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## Fifth Ward welcomes builder as 'community partner'

By **Paul Takahashi** Updated 12:33 am, Saturday, January 27, 2018



**IMAGE 1 OF 15**

Exterior of the Parra Design Group's new building at 4619 Lyons Avenue, Tuesday, Jan. 9, 2018, in Houston. Parra Design Group, a 20-year old architectural firm, has opened their headquarters in Houston's Fifth ... [more](#)

The red brick and metal building stands in stark contrast to the boarded-up shotgun houses, empty

lots and the vacant hospital building that surround it.

But it is here, along a once-thriving stretch of Lyons Avenue, where Camilo Parra decided to stake the future of his architectural and homebuilding company, Parra Design Group. The industrial chic headquarters, which held a grand opening last week, is on the leading edge of new development in Houston's historic but economically challenged Fifth Ward.

"My parents thought I was crazy for a bit," Parra said during a tour of the building. "Now they see the vision."

The two-story building at 4619 Lyons, where sunlight streams in through large glass windows and reflects off shiny concrete floors and exposed steel ceilings, is evidence of the kind of transition - revitalization to some, gentrification to others - that has taken place in neighborhoods from Midtown to Montrose.

Now, it is coming to the Fifth Ward, northeast of downtown and the traditional heart of Houston's African-American community.

Parra's new office building also represents how developers can build projects that are sensitive to neighborhood sensibilities.



Photo: Gary Coronado, Staff

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"We view Camilo as a community partner," says Kathy Flanagan Payton, president and CEO of Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corp.

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"We view Camilo as a community partner," Kathy Flanagan Payton, president and CEO of Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corp., said. "Camilo came to us very sincere with the goal of saying, 'I have the opportunity to do something profitable for me and good for the community,' instead of coming in as a capitalist looking to improve his bottom line. His approach is right."

"There's a strong sense of neighborhood here," Parra said. "We want to work with the neighborhood."

Lyons Avenue was once the cultural and commercial center of the Fifth Ward.





Ken Ellis / Houston Chronicle

African-Americans began moving there after World War I, lured by affordable housing and business prospects. By 1950, the Fifth Ward had become Houston's predominantly black neighborhood, and Lyons Avenue its economic engine.

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More than 40 black-owned businesses - clothing and shoe shops, grocery and drug stores, barbershops, funeral homes and churches - lined the thoroughfare named after white saloon owner Johnny Lyons. Popular black entertainers, including Duke Ellington, played at Club Matinee, which became known as the "Cotton Club of the South."

"When you came down Lyons Avenue, you saw people walking down the street, high spirited," said Payton, who has been with the Fifth Ward CRC for 24 years.

The expansion of Interstate 10 and U.S. 59, which cut off Lyons from downtown, began a decades-long decline in the neighborhood. Customers dried up, and one by one, businesses started to close. The end of segregation and subsequent black migration to the suburbs accelerated the demise of businesses along the corridor.

Payton, who grew up in the Fifth Ward during the 1960s, remembers when shops closed almost weekly.

"There were a number of fine-clothing tailor and shoe shops, a furniture store and smaller mom-and-pop shops," Payton said. "Now, those things are absent or derelict."

By the 1980s, Lyons had become a crime-ridden and neglected corridor. In 1983, the Chronicle called it "the baddest street in town." The block just south of Lyons and Jensen became known as "Pearl Harbor," because locals said more men died there than at its namesake.

Houston blues artist Weldon "Juke Boy" Bonner dubbed Lyons "blood alley" in a song called "Stay Off Lyons Avenue:"

"You better stay off Lyons Avenue.

"Cause you go there,

"You go there green.

"Somewhere there on Jensen,

"The last time you be seen."

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Parra didn't stay off Lyons Avenue. He was biking through the Fifth Ward about 10 years ago when the idea struck him.

"I remember thinking this neighborhood isn't as bad as everyone says," he said. "Sure, it has a bad rep, but I think that's changing."

