Amid the bodegas, the brilliantly hued frescoes and time-worn row houses of Pilsen, a former boathouse stands as the symbolic port of entry to Chicago's Mexican community - a reminder to its neighbors of who they are and where they come from.

But the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum aims to be meaningful to other cultures, too. And as it marks its fifth anniversary as one of the most nearly unique institutions of its kind outside Mexico, its aim is remarkably true.

The modern facility at 1852 W. 19th St. showcases Mexican culture, entertainment, art and history, with an open-door policy that invites children to roam the halls.

"It is a dream come true and a boost for our community," says Pilsen resident Carmen Velasquez. "The center represents who we are and who we are not - such as Mexicans with sombreros and mariachi."

The museum, which opened its doors March 27, 1987, draws 78,000 visitors annually, including school groups from other states and tourists from around the world.

Partly because of its success in reaching multicultural audiences, the museum has gained the respect of the city's mainstream cultural institutions.

"We live in a culturally diverse society, and I don't think people want to accept that," says Director Carlos Totolero, an energetic, speak-your-mind former schoolteacher and a museum co-founder.

"That is the beauty of this country. Cultures are a reflection of the human spirit. We want to see a society where all cultures are cherished. Mi casa, su casa" - my house, your house.

Museum President Helen Valdez, the other founder, serves as its calm and peaceful force. Also a former schoolteacher, she calls their creation a "living museum."

"Pilsen is the port of entry for Mexicans coming into the Midwest," Valdez says. "There are 500,000 Mexicans
in Chicago. They can come here and feel at home."

For the Pilsen community, the museum has become a sanctuary where a culture is preserved and celebrated.

"We must bring to the young people in this community other positive things that are happening and pull them away from the things that lure them astray," Velasquez says.

So much for the naysayers who said a museum never could survive in Pilsen, with its low-paid workers and high student dropout rates contrasting with bustling mom and pop stores, or bodegas.

"We disproved the idea that people have to go downtown to see good art," says Totolero. "Art doesn't just belong downtown. It, too, belongs in the community."

The museum is one of only two nationwide (the other, in San Francisco, is strictly a museum, however, and not a cultural center like Chicago's) and the only remaining Chicago museum on Park District land with free admission.

The two teachers founded the museum in 1982 on a $900 budget. In its first years, it was "in its nomadic phase," sponsoring exhibits at most of Chicago's large cultural institutions, Valdez says.

In January, 1986, they signed an agreement with the Chicago Park District to convert the Harrison Park Boat Craft Shop into a museum.

Today, the museum has 13 employees and a $1 million budget, with selections from the Field Museum of Natural History for specific exhibitions. Its Day of the Dead celebration in October has become nationally known. And the museum has 1,200 members, 55 percent of whom are Mexican.

Sandy Boyd, director of the Field Museum, calls it "a superb museum, with great leaders."

The museum is not without controversy. One current exhibit shows how Christopher Columbus "invaded," rather than "discovered," America. Also, the museum has become part of a national movement to replace the word Hispanic with the more specific terms Mexican and Latino.

Still, Totolero and Valdez's push for cultural equity and advocacy has drawn support from the MacArthur Foundation, Chicago Community Trust, Joyce, Sara Lee, AT&T, Kraft, Amoco, American Airlines and the city's Cultural Affairs Department.

Totolero "says what he thinks, and he is a voice that should be heard in Chicago," says city Cultural Affairs Commissioner Lois Weisberg.

"One of our goals," Totolero says, "is to break the image of what museums are. Museums should be places where things come alive. . . . They should give empowerment to the community, stand up for the betterment of mankind. The day we stop advocating for cultural groups and humanity is the day we should close our doors."

**GRAPHIC:** Helen Valdez and Carlos Totolero are founders of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum. "We disproved the idea that people have to go downtown to see good art," says Totolero. "Art doesn't just belong downtown." See PHOTO on page 1.

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