

**HISTORIC LANDMARK COMMISSION
Demolition Permit
1200 Montopolis Drive**

ARCHITECTURE

The Montopolis Community Center is an approximately 15,000 square foot two-story rigid steel frame recreational building of rectangular plan and gable roof with an adjoining one-story brick veneer flat-roof entry vestibule and adjoining one-story shed roof with painted concrete masonry unit walls mechanical room that was a later addition. The building is on a concrete slab. The exterior wall material is different at first and second stories. The first story of both rear and side walls is white sprayed stucco while the second story of all four walls is metal R panels painted green with several patches. The first story wall at the front is painted brick. The roof is metal R panel and appears not to be original. All of the other materials appear to be the original materials.

Originally, a flat roofed front porch spanned between the entry vestibule at the right and a ventilated concrete masonry unit solar screen wall to the left. The roof was supported by small diameter round steel columns. The pattern of the concrete masonry units was formed by vertically oriented 16" deep lintel blocks match-booked with the open part of the v facing each other. The same pattern and construction are currently found at other points around the building perimeter. The porch, roof, supporting columns, and concrete masonry unit wall are no longer existing. The brick and metal wall panels were originally unpainted. Large, square louvered ventilation fans are located in the upper rear gabled end. Windows are a mix of fixed and operable mill finish aluminum single-glazed steel windows.

**OCCUPANCY HISTORY
1200 Montopolis Drive**

Montopolis Settlement

Jessie C. Tannehill laid out the town site of Montopolis in the 1830s, but the area did not grow as Tannehill intended due to its proximity to the chosen capital of the Republic, Austin. The area became primarily farmland connected only to the city of Austin by a bridge built in the 1880s. Freedmen established a Freedom Colony, Burditt's Prairie, here after the Civil War. In the 1920s, the city saw an influx of Mexican American migration, as did all of central Texas during that time. The nearby Del Valle Army Air Field (later Bergstrom Army Air Field, Bergstrom Air Force Base, and then Bergstrom Airport) was built in 1942, and displaced many of the farm workers, who worked the once open land. Many moved to Montopolis due to the cheap land and worked at the Air Field. One of the few true rural regions left in the Austin area, the City of Austin annexed most of the Montopolis area in 1952 (completed in the 1970s). That year marked

the beginning of a struggle with the city over equitable amenities, fair education, and affordable housing.

The organization of a Catholic congregation in Montopolis began in 1938 when the Archbishop Arthur Droessarts of San Antonio granted Holy Cross Fathers jurisdiction of the area south of the Colorado River, including Montopolis. Archbishop Droessarts stipulated a mission system should be devised to reach the mass of Catholic parishioners, and in 1946, a Catholic church was built. However, Nuestra Senora de la Luz, or simply La Luz, was only open seven years as the facility quickly outgrew the needs of the community. In 1953, Nuestra Senora de los Siete Dolores (the principal Patron of the Congregation of Holy Cross), or Delores Church, was built for the Montopolis Catholic Parish at 1111 Montopolis Drive.

Father James Donnelly, C.S.C., pastor of Delores Church from 1960-1962, bought 75 acres of land across from the church in 1962. The cost of the land was \$75,000, and the area would later be home to the Montopolis Community Center.

Father Fred Underwood, C.S.C., arrived at the Delores parish in June 1962. A veteran of World War II, Underwood wanted to assist in the mitigation of poverty after seeing the conditions in Saipan. "Frankly it was the first time I was ever exposed to real poverty. There was quite a lot of it among the Samean natives living on the island."ⁱ He returned to his home state in Indiana to resume work for his family's construction business, but he was called to the priesthood and joined Congregation Holy Cross at Notre Dame in 1947 obtaining full ordination in 1956.

In 1962, welfare was prevalent in Montopolis. The crime rate and high school dropout rate were the highest in all of Austin. Housing was poor and inadequate, street lights and storm sewers were practically nonexistent along the unpaved streets, and job opportunities were few. Problems were intensified by Montopolis' isolation and lack of public transportation.

Creation of Montopolis Community Center

One of the first actions to aid the rehabilitation of the area was building a recreation center for the community. Underwood felt it would be a gathering place where people of all racial and religious backgrounds could meet and discuss their problems together. However, when he petitioned the City of Austin for funding to build the center, he was unsuccessful. "I realized that recreational facilities were the biggest need and that's when we contacted the city. When they didn't help, we just went at it on our own."ⁱⁱ Using Underwood's experience in construction and the assistance of numerous volunteers from the community, the Montopolis Community Center was built in 1963 at 1200 Montopolis Drive across the street from Delores Catholic Church on the land previously acquired by Father James Donnelly shortly before Underwood's arrival.

