

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: LEARNING FROM COMMERCIAL THOROUGHFARES AND THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF THE RECENT PAST: AN EVALUATIVE  
FRAMEWORK FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATIONISTS

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Using the Sun Belt city of Las Vegas, Nevada and its thoroughfares as a location of analysis, this study presents an evaluative framework – inspired by cultural geographers Peirce Lewis and Richard H. Schein – for observing and documenting the seen features and unseen aspects of commercial thoroughfares as cultural landscapes. Importantly, this framework incorporates physical features, as defined by the National Park Service and its National Register of Historic Places program, while also accounting for intangible culture and meanings. This comprehensive approach is brought about by embracing cultural landscape theory, which allows historic preservation practitioners to get beyond traditional discussions of historic integrity and significance, and move past building-by-building architecture surveys. By applying

this framework to a single property, such as an indoor shopping mall, or multiple ones, such as an entire commercial strip, preservation practitioners can acknowledge and document these ubiquitous cultural landscapes. This framework is meant to be flexible, and is structured in a way that allows for preservationists to discover meanings that may be missed in a more traditional survey. After applying the framework, an actionable step can be taken. The step can be limited, such as adding a historic marker for interpretation, or extensive, like proceeding with historic landmark designation – as determined through community engagement.

Commercial thoroughfares play an outsized role in the American built environment and are the key to understanding dynamic urban and suburban landscapes as cultural landscapes. This is especially true in the cities of the Sun Belt region, which experienced explosive growth in the Post-World War II years. In turn, these cities developed around automobiles, shopping centers, and parking lots. These wide thoroughfares, marked with free-standing signs and billboards, and their architecture of the “recent past” may give today’s historic preservationists pause, considering their perceived lack of “sense of place” and significant history. However, commercial thoroughfares’ strips and nodes have been serving local residents for decades, and play a meaningful role in residents’ lives.

In the 1960s through 1980s, the local and national retailers found along commercial thoroughfares primarily served a White, middle-income clientele – as shown by marketing at the time. Since then, these cultural landscapes have been transformed by a social evolution, where longtime commercial spaces – including strip malls, shopping centers, and indoor shopping malls – have been repurposed, and now cater to diverse and multicultural communities. This change, which typically includes physical alterations to the exterior and

interior of commercial spaces, has been accomplished in-part through the inherent flexibility of these buildings and structures. Former supermarkets and discount retailers have become swap meets and stores that sell products from around the world, and strip malls and one-time fast food restaurants now serve a variety of ethnic cuisines. By tracing this historic and social narrative, a multicultural palimpsest becomes apparent, composed of both tangible features and intangible aspects. Therefore, commercial thoroughfares and their corresponding commercial spaces are the perfect place for observation and analysis.

Subject Headings: Historic Preservation, Cultural Landscapes, Cultural Geography, American History, Urban Planning, Las Vegas, Commercial Strip, Shopping Center, Shopping Mall

LEARNING FROM COMMERCIAL THOROUGHFARES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
THE RECENT PAST: AN EVALUATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR HISTORIC  
PRESERVATIONISTS

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This thesis treatise is dedicated to my two biggest fans: my mom, Mary Norma Watkins, and my husband, Dr. Nicholas S. Hudak. Thank you for all of your support along this journey!

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	v
List of Figures	vi
Chapter I: An Introduction to The Cultural Landscape of Commercial Thoroughfares	1
Introduction	1
Cultural Landscapes and Cultural Geography	7
Defining The Commercial Thoroughfare, Strips, And Nodes, And Establishing Temporal Boundaries: 1960 To 1990	10
Why Study Commercial Thoroughfares?	15
Commentary On Commercial Thoroughfares and Commercial Spaces	20
The Selection Of Las Vegas, Nevada for A Case Study: Learning From Las Vegas In 2022	23
Study Overview	30
Looking Ahead: Presenting A Historic Narrative	32
Chapter II: The Growth and Development of Commercial Thoroughfares, And Their Historic Narrative In Las Vegas, 1960 - 1990	36
Introduction	36
Commercial Thoroughfares and Their Development Prior to World War II	36
Postwar Commercial Thoroughfares	48
Background On Las Vegas' History, Growth, And Development	62
Local, Regional, And National Trends: Las Vegas' Commercial Thoroughfares, 1960 To 1990	72
Looking Ahead: The Commercial Thoroughfare's Transformation	92
Chapter III: The Social Evolution: Repurposed Commercial Spaces Along Diverse and Multicultural Commercial Thoroughfares	104
Introduction	104
Classifying The Evolution of Commercial Thoroughfares and Commercial Spaces	107
Flexibility Along Commercial Thoroughfares: Serving Diverse and Multicultural Communities in Repurposed Commercial Spaces	112
The Multicultural Palimpsest: From Discount Retailers to Swap Meets	128
A Local Shopping Center with International Character	135
An Innovative Evolution of an Indoor Shopping Mall	139
Considering Change, Historic Integrity, And The "50-Year Rule"	143
Looking Ahead: Documenting The Social Evolution Through a Cultural Landscape Approach	152

Chapter IV: Using Fieldwork and Research Tools to Understand the Selected Commercial Thoroughfares and Their Physical Features	161
Introduction	161
Cultural Landscapes: Through The Eyes of Peirce Lewis	161
The Selection of the Six Commercial Thoroughfares	167
Visualizing The Six Commercial Thoroughfares	170
Fieldwork	186
Research Tools	187
Looking Ahead: Using Fieldwork and Research to Shape the Evaluative Framework	190
Chapter V: Commercial Thoroughfares as A Cultural Landscape: An Evaluative Framework for The Seen Features and Unseen Aspects, And Next Steps in Acknowledging These Common Landscapes	193
Introduction	193
The NPS Approach: The Seen Cultural Landscape	195
Richard Schein’s Approach: The Seen and Unseen Cultural Landscape	209
Taking Action in The Cultural Landscape of the Commercial Thoroughfare	220
Applying The Framework: Las Vegas’ Boulevard Mall On Maryland Parkway	227
Conclusion	237
Bibliography	242

## LIST OF TABLES

1. William Wyckoff's Scale and Classifications	110
2. Applying NPS' Integrity Standards	151
3. National Park Service Landscape Characteristics	202
4. Revised Landscape Characteristics	209
5. Evaluative Framework	219

## LIST OF FIGURES

1. Satellite Images of the Las Vegas Valley in 1972 and 2010	14
2. The Las Vegas Strip and its Signs in 1975	25
3. Map of Las Vegas in 1960	26
4. Map of Las Vegas in 1984	27
5. Venturi et al., Signs in History and Space	29
6. Los Angeles' Miracle Mile	42
7. 1930s Shopping Center Designs by Albert Frey	44
8. Aerial photograph of River Oaks Shopping Center, near Downtown Houston	46
9. Ed Ruscha's Sunset Strip	50
10. U.S. Highway 95 in Las Vegas	53
11. The Planned, Constructed, and Regulated Commercial Strip	59
12. Nuclear Family	61
13. The Atomic Age Comes to Fremont Street	63
14. Golden West Shopping Center Parking Lot	67
15. 1969 Riots	69
16. Nodes and Strips	73
17. Super-Grid	74
18. Park and Shop and West Gate Shopping Center	76
19. Shopping Center: 1989	77
20. Wonder World with Parking Lot	79
21. Retailer Signage in the Newspaper	80

22. Competing Signs	82
23. Self-Service at Wonder World	84
24. White, Middle-Income Consumers	86
25. Feminine and Masculine Advertisements	86
26. Commercial Center in 1963	89
27. The Boulevard Mall From Above	91
28. Taco Truck at the Mall	117
29. Derelict Hyde Park Shopping Center	119
30. Flex Cocktail Lounge	119
31. Themed Architecture	121
32. Fast Food Repurposing	123
33. Storefronts at Charleston West Plaza	124
34. Various Ethnic Cuisines at Decatur and Flamingo	125
35. Chinatown Vegas Shopping Center	126
36. Swap Meets	130
37. Commercial Center Today	137
38. Commercial Center Sign	137
39. The Boulevard Mall Today	140
40. Vacant Sears	141
41. Residential to Commercial Conversions	145
42. Historic Neighborhoods in Las Vegas	170
43. Key for Maps	171

44. West Charleston Boulevard	173
45. Decatur Boulevard, Northern Section	175
46. Decatur Boulevard, Southern Section	177
47. Maryland Parkway	179
48. Rancho Drive	181
49. East Sahara Avenue	183
50. West Sahara Avenue	185
51. Actionable Steps	221
52. Applying the Evaluative Framework to the Boulevard Mall	235



# CHAPTER I

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF COMMERCIAL THOROUGHFARES

### Introduction

Commercial thoroughfares play an outsized role in the landscape of American cities and suburbs. This is especially true in the cities of the Sun Belt region,<sup>1</sup> a vast area stretching from Florida and Texas to the Southwest and Southern California – and as far north as Raleigh, Nashville, and Oklahoma City.<sup>2</sup> This region's cities saw explosive growth during the post-World War II era and, in turn, developed around the automobile. Thoroughfares – often times originating from the downtown and older, prewar neighborhoods – crisscross the landscape and connect newer residential subdivisions, shopping centers, strip malls, fast food restaurants, car dealerships, indoor shopping malls, schools, churches, golf courses, and many other types of development.

Inevitably, these commercial thoroughfares and their corresponding development, played, and continue to play, a major role in the daily routines of these cities' residents. These cultural landscapes, constructed in the 1960s through 1980s, have taken on an entirely new importance, as commercial spaces along these thoroughfares – including swap meets, shopping centers, and indoor shopping malls – have since been repurposed by new, diverse communities, in turn, creating a multicultural palimpsest of meanings. Because of these social and cultural narratives, these commercial thoroughfares are worthy of historic preservationists' attention.

These commercial thoroughfares, along with their buildings and structures of the “recent past,” may give today’s preservationist pause. This is certainly understandable. These thoroughfares, with their endless, nondescript shopping centers and asphalt parking lots, suffer from a perceived lack of “sense of place” – a commonly discussed term in the fields of historic preservation and urban planning that is related to the human connection (or lack thereof) to the built environment. It is difficult to imagine a multilane boulevard packed with cars and lined with haphazard, free-standing retailer signage and billboards as a sentimental or nostalgic location in the urban and suburban landscape. In addition to this, these commercial thoroughfares, composed of commercial strips and nodes, are antithetical to the currently popular concepts of environmental sustainability and stewardship, which are rooted in concerns about climate change – the major challenge of our time. Nonetheless, these flexible commercial spaces along thoroughfares allow for reuse, which some would argue is more sustainable than demolition and new construction.

In “From Modernism to McDonald’s: Ideology, Controversy, and the Movement to Preserve the Recent Past,” public historian Kelli Shapiro writes about the recent past and the ever expanding list of buildings and structures that historic preservation practitioners strive to save. Shapiro’s comments highlight the conversation surrounding locations like commercial thoroughfares: “Places particularly embroiled in the preservation community’s debate over what one might term ‘preserving the enemy’ include the automobile-oriented environment, suburbia, and the landscape of mass consumption, as well as the modernist architectural/planning philosophy, which many deemed responsible for massive urban renewal

teardowns.”<sup>3</sup> While her point has some validity, it is an overly simplistic view of commercial thoroughfares and the development of the recent past.

These thoroughfares and their corresponding buildings and structures have been serving Sun Belt city residents for decades. They have always been locations of community and culture, and this has only become more evident as these shopping centers, strip malls, and other businesses have evolved to serve diverse and multicultural communities. Today, immigrants from around the world settle along and near commercial thoroughfares in American cities and suburbs, where they set up stores and restaurants that celebrate their ethnicity, nationality, and culture. This debate highlighted by Shapiro also assumes that the *distant past* was never problematic, which is clearly not the case, with the quintessential example being the plantation home of the Southern United States or any type of building associated with colonialism. However, that conversation is beyond the scope of this study.

Historic preservationists have an obligation to acknowledge this particular urban and suburban cultural landscape, document it, and possibly even historically designate it – or portions of it, such as a specific indoor shopping mall or similar commercial development that speaks to a city’s social history. On this note, Shapiro writes how “the movement [“to preserve the recent past”] has nonetheless grown...priding itself on not only saving important parts of American history, but also helping redefine public perceptions of what that history is.”<sup>4</sup> When preservationists engage with a particular cultural landscape and its buildings and structures, they take part in this “redefinition.” Sometimes preservationists are criticized for their actions, which is especially true as the profession begins to document and designate the buildings of the 1970s and beyond. However, preservationists must show leadership by proactively exploring

the less than obvious aspects of the built environment and its social narratives. Like any other development, commercial thoroughfares are an important feature of the urban and suburban landscape and its social history.

Contemporary commercial thoroughfares and their adjacent development – which are historically, and sometimes literally, connected to the nation’s first thoroughfares, streetcar suburbs, and interwar era “Miracle Miles” – are a part of the nation’s historic narrative over the past seven decades. In Sun Belt cities, such as Las Vegas, Nevada, these landscapes were initially constructed in the 1960s through 1980 to serve White, middle-income families that settled in the nearby, newly constructed residential subdivisions and suburbs – despite the city’s significant African American community, which had recently arrived from the Southern United States for job opportunities, first in defense-related industries and later in hospitality. These White families, of which mothers and fathers adhered to their respective feminine and masculine gender roles, patronized the shopping center and strip malls’ local, regional, and national retailers, including supermarkets and discount stores. These simple commercial developments included rows of parking spaces for convenience. These and other businesses found along commercial thoroughfares marketed to these communities through tailor-made newspaper advertisements, which focused on the consumption of products and services, and emphasized the “nuclear family” ideal.

