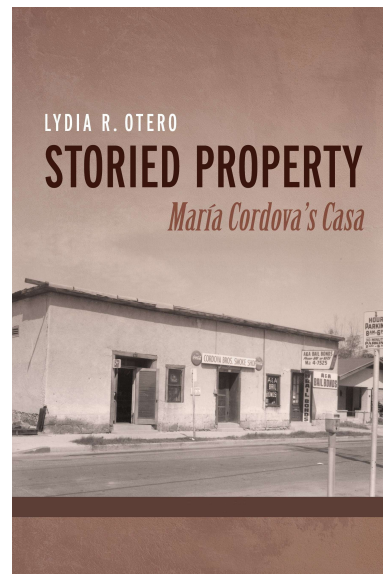




This ten minute talk draws from historical research, city records, and my book *Storied Property*. It looks at how Tucson has supported cultural institutions in the past and what that history can tell us about what is possible now.

Released  
October 2025



*Storied Property* was released in October and is available here. The book examines how land, culture, and power intersect in Tucson, particularly through the story of María Navarrete Cordova and La Casa Cordova.

## A new book about Tucson's "oldest" house and the woman behind the claim



María Navarrete Cordova saw herself as the rightful authority over her home and its history. In 1972, under urban renewal, she was removed through eminent domain. Her family fought back in court. They lost. This was one of the few documented cases in Tucson where residents tried to resist condemnation.



In the heart of downtown Tucson stands La Casa Cordova, an adobe structure located within the Tucson Museum of Art's Historic Block. It is often described as the oldest building in the city, but that description conceals a much more complicated history. After María Cordova was evicted through eminent domain, the house reopened as a Mexican museum. Adobe walls were exposed, packed earth floors reinstated, and period furnishings borrowed to construct an earlier past. This was not restoration. It was fabrication. María's presence, authority, and lived relationship to the house were removed so the building could tell a simplified and curated version of Mexican heritage.



The City expanded urban renewal boundaries to assemble prime land near the civic center. Buildings such as the Jacobs Mansion were demolished to make way for the Tucson Museum of Art's art center.



## Mayor & Council Memorandum

November 5, 1973

Subject: Tucson Art Center, Lease Agreement with the City of Tucson for Use of "The Art Center Block" page 1 of 3

The Tucson Art Center, Inc., desires to lease a City-owned parcel of real property for the purpose of erecting an art museum and restoring several historic buildings.

### Background Information

On July 13, 1970, the Mayor and Council adopted a Resolution (No. 7886) of intention to enter into a lease agreement with the Tucson Art Center to facilitate the construction of new improvements and the reconstruction of historic structures in the block immediately north of City Hall bounded by Washington Street, Meyer Avenue, Alameda Street and Main Avenue.

### Funding

As a part of the lease, the Art Center agrees to pay an annual rent of one dollar for ninety-nine years, and the City of Tucson agrees to provide to the Art Center annually an amount of \$60,000 or 50% of the annual cost of exterior and interior maintenance of the premises and improvements within the Art Center Block plus the annual costs of operation of the Art Center, whichever is less, for as long as the premises are operated by the Art Center.

In 1970, the Mayor and Council adopted a resolution expressing their intent to lease city-owned land to the Tucson Art Center. By 1973, that intent became a formal lease. The terms are explicit. The City leased prime land near the civic center for ninety-nine years at a nominal cost of one dollar per year.

The City also committed public funds. Under the lease, Tucson agreed to provide up to sixty thousand dollars annually, or fifty percent of the cost of maintenance and improvements, whichever was less. That support extended to both exterior and interior maintenance and to operating costs, for as long as the Art Center occupied the site.

Under the terms of the 1970s lease for the Tucson Art Center site, the City committed up to \$60,000 annually. In today's dollars, that translates to nearly half a million dollars per year, a significant and sustained level of public support for a cultural institution. This allocation ended after the 2008 financial crisis.



