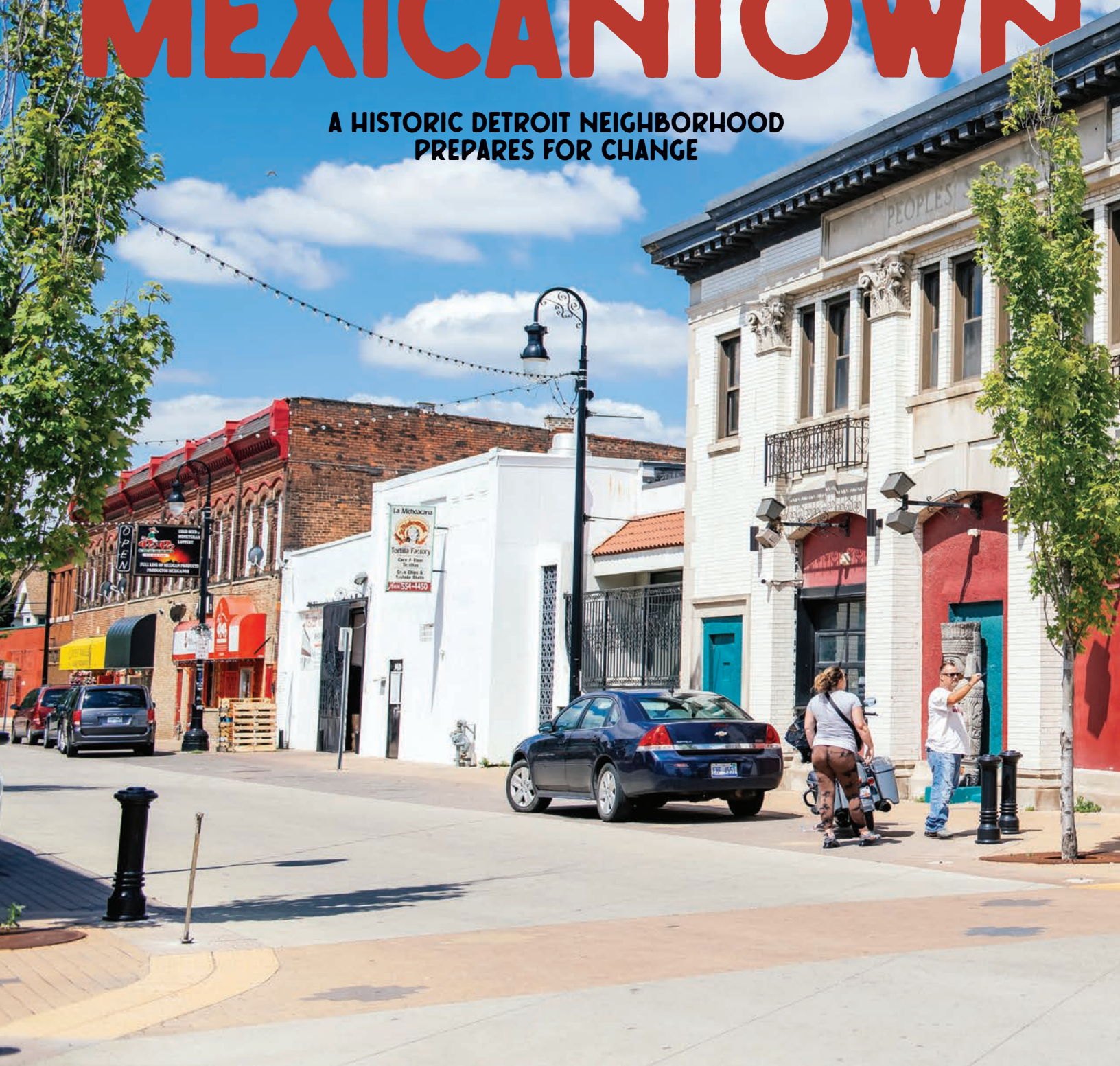


BY JOE SUGARMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY EE BERGER

NEXT STOP MEXICANTOWN

A HISTORIC DETROIT NEIGHBORHOOD
PREPARES FOR CHANGE







Ray Lozano and I pile into his white 2016 Jeep Cherokee as we set out on a tour of Mexicantown, a historically Mexican and Mexican American enclave in the city of Detroit. “Pardon the mess,” he says. “We spilled some salsa on the passenger seat.” Given the setting, it seems perfectly appropriate for our drive.