Over time, in cities like Las Vegas, these postwar commercial thoroughfares evolved, as many White, middle-income residents moved farther out to newer suburbs, and the demographics of Sun Belt cities changed. There was a social evolution, as diverse and multicultural communities moved in and repurposed standardized commercial spaces, which

were inherently flexible. Often times, these commercial conversions included physical alterations, both inside and out. Supermarkets and discount stores made way for ethnic supermarkets, supermercados, and diverse swap meets; and one-time fast food restaurants became ethnic restaurants. Therefore, this cultural landscape illustrates an important historic narrative and social evolution, and Las Vegas' commercial thoroughfares represent it well.

Despite the evolution along commercial thoroughfares, as buildings, their retailers, and their customers changed, thoroughfares remain and continue to organize this cultural landscape. Thus, the thoroughfare is a permanent feature, a description that echoes well-known cultural geographer John Brinckerhoff (J.B.) Jackson, who refers to "the road or street or highway" as "armature" and "framework."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this study, grounded in historic preservation and cultural landscape theory, will present an evaluative framework for acknowledging and documenting this urban and suburban landscape of the commercial thoroughfare and its corresponding development. Considering this landscape's multiple layers of history and culture, as well as tangible features and intangible aspects – which come together to illustrate a social evolution over the decades – commercial thoroughfares are the perfect place for observation and analysis, and the use of an evaluative framework with a cultural landscape approach.

Using the Sun Belt city of Las Vegas, Nevada – and focusing on six selected commercial thoroughfares – as a case study, I present an evaluative framework that will give historic preservation practitioners the tool they need when examining this type of commercial development in their own cities and towns – in the Sun Belt region and beyond. This framework provides a template that will guide preservationists as they document both the *Seen Features* –

as articulated by the cultural geographer Peirce Lewis and the National Park Service (NPS) through its National Register of Historic Places program – and the *Unseen Aspects* – as presented by cultural geographer Richard H. Schein through his own framework – in these kinds of cultural landscapes.

Therefore, the evaluative framework borrows and revises the best of two cultural landscape approaches and incorporates them. Importantly, the framework includes *Next Steps*, which was inspired by Schein’s work. Once a landscape is acknowledged and documented, local historic preservation practitioners can select the most appropriate course of action within their own communities. The options are limitless, and may be simple or complex, such as the decision to pursue historic designation for the landscape in question. This step pushes preservationists to be forward-looking, even as they research past history and observe the present landscape.

Despite being partially guided by NPS’s perspective on cultural landscapes, this study finds NPS’s approach limiting, as it is overly focused on a landscape’s physical features – including its architecture and design. Architecture matters, as historic preservation is about the built environment, after all. But this study is not establishing a method for surveying and classifying the architecture of a commercial strip or a shopping center. Instead, architecture plays a secondary role to the social narratives that are found along these commercial thoroughfares. This study, through its evaluative framework, hopes to illuminate these intangible aspects of commercial development. Crucially, this study seeks to move beyond traditional historic preservation views on topics like “historic integrity” and the much discussed “50-year rule,” as stipulated in the National Register program’s guidelines. This is critical,

considering the landscape of the commercial thoroughfare has been continually altered over the years, from interior and exterior renovations to demolitions and new construction.

In crafting this study's evaluative framework and conclusions, I researched the selected commercial thoroughfares' historic narratives and social evolution, and conducted fieldwork along these thoroughfares in Las Vegas. By looking at historic newspaper articles and advertisements from 1960 to 1990, and comparing this social history to Las Vegas' contemporary cultural landscape of commercial thoroughfares, a rich historic narrative and social evolution was revealed. In closing, the evaluative framework is applied to the Boulevard Mall, Las Vegas' first indoor shopping mall, which opened on a major commercial thoroughfare just south of downtown in 1968. This illustrates the usefulness and practicality of the framework, and how it can be used by historic preservation practitioners in the Sun Belt region and beyond.

### Cultural Landscapes and Cultural Geography

In the simplest sense, cultural landscapes are defined by NPS as "historically significant places that show evidence of human interaction with the physical environment."<sup>6</sup> Echoing this, Lewis writes, "I am not talking here about 'natural landscape,' but about the landscape made by humans – what geographers call cultural landscape."<sup>7</sup> In this widely accepted definition, cultural landscapes include physical, human-built features that are observable. NPS calls these "landscape characteristics."<sup>8</sup> NPS has traditionally considered cultural landscapes to be a limited set of historic locations, such as a rural landscape or a designed landscape, including a plantation, college campus, public park, battlefield, or parkways, to name a handful of examples.<sup>9</sup>

However, this definition is expanding, as even NPS says, “They [cultural landscapes] can be found anywhere, from cities to wilderness.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, a commercial thoroughfare – with its endless strips and nodes of shopping centers, strip malls, fast food restaurants, banks, billboards, parking lots, free-standing signs, car dealerships, and so on – is technically a cultural landscape, as it is a part of the built environment. Although, this particular perspective would likely be challenged by more traditional historic preservation practitioners who closely adhere to the National Register’s guidelines, as the landscape of the commercial thoroughfare is largely unplanned and relatively haphazard, especially at first glance. Nonetheless, an expansive definition is becoming more acceptable as cultural landscape theory continues to evolve to encompass intangible aspects of the built environment and additional meanings, such as control, power, economic profit, race, gender, and income. Scholars like Richard H. Schein, a cultural geographer, consider both tangible features and intangible aspects. For example, in a 2009 journal article, Schein examines these features and aspects through a framework that he applies to a specific cultural landscape: Courthouse Square in Lexington, Kentucky.<sup>11</sup> This article and its relevance to this study will be discussed in-depth in Chapter V.

Therefore, a cultural landscape perspective, like the one I use in this study, looks at what one might call the “big picture.” When observing a commercial strip, a shopping center, or even a parking lot, a historic preservation practitioner using a cultural landscape approach looks for the landscape’s palimpsest of layers and their meanings. These layers, which are both visible and hidden, are discovered through observation of the physical landscape, in conjunction with research that illuminates the landscape’s historic narrative and social meanings.



Of particular importance is how a cultural landscape approach allows for the consideration of change – which is a key aspect of this study. Change, which is also layered, is found throughout commercial thoroughfares and their properties, and is shaped by local residents and communities. For example, a shopping center may have been constructed in the 1960s, remodeled in the 1980s and 2000s – as architectural styles changed – and then partially demolished in the 2010s – as retailers and the surrounding neighborhood changed. This change over time challenges traditional historic preservation perspectives, especially when following National Register guidelines and determining “significance” and “historic integrity.” This will be discussed in-depth in the following chapters.

Additionally, although this study is firmly rooted in historic preservation, it is heavily shaped by cultural geography and its scholarship, particularly the works of Lewis and Schein.

Dartmouth Library defines this academic field in the following way:

Cultural geography examines the cultural values, practices, discursive and material expressions and artefacts of people, the cultural diversity and plurality of society, and how cultures are distributed over space, how places and identities are produced, how people make sense of places and build senses of place, and how people produce and communicate knowledge and meaning.<sup>12</sup>

This field’s scholarship lends itself to studying the built environment and has much in common with historic preservation, as it focuses on where and what humans choose to build. Since the beginning of time, humans have been constructing buildings and structures – most notably, for shelter – and these practices have been influenced by a variety of factors, including geography, climate, economics, politics, etc.

Finally, it is important to define “culture.” Typically, the public thinks of culture as the performing arts, music, artwork, and cuisine. But the built environment, whether iconic, like the

Statue of Liberty, or nondescript, like a car dealership, is also culture. As Lewis writes, “The culture of any nation is unintentionally reflected in its ordinary vernacular landscape.”<sup>13</sup> This makes sense, considering the Statue of Liberty speaks to American culture and democracy, and the national ideal of welcoming immigrants from around the world to the “melting pot.” It also contributes to the culture of New York City and is a symbol of the city. On the other end of the culture spectrum, a car dealership along a commercial strip represents American car culture and consumption, and is just one small subset of the “American Dream.” Therefore, Lewis writes, “The man-made landscape – the ordinary run-of-the-mill things that humans have created and put upon the earth – provides strong evidence of the kind of people we are, and were, and are in process of becoming.”<sup>14</sup>

#### Defining the Commercial Thoroughfare, Strips, and Nodes, and Establishing Temporal Boundaries: 1960 to 1990

Whether the average American realizes it or not, they are familiar with the commercial thoroughfare landscape at the center of this study. A commercial thoroughfare is a wide arterial or boulevard – many times up to seven-or-eight-lanes wide – that stretches across a Sun Belt city, from its downtown and historic, prewar neighborhoods through its postwar residential subdivisions and commercial development to the newest suburbs on the metropolitan area’s fringe. Over the decades, several scholars have emphasized the importance of these thoroughfares. One of them, cultural geographer William Wyckoff, writes: “Strips radiate from every city and define the edges of innumerable suburbs and small towns to form a part of daily life for a majority of the population.”<sup>15</sup> Importantly, Wyckoff highlights “commercial strips” – a term that is often used interchangeably with commercial thoroughfares, but is actually more descriptive of a certain type of development – and how

they serve local residents in their daily routines, including morning stops at the grocery store, dry cleaner, and bank, as well as a night out at the bowling alley, movie theater, or a popular Chinese food restaurant.

Historian Timothy Davis, who also writes about change on the commercial strip, touches upon these kinds of thoroughfares and their relevance to local residents – as opposed to highways lined with motels and highway attractions. He writes, “While the preservation of outstanding roadside relics is undoubtedly a worthwhile activity, it is also important to consider how the unreconstructed strip contributes to the everyday lives of its current users.”<sup>16</sup> Wyckoff and Davis discuss “daily life” and “everyday lives,” respectively. This study also stresses the importance of this type of interaction with these commercial spaces.

These thoroughfares are mainly lined by commercial development, including office use – with some residential and civic uses, including schools and churches. This is a product of “conventional zoning codes,” which contrasts sharply with the newer concepts of mixed-use and form-based zoning – often times found in downtowns and older neighborhoods, as well as newer, suburban “town centers.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, there is a clear distinction between the different zoning codes found along thoroughfares, whether they be commercial, residential, civic, etc.

This commercial development used by *in-city residents* generally takes two forms: nodal and linear/strip. When the thoroughfare intersects with another major thoroughfare, a commercial node typically develops, as real estate developers, construction companies, corporations, local officials, and other public and private stakeholders strive to gain an economic profit from local residents’ needs for products and services. These nodes can be both major and minor. Regardless of the acreage, there is at least one shopping center. Between

these nodes are the commercial strips, which include a variety of building types: strip malls, fast food restaurants, gas stations, car dealerships, office buildings and professional plazas, etc.

Nodes and strips include plenty of parking throughout and some landscaping, as well as various structures: free-standing signs, billboards, lighting, traffic signals, utility poles, and bus shelters.

These thoroughfares – which predominantly serve private vehicles, but sometimes include public transit, typically in the form of buses – are particularly important to the cities of the Sun Belt region, as they were initially extended into largely undeveloped areas. In many of these areas, particularly in the desert of the Southwest, there were few, if any, existing settlements. Therefore, many of these thoroughfares are straight, wide boulevards that cover many miles as they extend across the landscape – a manifestation of the Public Land Survey System.<sup>18</sup> The thoroughfares of the Sun Belt region, particularly its western portion, are distinct from the web of roadways in the Eastern United States. The latter have existed for decades and even centuries, and curve and bend – and undergo multiple name and route number changes – to connect different municipalities, both old and new.

Some of these thoroughfares are used to connect different cities and towns in a particular county or state, but they mainly serve the cities' residents in their *intra-city* travel. This sets commercial thoroughfares apart from highways used for cross-country, interstate, and inter-city travel, and separates the commercial development of the thoroughfare from roadside architecture and attractions.

Also, it is important to note that a commercial thoroughfare's purpose may have changed over the decades. In the past, they may have connected some of the few, scattered towns of a county, before these settlements were engulfed by the metropolitan area's

growth.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, some thoroughfares may technically serve as state highways – which is the case in Las Vegas. Nonetheless, most local residents would perceive these thoroughfares as within the city and its urban landscape, and very few individuals would associate these boulevards with their state highway numbers.

Finally, this study looks at all features and aspects of commercial thoroughfares, including older and newer buildings and structures. However, some temporal boundaries do need to be stated at the outset. By looking at the period of 1960 to 1990, and comparing that 30-year period to today, conclusions can be made about the past and present users of these commercial spaces, and the social evolution that occurred.

