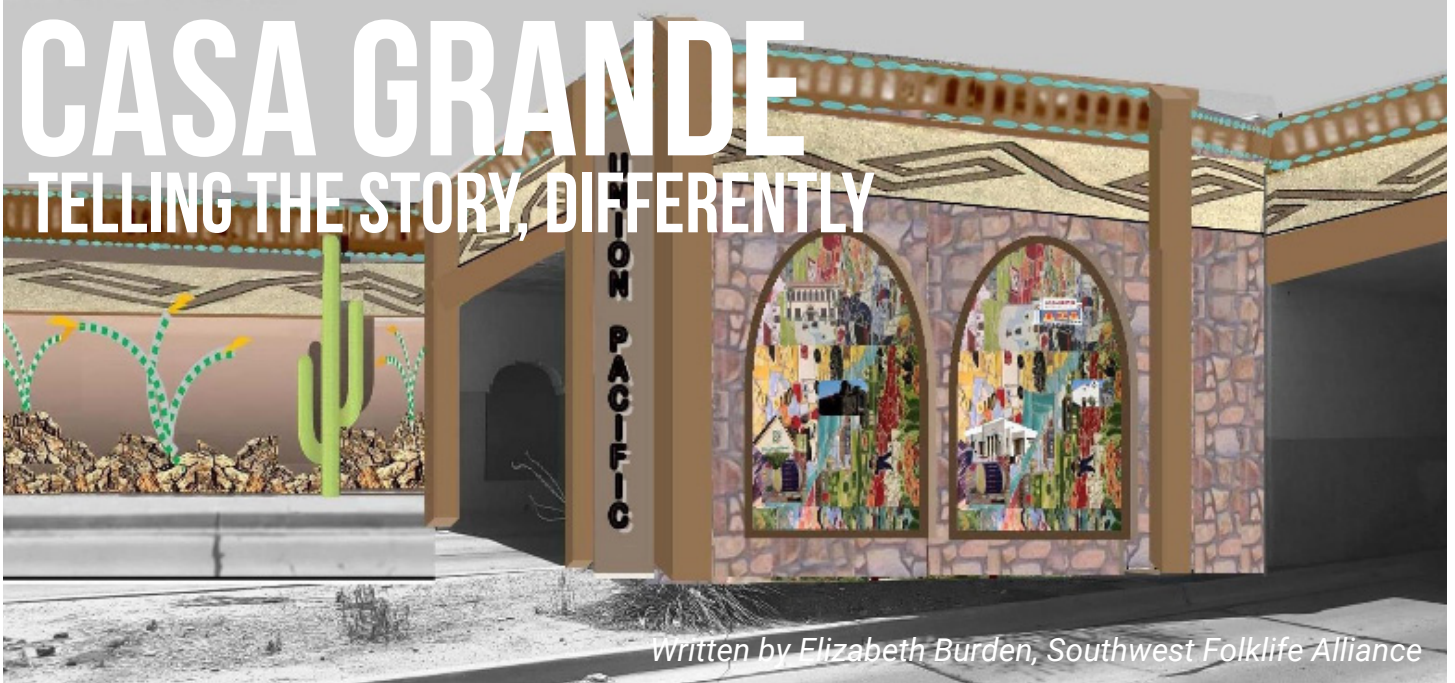


CASA GRANDE TELLING THE STORY, DIFFERENTLY



written by Elizabeth Burden, Southwest Folklife Alliance

As you come into Casa Grande, Arizona, from the west, you drive through a piece of real estate that has been there since the 1930s. Trains go cross over it daily, and some 5,000 residents live near it. This weathered underpass built in the Art Deco style, decorated with a few contemporary graffiti tags, projects an image of a bygone age, decay, and blight.

“Every time I went through there, I thought to myself, ‘My God, why hasn’t anybody fixed this up?’ said Gloria Leija, one of the members of the Casa Grande Arizona Creative Communities Initiative (CCI) team. “I think visual impressions are lasting.”

Leija and co-team members Stacey Seaman, , and Lisa Swanson agree. They consider the underpass the gateway to their small city. As a part of their grant, they are using a participatory community process to gather ideas for transforming it and, by extension, change the community.

“Sometimes we don’t think about the small little ways that we can make changes in our community that can have a bigger impact that we could ever realize,” said Seaman. “This is one of those areas that people go by ... all the time. It’s kind of right now indicative of ... part of our story that we could tell differently.”

The underlying concept for the project is that of a mosaic—a picture or pattern produced by arranging together a variety of small colored pieces. “CG Mosaic Festival” was the community art festival the team launched in 2018; an actual mosaic of ceramic tile pieces is envisioned as the primary design element for the underpass.

