Albuquerque, New Mexico: The Best of the Mother Road
The largest city in New Mexico, Albuquerque is nestled at the base of the Sandia Mountains and is surrounded by desert plateaus, Native American Reservations, and a generally arid landscape that is broken only by the Rio Grande River, which runs through the center of town. The city is about 900 miles east of the terminus of Route 66 in Los Angeles, and is in many ways the heart of the corridor’s southwestern region. The city is a mecca for Route 66 travelers because of its large stock of historic motels and its well-preserved neon signs. But Route 66 is only one of many historic and cultural resources in Albuquerque. Because of its historic connection to early Americans and, later, to Spanish settlers, the City of Albuquerque has a preservation-minded city government and a host of local organizations and advocates who celebrate the city’s cultural history.

Route 66 advocacy in New Mexico began in the mid-1990s, around the same time that other states began to form state-based Route 66 associations. In 1993, historian David Kammer completed the state’s National Register Multiple Property Listing for Route 66. He remembers that New Mexico’s statewide Multiple Property Listing was spurred on by National Register nominations taking place in Arizona; “I think that New Mexico had looked over at Arizona where there are some [Route 66] alignments that ran up through the Coconino National Forest near Flagstaff; they had done one or two nominations up near there, but New Mexico was the first state to try to take a comprehensive look at these resources.”

In 1995, the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center received a grant to prepare a Corridor Management Plan (CMP) for Route 66; the plan for the entire state was completed in 2000, as part of the state’s National Scenic Byway nomination for Route 66. According to the 2000 CMP, the state’s goal for its Route 66 corridor was, “to utilize Route 66 as a catalyst for economic development, while carefully protecting, preserving, and interpreting existing sites and landmarks and developing design guidelines that assure that future development will enhance and protect the intrinsic qualities of Route 66.” Although the New Mexico State Route 66 Association was involved in the preparation of the CMP, the Pueblo Cultural Center spearheaded the effort. The Center had been involved with the scenic byways program since the early 1990’s, recognizing the program’s potential for generating and supporting tourism around the state’s Native American reservations. The Route 66 CMP, however, required that the Pueblo Cultural Center partner with the state’s Route 66 Association, as well as the state’s Department of Economic Development and Department of Cultural Affairs. The Pueblo Cultural Center’s first attempt at creating a CMP, in 1996, spurred the revitalization of the New Mexico Route 66 Association, a loose group of 66-aficionados that first assembled in 1989. The New Mexico Route 66

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1 A Multiple Property Listing is a submission to the National Register of Historic Places that nominates a group of properties with a shared historic context. The National Park Service website describes the MPL as, “a cover document and not a nomination in its own right [that] serves as a basis for evaluating the National Register eligibility of related properties.” See http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb16b/nrb16b_interaction.htm.
2 David Kammer Interview, his home, January 26, 2006.
3 The Indian Pueblo Cultural Center focuses on culture, interpretation, and economic development for the Indians of New Mexico and is owned and operated by New Mexico’s 19 Indian Pueblo tribes. For more about the National Scenic Byways Program, see the “Conclusions” chapter of the thesis.
4 2000 New Mexico Route 66 Corridor Management Plan, p 3.
5 2000 New Mexico Route 66 Corridor Management Plan, p1-5.
Association went on to become one of the most active Route 66 State Associations in the country, issuing regular newsletters since 1996 and spearheading some of the most innovative restoration and outreach programs in all eight Route 66 states.6

State and local interest in reviving Route 66 coincided with an active period of downtown redevelopment in the City of Albuquerque. Ed Boles, the city’s Historic Preservation Planner, spoke to me about the city’s “Vision 2010” downtown plan, created in 2000, which engaged private developers with the City of Albuquerque’s Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency in the revitalization of the downtown core. “[Downtown] reinvestment was definitely stimulated by the creation of the new plan, the creation of a Business Improvement District, and the benefits to every property owner that that brought. And also by the city’s turning over a significant bit of land downtown to the Historic District Improvement Company.”7 These activities had a direct bearing on Route 66 development, since the heart of downtown Albuquerque is also the site of the “Route 66 Crossroads”, where the road’s 1937 north-south alignment along 4th Street intersects with the more prominent 1941 east-west alignment along Central Avenue (see picture). This is the only recognized “crossroads” on the entire Route 66 corridor, since the road was typically realigned parallel to itself, not perpendicular. The city formally recognized the crossroads in 1999 with administrative initiative R-212, which designated both roads “Historic Route 66” and positioned the city to apply for National Scenic Byway funds.

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6 The New Mexico Route 66 Association’s original founder, Judi Snow, was recognized by the Association in 2000 for founding the group in 1989; however much of the association’s most notable work, such as the $50,000 statewide rehabilitation of neon signage, has taken place in the last five years thanks to the work of Johnnie Meier and other committed volunteers.

7 Ed Boles Interview, Albuquerque City Hall, January 24, 2006.
for management of both corridors. The designation was partly the result of lobbying efforts by the New Mexico Route 66 Association, which successfully lobbied the state legislature that year for the “Historic Route 66” designation of all of the alignments of New Mexico’s former U.S. Highway 66 roads.