This 1960s through 1980s time frame was selected for important reasons. In 1960, Los Angeles became the nation's third largest city and Houston, for the first time, became one of the top ten largest cities in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Within 30-years, Sun Belt cities became the majority type of city in the top ten rankings<sup>21</sup> – as opposed to the cities of the Northeast and Midwest. During this three-decade period, Las Vegas also expanded in population, as reflected by its ever-lengthening commercial thoroughfares and their corresponding strips and nodes of development. During this period, cities like Las Vegas, with its numerous residential subdivisions and shopping centers selling a variety of brand name products, represented the stereotypical American Dream – as well as a place of good job opportunities and warm weather. Following 1990, the demographics begin to change dramatically, as Sun Belt cities like Las Vegas continued to grow and change. This growth has extended into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Fig. 1).

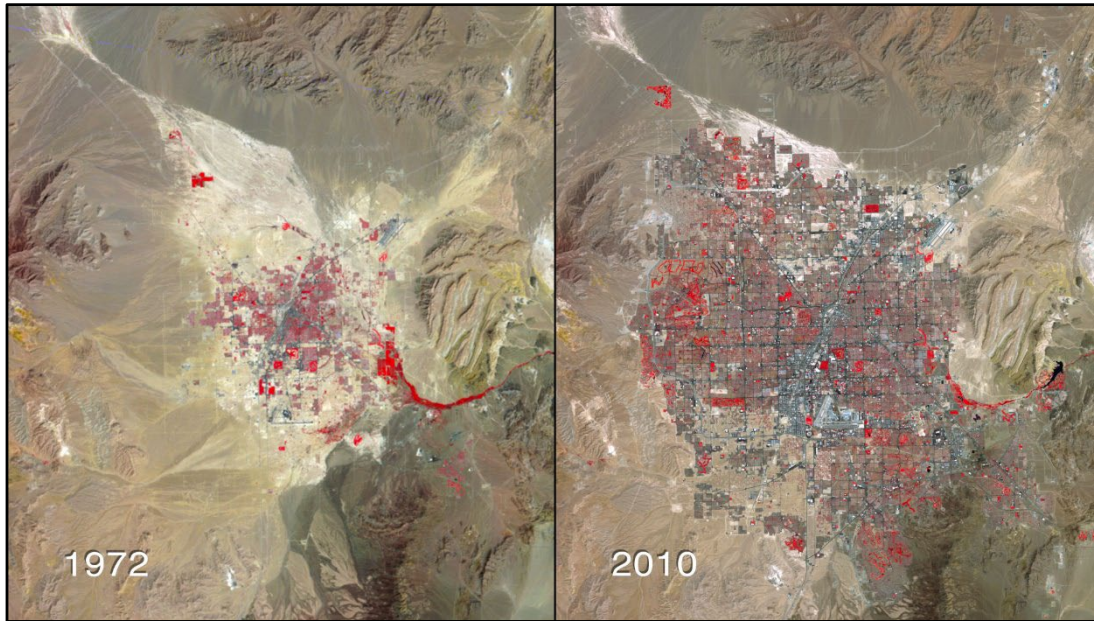


Fig. 1: Satellite images of the Las Vegas Valley in 1972 (left) and 2010 (right) show the astronomical growth of the city and its suburbs over nearly 40 years – something that has happened in cities throughout the Sun Belt region. The orderly grid of the commercial thoroughfares is visible. [Source: NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, Landsat Program (NASA and U.S. Geological Survey), NASA Visualization Explorer, 2011.]

By using a cultural landscape approach, I still considered properties constructed before 1960 and after 1990, as they are also important to the commercial thoroughfares' landscape, historic narrative, and social evolution. For the 1960s through 1980s, I analyzed historic newspaper articles and advertisements, photographs, and maps. This informed the in-person fieldwork that I conducted in Las Vegas in October 2021. This comparison between now and then revealed the city's social evolution and this, in turn, helped shape and produce the evaluative framework and conclusions that I present in Chapter V.

### Why Study Commercial Thoroughfares?

Commercial thoroughfares, with their more recent development of shopping centers and strip malls, are not the typical cultural resource studied by historic preservationists. Nonetheless, while out of the ordinary, they are not unusual by any means, as they have been discussed for decades at this point. As far back as 1982, geographer John Fraser Hart was arguing for the inclusion of the commercial strip – which he deemed “the bypass strip” – in the collection of “stereotypical American landscapes,” writing that “it represents the highest and best contemporary achievement of the American way of life for many ordinary Americans.”<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, shortly after the postwar era and the boom in automobile traffic, fast food, and nameless commercial strips, people were already thinking and talking about these features that are found everywhere in the American built environment. This is not surprising, considering its dominance of the nation’s culture during the second-half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup>.

The discussion surrounding commercial thoroughfares has been far from positive and has tended to be quite hostile. This dismissive criticism makes thoroughfares especially intriguing from a historic preservation perspective. Davis wrote in 1997, “As the twentieth century draws to a close, it is time to re-examine one of America’s most maligned and misunderstood landscapes: the automobile-oriented commercial strip.”<sup>23</sup> This is certainly still true over 20-years later. Echoing Davis, architect and urban planner Brenda Case Scheer describes this landscape as “one of the most exasperating, yet ubiquitous urban forms ever created. Occurring in nearly every settlement of any size in the country, the [commercial] strip is a familiar eyesore.”<sup>24</sup> Journalist Grady Clay’s description is especially memorable: “The dirty

old man of the urban scene is the highway strip.”<sup>25</sup> Despite being a major feature of the American built environment and at the center of millions of Americans’ daily routines, commercial thoroughfares and their development are unloved.

The importance of thoroughfares is regularly articulated in the field of urban planning. However, like other presentations on the topic, it is usually negative and focused on improving them for purposes of public transit, mixed-use, and walkability. Attorney and law professor Richard S. Geller describes the urban and suburban landscape of the thoroughfare: “Sprawl development often fails aesthetically. Gigantic signs directed to high-speed traffic dominate commercial roadways. Setback lines encourage developers to place massive, often half-empty parking lots alongside the roads, creating an auto-centric landscape without the architectural definition of adjacent buildings.”<sup>26</sup> This description very much reflects the work of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour in their groundbreaking text *Learning from Las Vegas*, where the buildings of the commercial strip are overshadowed by their signage.<sup>27</sup> One only has to look at the enormous, flashing signs of the Las Vegas Strip, which Venturi et al. studied in the early 1970s, and the wide, towering billboards of the Sunset Strip. As Venturi et al. famously quip, “It is an architecture of communication over space.”<sup>28</sup> Both strips are world-famous for their messaging through signs, which are notable features of the streetscapes and their infrastructure. In Las Vegas, the thematic signs promote the resorts’ many dining and entertainment offerings, while in Los Angeles they publicize the newest television shows and movies.

Geller says that this sprawling landscape, defined by features like the commercial thoroughfare, “has no sense of place or uniqueness.”<sup>29</sup> This study strongly disagrees, as the



thoroughfare and its development, including shopping centers, have served individuals and communities in the past and continue to do so in the present. This stereotype of the thoroughfare, with its strips and nodes of commercial development, is why an evaluative framework is needed. This framework will help historic preservation practitioners better understand this urban and suburban landscape's tangible features and intangible aspects, through acknowledgement and documentation. Otherwise, this heavily-criticized and misunderstood landscape will be painted with a broad-brush, and the important social narratives will be lost.

Echoing this, Wyckoff writes how Denver's Colfax Avenue, which represents an evolving commercial strip, "reminds urban geographers and American city- and suburb-dwellers alike of the need to *acknowledge* [emphasis added] and understand the increasing, ever-more-bewildering variety of commercial strip landscapes that are evolving today."<sup>30</sup> Historic preservationists are also obligated to "acknowledge" this cultural landscape central to the American experience.

Therefore, even though these commercial thoroughfares and their businesses may be seen as ugly or problematic by many (particularly outsiders), they have always been central to the lives of in-city residents. At times, their centrality to local individuals and communities has even extended beyond consumption of products and services. As just one example of this importance, a 1954 classified in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* lists the Hyde Park Shopping Center on West Charleston Boulevard as a "temporary meeting place" for a local church.<sup>31</sup> Thus, a shopping center could stand-in as a spiritual space.

Millions of Americans from the past 70-years identify with or relate – consciously or subconsciously – to these urban and suburban landscapes, as they have either grown up frequenting businesses along these well-traversed commercial thoroughfares and/or continue to do so. As diverse and multicultural communities settle along and near these thoroughfares, they continue to be spaces of community, culture, and memory. They are a key part of the Sun Belt region’s (and the nation’s) historic narrative and social evolution, and a significant stage in the built environment’s development – thus, they encompass a historic significance that could be placed under “Criterion A: Event” of NPS’s National Register program and its “Criteria For Evaluation.”<sup>32</sup>

This study and its evaluative framework fill a critical gap in the historic preservation literature. Even NPS, through its National Register program and cultural landscape guidance, focuses on the residential history of suburbanization, rather than the equally important commercial history.<sup>33</sup> For nearly 200-years, Americans have resided in suburban landscapes, and they have shopped at and frequented businesses in these landscapes – especially since World War II. Although she is also focused on residential development, historic preservationist Heather Bailey raises a crucial point that illuminates the gap that this study is trying to address. She writes, “While neighborhoods with high-art buildings...are an easier save, the proliferation of tract housing neighborhoods is a significant part of U.S. history and an important chapter in the evolution of the American residential landscape.”<sup>34</sup> Like tract housing, nondescript shopping centers sprang up along the innumerable commercial thoroughfares of America’s cities and suburbs. Despite blending into the landscape – after all, Scheer calls the commercial strip “one of the most...ubiquitous urban forms ever created” – they include an important

historic narrative and social history. So, to answer the question posed in Bailey's article, "Does this place really matter?" Yes, these thoroughfares and their commercial spaces matter.

Despite this cultural landscape being everywhere in America, we do not have tools for evaluating and documenting the built *commercial* environment. Highlighting this, architect and historic preservationist Mike Jackson writes, "Unfortunately, the survey materials for commercial architecture are far behind those for residential architecture."<sup>35</sup> Jackson goes on to mention the 1987 book, *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture* by architectural historian Richard Longstreth, "as the basic classification guide for anyone doing architectural surveys and National Register nominations"<sup>36</sup> – despite being over 30 years old. Additionally, the focus has almost always been on architecture, particularly when discussing commercial thoroughfares, where scholars and the public are quick to define the landscape as tasteless, with no acknowledgment of its past and present social value.

Studying the commercial thoroughfare and its corresponding development is the natural progression of the historic preservation field. Shapiro writes, "Where the very notion of what constitutes that 'recent past' is, in fact, constantly in flux by virtue of the march of time."<sup>37</sup> Acknowledging this, Shapiro references the drive to preserve and designate Miami Beach's Art Deco style buildings in the 1970s.<sup>38</sup> Whether it is Art Deco or Mid-Century Modern architecture, the modern-day preservationist views these styles as obvious contenders for historic designation, and letting them fall to the wrecking ball would be unacceptable.

Related to this idea but with a more disparaging tone, Davis writes, "As nostalgia works its way up through the decades at an ever-increasing pace, it seems inevitable that even the bland roadside architecture of the 1960s and 1970s will experience its share of misty-eyed

romanticism, commercialized revivalism, and academic endorsement.”<sup>39</sup> Davis was spot-on over 20-years ago. There are now movements to save the heavy concrete and austere buildings of 1960s and 1970s Brutalism, and 1980s Postmodernism – with its flashy colors, faux pediments, and exaggerated columns – is already being discussed, surveyed, documented, and historically designated. In addition to architecturally significant properties from the recent past, many preservationists are currently seeking out properties that highlight underrepresented communities and their narratives. Therefore, the commercial thoroughfare’s development should be no different, as it is an important layer in America’s cultural landscape and a key part of the nation’s historic and social narratives, particularly in the Sun Belt region.

#### Commentary on Commercial Thoroughfares and Commercial Spaces

J.B. Jackson has also written extensively about this particular linear landscape. In 1980, he eloquently wrote, “As in almost every other part of the landscape, the road or street or highway became the armature, the framework of the landscape. The piece of land no longer determined its composition.”<sup>40</sup> In this particular instance, Jackson is referring to the integration of the street and a city’s utilities, which led to “permanence,”<sup>41</sup> but this description is still relevant to how Jackson envisioned the thoroughfare and how its importance shaped, and continues to shape, American cities and suburbs. One only has to look at a map of Los Angeles, Phoenix, Dallas, or Orlando to observe the “armature” of commercial thoroughfares linking these metropolitan areas’ residential subdivisions, indoor shopping malls, and shopping centers. These patchworks of grids are even more pronounced with the advent of satellite mapping (e.g., Google Maps).

While J.B. Jackson bestows a great deal of attention on the thoroughfare (or highway) itself, he also writes:

The emphasis should be put not so much on the road or highway as on the broader landscape created or influenced by the highway. For the highway is merely a symbol of how we learned to organize space and movement...It is in that broader landscape that we can study how the dwelling partakes of the spirit of the highway, and the history of the dwelling over the last 150 years demonstrates the slow emergence of new ideas of community and of mobility.<sup>42</sup>

This concept of the thoroughfare as a reflection of organization (“to organize”) is compatible with Jackson’s other concept of “armature.” The thoroughfare, which fully developed because of the automobile, structured the “broader [Postwar] landscape” and continues to structure the contemporary city and suburb. The network of interlocking commercial thoroughfares provided the structure for public and private stakeholders, from county commissioners to construction companies. The thoroughfares created commercial development and this development spurred thoroughfares. Since the commercial thoroughfare is the main feature of these cities and suburbs, it provides the route for studying this particular cultural landscape’s commercial spaces – shopping centers, strip malls, indoor shopping malls, parking lots with free-standing signs, etc. – and the accompanying historic and social narratives that have evolved.