The Montopolis Community Center was designed by the architectural firm O'Connell and Probst, who also designed the Knights of Columbus Texas State Council Building in 1960 near Zilker Park, and Ray Simons served as the superintendent of construction. The building was 160 feet long by 90 feet wide and about 30 feet high. It contained three small basketball courts, a kitchen, a dining room, two large bathrooms, and second floor gallery. The total cost was \$225,000. The grand opening of the center was a three day event that took place on Memorial Day weekend in 1964.

After completion of the center, Underwood requested financial support from the City of Austin to help furnish and operate the facility, but the city was not able to provide resources at that time. Realizing the money would have to come from within the community, programs, such as dances, dinners, and breakfasts, began generating revenue.

Besides such recreational activities as basketball, volleyball, baseball, and weight lifting, the center also offered arts and crafts classes for all age groups. Perhaps the most influential program started was the boxing. As expected, the center became a meeting place for area residents of all backgrounds.

Montopolis Community Center, Inc. (MCC)

Soon, a formal organization was needed to direct the community center's numerous proposed projects. On 4/29/1965, the Montopolis Community Center, Inc. (MCC) received its charter. The non-denominational nonprofit corporation was devoted to the development of Montopolis, and especially to the welfare of the impoverished. Underwood served as the executive director with members of the community programming the organization. MCC quickly began seeking federal assistance for programs to help the Montopolis community.

One of the first projects established at the Montopolis Community Center was a daycare program funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity. The program provided preschool training for 3-5 year olds, and the staff was supplied by Head Start. It allowed mothers to go to work and help supplement family income and equipped Mexican American children with skills needed to compete successfully when they entered first grade. In 1969, the operation of this program was turned over to the Human Opportunities Corporation (HOC).

In 1965, with the help of a Federal Labor Department grant of \$68,000, the MCC began to sponsor the Montopolis Neighborhood Youth Corps. The Neighborhood Youth Corp was project stemming from the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, part of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Originally only a one year program, 75 of the community's most uncompromising agitators were selected. The teenagers drafted into the program were initially motivated to attend the training sessions by the promise of monetary reward. It was agreed that \$1.25 would be paid

for every hour spent in training. Boys were trained in fields such as carpentry, electronics, automotive repair, truck driving and janitorial work. The girls were prepared for positions such as secretaries, clerks, typists, receptionists, nurses' aides, teachers' aides, and food handlers. Gradually the teenagers began to learn good working habits and the power of a dollar earned.

A second grant from the Department of Labor provided for the continuation of the Neighborhood Youth Corps, and by 1968, the Labor Department was so impressed with the change in Montopolis that it requested MCC extend its vocational and educational program to all of Austin and the four surrounding counties. MCC accepted this responsibility for one year, but relinquished sponsorship to HOC in 1969.

Formal education was another activity that occurred at the Montopolis Community Center. Some classes from the Delores School were held at the center since it opened in 1964. In 1969, MCC established the Montopolis Community School holding classes at the community center and subsidized by the Moody Foundation and Title I and Title VII funds. The school offered a bilingual Montessori program and piloted individual instruction projects developed by Southwest Development Laboratory. The school operated a breakfast and lunch program subsidized by the Department of Agriculture. Hot breakfasts were available for a dime and lunches were 20 cents.

Other Delores Church Programs

Other projects operated simultaneously with the Youth Corps program to improve conditions in Montopolis. Isolation from the rest of Austin was always one of the community's most basic problems. A public bus line never serviced the area, and therefore the jobs, clinics, various welfare agencies, employments office, and other facilities of central Austin were never accessible to the carless residents of Montopolis. Underwood tried to convince the city to extend bus service to Montopolis and coined the term "poverty island," referring to the area as a low income and cut off from Austin. After his request was denied, Underwood went to Chicago in 1965 and returned with an old army evacuation bus donated by the Holy Cross Congregation at Notre Dame. A bus system known as Poverty Island Transportation (PIT) was organized. The new bus system not only gave people the chance to visit the health clinics and welfare organizations, but also allowed them to seek work outside the area.

