Conclusions
I began this thesis with two questions – are Route 66 cities engaging with this cultural resource, and if so, how and why does the form of engagement vary from city to city? Through my case studies, I have learned that cities along the corridor have engaged in the last decade with Route 66, but that engagement has taken different forms in different cities depending upon three primary factors: the city’s overall economic and political context, the city’s other redevelopment efforts, and the degree to which the city’s built fabric has survived the last twenty to thirty years of the corridor’s economic decline. My case study research also led me to several recommendations for the urban development of Route 66, and I have concluded each case study with site-specific recommendations. In this final chapter, I will focus on the broader issues of Route 66 as a national corridor and recommend ways in which local and national advocates can reframe their planning and development efforts to better emphasize Route 66’s most valuable features.

Local vs. National Perspective

All Route 66 cities share a common perception of the corridor as a tool for economic development and as a means of branding and identifying their city. This perception emphasizes a locally-based approach to Route 66 development as opposed to a state-based or regionally-based approach. At the local level, as exemplified by Tulsa and Rancho Cucamonga, Route 66 is a means to an end; if properly developed, it will increase tourism, attract businesses, and engage local merchants and property owners in the branding of each city. While planners and local advocates appreciate Route 66’s value and hope to capitalize on its international reputation, they do not create or implement preservation and development projects with the national corridor in mind.

However, aficionados and advocates who view Route 66 as a national corridor tend to have a different perspective: to them, the road is a place of meaning with an intrinsic value, regardless of how or why it develops. To this type of aficionado, “Anything that happens on Route 66 is great.”1 If a city views and develops Route 66 as an identity tool or as a means of jumpstarting economic development, as in Tulsa, these advocates are reluctant to criticize the city’s efforts, since they believe that any attention to the corridor is good attention and will only increase the public’s awareness of the road’s intrinsic value. As a result, national advocates, who care the most about Route 66’s legacy, are not the best people to create and implement corridor development strategies. However, de facto they are the custodians of Route 66 and their passion is one of the corridor’s greatest assets.

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1 This sentiment was expressed during my interviews by most of the roadies I met, including Tulsa’s Brad Nickson, New Mexico’s Johnnie Meier, and California’s Jim Conkle. Johnnie Meier expressed this idea when talking about the “Route 66 Casino”, a new 66-themed casino outside of Albuquerque. Jim Conkle echoed this sentiment when talking about the streetscaping in Rancho Cucamonga.
A Linear Place, with State-based Units of Preservation

Corridor preservation is a relatively recent phenomenon in the United States, and very little corridor preservation has taken place along 20th century pathways. Most preservation and interpretation of modern buildings and places has occurred at smaller scales, with individual sites or monuments. However, Route 66 will never reach its full potential as a cultural corridor unless it can be viewed as one “place” with one overarching idea that is manifested and interpreted through different themes along the road. This requires breaking away from a locally-based mentality. It also requires dividing Route 66 into manageable segments, as one must do with any project on such a large scale. For a variety of reasons, this has already happened on Route 66 with the state emerging as the preferred “unit” of preservation along the route.

While I believe that regional “units” will ultimately provide a stronger planning framework for Route 66, I found that the corridor’s most impressive grassroots and government projects were funded and implemented at the statewide level. For example, Johnnie Meier’s New Mexico neon sign program has been one of the Route’s most well-publicized and funded projects, gathering support from individuals, the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and the National Park Service’s Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program. In many ways, the state is a very manageable unit of preservation for Route 66, since the road’s character is just as strong in its rural areas as in its cities. These towns and rural areas, which often lack the resources to preserve a sign or building, rely on state-based Historic Route 66 Associations for funding and volunteer labor. The state-based Historic Route 66 Association, in turn, can take advantage of the funding and expertise of state government programs, from the Department of Transportation to the state’s SHPO. Because money and expertise for preservation work are most often available at the state-level, this has evolved as the de facto unit of

Johnnie Meier at the defunct Route 66 Sandwich Company; “Another Route 66 business bites the dust.” Source: Author.
preservation for Route 66. However, the quality and quantity of preservation work varies strongly with the individuals in charge of each state’s Historic Route 66 Association. In a state like New Mexico, which benefits from the tireless enthusiasm and professionalism of an aficionado like Johnnie Meier, a lot of work can be accomplished in a short period of time (see picture). Other states are not as fortunate.