The mustachioed, youthful-looking 77-year-old is the executive director of Mexicantown Community Development Corporation (also known as MexicantownCDC), an organization dedicated to preserving Latino arts, businesses, and culture in Southwest Detroit. His group leases space to a local nonprofit, a city-run career center, and state offices, and hosts cultural and community events. It also oversees MexicantownCDC Galería, an art gallery featuring local artists, and a new cafe slated to open this fall. An inscription emblazoned above the cafe’s doors reads: “*Necesito un café que esté tan fuerte que haga despertar a mis antepasados*”/“I would like a cup of coffee so strong that it wakes up my ancestors.”

We pull out of the parking lot and head east on Bagley Street, one of two main thoroughfares running through Mexicantown. (West Vernor Highway is the other, one block north and mostly parallel to Bagley.) We pass a small *mercado* and then Mexican Village Restaurant, which sprawls across three combined buildings, each dating to the late 1800s. Covered in white stucco in the Spanish Revival style, this was one of Detroit’s first Mexican restaurants. Fernando Gutierrez purchased it in the late 1950s, expanded the business, and ran it for decades. It used to stay open until 4 a.m., and hosted revelers who would wolf down tacos and enchiladas to soak up the booze after leaving the local bars. These days, Fernando’s sister Connie Azofeifa helps run the restaurant. For some employees, Mexican Village is where they got their first break. “We provide a place for people in the community to work who don’t speak the language or don’t have transportation,” Azofeifa later tells me. “They gotta start somewhere. They start here.”

Lozano also points out Honey Bee La Colmena market across the street, where locals have been shopping for Latin staples like bags of Guajillo peppers, fresh yuca, and corn masa since 1956. Its third-generation owners reportedly make and sell 30,000 pounds of chorizo annually, which explains the shop’s tagline: “Wake up and smell the chorizo.”

Behind Bagley’s storefronts and running south to the Detroit River less than a mile away lie blocks of modest, well-kept houses that make up Hubbard Richard, the mostly residential area bordering Mexicantown’s commercial core. Beyond, the twin spires of the Basilica of Ste. Anne de Detroit, a Gothic Revival-style structure dating to 1887, tower over the neighborhood. The parish itself was founded in 1701, making it the second-oldest continuously operating Catholic parish in the United States. Just to its west sits the busy Ambassador Bridge connecting Detroit with Canada. Ironically, when Canadians arrive in the U.S. by car, the first neighborhood they encounter features a slice of Mexico.

We soon hit the community’s eastern edge, and here things

change. Quickly. On the north side of Bagley is a newly constructed four-story black-brick apartment building. Rents for market-rate units start at \$1,495 for a studio or \$1,795 for a one-bedroom. There’s also a sushi restaurant and a stylish bar. We’re right by Mexican-town’s border with Corktown, historically home to Detroit’s Irish immigrant community. Once known for its plethora of Irish pubs and bars, after decades of development and gentrification, the neighborhood now boasts some of the city’s trendiest restaurants.

And then there’s Michigan Central Station. A couple blocks north of Bagley, hulking over Corktown, the 1913 landmark was known as Detroit’s Ellis Island for its role in welcoming thousands of immigrants who arrived via train. The station had been shuttered since 1988, but the Ford Motor Company is investing nearly \$1 billion to transform the 18-story Beaux-Arts structure and other nearby buildings into a technology hub. As many as 2,500 Ford workers are expected to labor here, as well as thousands of workers from other companies. Some will undoubtedly want to buy or rent homes in the area—and will also desire amenities to go with them.



Previous pages: Restaurants and shops line Bagley Street in Mexicantown. *Opposite:* Michigan Central Station (at right) overlooks the neighborhood, including Mexican Village Restaurant. *This page:* Ray Lozano at the Bagley Street Pedestrian Bridge.



This page: Improved landscaping features have helped make a two-block stretch of Bagley Street more welcoming to pedestrians. *Opposite:* The Basilica of Ste. Anne de Detroit offers docent-led tours that highlight its Gothic Revival architecture.

This is a pivotal time for Mexicantown, says Lozano. “A lot of people have taken the train station as a symbol,” he says. “Someone described it as the ‘phoenix rising.’” Many view it as a sign of rebirth for the community. In any case, he says, “there is major change going on.”

