

Requiem for a monument: The end of a bullring

by Luis Humberto Crosthwaite

In other cities, the monuments that define a place are a source of pride. In this city, the 50th anniversary of the Plaza de Toros, or bullring, is being celebrated with its demolition.

The news shocked bullfighting fans and local historians, since the bullring was still in operation last year, hosting its last corrida on Aug. 20.

Before the ring opened, in May 1957, Tijuana already was known as a bullfighting town. It was part of the formula that attracted tourists from the United States: the most entertaining cantinas, the best restaurants, the horse races and the bullfights. All part of that package called Tijuana.

Such was the bullfighting fervor that gripped the town in the '50s and '60s that the city seemed to become an outpost from Spain.

In the curio shops on Avenida Revolucion, shoppers could buy figurines of bulls and bullfighters, and all the paraphernalia associated with bullfighting, including capes, hats and banderillas.

Well-known musicians such as Charles Mingus and Herb Alpert gave testimony of this bullfighting culture along the border.

Mingus' 1962 album "Tijuana Moods," inspired by a visit the jazzman made to the city, vibrates with the sounds of flamenco guitars and castanets. Likewise, Alpert invented a musical style that went international in the '60s after a day spent at the Plaza de Toros.

But this image of Tijuana waned as the city became more industrial and the tourists lost interest in the fiesta brava.

In the last decades, the Plaza was often used for other entertainment events. Performances by Hispanic pop singers Camilo Sesto, Roberto Carlos, Menudo, Parchis and Sandro de America were memorable.

For many years the bullring was also the site of Mother's Day celebrations, boxing and lucha libre spectacles.

The dismantling of the historic Plaza de Toros began several weeks ago. The official reason given was that the structure, of metal and wood, is no longer safe for the 14,000 fans that could fill it.

Belatedly, civic groups and bullfighting associations are scrambling to get the bullring designated a historic site. But it will be difficult to stop the demolition, particularly in light of the apparent indifference of most of the city's residents.

Tijuana is a city that transforms itself year by year, and it's logical that with every transformation it should shed its skin. The Plaza de Toros takes with it a colorful piece of history, leaving behind rubble and nostalgia.

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