Officially operated by the MCC, the bus system was the first of its kind in the nation to be allotted funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). OEO National Director Sargent Shriver took one of the first rides on the bus in February 1966.

In August 1971, new transportation system was established on a much smaller scale by Austin Model Cities program. Two 15 passenger mini-busses were allotted to Montopolis and other parts of East Austin not serviced by regular bus lines.

In 1968, plans were drawn up for Country Club Gardens, a low cost housing project built on church property adjacent to the Montopolis Community Center. Two administrative grants from the Moody Foundation of Galveston provided the initial financial backing, and UT architectural students, under the supervision of Dr. Robert Mather, designed the entire project.

230 new houses were built, enabling low income families to own their home. The prices did not exceed \$17,000. Country Club Gardens was an official Federal Housing Administration Number 235 Housing Project, and the Housing Act of 1968 made it possible for most residents of Montopolis to qualify for long term financing. With a down payment of \$200, the monthly payments were computed on 20% of the family's adjusted income. To qualify for these units in Country Club Gardens, a family of four would have to have a minimum yearly income of \$6,210 after social security and \$300/year deduction for each child. A counseling service was developed to advise families how to increase their income and clean up their credit to qualify for the program. The Country Club project was a great success and most of the houses were sold before completion.

By 1973, the amount of people on welfare decreased dramatically, the crime rate was lower, and the high school dropout rate declined as well. The residents conquered their isolation with a bus system and 230 homes were built for the community to own. Montopolis Drive was finally paved and new storm sewers meant that water was no longer collecting in the streets. The community had done much to destroy the idea of "poverty island," and the approximately 8,000 residents were finally receiving more support from the city.

Cesar Chavez Rally

A significant event occurred in 1971 at the Montopolis Community Center when noted labor activist Cesar Chavez spoke to a crowd of thousands. The predominantly Chicano Upholsters' International Union Local 456, led by Lencho Hernandez, was battling the Economy Furniture Company in court over the workers right to unionize. Chavez visited the center on February 6 to speak to the workers and encourage a boycott of Montgomery Ward, Economy Furniture Company's largest customer. Chavez said that the workers on strike "should not to suffer two and half years to get an inherent right, the right to join a union."ⁱⁱⁱ Chavez, a man who embarked on the mission to better the economic conditions of Mexican Americans and working class people, spoke at the community center built with the same intentions.

City of Austin Purchase

On February 1, 1974, Austin Parks and Recreation Department purchased the Montopolis Community Center from MCC for \$150,000 and also received five surrounding acres to develop into a park. Underwood said, "It's always been a financial burden on us. We were hoping the city would take it over eventually. We felt that the city could do a better job in serving the

community with more staff and programs than we were.”^{iv} Plans to refurbish the building were put on hold until the summer so that the Montopolis Community School could finish its school year.

In 1974, PARD spent \$236,000 on renovations. Outside improvements included a new playground, privacy fencing and lighting for the softball field, replacing the ballfield backstop, landscaping the grounds, and adding walkways. Building renovations included repainting, plumbing work, air conditioning modifications, and the addition of some partitions. After this, PARD programmed the Montopolis Community Center until the present day.

A 2011 conditions assessment of the building stated the Montopolis Community Center was in “poor overall condition.” The facility was built as economically as possible in 1963 by the Delores Church, and the public used it extensively for almost 50 years. After several open meetings, the community expressed a desire for a new, modern facility that better met their needs. The bond package for the design and construction of a new \$15.5 million community center was passed by Austin voters in November 2012. After extensive public engagement to determine needs and wishes, the new Montopolis Community Center is expected be finished in 2020. The 33,141-square-foot facility will honor the original intentions of the center--to provide the Montopolis community a place to recreate and serve the community as the nucleus of social engagement.

ⁱ “In ‘Poverty Island’ Father Underwood—The Force for Change in Montopolis,” *The Austin American Statesman*, Montopolis Section, November 30, 1972.

ⁱⁱ Rowland Nethaway, “In Montopolis: Priest Sparked Economic Surge,” *The Austin American Statesman*, December 19, 1971.

ⁱⁱⁱ Don Fairchild, “Chavez Supports Furniture Boycott,” *The Austin American Statesman*, February 7, 1971.

^{iv} “Montopolis Center Work Will Begin Within Week,” *The Austin American Statesman*, February 21, 1974.