Also, scholar Kim Dovey has brought attention to “place as assemblage,”<sup>43</sup> a concept which could be interpreted as a modern-day version of J.B. Jackson’s “armature.” Once again, there is this idea of structuring the urban landscape around and through the thoroughfare. Dovey writes, “For instance, a street is not a thing nor is it just a collection of discrete things. The buildings, trees, cars, sidewalks, goods, people, signs, etc. all come together to become the street, but it is the connections between them that makes it an assemblage or a place.”<sup>44</sup> Shortly thereafter, he continues, “It is the flows of life, traffic, goods and money that give the

street its intensity and its sense of place. All places are assemblages.”<sup>45</sup> Commercial development along strips and in nodes, with changing uses serving changing communities over time, could be interpreted as “flows of life.”

As Sun Belt cities’ demographics have changed over the decades, many of the commercial spaces along thoroughfares have evolved in tandem. Many businesses in this landscape – which in the past catered to White, middle-income residents – are now owned and operated by and/or serve diverse and multicultural communities. This social evolution in particular – which includes both tangible features and intangible aspects – is what makes the cultural landscape of the thoroughfare worth studying further, and is the focus of this study and its evaluative framework, which is presented in Chapter V.

It is also important to clarify that this study uses the term “space” as opposed to “place,” since this study does not seek to examine personal connections and attachments between users and the commercial buildings and structures along thoroughfares. In the fields of historic preservation and urban planning, this type of deeper connection/attachment between an individual and a physical location typically means there is a “sense of place.” This location can be anywhere on a map, as connections and attachments are related to a variety of human emotions, and one location that is quite meaningful to one person may be completely unimportant to another.

Dovey succinctly explains these two words, which are often used interchangeably, and their drastically different meanings: “A large part of what distinguishes place from space is that place has an intensity that connects sociality to spatiality in everyday life. ...While a space may have physical dimensions, it is intensity that gives place its potency and its primacy.”<sup>46</sup> This

terminology used by Dovey is similar to his wording when describing the “assemblage.” This study mainly focuses on how the spaces (i.e., buildings and structures) along commercial thoroughfares have been used and physically altered by different individuals and communities over the decades – rather than any “intensity” of feelings or emotions. Now, someone may convert or repurpose a particular commercial space because they have a connection or attachment to it. Nonetheless, this study does not explicitly evaluate these types of conversions. Instead, this study views conversions as something that organically happens along commercial thoroughfares as cities and their demographics change. Often times, a repurposing is driven by social and economic factors.

Some individuals using a commercial thoroughfare and patronizing its various businesses may have a strong connection to a particular supermarket, ethnic restaurant, barber shop, or nail salon and may consider it a “place” for the local community, as they enjoy buying products imported from their country of birth or conversing with others in their native tongue. In contrast to this, other individuals may view a specific business as strictly a “space” and a stop along their daily routine, where they purchase their groceries or get their haircut. While this difference in perceptions and meanings is interesting and important to the fields of historic preservation and urban planning, gauging these differences is beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, it does speak to intangible culture, which is one of the focuses of the evaluative framework.

#### The Selection of Las Vegas, Nevada for a Case Study: *Learning from Las Vegas* in 2022

Las Vegas, Nevada is the ideal location for this study’s cultural landscape analysis and the application of an evaluative framework. The following chapters will explain the selection in-

depth, but it is worth mentioning a few reasons at this time. First, Las Vegas' proximity to Los Angeles, just under 300 miles apart, is key. Los Angeles was the first Sun Belt city – before the term was even used – to become one of the nation's largest cities (in the 1920 Census).<sup>47</sup> Los Angeles and its massive expanse of suburbs have been critical to the evolution of commercial thoroughfares – from Wilshire Boulevard during the interwar period to Sunset Boulevard during the postwar era – and their corresponding development – from the shopping centers and supermarkets of the past to the swap meets of the present. This represents a social evolution in Sun Belt cities, and Las Vegas illustrates this just as well.

Both cities are known for their iconic commercial strips: The Sunset Strip and the Las Vegas Strip, two of the world's most famous thoroughfares. Historian Carl Abbott convincingly argues: "Many traits of Los Angeles are drawn even more clearly in Las Vegas. ...Its *central component* is the commercial strip, a new main street made up of separate *nodes* of activity that are separated by parking lots, announced by huge signs, and connected by automobiles [emphases added]."<sup>48</sup> Abbott and other scholars have guided this study and its focus on commercial strips and nodes, which come together to form the commercial thoroughfare in cities like Las Vegas (Fig. 2). This study examines commercial development along portions of six selected commercial thoroughfares in the Las Vegas Valley: West Charleston Boulevard, Decatur Boulevard, Maryland Parkway, Rancho Drive, East Sahara Avenue, and West Sahara Avenue. Importantly, these selected thoroughfares were central to Las Vegas' development in the 1960s through 1980s. A map from 1960 shows a relatively small city, with development centered around Downtown Las Vegas (Fig. 3). In comparison, a map from 1984 shows the



A vibrant, crowded street scene in Las Vegas, likely the Strip, featuring numerous neon signs for casinos and hotels. Visible signs include 'Colonial House', 'Race Book', 'Fashion Square', 'Dirty Sally's', and 'Backgammon'. The street is filled with cars, and the sky is clear.

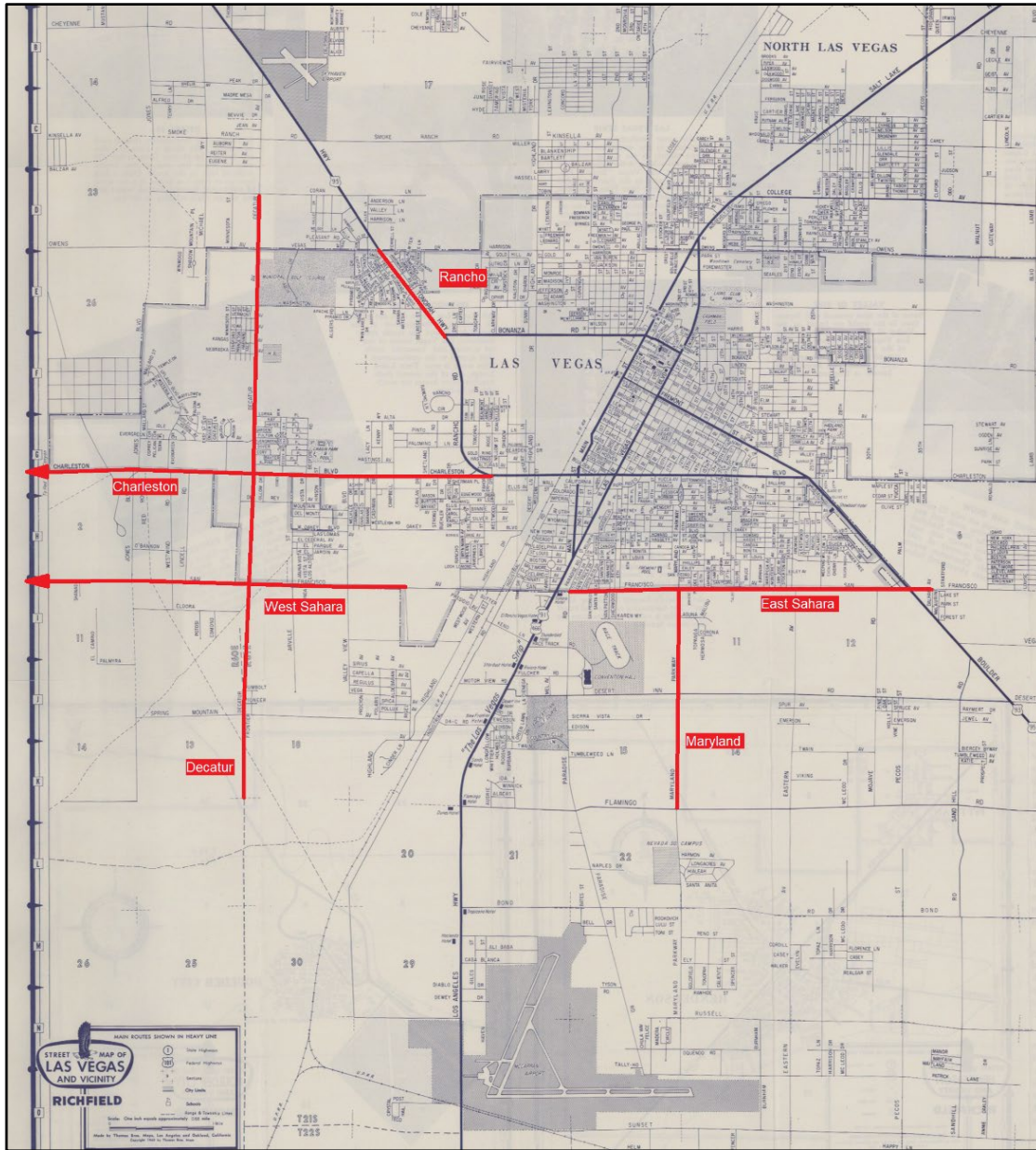


Fig. 3: The extent of Las Vegas' development in 1960. I have highlighted and labeled the six selected thoroughfares for the reader's reference – despite portions of West Sahara Avenue and Decatur Boulevard having not yet been completed. Also, at the time, Sahara was still known as San Francisco Avenue. [Source: Street map of Las Vegas and vicinity, 1960, Southern Nevada and Las Vegas: History in Maps, Special Collections & Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada (modified by author).]



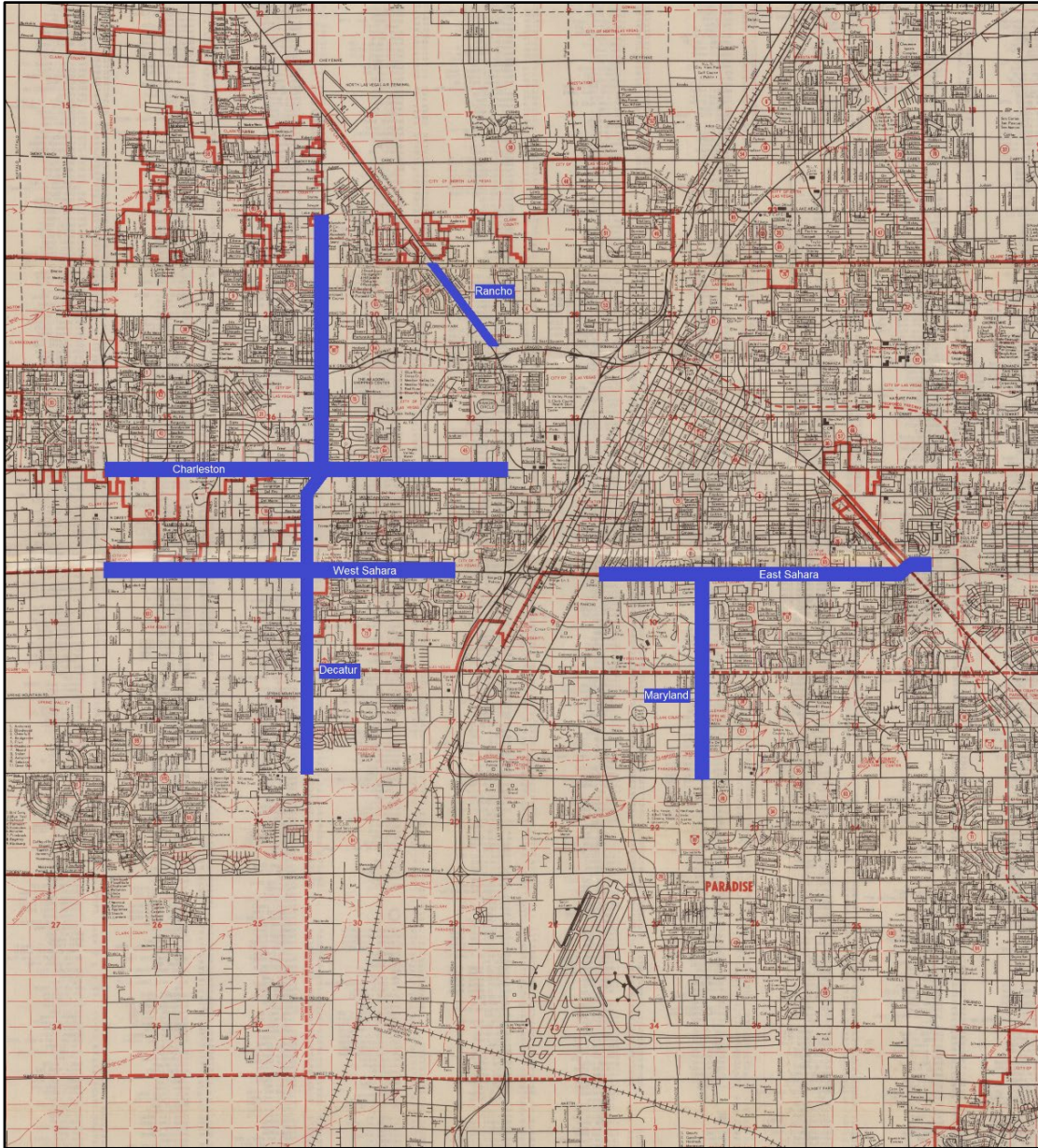


Fig. 4: The extent of Las Vegas' development in 1984. The growth of the city over roughly 25 years – represented by the many roadways added to the map since 1960 – is apparent. Additionally, the selected commercial thoroughfares are main transportation arteries stretching from Downtown Las Vegas and older neighborhoods to the most recent development. I have highlighted and labeled the six selected thoroughfares for the reader's reference. [Source: Street map of greater Las Vegas, Nevada, 1984, Southern Nevada and Las Vegas: History in Maps, Special Collections & Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada (modified by author).]

