

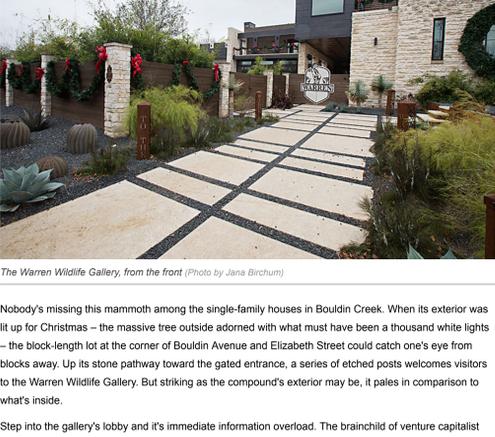
NEWS

Does Anybody Want the Warren Wildlife Gallery in Bouldin Creek?

Rick Warren's indoor safari brings turmoil to the South Austin neighborhood

BY NINA HERNANDEZ, FRI., JAN. 12, 2018

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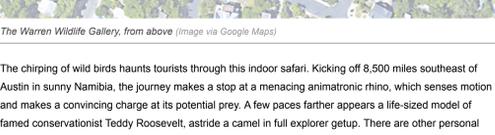


The Warren Wildlife Gallery, from the front (Photo by Jana Birchum)

Nobody's missing this mammoth among the single-family houses in Bouldin Creek. When its exterior was lit up for Christmas — the massive tree outside bourned with what must have been a thousand white lights — the block-length lot at the corner of Bouldin Avenue and Elizabeth Street could catch one's eye from blocks away. Up its stone pathway toward the gated entrance, a series of etched posts welcomes visitors to the Warren Wildlife Gallery. But striking as the compound's exterior may be, it pales in comparison to what's inside.

Step into the gallery's lobby and it's immediate information overload. The brainchild of venture capitalist Rick Warren — former man of the year for the UT chapter of Kappa Sigma Tau and heir to his family's Caterpillar dealerships — is chock-full of hunting trophies, artwork, and sleek video screens. In the reception area, hulking buffalo busts imported from around the world glare down at you from the walls. Outside, an Instagram-worthy swimming pool, surrounded by more stone, languishes unoccupied. Around the side of the house sits a six-bedroom residential component. A sturdy beige stone wall wraps the length of the property, detailed with bronzed hawks and surrounded by a bed of rocks. A sprinkle of prickly metal cactus dots the property line.

Though Warren declined an interview request through his representatives, citing a hectic schedule, family friend and gallery marketing and education director Morgan Sharpe was kind enough to serve as our tour guide in early November. Sharpe doesn't fancy herself a conservationist like Warren, but said she's learned a great deal about the animal kingdom during her time spent around the South Austin property. She pointed to a small screen on the wall at the onset of our tour; there are 14 others like it scattered around the gallery. Clicking on images of the animals in the adjacent displays brings up a bevy of information about their habitat, behavior, origins, and size. There's even a button to prompt sampled sound bites of the animal's calls. Warren hired a company to program the high-tech placards, matching the game trophies with high-definition photos and the gallery's research.



The Warren Wildlife Gallery, from above (Image via Google Maps)

The chirping of wild birds haunts tourists through this indoor safari. Kicking off 8,500 miles southeast of Austin in sunny Namibia, the journey makes a stop at a menacing animatronic rhino, which senses motion and makes a convincing charge at its potential prey. A few paces farther appears a life-sized model of famed conservationist Teddy Roosevelt, astride a camel in full explorer getup. There are other personal touches clearly meant to impress visitors throughout the room. On one segment, heating coils are employed to mimic desert heat. In another, a display rigged to shoot streams of icy air at visitors sits beside a walrus.

Inside Warren's gallery, with an inestimable number of bird calls echoing off the walls, it's easy to forget the turmoil this building has brought to its staunchly residential South Austin neighborhood, and the mounting campaign against the big game hunter and plans he has for his indoor safari. Outside, that's quite legible. Neighborhood signs protesting "Warren & Ramel" (for Jesse Ramel, the gallery's caretaker) make it quite clear: Not everyone agrees with Warren's vision. The question is, what can they do about it?

