

# The Nancy Franco-Maldonado Paseo Boricua Arts Building wins major architecture awards

The Paseo Boricua Arts Building— the Puerto Rican artists’ trench against rising rents in their community.

By: Alonso Vidal

In a one-bedroom apartment in Humboldt Park, Cristian Roldán, a Puerto Rican artist, gazes at the Chicago skyline from his balcony.

From afar, the city is silent and peaceful.

Roldán emphasizes the importance of solitude in producing his work. Having an art studio space in his apartment makes this possible, he says.

Inside his apartment, finished paintings and sketches, brushes, and canvases all have their place. “It’s my space. It’s my trench,” Roldán said.

Roldán is one of many

“It’s my space.  
It’s my trench.”

maintaining private living spaces.

She said the idea came from the Puerto Rican Cultural Center after they realized that artists make a very low living wage. At the same time, they recognized the importance of art in the community and its impact on preserving and promoting Puerto Rican culture.

Pellot said that before the project, some artists sought jobs that provided a “better quality of life.” This building offers them an alternative.

“I am extremely grateful that we, the artists, can have a space at an affordable price; otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to work on my own,” Roldán said.

Roldán left his native Puerto Rico at 25 to begin a new life in Chicago. “Either I leave, or I do nothing with my life,” Roldán recalled telling himself after a long period of unemployment. He then contacted a relative living in Chicago and decided to move in with her.

Roldán said he was unaware of Chicago’s large Puerto Rican community, so he was surprised to discover the Barrio Borikén.

Although it’s not the same as living in Puerto Rico, he said neighborhoods like this help ease the cultural shock immigrants experience when leaving their home country. It was in the Barrio Borikén that he met

José López, executive director and co-founder of The Puerto Rican Cultural Center, who gave him the opportunity to paint his first mural.

“If I hadn’t come here, I probably wouldn’t be doing any of this. It was here that I was given the platform and the space,” Roldán said.

As a muralist, Roldán says he uses community walls to share the local narrative—what’s relevant to his community and culture. “What isn’t discussed in the media.”

Roldán’s commitment to his work in his com-

hood he now calls home.

“[Here] you have people around you, you have a community, you have people who support each other. People you can talk to and discuss ideas with,” he said.

Pellot said that, like Roldán, the Paseo Boricua Arts Building residents want to be engaged with the community and feel close to their culture, so she incorporated a series of Puerto Rican elements into the design.

One of them is the balconies, or balconcitos in Spanish, a Puerto Rican architectural

said.

“It’s very important for me to always represent my country well,” she said. “It comes with a lot of love. It’s really tied to my heart.”

In December 2024, her commitment to her country and the importance of affordable housing was recognized when the Paseo Boricua Arts Building won the American Architecture Award in the Residence category.

“It’s considered the nation’s highest and most prestigious building award that honors new cutting-edge design in the United States,” Pellot said.

She added that the project has started to become a catalyst for future development and investment in the area. She sees a pattern of development that is not pushing or displacing current residents but is instead supporting them.

Roldán said that there is a process of homogenization in neighborhoods like his, where cultural memory is gradually erased, and communities become disorganized. However, while more projects like the Paseo Boricua Arts Building emerge, the arts persist. There is still

hope.

“Here, they have fought to preserve a space where Puerto Ricans can be,” Roldán said. “People like me, who come from the island, can find a place and develop.”



Cristian Roldán paints his latest mural at the Humboldt Park Health Wellness Center

artists who live in the Paseo Boricua Arts Building, a five-story mixed-use building in the Barrio Borikén.

Maria Pellot, the Puerto Rican architect who designed the project, said the main objective is to offer affordable housing for artists who need a space to work on their craft while



The Nancy Franco-Maldonado Paseo Boricua Arts Building

Credit: Urban Works

community helped him be selected as one of the first artists offered a unit in the Paseo Boricua Arts Building.

Today, Roldán says that thanks to the affordable rent offered by the project, he can afford a “space to create,” but for him, that’s not everything.

He said the most important thing is having the opportunity to stay in the neighbor-

hood that adds to social engagement.

“I grew up sitting on my grandmother’s balcony—rocking chairs and watching people go by. They would stop and say hi,” Pellot said.

As a Puerto Rican architect working in Chicago, raising awareness of the good things that Puerto Ricans do and are capable of doing is what she is most proud of in her work, Pellot



The Paseo Boricua Arts Building’s interior dining room - Resident’s art displayed

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