Second, despite being known as an international vacation destination and a hub of gambling and entertainment, Las Vegas' development is indicative of growth in the United States over the past seven decades, as Clark County's (the surrounding county's) population has gone from 48,000 people in 1950 to 2.265 million people in 2019.<sup>49</sup> With this growth, a vast built environment has developed in a relatively short period of time, and the city's cultural landscape is representative of other cities in the Sun Belt region. When looking at the Sun Belt region and its cities, the Rice University Kinder Institute for Urban Research says, "Because they were mostly built after World War II, many Sun Belt cities also feature wide arterial streets with fast-moving traffic,"<sup>50</sup> (i.e., thoroughfares) – of which Las Vegas has excelled at constructing.

Additionally, this study focuses on the city's social evolution, as illustrated through changing commercial spaces along these thoroughfares; and Las Vegas is symbolic of the demographic change that has occurred throughout the Sun Belt region since World War II. In the 1960s through 1980s, Las Vegas was a largely White, middle-income city. Today, Las Vegas and Clark County, which is now the 13<sup>th</sup> most populous county in the nation,<sup>51</sup> are home to significant communities of Latinx and Asians – and numerous additional communities, from Ethiopians to Hawaiians.

Third, Las Vegas played a starring role in Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's 1972 book on Postmodern architecture, *Learning From Las Vegas*. While this text is mainly focused on the Las Vegas Strip and its string of casinos and hotels, with their towering and sparkling signs, it has provided insight for many readers who live in a built environment that has been heavily shaped by the commercial strip. After all, the Las Vegas Strip is just one version, albeit a particularly famous version, of the commercial strip, which is found

everywhere – from the suburbs of Northern Virginia to the Puget Sound. This book has inspired readers, as it discusses buildings, parking lots, and signs. These physical features are relevant to other commercial thoroughfares in Las Vegas, the Sun Belt region, and around the nation. Commercial thoroughfares and their development are an important cultural landscape, and Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour took an analytical approach to this feature of the built environment in Las Vegas. Therefore, Las Vegas is the perfect city for analyzing commercial thoroughfares in the Sun Belt region, and the ideal setting for the development and application of an evaluative framework (Fig. 5).

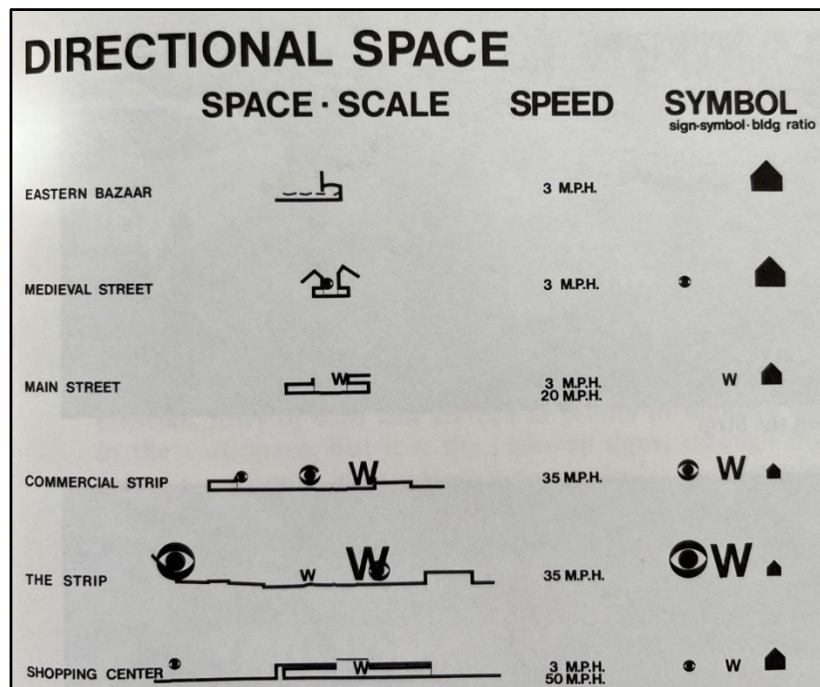


Fig. 5: In the groundbreaking architecture publication *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972), Venturi et al. took an analytical look at Las Vegas, particularly its internationally-recognized Strip. In this graphic from the book, the reader gains an understanding of signs in history and space, and how signs communicate to individuals. Therefore, the bigger, the better, with the building as an afterthought in the context of a commercial strip and its speeding drivers. Using Las Vegas as the basis for this study and its evaluative framework stands on firm theoretical ground first conveyed by Venturi et al. [Source: *Learning From Las Vegas*, Venturi et al., The MIT Press, revised edition, 1994.]

## Study Overview

Chapter II presents a historic narrative that traces the development of commercial thoroughfares and their corresponding buildings and structures, particularly shopping centers. This chapter illustrates how thoroughfares have been a key feature in America's built environment since the beginning of the nation. As thoroughfares changed and stretched farther into the landscape, the commercial spaces along them evolved as well. Los Angeles and other Sun Belt cities like Las Vegas continued to grow, and this growth would be heavily shaped through deal making between private and public stakeholders, as well as local and federal policies and various trends. Most importantly, these commercial thoroughfares of the 1960s through 1980s largely catered to White, middle-income families – something that was reflected in the newspaper advertisements of the time.

While Chapter II focuses on the historic narrative related to commercial thoroughfares – specifically the 1960 to 1990 era in Las Vegas – Chapter III presents these postwar commercial strips and nodes as locations of social evolution. Today, these thoroughfares and their commercial spaces, through tangible features and intangible aspects, illustrate changing uses and communities served. In Las Vegas, many of the flexible commercial spaces, from supermarkets and discount retailers to fast food restaurants, have been repurposed for diverse and multicultural uses, as Sun Belt cities' demographics have changed – particularly since 1990. There are also many surprising and innovative conversions, such as shopping center storefronts that now house churches and government agencies, and single-family homes that have been repurposed for commercial and office uses. Most importantly, this chapter focuses on three patterns that are representative of these buildings from the 1960s through 1980s and their

subsequent changes: two swap meets, a shopping center, and an indoor shopping mall. This chapter also includes an overview of historic integrity, the “50-year rule,” and the limitations of the National Register program and its guidelines.

Chapter IV provides an overview of the methods used, including the fieldwork that was conducted in Las Vegas in October 2021, and its related research tools. This fieldwork was inspired by the work of Peirce Lewis and his axioms. Therefore, this chapter gives an overview of his seven tips, which can be found in his article on “reading the landscape.” This chapter also includes information related to the six commercial thoroughfares’ selection, as well as accompanying maps and graphics illustrating these cultural landscapes, including the many physical features discussed throughout this study.

Finally, Chapter V presents the evaluative framework that can be used by historic preservationists in other municipalities – particularly when looking at cultural landscapes like commercial thoroughfares and their development. This chapter discusses NPS’s approach to cultural landscapes, which is largely focused on the tangible features, and revises and incorporates the agency’s approach into the framework as *Seen Features*. It then discusses the work of Richard H. Schein, and incorporates his theoretical perspective into the framework as *Unseen Aspects*. Schein’s particular approach also leads to including *Next Steps* in the framework. This provides preservationists with actionable steps that they can take in their own communities, following the research and documentation stage. Some possible actions are briefly discussed.

In closing, the evaluative framework is applied to Las Vegas’ Boulevard Mall, which is located on Maryland Parkway. Thus, the framework’s individual steps are followed and applied

to a particular cultural landscape. This example illustrates the relevance and applicability of the framework to the indoor shopping mall, the commercial thoroughfare, and Las Vegas, which, in turn, shows its usefulness to preservation practitioners in their own towns and cities.

Importantly, the framework is flexible, as it can be applied on a small-scale, such as with an individual development along a commercial thoroughfare, or on a large-scale, including multiple developments along a commercial strip or at a commercial node.

### Looking Ahead: Presenting a Historic Narrative

The social evolution along Las Vegas' commercial thoroughfares – which encompasses both tangible features and intangible aspects in converted commercial spaces – is particularly fascinating. This evolution found in Las Vegas suggests that other cities' thoroughfares may also have social narratives of interest to historic preservationists. Before discussing this evolution, it is important to present a historic narrative. This narrative starts with a national context, before narrowing to focus on the Sun Belt region and Las Vegas, Nevada during the 1960s through 1980s – and the local residents who patronized these businesses found at the commercial thoroughfares' strips and nodes. This overview presents important information that shaped the development of the evaluative framework. It also assists preservation practitioners in understanding and applying the framework to their own municipalities' commercial thoroughfares. This will lead to the acknowledgement and documentation of these undervalued cultural landscapes.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Rice University Kinder Institute for Urban Research, the term "Sun Belt" was first used in 1969 by Kevin Phillips. See: "The Urban Sun Belt: An Overview" (Houston, TX: Rice University Kinder Institute for Urban Research, 2020), <https://kinder.rice.edu/sites/default/files/documents/KIUR%20-%20The%20Urban%20Sun%20Belt%205.pdf>, 4.

<sup>2</sup> "The Urban Sun Belt: An Overview," 4-5.



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<sup>3</sup> Kelli Shapiro, "From Modernism to McDonald's: Ideology, Controversy, and the Movement to Preserve the Recent Past," *Journal of Architectural Education* 61, no. 2 (November 2007): 10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40480754>.

<sup>4</sup> Shapiro, 12.

<sup>5</sup> John Brinckerhoff (J.B.) Jackson, "By Way of Conclusion, How to Study the Landscape," in *Landscape in Sight, Looking at America*, edited by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, 316-17 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> "Cultural Landscapes 101," Article, National Park Service, last modified January 20, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/cultural-landscapes-101.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Peirce Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape, Some Guides to the American Scene," 1, (1979), [https://www.uky.edu/academy/sites/www.uky.edu.academy/files/Lewis,%20Axioms%20for%20Reading%20the%20Landscape\\_0.pdf](https://www.uky.edu/academy/sites/www.uky.edu.academy/files/Lewis,%20Axioms%20for%20Reading%20the%20Landscape_0.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> NPS has two lists of "landscape characteristics." At "Cultural Landscapes 101," there are 13 features. In the National Register Bulletin on *Historic Residential Suburbs*, there are 11 characteristics. There is plenty of similarity and overlap between the two lists. Nonetheless, for simplicity, this study will adhere to the 11 features found in the bulletin.

<sup>9</sup> National Park Service, *How to Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes*, by J. Timothy Keller and Genevieve P. Keller, National Register Bulletin 18, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB18-Complete.pdf>, 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> "Cultural Landscapes 101."

<sup>11</sup> Richard H. Schein, "A Methodological Framework for Interpreting Ordinary Landscapes: Lexington, Kentucky's Courthouse Square," *Geographical Review* 99, no. 3 (July 2009): 377-402, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40377399>.

<sup>12</sup> "Cultural geography," Human Geography, Dartmouth Library Guides, Research Guides, Dartmouth Library, last modified January 24, 2022, [https://researchguides.dartmouth.edu/human\\_geography/cultural](https://researchguides.dartmouth.edu/human_geography/cultural).

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> William Wyckoff, "Denver's Aging Commercial Strip," *Geographical Review* 82, no. 3 (July 1992): 282, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/215352>.

<sup>16</sup> Timothy Davis, "The Miracle Mile Revisited: Recycling, Renovation, and Simulation along the Commercial Strip," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 7, Exploring Everyday Landscapes (1997): 96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3514387>.

<sup>17</sup> Richard S. Geller, "The Legality of Form-Based Zoning Codes," *Journal of Land Use & Environmental Law* 26, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 35-91, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42842912>.

<sup>18</sup> Greg Bunce, "The Western Grid, Explained," Utah Geospatial Resource Center, March 11, 2019, <https://gis.utah.gov/the-western-grid/>.

<sup>19</sup> For example, before Las Vegas, Nevada (founded in 1905) became a major American city, the nearby City of Henderson (established in 1953) was physically separated by desert. Now, due to the extraordinary population growth of the Las Vegas Valley, the two cities seamlessly blend into each other.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 19. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1960," June 15, 1998, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/pop-twps0027/tab19.txt>.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 22. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1990," June 15, 1998, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/pop-twps0027/tab22.txt>.

<sup>22</sup> John Fraser Hart, "The Bypass Strip as an Ideal Landscape," *Geographical Review* 72, no. 2 (April 1982): 218, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/214868>.