In 2000, the same year that the city published “Vision 2010”, a private owner and the city of Albuquerque partnered on one of the city’s most successful redevelopment/preservation projects, the rehabilitation of the Jones Motor Company on Central Avenue. The Jones Motor Company is a Streamlined Modern corner building that was built in 1939 as a gas station to serve Route 66 motorists. The original owner of the gas station and accompanying car dealership, Ralph Jones, was president of Albuquerque’s Route 66 Association and a prominent local businessman. The station closed in 1957, and between its closure and redevelopment in 2000, it served a variety of commercial purposes, including its stints as a Goodwill store and a furniture outlet. According to Ed Boles, the Bernalillo County Office had had its eye on the property as the possible site for a community center (with a Route 66 interpretive center attached). The county had even appropriated funds to purchase the building; however, a private owner swept in and bought the building before the county could marshal its funds to complete the sale. Fortunately for the city, the owner planned to convert the historic gas station into a bar and restaurant while preserving the building’s historic character and architecture. Regardless, a short struggle ensued for the recently purchased building in which the county threatened to condemn the property in order to repossess it from the new owners to guarantee its preservation. Eventually, the owners, the county, and the city of Albuquerque reached a compromise; the owners would rehabilitate the building and sell the façade to the city as a preservation easement. The owners would also grant design review privileges to the City of Albuquerque over any changes necessary for the adaptive reuse, and the City would designate the building a City of Albuquerque Landmark. Today, the Jones Motor Company is the only City Landmark to have received this designation because of its Route 66-related history.

The Jones Motor Company was Albuquerque’s first foray into public-private participation in the preservation of a Route 66 property. In this case, both the city and the owners appreciated the building’s historic character, and they were able to reach a satisfying agreement that stabilized the property and contributed to the commercial vitality of the Nob Hill neighborhood. “The owners were savvy enough to realize that they had a historic building, and that they could rehab it and get a sizable tax credit in the process,” remembers Ed Boles. “And so they did that. They did everything by the rules, got their tax credit, and they’ve operated the business ever since. We’ve done a little bit of design review as they’ve done small changes to it, but they’re as interested in protecting the character of the building as we are.” Today, the building houses Kelly’s Brewery, a restaurant and microbrewery that anchors this commercial stretch of Central Avenue and draws regular crowds from the nearby university and residential neighborhoods. The restaurant preserved the original garage doors from the Jones Motor Company and added patio seating in the former gas station bays. The owners even added an historic
Texaco gas pump to the front of the building in homage to the building’s past as a Route 66 filling station.12

Among Route 66 properties, the Jones Motor Company was an obvious candidate for a public/private preservation partnership. The building’s architecture was distinctive and the structure was relatively intact; the building also occupied a valuable corner property in a gentrifying neighborhood with a strong pedestrian orientation and proximity to the large student population at the University of New Mexico. Also, locals recognized the building as a significant piece of local history, since it had once belonged to a prominent local businessman and was designed by an architect, Tom Danahy, who had made a career out of designing high-society mansions in 1940s and 1950s Albuquerque.13 These factors combined to position the Jones Motor Company for preservation by both private and public developers. The building’s history, architecture, and association with significant local personages made it attractive for preservation to the city and county; this, plus the building’s high-traffic location and good condition, also appealed to the private developers who eventually created Kelly’s Brewery. Not all Route 66 properties can claim such marketable features, and the success of the Jones Motor Company redevelopment may not be replicable for the city’s smaller, more deteriorated, and more anonymous Route 66 motels. However, this project illustrates how competition between public and private initiatives over a historic structure can result in a rehabilitation that benefits both parties.


Nob Hill’s Renaissance: the Context for Route 66 Redevelopment in Albuquerque

Albuquerque has long recognized the significance of Route 66 as a part of its built heritage, even before the city and state began listing historic properties with the National Register. The Nob Hill neighborhood, which has seen the bulk of Route 66-related preservation efforts, addressed the need to recognize Route 66 as early as 1987 in its “Nob Hill Sector Development Plan.” This plan was initiated at the request of the Nob Hill Neighborhood Association, and was completed by the Redevelopment Division of the Albuquerque Planning Department. In the plan, the city stated that the neighborhood contains “excellent examples of the roadside architecture built in response to the designation of Central Avenue as Route 66,” and that although the neighborhood was still relatively young, by Albuquerque standards, “the area has already attracted notice as a historically/architecturally significant section of the city.”

By 1985, two years before the sector plan, the neighborhood was already a part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s “Main Street” program, which selected architecturally intact historic business districts around the country for focused redevelopment efforts. At the time of the sector plan, only two properties in the neighborhood were listed on the National Register, and neither property was affiliated with Route 66. This is not surprising, since in 1987 the bulk of Route 66 properties in Albuquerque were not yet 50 years old, the minimum age for National Register designation. But the tide was clearly turning toward the preservation and listing of mid-20th century properties in Nob Hill, as illustrated by the sector plan’s “Historic Structures and Areas” map, which showed twenty-one properties along Route 66 with potential state or national register eligibility in 1987 (see picture).