IN ADDITION TO THE NEW HIGH-TECH CENTER, another bridge from Canada will open next year a couple miles west of the Ambassador Bridge. Also, the Joe Louis Greenway, a 27.5-mile-long biking/walking path, is planned to run through the community. As development pressure overflows from Corktown, rents and property values are going up in Mexicantown.

“This is a beautiful community, and I would love to move back, but I just can’t afford it,” says Maria Lerma, who grew up in Mexicantown and works at Tameria Nuevo Leon, a business her grandparents started in 1957. Today she lives 15 minutes away in East Dearborn, paying around \$1,000 a month for a two-bedroom townhome. Many of her friends have moved further away, to suburban communities in the Downriver region, where the cost of living is lower.

Lerma says she has noticed a lot of new customers coming into the *tameria* recently, which is good for business but disconcerting at the same time. “It’s good, but we also care about the community. I get it; we’re supposed to change and grow. But we want to keep our identity and preserve the culture.”

It’s a fear that city council member Gabriela Santiago-Romero hears frequently from her constituents in Southwest Detroit.

“We’re feeling excited but weary,” says Santiago-Romero, who recently purchased her first home in the neighborhood. “There is pride in seeing the investments that come to our business corridors [but we also feel] the pressures of the cost of doing business and living here. For some, it’s too much, so some folks leave.”

A recent check on real estate website Zillow found a renovated single-family house near the heart of Mexicantown listed for \$240,000. Records show that same house sold in 2021 for \$70,000.

In an effort to help keep rents affordable, the Southwest Detroit

Business Association (SDBA), a community development organization that helps preserve and promote the area, oversaw a pilot program in 2017 that provided grants to landlords interested in rehabbing vacant second floors above storefronts into housing. Twelve units were renovated in 2018. The pilot has since evolved into an official program, and another 24 units will be developed this year with monies from the American Rescue Plan Act.

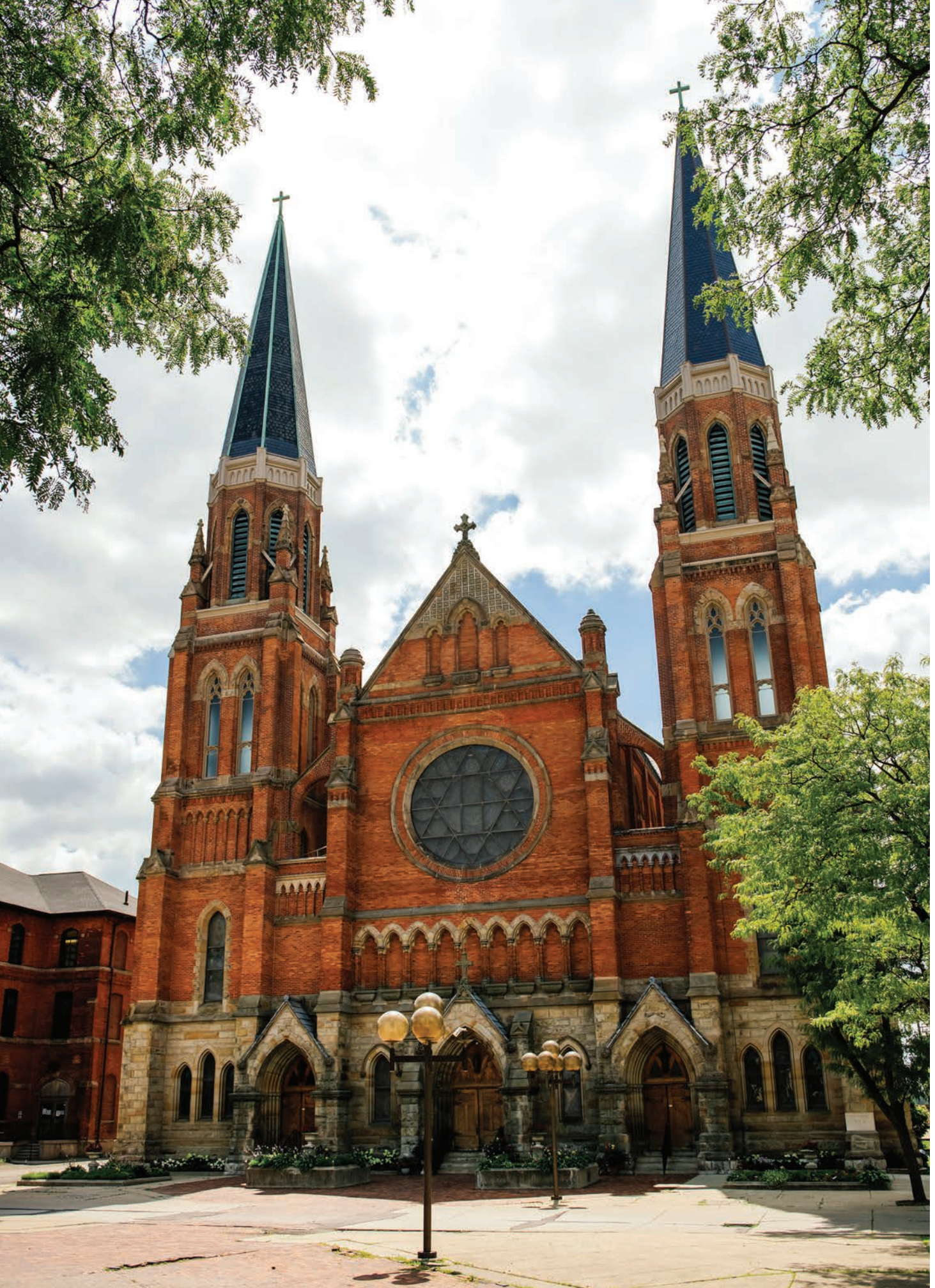
SDBA, an affiliate member of the National Trust program Main Street America, is also co-developing La Joya Gardens, a \$24 million, four-story, mixed-use project under construction on a block of West Vernor that had been vacant for over a decade. Starting in 2018, SDBA held community meetings where locals voiced their suggestions for the project. When it opens this year, La Joya (which means “the jewel” in Spanish) will offer affordable housing (rents starting at \$505 monthly) for 42 of its 53 units; a community space containing a cafe; an accelerator program for new businesses needing short-term leases to help them get off the ground; and, eventually, a restaurant.