An Answer to the Problem of State-Based Thinking

Since many aficionados lack the time, money, and expertise to accomplish large-scale and sustainable projects, ineffectiveness and inconsistency are inherent in Route 66’s volunteer-driven preservation culture. But a more significant problem with the state-based redevelopment of Route 66 is the balkanization that occurs among the states. Each State Association tends to have a very good sense of the initiatives that are happening throughout their own state, but very little knowledge of what is happening in other states. This is also true for other, locally-based Route 66 advocates; in my interviews, I was shocked by the lack of communication on a state-to-state level among Route 66 preservationists. For example, Sharlene Fouser in Flagstaff told me of her plan to use a seed grant to start a Route 66 National Scenic Byways office there in Arizona, with the hope of eventually luring the National Route 66 Federation to Flagstaff; she had not heard that Tulsa was spending $15 million on Route 66 alone, $7 million of which would go toward a new interpretive center that potentially would house the offices of the National Route 66 Federation. Fouser was not particularly fazed by this information, but I was surprised at the lack of communication among state-based advocates about something as fundamental as the location of their national headquarters.

The balkanization of activity at the state level also points to the need for more regular, systematized communication among state organizers. During my interviews, there were several instances in which I realized that something as simple as a monthly newsletter or listserv would have an enormous impact on the work of revitalizing Route 66. For example, the New Mexico Historic Route 66 Association has lobbied the state to create a Route 66 “vanity plate”, and a portion of the proceeds from the sale of the plate will go the State Association to support its work. This idea Johnnie Meier picked up from a friend in the Illinois State Association, which instituted a similar program. However, none of the other states I visited have implemented this relatively straightforward fundraising initiative, and I wonder how much of this is due to the relative strengths of different state organizations, or the lack of communication among the states in general. Some of this lack can be attributed to the age and technological inexperience of many Route 66 aficionados, who may be less comfortable using the Internet for regular communication. Yet, the web is full of Route 66-related websites, forums, and weblogs, and some advocates directed me to a few forums where many of the more active preservationists maintain a regular online presence. Regardless, the fact remains that there is no one

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2 Illinois has a particularly robust vanity plate program, so much so that state law enforcement officials are concerned that the state’s plate numbering system has been compromised by the overabundance of custom plates. As of March 2006, the state offered 153 varieties of vanity plate, 44 of which raise funds for non-profit organizations. See Cara Spoto, “License Debate a Plateful”, Chicago Daily Herald, March 20, 2006, p 12.
reliable and regular source for Route 66 preservation communication, and that this is a void that needs to be filled if the corridor is ever to achieve cohesiveness.

The state-based conception of Route 66 has another, more far-reaching effect on the corridor’s development. Many of the Route’s most interesting thematic segments – Native American culture, Santa Fe Railroad and Harvey Houses, and areas with a concentration of hand-hewn WPA architecture – span state lines. America’s state boundaries were drawn long ago by politics and history that have little to do with the cultural, social, and economic patterns that influenced Route 66’s development years later, and Route 66’s most cohesive themes often transcend state lines. Unfortunately, the dominance of the state-based development model deemphasizes these thematic areas. For example, the preservation of neon signs in New Mexico ends at the state border, although Arizona’s Route 66 was just as famous for the bright vernacular of its own neon signs, set against the same desert sky. The same type of program implemented at a thematic level could have preserved the most distinctive signs throughout Route 66’s desert cities, choosing from a wider range of signage and creating a thematic experience that contributed to the corridor’s cohesiveness.

The thematic redevelopment of Route 66 would require State Associations, aficionados, the National Park Service, and other route-wide advocates to view Route 66 through two specific lenses – a thematic lens, and a regional lens. Here, the term “region” refers to an area defined by geographic or cultural boundaries, rather than state or other political lines. The term “theme” refers to any cultural, natural, or historic pattern of development. As I drove Route 66, I was struck by several regional themes that could be highlighted through organized preservation or interpretation projects, particularly in the southwest. These included Native American Culture; the Santa Fe Railroad and Harvey Houses; the Neon Corridor; WPA Art and Architecture; the Dustbowl Exodus; California Agriculture; and Natural Wonders of the Southwest. Each of these themes has a specific historic, cultural, natural, or architectural consistency, and each emerges organically from a geographic region along Route 66. As such, these themes provide a more holistic system of national organization for Route 66 redevelopment than the current, state-based system.