Today, Nob Hill is the area of Albuquerque that engages most aggressively with Route 66. Although Route 66 (a.k.a. Central Avenue) runs all the way through Nob Hill into downtown, over the river to the “West Side” near Al Unser’s homestead and family garage, and then up and out of the city via “8 Mile Hill”, it is in Nob Hill where the icons of Route 66 are most prominent. A travel writer from The New York Times visited Albuquerque in 2003 and called Central Avenue in Nob Hill, “one of the best-preserved segments of Route 66 I’d ever seen, with a charming string of renovated tourists courts and motels, kitschy neon signs, 1950s diners and trading posts.”

Michael Taylor, the administrator of the National Park Service’s Route 66 Corridor Program and one of the few 66 aficiónados whose job demands an understanding of Route 66’s national significance, believes that, “Tulsa and Oklahoma City and St. Louis have some good properties,

14 Nob Hill Sector Development Plan, City of Albuquerque Planning Department, Redevelopment Division, December 1987.
15 Nob Hill Sector Development Plan, p50. Although the city’s 2005 Central/Highland/Upper Nob Hill plan also addresses the management of historic structures, it does not number and map them as the 1987 plan does. Although the 1993 Multiple Property Listing inventories the state’s historic Route 66 properties, it also does not include a map of these properties in Albuquerque.
16 According to the 1987 sector plan, the Nob Hill Neighborhood is bounded by Washington Avenue to the east, and Girard Avenue to the west, encompassing a 16-block square area.
A map of the Nob Hill neighborhood from the City of Albuquerque’s “Nob Hill Sector Development Plan, 1987”, that shows the location of properties listed on the National Register at the time, as well as potentially eligible properties. Central Avenue is shown in red. Source: City of Albuquerque website.
but Albuquerque’s Central Avenue is the crème de la crème [of Route 66].” Nob Hill is also home to some of Albuquerque’s finest restaurants and a number of small boutiques, coffee shops, and galleries.

Certainly, the presence of the University of New Mexico helps give Nob Hill it’s sense of urbanity, along with the area’s large stock of pre-war homes and subdivisions that were built on a pedestrian-friendly scale. Nob Hill resident and UNM professor David Kammer thinks Route 66 is just one of many cultural features that characterize Nob Hill; “[I] always bicycle to work, we have a public swimming pool a mile away, we’ve got places to shop around here, great restaurants. This area, when you’re in it, is a very workable, great place to live.” Planner Ed Boles, a longtime Albuquerque resident, sees Nob Hill as one of several distinct, historic neighborhoods within the city, but one that has taken control over its image and has, to some extent, resisted changes that threaten this image. “For years now, since 1985, Nob Hill’s Community District has been marketing itself as ‘Historic Nob Hill’, and so a number of people who live there also relate to it in those terms and want to see its historic character, and by that I mean its existing character, not violated by overly large new buildings. Or by any other thing, for that matter. And in Albuquerque terms, it’s probably the third best pedestrian environment [in the city], after Downtown and Old Town.”

19 David Kammer interview.
20 Ed Boles interview.
Since the 1980’s, Nob Hill has benefited from the redevelopment efforts of a string of neighborhood-based organizations, including the Nob Hill Neighborhood Association, Nob Hill Main Street, Inc., the Nob Hill Business Association, and most recently, the Nob Hill-Highland Renaissance Corporation. Each of these groups has engaged with the city’s Route 66 history, but often in the context of neighborhood beautification and economic development, as well as preservation. For example, in 1999 the Nob Hill-Highland Renaissance Corporation erected two steel-framed, neon-decorated “gateways” over Central Avenue/Route 66, on the eastern and western edges of the neighborhood. The arches demarcate the boundaries of the neighborhood and pay homage to the strip’s Route 66 past through the use of neon lighting. Unlike the proposed archways in Rancho Cucamonga, which I discuss in a later chapter, Nob Hill’s arches are much more abstract and lack the icons and signage most often associated with Route 66. In fact, the city of Albuquerque characterized these arches as “public art” projects and provided funding for their construction from the city’s public art budget. In their design and siting, the arches have much more to do with the Nob Hill neighborhood’s overall identity as a self-defined and distinct neighborhood, than with the area’s Route 66 heritage. Regardless, the New Mexico Route 66 Association recognized them as a component in Route 66’s revitalization and awarded the Nob Hill-Highland Renaissance Corporation a “Historic Route 66 Award” for the construction of the gateways.21

As in Rancho Cucamonga, the “gateway” concept has captured the public imagination in Albuquerque more than other Route 66-themed projects. In fact, Albuquerque’s “West Side” was so enamored of Nob Hill’s gateways that the neighborhood lobbied the city to build another set of gateways in 2004 over Central Avenue/Route 66, but on the west side of town. “In fairly recent years, say the last five to ten years, the folks on West Central have been saying, ‘What about us? We’re Route 66 too. We have some of that character – it may not be the same as Nob Hill, but when are you going to spend some

money out here?" remarked Ed Boles. “So the city went and built a different version of gateways on West Central…also neon lighted, spanning structures, but of a very different character.” The west-side arch, which is more reminiscent of Rancho Cucamonga’s proposed “iconic” archways than the abstract, geometric arches in Nob Hill, cost the city $300,000, which was provided by federal Community Development Block Grant as a streetscaping amenity.

