

# CURRENT

## Team Better Block takes on Alamo Plaza

By Scott Andrews

Published: August 15, 2012



*Team Better Block volunteers hard at work during last Friday's pre-build event.*

PHOTOS BY STEVEN GILMORE

This Friday and Saturday an experiment will be held in Alamo Plaza. The street will be closed and food stalls and a pop-up wine shop will be erected. Storytellers and musicians will be on hand, and a walking tour of the plaza will point out the locations of the long missing walls of Mission San Antonio de Valero. In honor of Davy Crockett's birthday, the Alamo will stay open late Friday night, and Saturday, Native American dancers will perform.

The history-themed itinerary has all the fixings of a blow-out street party, but, says organizer Andrew Howard of Team Better Block, "First thing — it's not a party. It's a demonstration."

The 2012-17 bond voted in this year awards \$1.2 million for improvements to Alamo Plaza, but like most aspects of the famous but contentious site, there is no clear consensus on what changes should be made, what stories should be told. To explore options, this weekend's event will present mock-ups of features and programming that might be incorporated in a re-imagined plaza. Following on their partnership with the Complete Streets Initiative of the city's Department of Planning and Community Development last March during *Síclovia*, when Better Block volunteers turned a run-down stretch near Broadway into a temporary vision of urbanity — replete with art gallery, flower shop and street music — TBB was asked by the Center City Development Office to take on another demo: Alamo Plaza.

Formed in 2010 by Andrew Howard, a transportation planner, and Jason Roberts, an I/T and communications consultant, Dallas-based TBB practice place-making in its most literal fashion, building mock-ups of possible urban futures in abandoned blocks in cities across Texas and beyond to encourage grassroots participation in urban development. Though they now consult many municipalities, and both Howard and Roberts have extensive corporate and government experience, their first effort in the Dallas Oak Cliff neighborhood was a guerilla action. Inspired by Park(ing) Day, a worldwide event begun in 2005 that temporarily transforms street

# Team Better Block takes on Alamo Plaza

*Continued from page 1*

parking spaces into people spaces with tiny stores, food offerings, and miniature libraries, they took the model and decided to scale it up to block size. Six blocks away from a site that had received \$2 million in city infrastructure improvements lay a blighted area that Oak Cliff residents knew had potential. "We were frustrated that the city was taking a long time to do anything," says Howard. "We had gone to enough public meetings. So we said, 'Let's just do it ourselves.'" Moving into the place without city permission, the group built a temporary art installation, then invited city representatives and staff to judge the project. "We posted what all laws we were breaking, like, you couldn't have awnings, you couldn't have street flowers, you couldn't gather on the sidewalk. Just old laws that we had," says Howard. "And they said, 'Well, we don't know why we have those. We should look into changing that.'" What began in April, 2010, as a renegade community action was soon backed up by the city of Dallas: "They started changing those laws, and we got a million dollars for that first Better Block to make it permanent. You look at a typical timeline for something like that, it's five years."

Little more than two years since their precarious start, the team has now staged 33 Better Blocks in Dallas, Fort Worth, Memphis, Wichita, and other cities. Two weeks ago, TBB co-founder Roberts received a Champions of Change Award at the White House from the Secretary of Transportation; next week the Team will present at the U.S. Pavilion at the 13th International Venice Architecture Biennale as part of Spontaneous Interventions: Design Actions for the Common Good. It's been a fast ride for Howard and Roberts, quite a contrast in pace from Howard's previous career as a transportation planner. "Streets are our biggest asset in this country — they're bigger than parks. That's where we live. That was my whole frustration as a transportation planner for 15 years before this. I worked on the regional scale and talked about 25-year build outs, corridors. And it never went anywhere." Now focusing on single blocks, it is community members and private investment — small business owners — who Howard says, "get it first." After seeing Better Block proposals as functioning, albeit temporary businesses, empty buildings are soon rented, and pop-up businesses run for a weekend are reborn as attempts at permanent endeavors. Though TBB consults with municipalities, public sector funding usually follows, rather than leads, private investment.