The Benefits of Regional Thinking

The benefits of the “regional theme” conception of Route 66 would carry over into the corridor’s surrounding regions and communities, increasing the tourism draw for a wide range of associated businesses and attractions. A regional theme would employ the Route 66 corridor as a springboard for a wider pool of cultural resources, and as a result, an entire region could enjoy the economic benefits of theme-based tourism. For example, a Route 66 traveler entering the “Santa Fe Railroad and Harvey Houses” portion of the road may discover a passion for the architecture of Mary Colter and decide to take a detour off of Route 66 to explore her other structures.3 The regional theme concept

3 Mary Colter was the architect and interior designer for the Harvey House chain and the lodges at Grand Canyon National Park, and is famous for her narrative-based approach to building design and her incorporation of local materials, processes, and aesthetic traditions.
Route 66 Regional Themes

California Agriculture
Santa Fe Railroad and Harvey Houses
Native American Culture
Neon Corridor
Natural Wonders of the Southwest
Dustbowl Exodus
WPA Art and Architecture

Source: Author.
also has the potential to attract cultural tourists who may not be specifically interested in Route 66 as a corridor, but would like to learn more about one of the corridor’s associated themes. This type of tourist is more likely to stay longer and spend more money in one place as she explores her area of interest, as opposed to roadies, who thrive on constant movement along the corridor.

At the same time, a thematic organization of the road would require planners and advocates to look beyond state lines to form spatial and thematic connections, which can also improve wayfinding and connectivity. Currently, “Historic Route 66” signs have a consistent size and color throughout the entire corridor, but they are placed at irregular intervals and can be difficult to follow, particularly in urban areas. Even when signs are present, they indicate only the roadbed itself, not the architecture, history, narratives, and events that characterize different segments of Route 66. Signage that corresponded to regional themes would help travelers to organize a trip around motels, restaurants, museums, and other attractions that represent that region’s particular culture. This would aid in the local marketing of Route 66, as well as the national branding and connectivity of the corridor.

Most importantly, a thematic organization of the corridor would enrich the traveler’s experience by framing her Route 66 journey in a wider context. For example, as a traveler enters a particular thematic region of Route 66, she sees a sign welcoming her to the “Dustbowl Exodus” segment of the Oklahoma highway, and suddenly the rolling fields and farmland outside of Oklahoma City take on a new resonance. The road becomes a place where families like the Joads took to the highway out of desperation, hauling all their worldly possessions in the back of a third-hand, flatbed truck.\(^4\) None of this history and narrative is immediately visible through the windshield, but a regional theme helps to sound the depths of the traveler’s own memories and experiences, connecting the act of travel to the search for meaning that often accompanies it.

**Implementing Regional Themes and the Future of Route 66**

Currently, the National Park Service’s Route 66 Preservation Program is the only program whose mission is to foster the development of Route 66 as a national cultural resource. While this program is filling an important gap, the program is scheduled to “sunset” in 2009 regardless of whether or not it has spent its allocated budget.\(^5\) In the interim, the volunteer-run Route 66 Federation may re-emerge as the focal point for national Route 66 activity. But if not, what entity will act as a communications clearinghouse for all Route 66 projects? More importantly, will this organization have the vision and capacity to develop Route 66 as a national corridor along thematic and regional lines? One likely participant in the future development of Route 66 is the National Scenic Byways office once Route 66 earns the designation of “All-American Road.”

\(^4\) The Joad family were the protagonists of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, which chronicles the mass exodus of Oklahoma farmers out of the Oklahoma dustbowl toward California along Route 66. In this book, Steinbeck dubbed Route 66 “The Mother Road”.

\(^5\) Michael Taylor interview, and Public Law #106-45, Department of the Interior, 1999. Although Taylor stated that the future of the program is uncertain, it is not uncommon for similar National Park Service programs to be renewed as they approach their sunset date.
To earn this status, a majority of the Route’s eight states must have their roads declared “National Scenic Byways”; the entire corridor then becomes eligible for All-American Road status. The Scenic Byways program, founded in 1992, has awarded $250 million in grants to thousands of scenic byway roads; byway grants cover both preservation and promotion, and the program represents a both a good source of funding and an organized and effective means of promotion for the Route 66 corridor. However, the National Scenic Byways office does not serve in an advisory capacity, offer technical assistance, or organize programs or events. The Byways program will provide financial resources, but Route 66 needs an organization with a national scope if Scenic Byway funding is to be used creatively and efficiently.