The city of Albuquerque has also contributed to the character of Nob Hill and Central Avenue with the creation of the city’s most successful rapid transit program, the ABQ Ride. While the city did not implement this transit system with Route 66’s history in mind, the system has been a great success for the city of Albuquerque and has contributed to the cohesiveness of the Central Avenue corridor. The city established this rapid bus transit route along the Central Avenue corridor in 2001, and today the “Central Avenue/Route 66” corridor is the city’s most popular mass transit route, with over 175,000 passenger boardings per month in 2006. The next most popular route, the Rapid Ride route, has only about 100,000 boardings per month, which illustrates the relative popularity and utility of the Central Avenue line. The Central Avenue/Route 66 line runs through Nob Hill, past UNM, and into downtown Albuquerque, with nine stops along the way. To complement this system, the city has proposed the construction of a modern streetcar or light-rail system that will run along Central Avenue/Route 66, through the Nob Hill neighborhood. However, despite the success of rapid bus transit in the neighborhood, the community may not be prepared to develop at the higher densities necessary to support a more aggressive public transit system.

When I visited Albuquerque in January 2006, I attended a Nob Hill community meeting, and I was struck by how divided the community was over the issues of high-density development, parking, and mass transit. In recent years, this debate has overshadowed any debate about historic preservation and Route 66, although concern for the neighborhood’s historic character underlies the opposition to transit and densification. The community would like to see a streetcar system, but not if it calls for four-story developments along the Central Avenue corridor, which is currently comprised of single-story commercial properties with on-street parking. People think of these higher buildings as out of scale with the neighborhood’s existing character, although all agree that this “character” is rooted in Nob Hill’s pedestrian orientation as well as its history. Ed Boles recognized this planning challenge and clarified it for me by putting it in the context of the neighborhood’s twenty-year revitalization history; “[Nob Hill] wants to see the sort of improvements that a more densely developed place would automatically draw, the public investment that that many more residents might demand and be able to get. But they want the status quo in some areas and the advantages or improvements that the status quo actually works against. You know, Nob Hill is, in local terms, a revitalization success story, because back in the 80s it was shelled out badly. But it really hasn’t come up to what it might have been or might yet be in terms of low vacancy rates, really solid businesses in every store. I shouldn’t criticize it because it has a lot of great businesses, but there are some places where it’s still kind of marginal, in terms of retention of retail

22 Ed Boles interview.
businesses and the quality of the pedestrian environment."\textsuperscript{25} Clearly, Nob Hill is a work in progress as an historic, mixed-use community, struggling with issues of transit and densification that will persist as Albuquerque grows. The city’s relatively fixed growth boundaries – Native American reservations to the north and south, and the mountains to the east – will likely result in denser infill development over time. Nob Hill is only one of many older neighborhoods in Albuquerque that will have to navigate the infill process and make long-range decisions about the relative importance of cars and mass transit in the city at large.

The debate over transit in Nob Hill was particularly interesting in the context of Route 66, an international symbol of America’s love affair with the automobile. Of the four case study cities I visited, Albuquerque/Nob Hill was the only city in which the community expressed ambivalence over the role of cars as a means of transportation on its Route 66 thoroughfare. Although Flagstaff’s planners recognized that Route 66 redevelopment should focus, in part, on automobile culture, they did not exhibit the conflicted emotions of the Albuquerque advocates and planners that I spoke with. “In [Nob Hill], it’s a place where people who have lived in urban areas, or have wanted to live in a more urban area, tend to gather,” said Ed Boles. “All the shops are side by side, and you can walk and shop and bar hop and do all those types of urban things, in a way that most of Albuquerque isn’t conducive to. So it figures that folks who choose to live and hang out there are going to have that sort of orientation about the car.”\textsuperscript{26} In Nob Hill, residents I spoke with wanted cars to be subordinated to public transit, even though much of Central Avenue’s historic character is defined by its motor courts (motels), historic gas stations, and neon signage – all remnants of Route 66. The commercial architecture associated with car-oriented development is not the only impediment to creating a pedestrian-oriented commercial strip; the road has four lanes with very few stoplights between downtown and the east end of Central. As such, it is too wide and fast for safe pedestrian crossings, and much of the debate at the transit meeting I attended centered on how unsafe the crosswalks along Central were, and how the city needed to redesign pedestrian intersections to increase the street’s foot traffic. If Nob Hill continues to urbanize and successfully establishes a streetcar system, it may become the only stretch of historic Route 66, outside of the termini in downtown Chicago and downtown Los Angeles, where the artifacts of car culture are memorialized and celebrated along a corridor that no longer prioritizes the automobile.