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- <sup>23</sup> Davis, 93.
- <sup>24</sup> Brenda Case Scheer, "Strip Development and How to Read It," in *Retrofitting Sprawl: Addressing Seventy Years of Failed Urban Form*, edited by Emily Talen, 32 (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015).
- <sup>25</sup> Grady Clay, *Close-Up, How to Read the American City*, Phoenix ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 85.
- <sup>26</sup> Geller, 38.
- <sup>27</sup> Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 8-9, 13, 18.
- <sup>28</sup> Venturi et al., 8.
- <sup>29</sup> Geller, 38.
- <sup>30</sup> Wyckoff, 292.
- <sup>31</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), December 10, 1954: 21, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvcld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16D2E93028B7D4DD%402435087-16D18EC4F8C908C7%4020-16D18EC4F8C908C7%40>.
- <sup>32</sup> There are four significance criteria: A, B, C, and D. Criterion A says, "Properties can be eligible for the National Register if they are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history." See: National Park Service, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, National Register Bulletin 15, 1990, revised for Internet 1997, [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15\\_web508.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15_web508.pdf), 2, 12, 13.
- <sup>33</sup> See: National Park Service, *Historic Residential Suburbs: Guidelines for Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places*, by David L. Ames and Linda Flint McClelland, National Register Bulletin, 2002, [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB46\\_Suburbs\\_part1\\_508.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB46_Suburbs_part1_508.pdf) and [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB46\\_Suburbs\\_part2\\_508.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB46_Suburbs_part2_508.pdf).
- <sup>34</sup> Heather Bailey, "Does This Place Really Matter? The Preservation Debate in Denver's Postwar Suburbs," in *Making Suburbia: New Histories of Everyday America*, edited by John Archer, Paul J.P. Sandul, and Katherine Solomonson, 121 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- <sup>35</sup> Mike Jackson, "Modernism on Main Street: The Dilemma of the Half-modern Building," *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 48, no. 2-3 (2017): 34, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26250097>.
- <sup>36</sup> Mike Jackson 34.
- <sup>37</sup> Shapiro, 12.
- <sup>38</sup> Shapiro, 6-7.
- <sup>39</sup> Davis, 95.
- <sup>40</sup> J.B. Jackson, "By Way of Conclusion," 316-17.
- <sup>41</sup> J.B. Jackson, "By Way of Conclusion," 316.
- <sup>42</sup> J.B. Jackson, "By Way of Conclusion," 317.
- <sup>43</sup> Kim Dovey, "Place as Assemblage," in *Becoming Places: Urbanism/Architecture/Identity/Power* (London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009).
- <sup>44</sup> Dovey, "Place as Assemblage," 16.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>46</sup> Kim Dovey, "Making Sense of Place," in *Becoming Places: Urbanism/Architecture/Identity/Power* (London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 3.

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 15. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1920," June 15, 1998, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/pop-twps0027/tab15.txt>.

<sup>48</sup> Carl Abbott, "Southwestern Cityscapes: Approaches to an American Urban Environment," in *Essays on Sunbelt Cities and Recent Urban America*, edited by Robert B. Fairbanks and Kathleen Underwood, 64 (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1990).

<sup>49</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *1950 Census of Population: Volume 1. Number of Inhabitants*, 28-5, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1950/population-volume-1/vol-01-31.pdf>.

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<sup>50</sup> "The Urban Sun Belt: An Overview," 13.

<sup>51</sup> "2020 Population and Housing State Data," Census Interactive Gallery, Census Infographics & Visualizations, Library, U.S. Census Bureau, last modified August 12, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/2020-population-and-housing-state-data.html>.

## CHAPTER II

### THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF COMMERCIAL THOROUGHFARES, AND THEIR HISTORIC NARRATIVE IN LAS VEGAS, 1960 - 1990

#### Introduction

Commercial thoroughfares have always been central to the story of American cities and their development, from the first settlements and cities on the East Coast to the industrial metropolises of the Midwest to the growing Sun Belt cities and suburbs of the South and Southwest. This chapter traces the historic narrative of this important cultural landscape. It begins with a broad overview of commercial development found along thoroughfares. This narrative falls into two sections: the first presents commercial thoroughfares prior to World War II and the second presents postwar commercial thoroughfares, which are often represented by automobile-centric commercial strips dotted with signs.

This chapter then provides a brief overview of Las Vegas, Nevada's history, growth, and development, and the case study city's relevance to this wider narrative. This chapter then closes with a discussion of Las Vegas' commercial development along this study's six selected commercial thoroughfares, and how this development was influenced by local, regional, and national trends. This discussion builds upon the information presented in the historic narrative.

#### Commercial Thoroughfares and their Development Prior to World War II

Thoroughfares defined early American cities, whether it be Broadway or the Bowery in New York City, Market and Broad streets in Philadelphia, or Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington.

They were centers of commerce and ceremony. Additionally, some thoroughfares had a more residential character, with the posh homes of the elite, like Beacon Street in Boston.

Thoroughfares were also found on a smaller scale, in towns outside of the nation's largest cities. Therefore, one could argue that the concept of the thoroughfare stretches back to the quintessential American Main Street.

Historic preservationist Chester H. Liebs takes this approach in *Main Street to Miracle Mile, American Roadside Architecture*. With a strong focus on highway-type businesses, Liebs looks at the thoroughfare as a timeline. He writes, "The first stop along the roadside commercial time line is the corridor of business activity in the heart of most towns and cities – a corridor known literally or generically as Main Street."<sup>52</sup> When looking at the historic development of the American city, downtown – which was largely devoted to commerce and civic purposes – dominated for many decades.

Downtown had its thoroughfare – or multiple thoroughfares in the larger cities – where the most important businesses, public buildings, and institutions were located, something Liebs discusses in his timeline approach: "Whether in Lewiston, Maine, or New Orleans, they [Main Streets] had become the hardest working thoroughfares in town."<sup>53</sup> Over the decades, "shopping streets" developed and "long fingers of development" started to compete with Main Street and challenge its primacy.<sup>54</sup> This new competition was spurred by cities' streetcar systems, which created "clusters" around a stop.<sup>55</sup> Another term for these clusters is "nodes" – a term used in some literature, but also in professions like urban planning.

Thanks to expanding streetcar tracks, multiple, smaller nodes started competing with downtown, as well as each other. Importantly, historian Kenneth T. Jackson, in his

comprehensive historic narrative *Crabgrass Frontier, The Suburbanization of the United States*, writes: “Subdividers lobbied with municipal governments to extend city services, they pressured streetcar companies to send track into developing sections, and they set the property lines for the individual homes.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, there was a strong interplay between real estate interests, local governments, and private transit corporations. Also, taking part in this land “conversion” were “property owners, speculators, banks, private lenders, builders, and buyers.”<sup>57</sup> This mix of private and public partnerships, with its wide range of actors and deal making, has continued to this day and has crafted the urban and suburban landscape.

Streetcars expanded cities to a whole new scale that was unimaginable only decades before. This is especially the case in the relatively flat industrial cities of the Midwest, such as Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, and Cleveland – and later on in the Los Angeles Basin, where growth took place at a brisk pace. With these new streetcar lines came new thoroughfares. Kenneth Jackson discusses railroad businessman Henry E. Huntington’s direct influence on Los Angeles and its suburbs. Jackson writes, “Huntington’s ‘big red cars’ soon became as familiar as the orange groves through which they swayed and clattered,” and continues, “He [Huntington] initiated the Southern California sprawl that still baffles visitors.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, many postwar and contemporary commercial strips and highways have their roots in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

As cities expanded across the landscape, they also extended across the continent – often times through an orderly grid, thanks in part to the Public Land Survey System.<sup>59</sup> In 1850, St. Louis became the eighth largest city in the nation and the first city west of the Mississippi River to enter the top ten largest cities.<sup>60</sup> In 1860, Chicago shot to number nine, and from then

on would sit in the top ten.<sup>61</sup> In 1890, Cleveland would join the top ten, followed by Detroit 20 years later.<sup>62</sup> And with these cities came their notable thoroughfares: Olive Street and Lindell Boulevard in St. Louis, Prairie and Michigan avenues in Chicago, Euclid Avenue in Cleveland, and Woodward Avenue in Detroit.

These new commercial thoroughfares in these growing cities included “taxpayers.”<sup>63</sup> Liebs defines these as “commercial buildings along the streetcar routes” that were “interim improvements designed to produce enough revenue to pay the taxes and hold the property for the future.”<sup>64</sup> These two-to-three-story buildings were constructed throughout American cities. Today, historic preservationists know these buildings well. They are the small-to-medium-sized brick masonry buildings found along the main thoroughfares leading out of a downtown. In the past, they may have housed dry goods and general stores, automotive repair shops and garages, bicycle shops, or dress and hat stores. But now they have either fallen on hard times and are vacant, with a corresponding ghost sign, or have been gentrified and turned into bookstores, coffee shops, gyms and yoga studios, or luxury loft apartments – possibly with a modern addition. Although this phenomenon is found in cities like Los Angeles, as Liebs illustrates, it is arguably less common in Sun Belt cities, particularly in the Southwest, where there were not extensive streetcar systems (if at all) nor increased development around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Liebs adds that, contrary to the financial wishes of the numerous real estate developers and business owners, the “taxpayer strips” stuck around – a fact that is supported simply by viewing the contemporary built environment. Liebs writes, “Instead of becoming more densely packed, cities simply continued to sprawl. ...As it turned out, taxpayer strips were zones of

transition. ...and had become the evolutionary link between Main Street and the thousands of miles of bright strips of highway commerce that unfold across the landscape today.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, the simple commercial blocks were never replaced by 10-or-12-story office buildings. And why would it be replaced when the city could just continue to grow farther out, along the commercial thoroughfares, towards the county line?

Additionally, due to the influence of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the corresponding City Beautiful Movement became popular, not only in the design and construction of numerous grand buildings, but also in the establishment of parkways and boulevards. This further expanded Americans’ understanding of what constituted a thoroughfare. Roadways were no longer always simple and narrow, hemmed in by brick buildings. Rather, roadways could be quite elegant and wide, with plenty of greenery for the local residents to enjoy. These parkway systems sprouted up in major cities: Brooklyn (New York City), Buffalo, and Kansas City, just to name a few.

The parkway was very much a contemporary of the automobile. And with the automobile, the commercial thoroughfare was no longer closely linked to the streetcar. With these changes, there was once again private and public partnerships. Although this time different players were involved. Kenneth Jackson writes:

By the 1920s, a coalition of private-pressure groups, including tire manufacturers and dealers, parts suppliers, oil companies, service-station owners, road builders, and land developers were lobbying for new streets. ...they justified public financing for such projects on the theory that roadway improvements would pay for themselves by increasing property-tax revenues along the route.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the new parkways and their element of leisure, thoroughfares outside of the city center had a highway-oriented aspect to them, with businesses catering to the automobile owner and



their needs, whether it be gasoline, a tire change, or a tune-up. Therefore, this period was very much the beginnings of what would become the postwar commercial strip.

Thoroughfares soon extended beyond the streetcar suburbs, especially in the interwar years of the 1920s and 1930s. Kenneth Jackson succinctly articulates how revolutionary the automobile was in at least one respect. He writes, “The real significance of the motor vehicle lay in its ability to move laterally or perpendicular to the fixed tracks, and thus open up land for settlement previously regarded as too remote.”<sup>67</sup> Streetcars, and their limited stops surrounded by clusters of buildings, were appearing to be quite obsolete when compared to the shiny, new Fords rolling off of the assembly line in Michigan.

In 1920, Los Angeles became the nation’s tenth largest city.<sup>68</sup> Although San Francisco had previously been in the top ten for a short time, from 1870 through 1900,<sup>69</sup> the top tier placement of this particular California city was more remarkable and better reflected the direction of America’s urban development. This was a city of citrus, oil, and moviemaking that was being constructed, for the most part, around the automobile. And decades before the term “Sun Belt” was coined, Los Angeles was very much the first Sun Belt city to reach the top ten.

Around this time, the term “Miracle Mile” enters the conversation, which Liebs defines as “busy roadside trading places.”<sup>70</sup> Historic preservationist Thomas W. Hanchett writes about “business nodes” (i.e., clusters) which were integrated into cities’ streetcar systems.<sup>71</sup> Hanchett writes how, with the growing use of the automobile, “these nodes expanded into ‘miracle mile’ strips with motels, auto showrooms, and the occasional early supermarket joining the ‘convenience’ stores.”<sup>72</sup> Wilshire Boulevard’s “Miracle Mile” in Los Angeles is the premiere example of this early commercial strip development and density, which was represented by

numerous businesses, from department stores to supermarkets, situated along an automobile-centric commercial thoroughfare outside of the city center, *but* still catering to in-city residents (Fig. 6). As Kenneth Jackson descriptively writes, “Every multi-lane ribbon of concrete was like the touch of Midas, transforming old pastures into precious property.”<sup>73</sup> While still paramount, downtown and the streetcar suburbs were starting to lose their wealth and attractiveness, as the economic center of gravity was moving outward.

