

Filmmaker Efrain Gutierrez wants new center to bolster Chicano arts

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Efrain Gutierrez has big plans for an old Chinese grocery store he's refurbishing at the corner of South Flores Street and West Glenn Avenue, a

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Efrain Gutierrez envisions a cultural space that can be used as an art gallery, act as a haven for the West Side sound and include film screenings and fashion shows.



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couple of blocks east of **Burbank High School**.

The pioneering Chicano filmmaker, whose seminal 1970s films such as "Please, Don't Bury Me Alive" and "Run Tecato Run" reveled in gritty realism, plans to open the **Efrain Gutierrez Taller de Cine**, Arte, Musica y Comida on May 1.

"I want it to be a venue for *musicos* and artists," said Gutierrez, 67, who will operate it with his wife, Irma, and son Efrain-Abran.

He envisions a cultural space that can be used as an art gallery and also will be a haven for the West Side sound and offer possibilities for film screenings and fashion shows. Eventually he wants to open a small

restaurant, too.

The two-story, 1940s-era building is owned by retired insurance agent **Julio Gonzalez**, who has been a fan of the filmmaker since the first time he saw "Please, Don't Bury Me Alive" at its premiere at **Century South Theatre**.

"I just believe in him," said Gonzalez, who bought the site two years ago and who right now is renting it dirt cheap; he hopes to sell the place to Gutierrez, who became its tenant in August.

"He still has good ideas, and I'll help him any time I can. He needs to (share) his talents. Efrain is a very smart guy. He's practically in the SoFlo area."

The building is located at **3403 S. Flores**, on a stretch south of U.S. Highway 90 more than a dozen blocks south of the revitalized residential, restaurant and arts district known as SoFlo.

During their CineFestival visits, Los Angeles filmmaker **Alberto Barboza** and Miami filmmaker **Julian Yuri Rodriguez** checked out the work in progress. The indie directors were blown away.

"People want to see it because of my name," Gutierrez said.

Cultural and community arts experts said it will take more than a legendary name to survive, much less prosper.

Long haul

Graciela Sanchez, executive director of the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center, applauded Gutierrez's efforts but cautioned "it's a lot of hard work" and that his "neighborhood isn't a wealthy neighborhood."

Artists and the community must be engaged, she added, and programming must be consistent.

"The South Side needs something. It would be great to have something there going on," Sanchez said. "Hopefully, it's not just (Efrain) by himself because you need lots of folks to support you ... it's like running a restaurant. You can do it, but after a while you get tired. You have to be there all the

time. Hopefully, there's a long-term vision. I wish him luck.”

Likewise, Palo Alto educator and musician **Juan Tejada**, co-founder and producer of the **Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center**'s Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio, wishes his friend the best.

Years ago, Tejada opened the Aztlán Café on the far South Side on Pleasanton Road. He programmed live music, art exhibits and poetry at the small venue. It didn't last long.

“I know how hard it is to launch a place,” Tejada said. “But I give credit to Efrain. Places like that are necessary.”

Tejada alluded to the loss of popular Chicano hangouts such as Ruben's Place, Saluté and Lermas.

“We need places where our musicians can congregate, our collective community, organizations, artists,” he said.

Labor of love

“This is my corner,” said Gutierrez, pointing to a small area off the main entrance decorated with his movie posters. Some old movie seats indicate this will be the screening area and where he will hosts his *placticas* (discussions).

Across the room is an antique walk-in icebox that will be converted to a DJ booth.

Artist and sometime actor Manuel “Mambo” Flores has finished out the concrete floor with tiles that he's etched and painted by hand. The floor decorations reflect Efrain Gutierrez's love of Aztec history and indigenous cultures. That means visitors will be greeted by Xochipilli, the Aztec god of the arts. Nearby is his twin sister, Xochiquetlal, the goddess of love. There also are depictions of fertility gods and the jaguar god of war.

“It's different. I can't even pronounce those names,” Flores said a bit quizzically. “Everyone will walk all over it. But that doesn't matter. I hope it's something that'll last.”

So does Gutierrez. But does he have the stamina? That's the question, Tejada said.

“Efrain, from the beginning, has always had good ideas,” he said, calling the center's location a sign that “the South Side is rising again.”

In many ways, the fast-talking, big-dreaming filmmaker embodies the Aztec philosophy “if it doesn't move, it doesn't exist.”

Such kinetic energy has sometimes gotten him into trouble — a poorly promoted, poorly attended Chicano Woodstock in September 1977 hurt his credibility with musicians; a subsequent drug bust didn't help his career or image; and retreating from acting and directing and refusing to follow up his early indie showing stymied any chance for big-budget success.

UCLA professor and film historian **Chon Noriega** once described Gutierrez (who is wrapping up shooting “The Betrayal,” a short docudrama, and working on a documentary with decorated veteran Placido Salazar called “American G.I. Forum”) as “one of the least likely, most bewildering figures of the celluloid era.”

But it's that charismatic personality that has up-an-coming painter **Michael Esparza** gushing that the new taller “is the greatest thing.” Esparza currently has paintings hanging in the gallery.

Gutierrez's worldview is still unapologetically tethered to the radical Chicano Movement and the brown sound of Little Joe y la Familia and Esteban “Steve” Jordan.

He wants to host gallery shows for Latino artists once a month, and he plans to present music on the spacious backyard patio every Thursday, beginning in May.

“If it doesn't work, I guess it'll die out,” he said.

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