\textit{The Motels – from Courtyards to Hot Sheets}\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{25} Ed Boles interview.
\textsuperscript{26} Ed Boles interview.
\textsuperscript{27} “Hot Sheet” is an expression I learned from interviewee Quinta Scott, who used it to describe the hourly-rate Route 66 motels she first photographed in the early 1980s.
Albuquerque’s most widely recognized sites of illegal activity, from prostitution to methamphetamine production. More than any other case city, Albuquerque has struggled with the conflicting desires to protect these historic motels and to condemn and destroy the most egregious offenders. This is, in part, because of the large number of motels that the city supported during Route 66’s heyday, all of which were virtually abandoned after the construction of Interstate 40. “When you look at city directories from the 1950’s, you had 100-plus tourist courts. And now you’ve got maybe 30 or 35,” remembered Nob Hill resident David Kammer. Ed Boles has worked as a preservationist for the City of Albuquerque for twenty years, and has seen many motels fall by the wayside during that time; “There was this big collection of motels. And obviously, when the interstate highway went through town, it took so much of the through traffic and resulted in the construction of motels associated with it. And a certain number of these motels were going to be marginalized commercially, so a sorting out is taking place. It has happened a lot over the last ten years, and it’s still taking place.”

As in Tulsa and Flagstaff, historic motels have proven to be a good site for methamphetamine labs and other illicit activity. By 2002, crime in the motels had become such a scourge to the city that in March, mayor Martin Chávez created the Albuquerque Community Enforcement and Abatement Task Force, commonly known as the Mayor’s Safe City Strike Force. The Strike Force’s stated goal in 2005 was “to address neighborhood quality of life and public safety though nuisance abatement actions, graffiti vandalism collections and DWI vehicle forfeiture”, although much of its work has focused on nuisance properties on or near the Central Avenue corridor. Since its inception, the Strike Force has shut down and boarded up or bulldozed at least four motels, beginning with the Gaslite Motel in 2002. As of December 2004, about 40 other motels had been inspected for housing code violations, forcing owners to make repairs or face a city-ordered shut down. In 2005, the Strike Force reported having taken “nuisance abatement action” against 9 motels, hotels, or businesses along Central Avenue and initiating 27 condemnations.

While some of Albuquerque’s motels were never particularly distinguished architecturally or historically, at least two demolished Albuquerque motels were listed on the National Register of Historic Places at the time of demolition. Ed Boles has been the city’s preservation planner for ten years, the period in which motels have been boarded up or destroyed; “We’ve actually lost two motels that were registered, one to just mismanagement and eventual degradation to the point where the buyer was forced by the city to tear it down after the previous owner had let it go so badly. And then the other one being an instance where a little 14-unit motel was so small that it really wasn’t viable anymore.

28 David Kammer interview.
29 Ed Boles interview.
31 Motels shut down by the Safe City Strike Force include the Gaslite Motel, The Royal Inn, The Zia Motor Lodge, and most recently, the Route 66 Inn in December of 2004.
33 Safe City Strike Force Legal documentation, 2006.
34 Being listed on the National Register of Historic Places does not protect a building from demolition by a private owner; it only prevents local governments from condemning a property. It can also delay demolition by requiring a “Section 106” review, or an impact assessment on any interventions proposed for the building.
Above, the site of the former Zia Motor Lodge, and below, the Zia in better days. Sources: Author and Route 66: Images of America’s Main Street.
The people had paid it off and they could have continued to rent it and make money, I suppose, but they wanted to put a bigger motel on their site and we approved the demolition of it. Frankly, I made a value judgment that the building wasn’t quite as strong as its registration would suggest. So we’ve got a sort of flexible standard here, where we have to look at preservation, as all cities do, in the context of redevelopment and opportunity, and where it makes sense to stand by a property and really defend it as necessary.35

To determine which motels it should stand behind and attempt to preserve and which motels it should abandon to the tide of real estate development, the City of Albuquerque relies on two inventories completed by the state of New Mexico in the 1990s. One of these inventories is a Multiple Property Listing for “Automobile Oriented Commercial Development”, which describes three types of archetypal motel architecture present in Albuquerque – the “Southwest Vernacular” style, the Spanish Pueblo Revival, and the Streamlined Moderne.36 This inventory, combined with an earlier MPL covering Route 66-related architecture, resulted in the National Register nomination of many of the city’s most historically and architecturally prominent motels.37 However, Ed Boles is quick to point out that the National Register not only fails to protect a building from private development, but that the nomination process has overlooked some of the city’s more interesting historic properties.