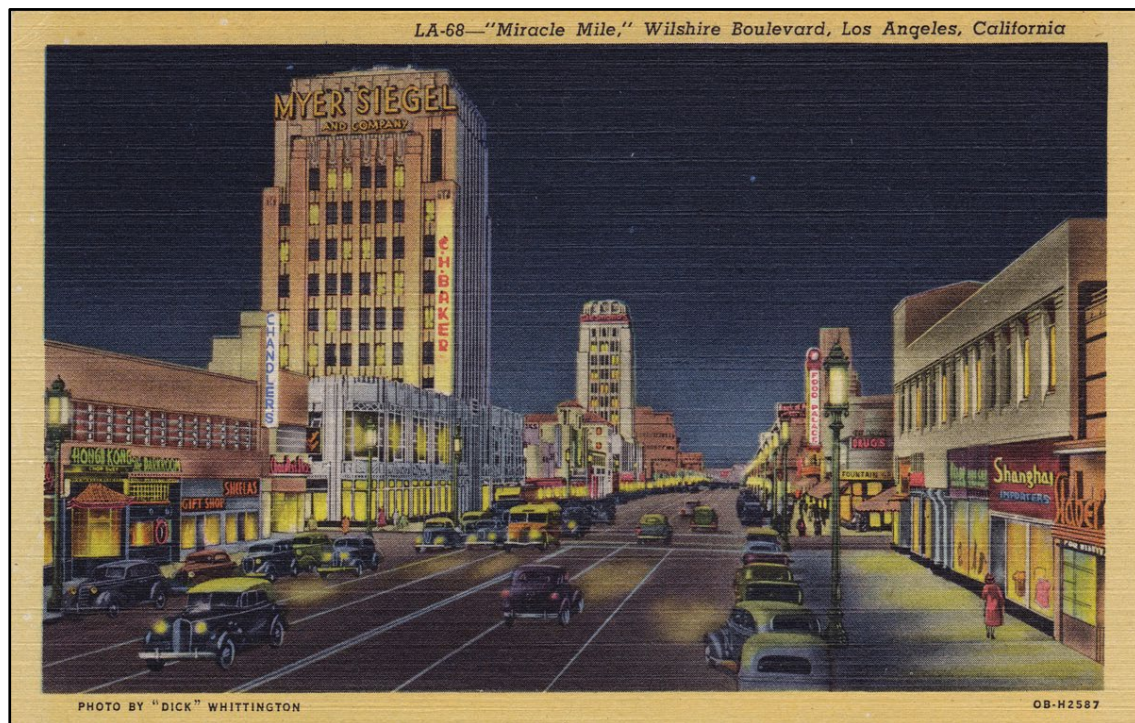


Fig. 6: The most-famous “Miracle Mile” is Los Angeles’ Wilshire Boulevard, which stretches westward from Downtown Los Angeles, through Beverly Hills, to Santa Monica. At its peak during the interwar years of the 1920s and 1930s, it was lined with department stores, supermarkets, and other businesses catering to in-city residents with automobiles. This colorful postcard is from approximately 1940, and makes the commercial thoroughfare look especially appealing. [Source: Miracle Mile Postcard, Circa 1940, Dick Whittington Studio, Miracle Mile Historical Photo Collection, Miracle Mile Residential Association.]

Following the Miracle Mile’s heyday of the 1920s and 1930s, a 1956 submission to the academic journal *American Speech* inquired about the term “Miracle Mile.”<sup>74</sup> The following year, someone responded by referencing a “flamboyant” portion of Wilshire Boulevard in Los

Angeles and its “success,” which led to a wider adoption of the term.<sup>75</sup> They also added: “A Los Angeles realtor, A. W. Ross, is given credit for creating the flourishing development. His efforts to get the appropriate commercial zoning and to control the kinds of buildings that went into the area are said to have begun in 1923. Mrs. Dee Davis...gives 1929 as the date when the expression *Miracle Mile* was first used orally.”<sup>76</sup> Therefore, the commercial strip aesthetic of the thoroughfare dates to at least the interwar period. This makes sense, considering the rising influence of the automobile and the waning relevance of the streetcar.<sup>77</sup> It created a new landscape that was neither wholly urban and commercial, nor fully suburban and residential.

The commercial thoroughfare of this period redefined “clusters” and “nodes.” Like other authors, architectural historian Richard Longstreth brings attention to the node, its long history, and its Southern California roots. He writes, “A scheme devised in 1927 by the Los Angeles city planning office was among the first, calling for nodal concentration where major arteries intersected. Stores were set back to be aligned with neighboring houses, but more important to provide space for parking.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, as the thoroughfare evolved, so did its corresponding commercial buildings and structures.

Longstreth’s description brings to mind the traditional “L”-shaped shopping center,<sup>79</sup> with its grocery store, pharmacy and/or hardware store, as well as some additional shops – or many more, depending on the size of the particular shopping center’s parcel. Often times, tucked between the shopping center’s stores, parking lot, and the adjacent intersection, is a gas station and maybe two-or-three other businesses, such as a sandwich shop or a barber shop. Longstreth argues that this common shopping center layout is tied into the evolution of the supermarket/grocery store, drug store/pharmacy, and discount/variety store.<sup>80</sup> This

phenomenon and its preceding commercial forms – service stations and drive-ins – is something he discusses at length in his book *The Drive-In, The Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941* (Fig. 7).

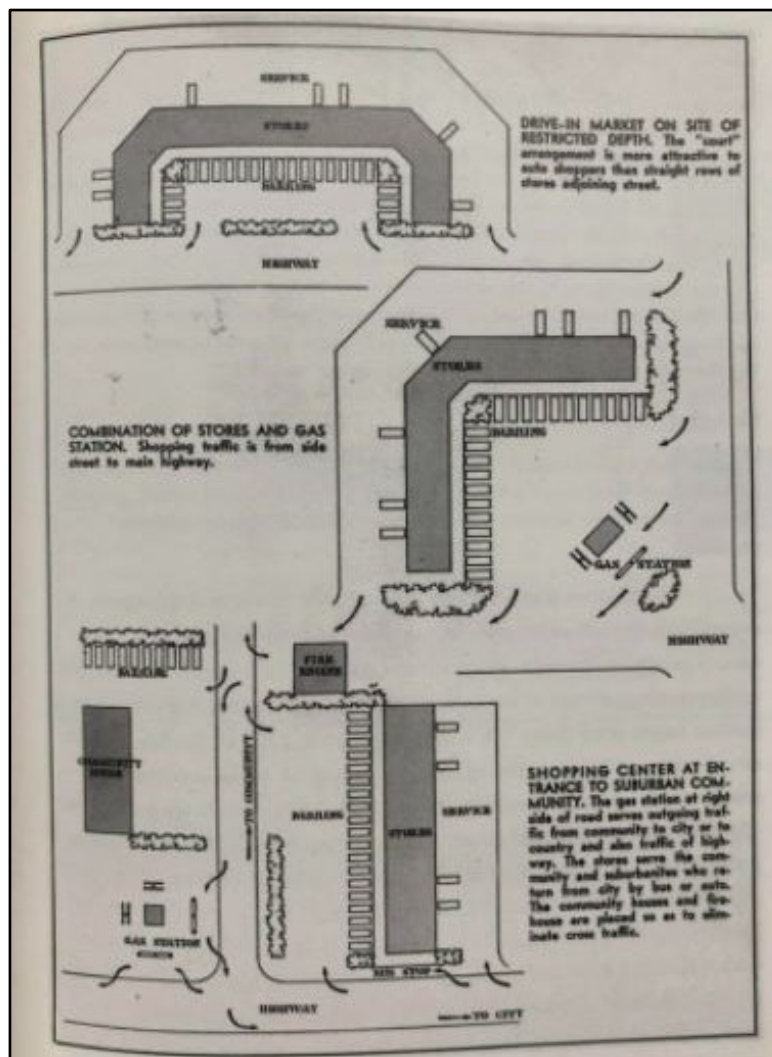


Fig. 7: 1930s shopping center designs by Albert Frey (Architectural Record), presented by Richard Longstreth in his text on Los Angeles' commercial development. The middle illustration shows the quintessential "L"-shaped shopping center, including a gas station, at the intersection of two thoroughfares (i.e., a commercial node). [Source: *The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941*, Richard Longstreth, The MIT Press, 1999.]

Today, these commercial nodes at major intersections – represented by at least one shopping center (or several) – are found, not only in Los Angeles but throughout the country, from Boston to Honolulu and Seattle to Tampa. Thus, the Miracle Mile and early commercial strip of the interwar years directly influenced and shaped today's urban and suburban landscape.

The interwar period was an era of cutting-edge commercial formats that would soon become permanent features of the commercial thoroughfare. Kenneth Jackson points to Dallas' Royce Hailey's Pig Stand (1921) as "the first drive-in restaurant," and Kansas City's Country Club Plaza (1925), the brainchild of Jesse Clyde Nichols, whom he credits with "the idea of the planned regional shopping center."<sup>81</sup> Another shopping center, Houston's River Oaks (1937), was also a milestone from this period, with its "two nearly identical units on either side of a cross street that was a direct route to downtown" and "crescent form."<sup>82</sup> Longstreth writes, "The corner filling station...further suggests that these Southern California buildings provided inspiration."<sup>83</sup> This echoes the description and illustration of the ubiquitous "L"-shaped shopping center, despite River Oaks' "crescent form" (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Aerial photograph of River Oaks, near Downtown Houston. This late-1930s shopping center is notable for its style (i.e., “crescent form”), but also for its gas station and proximity to Downtown Houston. During the interwar period, cutting-edge commercial formats, such as drive-ins and shopping centers, could be found along commercial thoroughfares in numerous cities throughout the country. This was the beginning of the commercial development that would become ubiquitous following World War II. [Source: *Lost Houston* (blog), 2007.]

Like the commercial development along Wilshire Boulevard – just west of Downtown Los Angeles – River Oaks was connected to Downtown Houston, but was still separate from the city center. This shopping center also included a gas station, illustrating the need to have an automobile to fully access and patronize its businesses – which, in the coming decades, would become even more of a requirement along commercial thoroughfares.

Longstreth does point out the lack of a supermarket at River Oaks, and writes, “In this respect, River Oaks was more a reflection of the past than a harbinger.”<sup>84</sup> Longstreth reaches this conclusion because he believes that the supermarket has a uniquely important history and that its development is integral to the modern-day shopping center, and vice versa. He explains:

“By 1950 the shopping center was transforming the supermarket from a lone-wolf operation into an anchor unit of a considerably larger enterprise. But the supermarket also was key to transforming the shopping center into a complex that was substantially larger than examples of the previous decade.”<sup>85</sup> However, despite this argument, River Oaks was clearly significant. Its simple commercial format, which included a handful of businesses and a gas station at an intersection (i.e., a commercial node), would become ubiquitous. Not to mention, River Oaks was located in a city and county that would soon become a major metropolitan area of the Sun Belt region, and the wider nation. If anything, River Oaks could at least be described as an early version of the strip mall.

In contrast, Longstreth is especially fond of the Colonial Revival style Park and Shop (1930) on Washington, DC’s Connecticut Avenue NW, which initially included a Piggly Wiggly grocery store.<sup>86</sup> He describes how the Los Angeles drive-in inspired the “L-shaped” Park and Shop, and says that this shopping center “drew widespread national attention and eventually exerted considerable influence.”<sup>87</sup> One can see this commercial format at some of the still-standing shopping centers that are contemporaries of the Park and Shop, as well as at later Mid-Century Modern style shopping centers from the postwar period – something that will be discussed later in this chapter. Today, the innovative Park and Shop is within the boundaries of a historic district, illustrating its historic significance.<sup>88</sup>

Also during the 1930s, the powerful Federal Housing Administration (FHA) – a product of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s expansive New Deal – published *Planning Neighborhoods for Small Houses*, which, among many other points, argued the following: “The location of a shopping center should generally be on or just off a main thoroughfare in the line of the

greatest pedestrian traffic. ...It should not be permitted to spread unrestrained along the length of the thoroughfare.”<sup>89</sup> This bulletin also articulates the need for zoning ordinances, and the clear separation of commercial and residential uses – which would become widespread in the coming decades.<sup>90</sup> With this recognition by federal bureaucrats in 1936, shopping centers were clearly becoming a generally accepted commercial format, and feature of the built environment and adjacent residential subdivisions. Even if the bulletin’s suggestions on unsightly commercial strip development went mostly unheeded, its guidelines on commercial nodes were surely influential: “The sketches [shown in the bulletin]...indicate how proper zoning and deed restrictions and careful planning provide for shopping centers at important intersections and at suitable intervals along the highway.”<sup>91</sup>

Despite the occasional River Oaks and Wilshire Boulevard, which historian Carl Abbott calls “the first linear downtown,”<sup>92</sup> Longstreth writes, “As late as 1950, most shopping precincts remained pedestrian-oriented.”<sup>93</sup> Similarly, Kenneth Jackson writes, “As late as 1946 there were only eight shopping centers in the entire United States.”<sup>94</sup> However, soon the shopping center and its stores – along with other businesses, like car dealerships and fast food restaurants – would dominate commercial thoroughfares throughout the nation. Commercial thoroughfares support commercial development, and vice versa. These features come together to create the urban and suburban landscape of commercial thoroughfares.