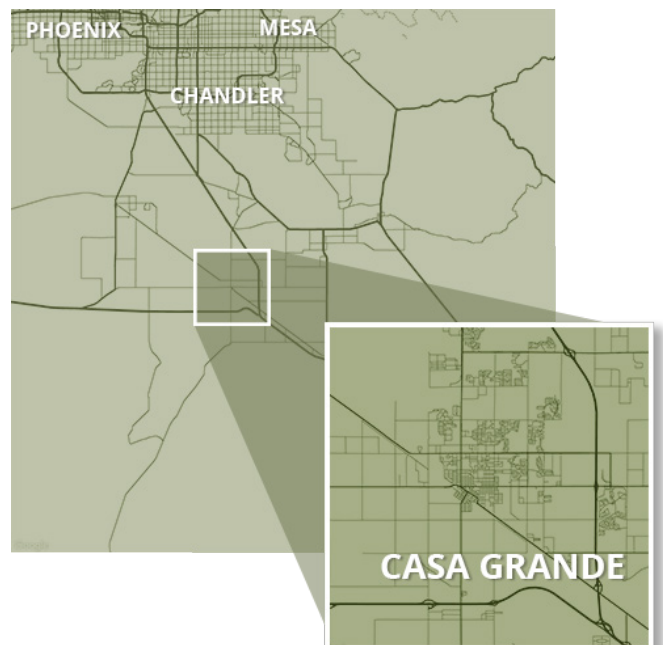
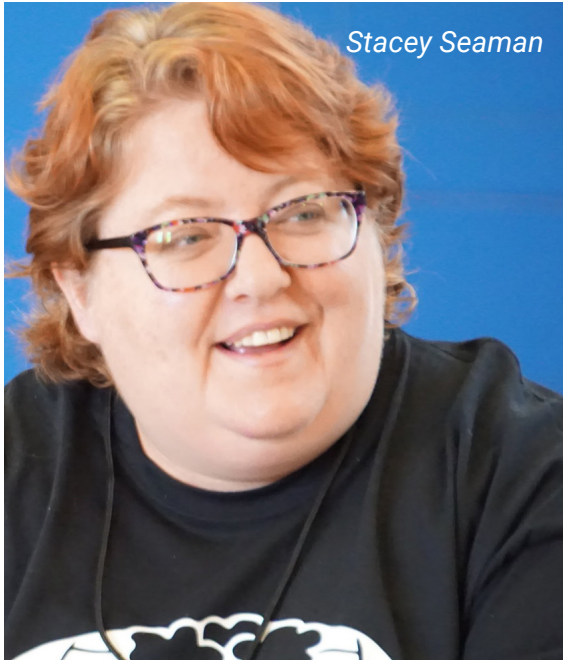


Photo: Conceptual Design of re-imagined Union Pacific Railroad underpass on West Gila Bend Highway.

“The mosaic [concept] is about the different fabrics that our community is made up of,” said Leija. “When we talk about fabric, we’re talking about cultural difference, seniors and kids, Hispanic, African-American, Asian, all what our community is made up of, how we’re woven together.” The diverse history is one everyone needs to be told, Sommer added.



Nearly 400 Casa Grande residents participated in community events, where they were invited to share their stories and histories. Young and old were encouraged to draw on specially designed coloring pages depicting the underpass to share their visual ideas of what its new look should be.

Seaman said the ideas shared by the community have been thoughtful and thought provoking. “Several women were talking about how the arches in the overpass look like windows they used to have in Mexico and how they would decorate them. They were looking at this Art Deco piece as a snapshot of their heritage,” she said. “It was something that personally would have never occurred to me. It was such an eye-opening experience to see what the real power of different peoples’ perspectives in public art can be. And as soon as I saw their drawings with flowers and the lattices, I was like, ‘That is so beautiful.’ How can that not be a part of something that we end up putting up?”

Swanson, the artist on the project, distilled the community stories and ideas into a coherent design that reflected the community.

“The mosaic on the sides, it’s going to be history, the story [of] Casa Grande. It’s supposed to tell the story of the past, present, and future and then also the diversity of the community,” she said.

The design is not the only result of the process. Leija noted that engaging people in a process to change the built environment helps to build community. She felt that the finished project will “give us a sense of pride to see, you know, that this was developed by our community members.”

The community sessions have changed team members’ views of the project. “When we first sat down two years ago, I think we all had this idea in our heads that we all knew what mattered. We’re going to do this thing, and we’re going to do it this way because that’s how we’ve always done it,” she said. “And then through some of the deliberate exposure and interactions through, you know, all of these things, we started realizing that maybe we’re asking ourselves the wrong questions about what matters.”

The project has changed team members’ perceptions about community engagement, community connections, and community leadership. “I sit on different commissions and boards. It has always been the same people, the same people, the same people,” Sommer said. “Other people can do things. [In this project] I saw different people and met different people who I will continue to make sure that are involved because they want to stay involved.”

Seaman added, “Now, we go downtown with all these different community organizations, and it’s hard ... that’s directly a result of this [project], but they weren’t things that were in place before a year ago when all of the sudden some of these connections were kind of made. It just seems like there’s a little bit ... more movement and people kind of making a few more connections about what could possibly be done.”

The roadway through the underpass not only leads into the community but also leads out of town. The CCI project has helped connect Casa Grande to other communities across the state, connections that may help shape the town’s new story.



Left to right: Erica Herman, Regis Sommers, and Gloria Leija

“We have people in Flagstaff and in Douglas, and in Eastlake, and in Barrio Anita, who are facing some of the exact same struggles,” said Seaman. “And there are organizations who we never would have been connected to before. Now, literally we’re a phone call or an email away. When somebody [in Casa Grande] says, ‘I want to do this thing’ we can be like, ‘We know somebody who can help with that.’ Just this feeling of not being alone in this, that there’s so many more resources than I had ever really imagined. And they’re not as hard to get as I thought they were before.”