The most unique and important of these is the DeAnza motel, whose owner, Amir Nagji, purchased the motel in 1992. While preparing to whitewash over a mural in the hotel’s basement, Nagji put down his paintbrush after his daughter recommended finding out more about the murals before covering them up. After a few inquiries into the building’s history, Nagji discovered that the murals were painted by Zuni artist Tony Edaakie in 1951, and that they are the only Zuni murals of their kind outside of Zuni reservation land. Nagji also learned that the motel was originally built by a well-known trader with the Zuni people named Charles G. Wallace, who was later a joint-founder of the hotel network that became the Best Western chain.38 In the last several years, the Nob Hill-Highland Renaissance Corporation and the New Mexico Route 66 Association have rallied around the DeAnza as an important Route 66 and local landmark, but because it was not on the original historic property surveys from the early 1990s, the motel initially remained under the radar of state and local preservationists; “We realized over time, and I think the federal and state government have realized too, that the early 90s work got at most of the most important properties, but not all of them,” remarked Ed Boles. “There were some gaps, and the De Anza Motor Lodge is a perfect example, where a highly significant building with a really unusual resource, this Zuni mural, wasn’t identified in the first tier of significant motels in the state.”39 Since 2003, the city has

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35 Ed Boles interview.
37 The first MPL, “Historic and Architectural Resources of Route 66 Through New Mexico”, was written by David Kammer and was submitted in 1993.
39 Ed Boles interview.
been negotiating the purchase of the DeAnza motel for $800,000 with the possible reuse as a boutique motel.40

Although the DeAnza is exceptional among Albuquerque motels for its Zuni mural and its association with historic persons, its story illustrates how arbitrary the preservation and rehabilitation process can be around the built artifacts of Route 66. Rescued and rehabbed properties are often “discovered” and championed by individuals before city and state officials will leverage their financial and legislative powers toward the property’s rehabilitation. And often, the champions of motel properties are not their owners, but others with a passion for Route 66, for commercial architecture, or for local history. This dynamic is complicated by issues of race and ethnicity, particularly in the ownership and management of older motels in urban areas where motels have long been locations of vice. For example, the DeAnza’s owner, Amir Nagji, first discovered his motel’s Zuni murals in 1992, yet the property remained off the radar as an important Route 66 resource until the last few years, when the city was entreated by Nob Hill preservationists to purchase the property and save it from redevelopment. How much of this delay was due to a communication gap between the east-Indian owner and the

40 The city hired an external consultant who examined the site’s zoning, architecture, and existing dimensions, as well as the tourism market in Albuquerque and concluded that the site’s best use would be as a “boutique historic motel” catering to 66-roadies and other heritage tourists. As in many motels, rooms at the DeAnza are too small to become apartments, another use considered for the site. See Diane Velasco, “Study Suggests a Boutique Hotel”, The Albuquerque Journal, January 27, 2003, p 2.

66 Spotlight - Pauline Bauer and the La Puerta Motel

Pauline Bauer has been in the motel business since 1941, the year her family moved to Albuquerque from Canadia, Texas. Pauline attended the University of New Mexico, the state’s most prestigious public school and one of the few universities located directly on the original Route 66 corridor. She could walk from the University to her family’s motel on Route 66, and for several years she worked in the motel and in her parents’ real estate development office. After the death of her first husband, a WWII veteran, Pauline remarried and decided that it was time for her to enter the motel business for herself. “I had just been married to him a little while, he was off with my folks up in Utah; they were on a trip off prospecting for uranium. And when he got back, I said, ‘Well I traded the house off’, and he said ‘What’d you get?’, and I said ‘A hotel.’ And I had the whole block here, the 9700 block.” The motel that she and her husband rehabilitated became the La Puerta Motor Lodge, one of Albuquerque’s most well-kept Route 66 motel properties – a fact due largely to Pauline’s continuous residence on the property since she bartered for it in 1956.

Unlike some other long-time motel owners in Albuquerque, Pauline owns, runs, and lives on the premises of her motel. She also owns the property next door to the motel, which she rents out to a used car lot owner. According to Pauline, her income from the rental of this adjacent property, in addition to other financial resources, has made it possible for her to stay in the motel business in recent years while other Albuquerque
motels have floundered. “I don’t do active marketing – mostly because I don’t need to...I turn away even more people than I take. And I can afford to do that – if I couldn’t, I wouldn’t be here. I would have gone a long time ago if my living depended on picking up people on the street.” Pauline earns more from the lease of the neighboring lot, she claims, than she makes from the La Puerta, even when it’s fully booked. This allows her to have a comfortable living and to pick and choose her tenants.

Although she rarely interacts with other motel owners, Pauline did discuss the vagaries of the Albuquerque motel business with another motel owner a few years ago, when both traveled to Santa Fe to see their motel signs added to the National Register. “And one of the men that rode with us asked, how can you run your place, aren’t you afraid, and I said, well I don’t take people that I’m afraid of. I wouldn’t take that type of person. I would just tell them that I didn’t have anything for them. And he said he just hired a manager and moved to Moriarty [a nearby town], because he was afraid to run his place. So, if you are trying to just let anybody in, pretty soon your place will go downhill.” Pauline has also taken advantage of carpentry and maintenance services provided by a former tenant. Although neither Pauline nor Jack Patel (see “66 Spotlight - Jack Patel” in Chapter 4) would admit to accepting labor in exchange for rent, both remarked that tenants with carpentry skills had been very helpful in the maintenance and restoration of their properties.

Pauline also offered a more practical explanation for her motel’s success. In addition to her financial security, which has helped her to stay in business and cater to a less marginal, more stable population, Pauline also believes that her motel’s pre-war construction has contributed to its longevity and has eased her maintenance burden. “It’s going to take a lot of money to bring [other motels] back – they might not have been too well built in the first place. Things that were built during the war, you couldn’t get good materials. A lot of those didn’t hold up too well that were built during that period. Ours is made from old cinderblock, [so heavy] that you couldn’t hardly lift a block.”

