

TRANSPLANTING PUERTO RICO TO A NORTHERN CLIMATE

May 2012

The
Receptory
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Who would have thought horse stables could become the site for an arts and cultural center?

Yet this is exactly what has happened to the Humboldt Park Receptory Building and Stable on Chicago's west side. In a creative reuse of space, the site has been preserved and transformed into a vibrant home for the Institute of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture.

A unique combination of romantic Queen Anne and 'old German country house' styles, the Receptory was built between 1895-1896; it is the oldest surviving building in Chicago's famous Humboldt Park. Chicago architects Emil Frommann and Ernst Jepsen designed the building to suit the grand boulevards and picturesque parks developed by Chicago after the devastating 1871 fire. Noted

landscape architect Jens Jensen (1860-1951) helped to plan the Park's 206 acres, and was its Superintendent when the Receptory first opened.

In its heyday, the Humboldt Park Receptory Building and Stable was a destination point for many Chicagoans. Visitors came here to escape the grime and pollution of city life through romantic getaways or leisurely weekends. Both strolling through the Park's gardens and conservatory [now destroyed] and boating in the Park's lagoons were thought to have the added benefit of restoring the health and well-being of city residents.

The Receptory

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the

Receptory Building and Stable was the central hub for the Park. Situated in the front of the building facing Humboldt Blvd., the receptory housed the office of the Superintendent while serving as the storage facilities for carpentry and landscaping tools.

Sixteen stables, a carriage receptory and additional storage rooms were located at the back and away from the street. A loft on the second floor, overlooking a large central courtyard where the carriages once passed, was used to store feed and hay.

The receptory itself was used as a reception hall. Visitors parked their carriages and arranged for a groom to tend their horses here. They also rented canoes to explore the park's large meandering lagoons. Visitors could buy postcards here at

the receptory, either as souvenirs or to send to friends. One in particular, held three photographs: of the building's exterior in its quiet picturesque setting; its well-maintained stables; and the courtyard facilities. Each separate image was delicately bordered with vines. One photograph sat next to a winding carriage road which softly faded away over a distant bridge.

Because Chicago was the primary site for big business in the Midwest, the city attracted visitors from all over the United States and even from abroad. For tourists, Chicago had it all---from the famous Marshall Field department store [now Macy's] to the luxurious Palmer House Hotel, designated a Chicago Landmark (2008) to Humboldt Park itself.

But while Humboldt Park was a site to see in the late nineteenth century, the receptory fell into disuse in the twentieth century. After standing empty for several years, it was targeted for restoration in 1990. Located in what is now the heart of Chicago's Puerto Rican community, the building was viewed by many as the perfect site for a Hispanic museum and cultural center. After consultation with the community, the Institute of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture (IPRAC) was chosen as the new tenant.

Restoration and Re-Use

Unfortunately, shortly after restoration began in 1992, a fire destroyed about forty percent of the roof, delaying the project. But by 1997, exterior restoration was



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complete. Galleries, classrooms and performance spaces were constructed in the following year.

Architects took great care to incorporate materials native to Puerto Rico, such as bamboo, tile, and Spanish cedar.

The original carriage receptory became the main entrance for the institute, its glass doors inviting viewers to look beyond and into the open courtyard. The hay and feed loft appears just as it did over 100 years ago, but worked into the courtyard's brick and tile pavement is a large circular mosaic. The island of Puerto Rico lies at the center of this mosaic, surrounded by images of its artistic and cultural traditions.

In 2009, the Institute (IPRAC) finally moved into the former stable. Since its establishment, IPRAC has worked to provide a forum for artistic and cultural expression which reflect issues of

immediate concern to the community.

Executive Director Jose E. Lopez points out that more Puerto Ricans now reside outside of Puerto Rico than in Puerto Rico itself, with some 4.6 million Puerto Ricans living in Chicago, New York, and throughout Florida. To serve the needs of this community, the IPRAC highlights issues such as displacement and belonging, and poverty and health, while also exhibiting Puerto Rican art.

The Institute also hosts the annual Navi-Jazz concert; the concert embraces a mix of contemporary African-American/Puerto-Rican rhythms. The current exhibit of artwork by Antonio Martorell puts the spotlight on one prominent Puerto Rican artist while the upcoming exhibit, 'Everyone Matters' features work by fifty community residents.

The history and significance of the building is a vital element in the Institute's identity. IPRAC sits at the end of 'Paseo Boricua', Division Street's Puerto Rican business and entertainment cluster.

Together IPRAC and the Humboldt Receptory serve as an anchor, offering residents a sense of belonging and renewal that is as much about the past as it is about the present and future.

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