It’s just the kind of addition that Laura Chavez-Wazeerud-Din, president and CEO of SDBA, thinks the neighborhood needs.

“We will not be casualties to development,” she says. “There is so much development, and a lot of times those decisions are made without community stakeholders. We are an immigrant-based community. We want to make sure the businesses are relevant to the community, and we want to protect the community from development that’s happening in and around us. We don’t want development to happen to us. We want [it] to happen *with* us.”

In 2017, SDBA, in collaboration with local businesses, residents, and community organizations, applied for and received the designation of Mexicantown as a Michigan Main Street community. The goal is to preserve Mexicantown’s history and heritage while strengthening and promoting its business corridor of about 150 stores, restaurants, and organizations along stretches of Bagley and West Vernor. This past February, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation awarded SDBA a Main Street Vibrancy Grant to implement new communications and marketing plans, which include installing banners, branding trash bins, and producing print and digital content.

Chavez-Wazeerud-Din wants to make sure any potential new visitors to Mexicantown don’t just pass through. “When you think about two international bridge crossings, you think about, ‘What does that mean to a community? How can we make this happen to our benefit and not to our detriment?’ We don’t just want people to drive through our community, but to experience it. Visit our tourist destinations.





This page: Laura Chavez-Wazeerud-Din at the Plaza del Norte building, developed and owned by MexicantownCDC. The mural is by Detroit-based artist Elton Monroy Durán. *Opposite:* La Michoacana tortilla factory, a neighborhood institution, adjoins La Gloria Bakery, another popular local business.

Shop our shops. Eat at our restaurants. We want to make sure people understand our relevance and see the historic destination that we are as a community and see the value in what we bring to the city of Detroit.”

WHILE THERE ARE A FEW DIFFERENT EXPLANATIONS for how the label “Mexicantown” began, some say that in the 1980s, the now-defunct Hispanic Business Alliance came up with the name to promote the community’s many local businesses. When Ray Lozano was growing up, the neighborhood was alternatively known as La Colonia Mexicana (the Mexican Colony) or simply El Barrio (the neighborhood).

Like many Mexican immigrants who first arrived in Michigan in the 1910s and ’20s, Lozano’s grandfather was fleeing the Mexican Revolution, which had disrupted the country’s economy. Some from Mexico migrated to the state to work on farms. Others came to toil at the growing automotive plants that sprung up in and around Southwest Detroit.

“Southwest Detroit is [known as] the neighborhood that built the car,” says Maria Elena Rodriguez, Lozano’s predecessor at MexicantownCDC and author of a book about the neighborhood. Henry Ford’s promise to pay workers \$5 per day attracted immigrants from all over the world, and Southwest Detroit’s population reflected that. “It was like the United Nations,” says Rodriguez.