When I asked Pauline what she thought about Route 66 as a current and future tourism destination, she didn’t have a firm opinion. If anything, she seemed to see her motel as more of a local business with little potential for tourist traffic. Many of her current customers are people from rural New Mexico who come to Albuquerque for medical reasons, or for leisure. Her motel’s proximity to the Albuquerque fairgrounds, home of the New Mexico State Fair, brings her some regular clients who attend the fair as presenters or simply to see the spectacle. Some tenants are recent professional transplants to Albuquerque who stay at the La Puerta while they seek more permanent housing. If the La Puerta receives tourists, according to Pauline, very few of them are from outside the United States. Unlike Jack Patel’s Desert Hills Motel in Tulsa, the La Puerta does not draw the sentimental Route 66 tourist, despite the iconic sign and the motel’s pristine condition.

Pauline does not make any effort to market the La Puerta to either tourists or locals. She seems to keep the motel in good condition out of a combination of practicality, since it is her primary residence, and personal pride. But I was curious about the designation of her sign as a part of the National Register – was she aware of the grants she was eligible for to repair and maintain her sign? What about the motel itself; did she have any plans to have it listed as a local, state, or national historic site?
Pauline said no. She understands that the land on which the motel sits, not the business itself, is what’s economically valuable, and this is what she plans to leave her children when she dies. Although she is eligible for sign grants, she has no interest in acquiring one; “I never wanted to borrow anything – I don’t have to. So I couldn’t see any sense in borrowing money to repair [the sign] – if I want to fix it, I’ll fix it myself.”

In recent years, as Albuquerque has grown steadily and the city has absorbed ever higher percentages of the county population, Pauline has rejected several offers to purchase the motel, one by a man who owns most of the properties surrounding her two lots. She anticipates that the land will become increasingly valuable as the city grows, and she wants her children to inherit this land and do with it as they please, including selling or demolishing the motel. The motel’s beautifully hand-carved wooden door frames and ceiling beams have already been spoken for by a local man who collects Southwestern art, and according to Pauline, there is not much else of historic value on the property itself. But for now, she enjoys living on the property and spends most of her time tending orchids in her greenhouse behind the motel, and in the rock garden she created there with her second husband, who died several years ago.

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primarily white local preservation advocates, and how much was simply the sluggishness of the public sector in responding to these advocates’ demands?

To its credit, however, Albuquerque has engaged its motel owners in an education process comparable to that which Albuquerque landlords must complete before renting out properties to lease-holding tenants. As part of its mission to rehabilitate Central Avenue, in 2004 the city created a mandatory “Crime-Free Rental Housing Training” program for city motel owners. The initiative requires that motel owners attend a training course focusing on screening tenants, conducting background checks, and recognizing the signs of criminal activity, particularly methamphetamine labs.41 This initiative is unique among Route 66 cities, although it remains to be seen how effective the program is in deterring motel owners and managers from renting to less desirable tenants who are willing and able to pay. After all, it is hard to believe that any motel owner would choose to rent to a suspicious tenant; but when these are the only clients available (and they are offering to pay ten times more than the stated rates), it is hard to blame motel owners for accepting these tenants in exchange for willful ignorance of their activities.

If anything, Albuquerque politicians are the most likely of all to benefit from the “Crime-free” training program, since it shifts the blame for motel crime onto owners, who can now no longer plead ignorance about the criminal backgrounds and tendencies of their tenants. However, since so many of these owners are new Americans, the city can pitch its “Crime-free” training as an educational initiative aimed at naïve foreigners who cannot recognize a possible criminal; in many ways, this initiative characterizes the gap in understanding between the immigrant motel-owning population and the political forces at work in Route 66 cities. As I learned through both formal and informal interviews, Route 66 motel owners, Indian or otherwise, are certainly not oblivious to crime occurring on their property; most owners are only trying to stay in business in a competitive and oversaturated market.

Significantly, in Albuquerque, Indian motel owners have emerged as some of the city’s most influential and publicly minded businessmen. Several Albuquerquians I spoke with regaled me with stories about Indian motel owners who had distinguished themselves as thoughtful, active public citizens in the Albuquerque community. Both Ed Boles and David Kammer praised Mohamed Natha and his wife Shokatbanu as civic-minded motel owners who had marketed their motels as Route 66 heritage sites while serving the needs of the local community. Natha’s motel, the Aztec, was home to several long-term tenants, including a retired professor of social work who then moved in with the Nathas when they sold their motel several years ago. Some of these tenants have left a permanent mark on the Aztec through folk-art decorations, gardens, and murals that add even more spice to the already distinctive property (see picture). Today, although the Nathas have retired from the Aztec Motel, they stay engaged with the Albuquerque community by collecting clothing and household goods in the city to bring to the Navajo reservation for people in need.