**Other Recommendations and Concerns**

In addition to my observations about Route 66’s local and national leadership and the importance of implementing a regional theme approach, I would like to advance ten specific recommendations and concerns that apply to the entire Route but are derived from my experiences in the case study cities. “Recommendations” refer to implementable strategies. “Concerns” refer to issues that will continue to surface along Route 66 unless they are addressed in meaningful ways by local government and organizations.

**Recommendations**

1) The lessons learned by these four Route 66 cities should be shared with other cities along the corridor, regardless of state or region, since the city has emerged as a distinct “unit of preservation.” Preservationists should begin to view the city as its own preservation “unit,” since many Route 66 cities will need to address similar issues, such as development pressure and motel crime, that may not apply to rural and small-town areas. As well, urban Route 66 redevelopment efforts share a perspective on Route 66 as a tool for economic development and branding; this commonality suggests that cities could benefit from a dedicated forum for exchange about Route 66’s urban issues. One way to facilitate this learning would be to hold a “Route 66 City” symposium, where urban preservation efforts can be compared with one another and where local government representatives and advocates can exchange ideas and strategies.

2) One way to achieve greater authenticity along Route 66’s built fabric is to foster individual preservation efforts, whether they happen on a statewide scale like Johnnie Meier’s sign program, or on a small-town scale like the revitalization of La Posada hotel in Winslow, Arizona. This fine-grained preservation is what gives Route 66 variety and eccentricity, two of its defining characteristics. Route 66 is lucky; it is defined by entrepreneurialism and individuality and it does

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6 National Scenic Byways program website and Sharlene Fouser interview. See http://www.byways.org/learn/.
7 http://www.byways.org/learn/program.html.
not require visual harmony or consistency to maintain its character as a linear corridor. In fact, harmony detracts from the Route’s identity as an odd assortment of individual commercial enterprises. One simple way that cities can facilitate grassroots efforts is by supporting Route 66 non-profits, such as the eight Route 66 State Associations. These associations have been working on the Route for ten years or longer, and their volunteers are some of the most capable and committed aficionados along the Route. A little dependable financial help from local government could go a long way in the hands of an Emily Priddy or a Johnnie Meier in their respective states.

3) To encourage fine-grained preservation, the grant-making aspect of the National Park Service Route 66 Preservation Program should also be replicated and reinforced by programs within state and local governments. The National Park Service acts as a steward of Route 66, rather than as a hands-on preservation organization. This bolsters the idea that Route 66, even more than other types of historic resources, can best be kept alive through the fostering of individual efforts.

4) Do not shy away from the integration of affordable housing with historic preservation. The restoration of a motel does not have to mean turning it into a boutique property, as many have suggested. In some cases, local affordable housing advocates may be the Route’s best allies in the preservation of older motels. Of course, this may mean that motels will be only “partly” preserved, and they may not meet the standards required by the National Register and must therefore forfeit historic tax credits; alternatively, it may also mean that affordable or specialized housing has to spend some of its budget on cosmetic and façade improvements - an allocation that may not be palatable to some community organizers. Regardless, partnerships between community groups and Route 66 preservationists present a natural solution for the Route’s motels, if both groups are willing to give a little. This partnership should be recognized and facilitated by local government in cities like Flagstaff, where the need for affordable housing is increasing.

5) Activists and property owners along Route 66 would benefit from a booklet showing a variety of adaptive reuses for motel properties. This could include rehabilitated properties, restored properties, or completely redeveloped properties, ranging from condos and affordable housing to boutique motels. The book could also show how specific tax incentives have enabled partial or full motel preservation, including examples where only the façade has been maintained. This would be useful not only along Route 66, but for older motels and hotels across the country. The study would have to recognize that total preservation is not always possible, but that there is an important role in urban development for “partial” preservation (such as façade donations, etc.), particularly when development pressure makes total preservation an economic impossibility.
Concerns

1) In interpretation, authenticity is more difficult to achieve than cliché - it takes more research, more participation, and more imagination, and therefore it can also require more time and money. This is an inevitable challenge of the interpretation process and should be acknowledged by those engaged in Route 66 interpretation. If the challenge of authenticity is not recognized and planned for, new Route 66 museums and centers will end up glorifying the iconography of Route 66, rather than rendering the hardship, complexity, and ambiguity that characterize the true Route 66 experience.