Oppose Warren

For years, 1401 Bouldin was the site of a pentecostal church, but in 2010 Warren purchased the property and began renovating it to suit his interests. That involved detailed modeling and countless hours of labor. In the first couple of years, the work entailed objectives like bringing the interior up to city code standards, and the addition of an uncovered deck. In 2013, it became stripping down and reinventing the inside of the building. In January of 2015, the year Warren installed an in-ground pool and spa, Ramel wrote the Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Association a get-to-know-you letter. "As many of you have noticed there is now a large house 'mansion,'" reads the note. Though he announced a series of parties during which Warren planned to show off a small part of his collection, Ramel also asked, somewhat pointedly, that neighbors "be respectful of people's privacy."

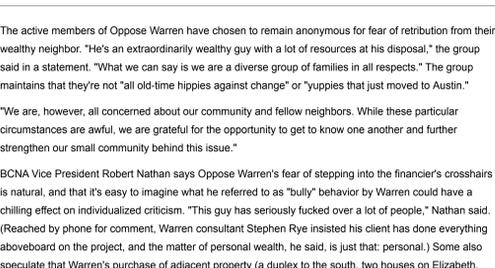
It wasn't until 2015 that neighbors began to more seriously question what Warren was doing with his new building. The city's Code Department responded to a trio of complaints that year regarding potential short-term rental activity, home occupation, and trash accumulation; each was eventually resolved by "voluntary compliance." After a quiet 2016, last year Code received eight new complaints on the property.

Safe to say Warren's development has created an unusual tension in a previously quiet neighborhood. Neighbors describe the congregation of the previous occupant as a small one. They held small events and occasional cookouts, and on Sundays the children would play outside on the lawn. Some remember the church appearing to be on the decline in the lead-up to the sale.

Warren would prove to be much more of a distraction. Homeowners around Bouldin and Elizabeth describe the last three years as a stream of dumpsters, cranes, construction crews, and taxidermy deliveries — a constant disturbance in their daily lives.

Then, last October, Warren filed for a conditional use permit that would allow him to open the conservation museum to youth tours. In a blog post published to the gallery's website, Warren explained that the space could gift the community with an "unmatched wildlife experience" via tours that promote sustainable hunting "as it relates to animal conservation." Sharpe referenced the one-of-a-kind quality during our tour, expressing doubt that there's another connection exactly like it.

A subset of the neighborhood responded by organizing into a shadowy group called Oppose Warren, which has yard signs dotting the neighborhood, highly concentrated on the lots adjacent to Warren's gallery. Parallel to the official Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Association, whose general assembly voted against the use permit last year, Oppose Warren calls the gallery Warren's "pleasure palace," and fears the effect the growing project will have on their quality of life, and the property values of their homes.



Opposition signs are in abundance throughout the neighborhood. (Photo by Jana Birchum)

The active members of Oppose Warren have chosen to remain anonymous for fear of retribution from their wealthy neighbor. "He's an extraordinarily wealthy guy with a lot of resources at his disposal," the group said in a statement. "What we can say is we are a diverse group of families in all respects." The group maintains that they're not "all old-time hippies against change" or "yuppies that just moved to Austin."

"We are, however, all concerned about our community and fellow neighbors. While these particular circumstances are awful, we are grateful for the opportunity to get to know one another and further strengthen our small community behind this issue."

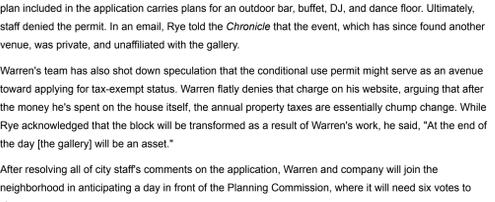
BCNA Vice President Robert Nathan says Oppose Warren's fear of stepping into the financier's crosshairs is natural, and that it's easy to imagine what he referred to as "bully" behavior by Warren could have a chilling effect on individualized criticism. "This guy has seriously fucked over a lot of people," Nathan said. (Reached by phone for comment, Warren consultant Stephen Rye insisted his client has done everything aboveboard on the project, and the matter of personal wealth, he said, is just that: personal.) Some also speculate that Warren's purchase of adjacent property (a duplex to the south, two houses on Elizabeth, and one on Jewell) has quieted some neighbors who, eyeing property values, may still be holding out for an offer. Warren is believed to seek a demolition of the duplex to make room for a parking lot, but said through representatives that the other properties he's bought will remain residential. Neighbors fear that means short-term rentals that would be used to support events held at the gallery.

Warren insists via his website that the ultimate goal for the Warren Wildlife Gallery is not to create a busy event space, but rather to "support the educational mission of school groups as well as extracurricular organizations," though recent actions have called that claim into question.

Whose Community Benefit?