The front and side view of Albuquerque’s Aztec Motel. Source: Author.
Ed Boles, a close friend of the Nathas, also praised the work of longtime motel owner Shiraz “Sam” Kassam who ran the El Vado motel for fifteen years before his death several years ago.42 “During the whole [fifteen years], Kassam promoted [the El Vado] to the extent that he knew how, as the best Route 66 motel remaining anywhere,” remarked Ed Boles. “And he worked that pretty hard – he wasn’t a real savvy, modern-day manager of a lodge; he should have had an online presence and done some things to really reach out broadly. But he did what he knew how to do… and he was another example of somebody who appreciated [Route 66] at some level. I think that’s true of a number of other [motel owners], even though the circumstances that surround most of these motels now make it really hard for some of these folks to stay in business.”43

Beyond appreciating the history and relevance of these motels in American culture, the owners of safe, well-maintained motels also provide the city’s neediest individuals with safe and decent housing that they cannot find in the rest of the city; “One of the issues here in Nob Hill is this notion of Route 66 as the Whitmanian open road, and the small democratic highway,” began David Kammer, “and I thought Mohamed’s place [the Aztec] was always a reminder of that diversity. I used to think about the people living there, battered women and others, in terms of that Hemingway short story called ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place’, that everyone should have a place where they have some dignity. And I always thought that the Aztec gave that to the people who lived there.”44

While some owners, like Pauline Bauer (see spotlight), have been able to rely on external financial resources for the maintenance and management of their motel properties, others have survived as best they can as small business owners in a declining market. In some ways, these motel owners are the real heroes of Route 66; they have kept these small, locally owned businesses alive for the last thirty years, despite the hazards and vagaries of these “bypassed” markets. And many of these owners have also embraced their motels’ peculiarly American history, even though this heritage was not what brought them to their motels in the first place. David Kammer described to me how Kassam and Natha would open closed or private areas of their motels on a moment’s notice for Route 66 tourists and advocacy groups; “I could call Mohamed or Sam Kassam…and they would always open up their places. And Mohamed would inevitably have sandwiches and coffee and a cooler of soft drinks, even though I would tell him not to have things ready like that,” mused Kammer.

Along with their historic properties – and just as relevant to the story of Route 66 these businessmen have preserved the corridor’s spirit of small private enterprise and unabashed, good-natured, American commercialism. If the business of America is business, then Route 66 is the highway that leads inevitably to this most American pursuit. In Albuquerque, Route 66 and its stream of commercialism have joined the tide of neighborhood-based economic development; together, they have effected the transformation of a historic, mixed use neighborhood, and both the city and Route 66 itself have benefited from this convergence.

42 In 2003, the city began a prolonged and much publicized battle with the El Vado’s new owner over the future of the National Register property. Tulsa’s Emily Priddy (among others) drove overnight from Tulsa to Albuquerque to participate in a City Hall meeting about the property’s future.
43 Ed Boles interview.
44 David Kammer interview.
**Albuquerque Conclusions**

As many roadies already know, Albuquerque is the Route 66 city that has “done it right.” The city has a wealth of historic signs and properties, and Route 66 has the good fortune of running through Nob Hill, one of the city’s most vibrant and diverse neighborhoods. The city’s Route 66 corridor owes much of its success to Nob Hill’s decades of activism. Albuquerque also benefits from the presence of the University of New Mexico, which provides a built-in customer base for restaurants, boutiques, and performing arts venues. Another case study city, Tulsa, also has a University along its Route 66 corridor (the University of Tulsa), but Tulsa’s university neighborhood does not have the spatial or social cohesiveness of Nob Hill. This cohesiveness is a byproduct of the neighborhood’s history as a pre-war subdivision; as David Kammer stated in our interview, Nob Hill is one of the city’s few walkable, small-lot, historic neighborhoods. Therefore, the people who live there have chosen the neighborhood over newer, more spread out subdivisions further out from the center of town, and it is safe to assume that residents value the spatial and architectural characteristics of the neighborhood. In fact, Nob Hill residents and the city at large have recognized the neighborhood’s value for decades, even before the Route 66 Renaissance became a national movement. Today, Route 66 is only one of several components that contribute to the neighborhood’s historic character.

For better or for worse, Albuquerque is also home to a wealth of historic motels. Crime in these motels has galvanized the city, and city government (in the form of the Safe City Strike Force) has addressed this issue head-on through aggressive monitoring of code violations. However, Albuquerque has failed its historic motels and their owners in two ways: first, by failing to recognize the important role that motels play in providing affordable short and medium-term housing for Albuquerque’s neediest populations, and second, by addressing motels and their owners as sources of the vice problem, rather than as a potentially powerful business league in possession of an important resource. Given that several Albuquerque motel owners, such as Mohamed Natha, have proven themselves to be active, publicly minded citizens, Albuquerque should be encouraging their efforts through the creation of a motel-owners task force or committee. This would create a space for a meaningful dialog about crime, preservation, affordable housing, and race that could serve as a model for other Route 66 cities. A citizen-oriented motel “task force” could also serve as a model for cities like Flagstaff that are beginning to address similar issues surrounding historic motels.