By 1973, the City of Tucson had established mechanisms to support institutions

- 1) It knew how to **lease land** or buildings for one dollar a year over long periods of time.
- 2) It knew the importance of providing usable, strategically located space that was buildable, accessible, and viable for long-term institutional use.
- 3) It knew how to back institutions with **ongoing fiscal support**, including annual public funding for maintenance, improvements, and operations.

By the early 1970s, the City already knew how to support art institutions. It leased land at nominal cost, provided centrally located and usable space, and committed annual public funding. This was not hypothetical. It was established practice.

## ***Unity group wins site for center***

The City Council voted 5-2 last night to lease a parcel of West Side acreage to the Mexican-American Unity Council for development of a cultural center.

Republicans Michael Borozan and Emmett McLoughlin voted against the measure.

The land is being leased at \$1 a year for 99 years on a former landfill site on Mission Road at the base of "A" Mountain. The cultural center will consist of a theater, museum, community center, day care center and technical school, and all construction financing will be raised by the Unity Council.

McLoughlin voted against the center, saying there was more need for such a cultural center east of Alvernon because of the existing El Rio Neighborhood Center being completed on the city's West Side. Borozan made no explanation of his negative vote.


*Tucson Citizen*, September 26, 1972, page 52

The land is being leased at \$1 a year for 99 years on a former landfill site on Mission Road at the base of "A" Mountain. The cultural center will consist of a theater, museum, community center, day care center and technical school, and all construction financing will be raised by the Unity Council.

During this same period, Mexican Americans were also envisioning a cultural center. The Mexican American Unity Council, established around 1968, secured a long-term lease from the City for one dollar a year.







*Tucson Citizen,*  
April 24, 1973,  
page 35

## **Unity group slates report on center**

The Mexican-American Unity Council will present a color slide show and progress report on its proposed Tucson Mexican-American Cultural Center Thursday.

The public meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. at El Rio Neighborhood Center, 1390 W. Speedway Blvd.

The council is raising funds to build the center on South Mission Road at the base of "A" Mountain. Mrs. Betty Lopez and Raul Castro are co-chairmen of the fund drive.

The Mexican American Unity Council tried to make the project work. They organized meetings, raised funds, and many of its member were political connected. Raul Castro, would become Arizona's first Mexican American governor, a year after this event.

**As  
environmental  
standards  
changed,  
the Mexican  
American Unity  
Council's vision  
became harder  
to realize**

- **Early 1970s:** When the lease was first signed, former dumps and landfills were routinely reused with little formal review.

- **Mid-late 1970s:** The Environmental Protection Agency was created, and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (1976) established new regulations for solid waste and landfills.

- **1980s–1990s:** Environmental compliance became more formal and restrictive.

- **Outcome:** Building on the site was no longer feasible. Jennie Morales advanced an amended vision forward and established a park.

The site was former landfill land. As environmental standards tightened through the late 1970s and beyond, building became legally and financially risky.

Over time, the Mexican American Unity Council dissolved, not because the idea disappeared, but because the site became unworkable for a permanent building. Jennie Morales carried the vision forward by establishing a park.

This reflects how the City symbolically acknowledged Mexican American culture while relegating it to a marginal site.

The idea did not disappear. It has carried forward.



Conclusion: As the mayor will explain, this idea is in an exploration phase. There are no plans or designs yet. What is underway is a broader question about how cultural space in Tucson might be organized differently.

Those of us interested in a Mexican American and Chicano cultural center are not seeking a provisional space. We are seeking a lasting one.

WE ARE NOT ASKING THE CITY TO INVENT NEW POLICY. The City has a long, documented PRACTICE of supporting arts institutions through low-cost, long-term leases.

What is different here is the request itself. This time, the request is not for a compromised site, but for meaningful institutional support.

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Currently, the Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson and the Presidio San Agustín del Tucson both operate on City-owned property under long-term, low-cost lease agreements.