After three years spent chafing at the ongoing construction, Warren's request for a conditional use permit represents the straw that broke the neighborhood camel's back. Whereas neighbors have little to no sway over what Warren does with a residential property, they will at least get time to make public comment before the city's Planning Commission, once his application makes its way to that body. Neighbors are already preparing for that possibility, saying they expect a crowd to materialize whenever that day comes.

Planning and Zoning staff said the department is currently waiting for an updated site plan before they can go forward. To hear Warren's side of things, the conditional use permit should be relatively open and shut. To quote the gallery website: "The transition to an educational institution for the benefit of the broader community ... is not unusual, and indeed customary, for such institutions to be organized as nonprofits." Site language argues that any other subject matter (i.e., not taxidermy) would be welcomed with open arms, so it would serve as a form of discrimination for the city to reject his request.



Homeowners around Bouldin and Elizabeth describe the last three years as a stream of dumpsters, cranes, construction crews, and taxidermy deliveries. This photo, taken last September, shows construction and support vehicles filling the entire block along Elizabeth Street. (Photo by Nick Barber)

But neighbors dispute that, including Mark Ellis, who says that the gallery only exists to house Warren's hunting trophies. "If it was a museum, that would be cool, but this is not the case," he said. Another neighbor, Judith Sims, who recently retired after a career spent in Austin's art scene, said she didn't get many answers when she asked staff about curators and tour organizers. But she emphasized that the overwhelming issue continues to be that the museum setup Warren envisions is incompatible with the neighborhood.

"If it was a museum, that would be cool, but this is not the case."  
— Bouldin Creek neighbor Mark Ellis

In the fall, Oppose Warren seized on a Dec. 2 application for a wedding at the location, an event the group says would conflict with Rye's previous assurances that the gallery would not be used as a "commercial event space." The group questions how that type of event qualifies as an educational experience. The site plan included in the application carries plans for an outdoor bar, buffet, DJ, and dance floor. Ultimately, staff denied the permit. In an email, Rye told the Chronicle that the event, which has since found another venue, was private, and unaffiliated with the gallery.

Warren's team has also shot down speculation that the conditional use permit might serve as an avenue toward applying for tax-exempt status. Warren flatly denies that charge on his website, arguing that after the money he's spent on the house itself, the annual property taxes are essentially chump change. While Rye acknowledged that the block will be transformed as a result of Warren's work, he said, "At the end of the day [the gallery] will be an asset."

After resolving all of city staff's comments on the application, Warren and company will join the neighborhood in anticipating a day in front of the Planning Commission, where it will need six votes to clear.

A version of this article appeared in print on January 12, 2018 with the headline: Night at the Muse-uhm

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homiegot 6 years ago  
Wait until low-cost housing comes to Bouldin.  
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Bubba\_Fett 6 years ago  
It won't.  
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Prophet Amos 6 years ago  
Better an apartment building than that party-palace posing as a museum!  
0 1 Reply Share

Just GF 6 years ago  
My goodness. What would the fair folks of Bouldin Creek do if a homeless shelter were to have opened in this former church? I love the photo of the eye sore property with the sign opposing Warren. Would someone please report the overgrown yard and dilapidated home shown? I don't see a single thing wrong with the property other than it took years to get through Austin's building codes to upgrade and make substantial improvements to the place. You don't like big game hunters wanting to share information on conservation or wanting to give tours to educate students? This native Austinite couldn't give 2 bird poop about that. Get over yourselves. I do hope the unsubstantiated, rude name calling by neighborhood association president is noted by everyone as the only 'bullying' taking place in this article.  
3 1 Reply Share

Stormy Daniels 6 years ago  
My friend's sons are big game hunters! Does Warren have any of that Rhino horn? :)  
2 1 Reply Share

Deeter 6 years ago  
Just yesterday I watched an episode of PBS' American Experience about how then former President Teddy Roosevelt lost 50 pounds & very nearly died in the Amazon rainforest in 1914. I dunno if this weird development will really harm the neighborhood, but I do know that no dealership frat heir / pseudo-safari-man will ever truly homage to manlier men. Anyone who'd like to see something like that would be better served by going 10 minutes down I-35 to Cabela's.  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/ame...>  
1 0 Reply Share

Jody 6 years ago  
This place has been under construction since 2010. Anyone seen Ozark?  
1 0 Reply Share

Richard 6 years ago  
Let that man enjoy his property as he See's fit  
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JB 6 years ago  
"Does Anybody Want the Warren Wildlife Gallery in Bouldin Creek?" Apparently, Rick Warren does. Stupid Headline...What is this, Yahoo?  
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