Though there is disagreement on what should happen to Alamo Plaza, that changes should be made is a view widely held. With \$1.2 million in bond money for as-yet-unstated improvements, Center City Development Office brought in another place-making organization to study the matter. Project for Public Spaces (PPS) director Phil Myrick met with City Council last March 7, when a number of "criteria for creating great civic spaces" were stated. PPS was brought in by the Development Office to study possibilities for an improved Alamo Plaza. PPS has been an authority in urban development for 35 years, stressing a "lighter, faster, cheaper" approach to civic change. Concerns were voiced for better attractions and amenities coupled with an image that expresses identity. One of the problems discussed was the orientation of the plaza. Currently, visitors get their impression of the plaza from the front of the church, where they take their pictures and then often wander off after a few minutes looking for something to do — and visit Ripley's across the street, perhaps. There is a lack of seating, tables, and shade in the plaza; the plaza, noted Myrick, "functions as a major street with two sidewalks." Among recommendations made were marking the original mission perimeter and establishing a sense of the height of the missing walls. Enhancements to the plaza might also be accomplished by moving the massive cenotaph that dominates the plaza island and bringing in dining, music, and performances. But these are just suggestions — what will happen is up in the air for now.

To reorient the visitor's experience of the plaza, the original south-facing front gate, along with a section of the old mission walls, will be mocked up this weekend as a "ghost structure," an armature that delineates what is thought to be the shape of the missing structure in full height and width. In addition, a new mobile walking tour of the plaza, complete with images, will be rolled out. Downloaded on cell phones through a QR app, the tour

# Team Better Block takes on Alamo Plaza

*Continued from page 2*

will help the visitor imagine Mission San Antonio de Valero from its founding in 1724, through the battle of 1836 and beyond. Expressing the divergent concerns for telling the entire history of the plaza from the founding of the mission, or concentrating instead on the iconic Battle of the Alamo, spokespersons representing various points of view will participate in the weekend programming.

Storyteller Isaac Alvarez Cardenas, director of programs for American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, is of Coahuiltecan/Apache descent. Though lacking federal tribal status, American Indians in Texas have fought for the rights of the descendents of the Indians who converted to Catholicism and lived and farmed at the missions. Cardenas will present his tales this Friday on the plaza. The Alamo's Historian, Dr. Richard Bruce Winders, will talk about Davy Crockett Friday night as part of Crockett's birthday celebration. The Sons of the Republic of Texas, a group of history buffs concerned with matters of the Texas Revolution, will present walking tours both days. Friday dinner will be served by the San Antonio Chef Coalition, and yet more food will arrive in a reenactment of SA's famous chili queen scene. With help from volunteers last weekend, table trestles were constructed from scavenged wood, benches were made from planks cut from downed pecan trees, and an information booth constructed of cedar in the form of a jacal, the dwelling favored by indigenous people and early Tejano settlers to the region. Whatever your aspirations might be for the plaza's identity, this weekend is the time to voice them. It will be a veritable fair of cultural identity.

So, what happens in the short run? After the weekend demonstration, during which feedback from guests will be gathered, the data will be counted and analyzed. But you'll still have opportunity to send in your own advice for several months. "We want this place to be a place for tourists and residents," says Lori Houston, assistant director of Center City Development Office. "In order for us to do that, we need to understand what would bring the residents out to this special place in our community. We will learn a lot on the Friday night event. Do people like standing on the plaza? This is a way for us to check it out."

Whatever the changes might end up being — occasional street closures for events, or an eventual restoration of the historic plaza, one thing seems sure: this is an historic moment, a time to change the master narrative that has troubled, rather than united, San Antonio. For once, decisions will come from the bottom, rather than top down. "There are a lot of people making money off the current failed planning process. So, to break that you got to have a mass revolt against it," says Howard. "You need to get more people involved in it, in ownership, and loving the city again. And that doesn't happen in a public meeting."

---

## **The Alamo Plaza Better Block**

Free

5-11pm Fri, 9am-1pm Sat

Alamo Plaza, between Houston and Crockett

[teambetterblock.com/alamo](http://teambetterblock.com/alamo)

---

**Source:** <http://sacurrent.com/news/team-better-block-takes-on-alamo-plaza-1.1358169>