We need something that's going to anchor all of that and let people know. That's when I said I wanted gateways."

Billy goes on to discuss how the architects came back with 10 different designs of gateways. But Billy and José López knew the moment they saw the winning design: "At the meeting, José López and I just looked at each other and we said, "That one!" The architects asked if they wanted to go through the other proposals, but Billy and José declined, expressing, "No, no, no, no, we just want *this*." Billy told me this story moving forward into the table, smiling and pointing to a piece of paper emphatically.

Architects Edward Windhorst and James DeStefano came up with the design by walking around the community, observing, and talking to residents. The architects explained to Billy how they came up with the design, "Billy, everywhere you took us, people or somewhere,

every store every restaurant, everybody had the flag somehow. So we thought that it's not like any other flag because, people take pride in a lot of things, but in the Puerto Rican community, the flag, has always been *the* symbol." The architects said, "Look, why don't we do *this*?" By observing and interacting with the community they came to the conclusion that the flag really captured the pride and sense of community among Puerto Rican people.

The installation of the Puerto Rican flags in 1995 represented a new chapter for the community—a "marker" that slowed down gentrification, brought hope and much needed economic and community development into these inner-city blocks. The flags of steel were conceived by DeStefano and Partners who, after studying the Puerto Rican neighborhood and listening to community leaders and residents, came to the conclusion that for Puerto Ricans, the flag was their symbol. This shows the importance of community-driven design, something that is not always valued in the field.

The gateway became a mechanism of ethnic emancipation and identity formation for the community at large. Counter-discourses that contest displacement and embrace claims of equality, social justice, and fairness for the Puerto Rican people, are created and re-created through what Paseo Boricua and its gateways mean symbolically. If gentrification seemed like a given in 1995, today, 22 years later, members of the Puerto Rican Agenda keep organizing against it—but as community leaders often declare, this has only been possible because of the flags of steel.

The case of Paseo Boricua shows that uneven development and displacement are not natural—people can organize against it and they can do it through the built environment. Architects who listen, observe, and empathize can be instrumental to community sovereignty. It is of utmost importance that architects and planners come to terms with the empirical fact that communities are built around historically contingent and path-dependent traditions and evolving cultures of their own. Thus, helping communities to achieve those visions is a first step towards facilitating *their* ability to achieve self-determination and empowerment.



“Sea of Flags” by Gamaliel Ramírez.

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