Lozano remembers growing up with families from Hungary, Poland, and Armenia. He says he still recalls the tunes of the Lithuanian songs he learned in grade school.

Other waves of migrants arrived from Puerto Rico in the mid-20th century, and again from Mexico in the 1950s, ’70s, and ’90s.

Today, Southwest Detroit remains diverse. In recent years, a growing number of immigrants have come from Honduras, Guatemala, and Venezuela.

As Lozano and I continue our

tour, we head west along Vernor Highway and cross a bridge running over a dozen busy lanes of Interstate 75 and Interstate 96. Somewhere down there once stood Lozano’s childhood home.

Like in many states in the 1950s and ’60s, Michigan’s highways were built through communities with the fewest resources to fight them. Thousands of Detroit homes and businesses were razed to make way. “It devastated most of the neighborhood,” says Rodriguez of I-75, which opened in stages throughout the ’60s after years of disruptive construction. “They wiped out blocks. Businesses packed up and moved elsewhere. It literally bisected our community.”

Lozano’s family, like many others, moved west as Mexican-town’s business corridor reestablished itself along West Vernor. In 2010, the state finally completed a more than 400-foot-long pedestrian bridge spanning I-75 and I-96, at last reuniting the eastern and western sides of Bagley Street.

As we pull onto the western side of Bagley, I can see that its mix of two-story brick or stucco buildings, many dating to the turn of the 20th century and housing mostly ground-floor restaurants, remains well preserved.

In 2020, the city turned this two-block section of Bagley Street into a shared street, with cement replacing the roadway’s asphalt and sidewalks fashioned from brick pavers. While not completely pedestrian, it does possess a pedestrian-friendly vibe.

The air smells of tortillas cooking at La Michoacana, one of Michigan’s first tortilla factories, started by Rafael and Concha Gutierrez in the early 1940s. Their descendants, including Mexican Village’s Connie Azofeifa, are still involved in the business. Nearby, Latin music blares from a speaker outside of El Popo Market, where you can buy everything from seasoned dried grasshoppers (a Mexican treat) to graphic T-shirts.

Lozano points out a colorful mural depicting artist Frida Kahlo on a building across the street. Mexicantown boasts dozens of murals; one of the oldest dates to about 1979. Subject matter ranges from agricultural scenes to a Cinco de Mayo parade to famous Mexican actors and singers.

“For a community that for a long time felt like their voice was not heard, art has always been the medium through which Latinos speak,” says Chavez-Wazeerud-Din. “That’s how we express ourselves. Whether it’s the pain, the pride, or political events, it’s through our art the community has spoken.”

To help recognize and preserve the neighborhood’s cultural and architectural heritage, Detroit City Council’s Historic Designation

 Mexicantown is a Main Street America community. For more information on this National Trust program, visit mainstreet.org

Advisory Board recently used an Underrepresented Communities Grant from the federal Historic Preservation Fund to survey Latino history in Detroit. The group is preparing a nomination for Mexicantown's commercial corridors to be listed as a historic district on the National Register of Historic Places.

Janese Chapman, director of the advisory board, says the effort is long overdue. "We have to be inclusive in how we define our history," she says. "The people who built these buildings are the DNA of the community itself. Their DNA, their stories, are just as much a part of Detroit, of America, as any other."

She also hopes business owners who operate out of these buildings could eventually take advantage of state and federal historic tax credits for improvements, rather than selling out to national chains. "You don't need a Taco Bell in Mexicantown," she says.

As we head back to Lozano's office, crowds are flowing into the park in front of Michigan Central Station. It just so happens that tonight—June 6—is its dedication. Twenty thousand people are

expected to attend a celebratory concert featuring a slate of Michigan's musical royalty, among them Diana Ross, rappers Eminem and Big Sean, and former White Stripes frontman Jack White, who grew up in Southwest Detroit.

It's a big night for the city. And potentially an even bigger night for Mexicantown.

But the effects of the new high-tech center on the community's residents and businesses remain to be seen. Chavez-Wazeerud-Din, for one, wants to make sure the companies at the new technology hub don't forget who's in their backyard. "We want our students from César Chávez and Cristo Rey [high schools] to be participants there. We want to make sure we're giving opportunities to our community first. We are here," she says. "We cannot be ignored." **P**

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