2) So much of the beauty of Route 66 resides in shared memory and the cultural products (books, movies, music, television shows) associated with the road. These things should be integrated with any efforts to interpret the road’s history, since these are the images one thinks of when thinking “Route 66,” rather than the actual road itself.

3) Route 66 ignores the last thirty years of its history at its peril; the east Indians are a part of the story of Route 66 just as much as the Oklahoma Dustbowl farmers and the bypassing of the Interstate are. However, the generation of Americans who will be responsible for maintaining this history have grown up in a more ethnically and culturally diverse country, as opposed to the route’s current custodians, many of whom are near or reaching retirement. For the next generation of Route 66 aficionados, like Emily Priddy, the story of the road’s east Indian motel owners will be an easier story to tell.

4) Ambivalence about the car is another important part of the Route’s narrative. The growth of automobile travel created Route 66 in the first place, as its relocation to the Interstate later caused Route 66’s demise. Route 66 interpretive centers have the opportunity to educate and inform Americans and other tourists about the car’s role in our nation’s built history – not just on the Route, but as a force responsible for decentralization of all American cities. Our country’s growing ambivalence about automobiles is beginning to reveal itself, as shown by the mixed-emotions concerning mass transit planning in Albuquerque. As it evolves as a cultural resource, Route 66 will have to take this ambivalence into account in its interpretive centers if it wants to stay connected to the issues that concern younger audiences.

5) The most interesting ideas for the Route 66 Renaissance come from people who embrace change along the corridor, not from those who would like to see it frozen in time. Regardless of their design value or aesthetic sensibility, the abstract arches over Albuquerque and the “Route 66 Xperience” in Tulsa are just two ways in which the Route is growing and changing to meet the needs of a new audience. Preservationists should not resist growth and change along Route 66, since this is how the corridor maintains its economic vitality and its cultural relevance.
However, preservationists may find that they have to walk the line between economic development (which tends toward nostalgia/marketing) and meaningful interpretation (which is slower, more complex, and more expensive).

Finally, I want to re-emphasize the importance of framing Route 66 as a national resource. At the local level, this conception is overshadowed by the corridor’s potential as a tool for economic development and identity creation. But local initiatives will not succeed if Route 66 does not develop its national identity and cohesiveness. This is why I have used this conclusion to examine Route 66 from a wider perspective and to make recommendations for large-scale development and planning. Although this thesis examines Route 66 as a local resource that is being developed by individual cities, Route 66 is undeniably a national resource with an international presence, and as such, it must be viewed not only as a local resource but also as an interconnected network of places that interpret a common history. For Route 66 to reach its fullest potential both on the local and national level, it must be developed as a continuous place, in which each of its components contributes to the overall corridor’s success.
Further Research

Here, I am including a list of six ideas for further study. At some point during the thesis process, each of these ideas tempted me away from my original question, and I hope that other planning students and scholars will look to this list for inspiration about further research into the Route 66 corridor:

1) How has the east Indian and Pakistani population been integrated into Route 66 preservation efforts, and what more can be done? Is this the future of Route 66 preservation, since this population represents such a major part of the route’s historic property ownership?

2) Will the preservation of Route 66 in urban areas inevitably lead to gentrification, similar to the historic preservation of older homes in large east and west-coast cities, which has increased their property values?

3) Are gentrification and “Disneyfication” effectively the same concept on Route 66, or do they refer to different processes? Does an ambiguous term like “Disneyfication” adequately describe the development of a place like Route 66, where the layering of themes and ideas from popular culture is integral to the corridor’s culture?

4) Does Albuquerque’s Route 66 rapid bus line represent a possible future for Route 66 tourist-strips in urban areas? Or is this only possible in Albuquerque because the city is undergoing redevelopment efforts independent of Route 66?

5) At what point does a place or property “turn the corner” and become an acknowledged historic artifact? Is this time period correlated to the human life span? Is this span enough to make something transform from a blighted motel to an historic treasure?

6) What other types of cultural resources have required inter-state participation? How does the redevelopment of Route 66 parallel the recreational development of shared natural resources, such as lakes, rivers, or forests?
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