Parra, a University of Chicago graduate with a master's degree in architecture from the University of Texas, has lived in Houston since 1998. About a decade ago, he began buying up empty lots, mostly between Waco and Lockwood, north of Lyons. He now owns 100 lots, which will yield 200 homes. He has built 36 homes, sold 35 of them and currently has 10 under construction.

Parra set aside two lots on Lyons to build the new headquarters for his company, which marks its 20th anniversary this year. After securing financing from BBVA Compass and Prosperity Bank, he developed a sales office and design center, as well as a warehouse to store construction equipment and materials.

He envisions one day sharing part of the office space with a professional tenant, such as a small law firm or real estate company. The homebuilder has three full-time and two part-time workers.

Parra took the unusual step of consulting with the Fifth Ward CRC before building his company's office and homes. He said he wanted to be mindful of how his office and homes will mesh with the environment.

"We want to have the architecture fit the neighborhood," Parra said. "It has to be cohesive."

Parra designed the brick exterior to harken back to main streets of years past. He used Fifth Ward CRC guidebooks to install wide sidewalks, streetlights, trees and a bike rack in front of his office to encourage walking and biking along Lyons. On the southern facade, a steel-grate balcony acts as a sun shade for pedestrians.

Parra also is building a more traditional, two-story house that complements existing homes in the area in contrast to his signature modern metal townhomes dotting Houston neighborhoods like the Heights and West End. The three-bedroom houses are roughly 1,600 square feet and are priced from \$239,900, appealing to first-time home-buyers.

"We're excited that Parra decided to develop affordable and market-rate housing in the Fifth Ward," Payton said. "We need the economic diversity and integration to eliminate the barriers we have, such as being a food and retail desert."

Parra is active within the Fifth Ward community. He has opened up the vacant first floor of his office as a community meeting space. He also offers buyers a free one-year membership to the community association with every purchase and encourages prospective buyers to get involved in community events.

"This is a commitment to the neighborhood," Parra said of his Fifth Ward projects. "We're here to stay."

Other developers are eyeing the Fifth Ward for redevelopment. The appeal? The neighborhood's proximity to downtown and relatively abundant land and affordable prices.

Midway, the Houston-based developer of CityCentre, plans to transform the former KBR campus into a mixed-use development called East River. Some 8 million square feet of offices, shops and entertainment venues are envisioned on 150 acres along Buffalo Bayou less than a mile from downtown.

Nearby, Frank Liu for years has been working to redevelop the former Many Diversified Interests foundry into hundreds of homes. The local builder bought the 35-acre site at 3617 Baer after striking an agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to clean up the Superfund site, which tests had found had been contaminated with pollutants including arsenic and lead.

Liu spent millions of dollars to clean up the site to ready it for redevelopment.

Fifth Ward CRC has developed public-private partnerships, which brought about new homes and

apartment units, art installations, the restoration of the Deluxe Theater, the Fifth Ward Jam recreation center, Legacy Community Health's Fifth Ward Clinic and the Houston Independent School District's Mickey Leland College Preparatory Academy for Young Men. It is looking to restore the former St. Elizabeth's Hospital into more housing and retail, catty-corner from Parra's new office.

"We look at this as a positive," Payton said of the redevelopment projects. "You can continue to have blighted properties that create additional burdens to the city, or look at it as an opportunity to increase the tax base and the curb appeal of our community."

Yet Payton also acknowledged concerns that gentrification could force out longtime residents.

"We're cautiously excited about the development that's taking place in the community," she said. "We want to make sure there's a balance of housing opportunity that doesn't displace the indigenous community. We don't want to lose sight of the history, spirit and culture on which this community was built."

Tom Reynolds, who owns the carwash across the street from Parra's new office, welcomes the changes in his neighborhood. The 78-year-old said he moved to Houston in 1963 and has lived in the Fifth Ward for 30 years.

He also views it as inevitable.

"That's progress, man," he said. "There's nothing wrong with change, nothing wrong with progress. In 50 years, this is going to look like River Oaks."

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