### Postwar Commercial Thoroughfares

Following World War II, commercial thoroughfares and their corresponding commercial developments grew exponentially. Soon, across the nation, thoroughfares were being extended farther and farther out to new shopping centers, residential subdivisions, and suburbs. The San



Fernando Valley, which just a few decades earlier was annexed by Los Angeles, was very much the quintessential location for this “rapid building,”<sup>95</sup> and its corresponding grid of thoroughfares and highways, including Ventura Boulevard. Kenneth Jackson describes San Jose, at the south end of San Francisco Bay, as “the nation’s largest suburb.”<sup>96</sup> He writes, “As the automobile-based circulation system matured, the county’s spacious orchards were easily developed, and bulldozers uprooted fruit trees for shopping centers and streets. ...Dozens of semiconductor and aerospace companies expanded and built plants there.”<sup>97</sup> Despite these prominent examples, one commercial thoroughfare in particular was the most influential on the postwar era’s built environment and popular culture, including the concept of the commercial strip.

If Wilshire Boulevard was the premier commercial thoroughfare of the interwar years, nearby Sunset Boulevard was the quintessential thoroughfare of the postwar decades; and it still looms large in today’s popular imagination (i.e., the Sunset Strip). Sunset Boulevard makes its way from Downtown Los Angeles to the gleaming waters of the Pacific Ocean. Hugging the Hollywood Hills along the way, it goes from a wide commercial boulevard of towering billboards and iconic signage related to the entertainment industry to a zig-zagging, largely residential route that passes through Beverly Hills – amongst other areas. Finally, after many miles, it drops the driver at the beach, just east of Malibu. While most thoroughfares are far-less iconic, Sunset’s overall feeling is representative of the commercial strip.

During this postwar period, people were drawn to commercial thoroughfares, both consciously and subconsciously. Many Americans shopped along these arterials at the new shopping centers, supermarkets, discount retailers, and strip malls – with their fluorescent

lights beaming through the front glass of the stores and reflecting on the endless pavement of the parking lot, with its large signage. A much smaller, yet significant, segment of the population was drawn to these “new” thoroughfares and their development for more artistic and sometimes unexplainable reasons. There were the innumerable groups of teenagers who would “cruise” their city or town’s equivalent of the Sunset Strip – illustrated in popular culture from “Fun, Fun, Fun” by The Beach Boys to George Lucas’ *American Graffiti*. And long before Google Street View, artist Ed Ruscha was documenting the Sunset Strip streetscape, monitoring its subtle and drastic changes over the years (Fig. 9).<sup>98</sup>



Fig. 9: One section of the Sunset Strip photographed by artist Ed Ruscha in 1965, 1985, and 1995, as part of his “12 Sunsets” project. Like others, Ruscha was clearly inspired by the commercial thoroughfare and its influence on America’s pop culture and built environment. His work brings to mind today’s Google Street View. [Source: Photos by Ed Ruscha, “12 Sunsets,” J. Paul Getty Trust, 1965, 1985, 1995.]

Cultural Geographer J.B. Jackson was extolling thoroughfares, writing about them in an almost sentimental way. He writes, “Yet to me...the really interesting attraction is the priority of the thoroughfare – street or boulevard or limited-access highway – over the architectural elements in the city.”<sup>99</sup> As the car moved forward down the wide thoroughfare, the illuminated lanes of the roadway were the driver’s focus and everything else was on the periphery. As the 1950s and 1960s continued, commercial thoroughfares became longer and longer. The older sections of the thoroughfares, such as the one-time Miracle Miles, felt worn out and stuck in the past; and they often were dated and undesirable when compared to the postwar commercial strips stretching into the newly constructed suburbs.

Simultaneously, during this period of unprecedented suburban growth into the country’s deserts, swamps, and farmland, the all-American indoor shopping mall, first brought about by Victor Gruen at Minneapolis’ Southdale Center in 1956,<sup>100</sup> became popular. Remarkably, the same year that Southdale opened in suburban Minneapolis, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which brought about interstate highways.<sup>101</sup> Thus, transportation via the private automobile on federally-funded interstates supported consumerism, and vice versa. This led to an “interchange land rush,” in the words of Liebs, where consumers could find everything at the businesses located where the thoroughfare and the highway meet – a version of the commercial node.<sup>102</sup> Here, real estate developers, retailers, and other private and public players took advantage of the intersection of primary arterials.

This was very much the beginning of nodal “edge cities.”<sup>103</sup> These vertical, suburban centers have the appearance of an additional downtown, with their medium-to-tall glass office

buildings, residential towers dotted with balconies, and gigantic indoor shopping malls.

Nonetheless, they are commercial nodes in the simplest sense, as they are centers of business that developed at major crossroads.<sup>104</sup> This study does not include an examination of these suburban areas, but they are worth noting for their relevance to the larger historic narrative.

Americans appreciated the one-stop-shop atmosphere of the indoor shopping mall. Kenneth Jackson sums up these “mega-malls” as “the identifiable collecting points for the rootless families of the newer areas.”<sup>105</sup> Reflecting this national trend of indoor shopping malls, the Boulevard Mall, “Nevada’s first regional indoor shopping center,” opened in 1968 on Maryland Parkway, just south of Downtown Las Vegas.<sup>106</sup> As Las Vegas continued to boom during this time, U.S. Highway 95 would spread west as a limited-access highway – away from downtown, the railyards, and the new north-to-south Interstate 15 (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10: Las Vegas, like other American cities in the postwar era, was expanding outwards, away from downtown. This was facilitated through lengthening commercial thoroughfares and new limited-access highways, like U.S. Highway 95 – shown here, as it intersects with the new Interstate 15. Downtown and the railyards can be seen in the background. [Source: Photograph of interchange between I-15 and US 95, Las Vegas, circa 1967-1970s, Elbert Edwards Photograph Collection, Special Collections & Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada.]

In addition to the indoor shopping mall trend and this significant change in federal transportation policy, Hanchett has argued that a federal tax policy amendment drafted in the 1950s incentivized the building and selling of more and more commercial developments, providing the public an endless variety of shopping centers.<sup>107</sup> Thus, it was not necessarily a remodel or a demolition and replacement of an “old” shopping center that occurred, but rather real estate developers and retailers moved farther out for purely economic reasons. This is likely due to accelerated depreciation, a technical tax change that came about through a federal law in 1954.<sup>108</sup> Hanchett writes, “Accelerated depreciation, in plain language, suddenly transformed real-estate development into a lucrative ‘tax shelter.’ ...Savvy investors quickly

discovered that they could build a structure, claim ‘losses’ for several years while enjoying tax-free income, then sell the project for more than they had originally invested.”<sup>109</sup>

Making an economic profit from these shopping centers in a capitalist landscape, like that of the commercial thoroughfare, ties in with the key concepts of “mass consumption” and “desire,” as articulated by scholars Kelli Shapiro and Kim Dovey, respectively. In discussing “place as assemblage,” Dovey writes, “From such a view, all of the places we inhabit can be seen as products of desire. ...A primary product of these flows of desire are assemblages.”<sup>110</sup> Dovey gives the example of suburbs facilitating “desires for detached identities, distance from the urban and desirable neighbourhoods [sic].”<sup>111</sup> This description very much illustrates the look and feel of the postwar residential subdivisions and suburbs, and their residents.

There was certainly the occasional developer who thoughtfully invested in a strip mall or the architect who wanted to create a special place for the local residents. But, by and large, the “desire” to make money as fast as possible was the goal, and most people promptly moved on to the newest commercial developments found along these thoroughfares. One could argue that consumers moved on just as quickly as developers and corporations, considering the continued growth of suburbs, and local residents patronizing new, more-distant shopping centers. Shoppers desired the newest supermarket, department store, indoor shopping mall, fast food restaurant, car dealership, movie theater, and so on; and this is still the case today. They desired purchasing and consuming the many products and services available at innumerable businesses. For example, why would a Southern California shopper go to the once-grand department stores and supermarkets found along Wilshire Boulevard – which may have even closed, due to a lack of business and a changing neighborhood – when they could go to

the brand-new shopping centers gleaming near the highway exit in the San Fernando Valley? Or for that matter, Orange County, just south of Los Angeles, which Kenneth Jackson labels: “The Centerless City.”<sup>112</sup>

Regardless of developers, architects, corporations, and consumers underlying motivations, the results of the federal tax policy change are evident. Hanchett notes five “new regional centers” in 1955; one year later, there were 25 (the law was changed in 1954).<sup>113</sup> He says, “By 1970, the United States had some 13,000 shopping centers, nearly all of them erected within a period of just fifteen years.”<sup>114</sup> This jaw-dropping growth is often derisively referred to as “sprawl.” Historian Dolores Hayden has also flagged the sprawl-inducing policy choices of the federal government during the 20<sup>th</sup> century – from favorable tax policies, including accelerated depreciation, to highway expansion and involvement in the mortgage market – and how these policy choices and their corresponding programs led to this exponential growth.<sup>115</sup> She succinctly and appropriately calls the shopping center aspect “mall glut.”<sup>116</sup> Crucially, she writes, “Combined with state and local subsidies for development, these federal programs have transformed a nation of cities and small towns into a nation of sprawling metropolitan regions.”<sup>117</sup>

Besides economic support, local zoning ordinances have also spurred this sprawl and glut. Architect and urban planner Sonia A. Hirt writes, “Eventually, the zoning system created urban and suburban worlds in which everything was not only in its place but was also in its own *separate* place.”<sup>118</sup> These policy decisions have roots going back to the 1930s and earlier, with the FHA’s guidance as just one example. Thus, major thoroughfares in cities like Las Vegas are largely zoned for commercial purposes, rather than a mixture of uses. This, in turn, contributes

to the commercial strip landscape. Hirt also writes how “individual zones became much larger.”<sup>119</sup> One only has to look at how the scale of shopping centers has changed over the decades or how the older supermarket now looks miniscule next to the newer big-box store. And, most importantly, Hirt adds: “Finally, zoning has been strongly criticized on aesthetic grounds for encouraging cookie-cutter environments and for reducing the complexity of urbanism.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, these huge buildings housing innumerable products and services appear rather soulless to many. Nonetheless, from the postwar era until today, they have continued to attract scores of Americans for various reasons, including low prices and convenience.

Thanks to these national trends and federal policy choices in the 1950s, a tectonic shift in the nation’s population and development was revealed in the 1960 Census. That year, Los Angeles dethroned Philadelphia as the nation’s third largest city.<sup>121</sup> And for the first time, Houston zoomed into the top ten – past St. Louis, Washington, and Cleveland – to land at seventh place.<sup>122</sup> Despite Los Angeles’ longtime growth, reaching back to 1920 and before, Houston’s top tier placement in 1960 illustrates that the Sun Belt city had finally arrived. With this significant change in *where* Americans were living, the timespan at the focus of the Las Vegas case study starts in 1960.

In addition to favorable governmental policies and the postwar “Baby Boom,” a key invention certainly contributed to the Sun Belt region’s rise: the air conditioning unit. Kenneth Jackson writes, “Indeed the growth of the South and Southwest has been closely linked to the technology of de-humidifiers and air conditioners. Houston...is an accidental city that was founded on a swamp by speculators who could not have dreamed that it would one day be the nation’s fifth largest city [at the time of Jackson’s writing]. ...without air conditioning it would



not have done so.”<sup>123</sup> The same could be said for the desert metropolises of Phoenix and Las Vegas.

Historian Andrea Vesentini has looked at the promotion of air conditioning’s promise during this time, and writes that “the spread of air conditioning into private homes was easily integrated into the dream house narrative.”<sup>124</sup> Like many advertisements of this era, race was front-and-center – or far from subtle – as heat was equated with “African vendors clothed in tribal outfit” or “the ethnic stereotype of the dull Mexican dozing off in the streets with only his sombrero to shield him from the scorching sun.”<sup>125</sup> These postwar commercial thoroughfares linking the “inner city” (i.e., downtown and older residential neighborhoods) to the new, cool residential subdivisions and suburbs were pathways for White American families to escape. And as one got farther out, the commercial spaces along these commercial thoroughfares were meant to serve White families. As Vesentini writes: “Suburbanization and the climate-control technology were equally instrumental in the postwar flight from the city and pursuit of insularity.”<sup>126</sup> Therefore, Vesentini touches upon a concept similar to Dovey’s “desires for detached identities.”

Architectural historian Dianne Harris also illustrates how advertising from this period was geared towards White Americans.<sup>127</sup> She looks in particular at magazine advertisements related to home life and its corresponding products, but this is also applicable to commercial thoroughfares and retailers’ advertisements in local newspapers. Marketing in Las Vegas in the 1960s through 1980s was focused on White, middle-income consumers, and this is apparent through illustrations and other visual messages found in newspaper advertisements from this period – something that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Additionally, Harris' work fits in with other scholars' writings on "discourse," particularly those of cultural geographer Richard H. Schein, who uses the term "discourse materialized" and highlights the ability of a cultural landscape and its past and present meanings to spur important discussions amongst its current occupants/users.<sup>128</sup> Harris writes, "Given the visual codes described herein and their persistence in popular representations of the home, the taste-making and design literature from the postwar era onward must be viewed in an entirely new light – one that considers race and class as embedded subjects in *discourses* [emphasis added] on the built environment."<sup>129</sup> This discourse concept will be addressed further in the coming chapters, particularly in the context of the evaluative framework found in Chapter V.

In addition to corporations and consumers, there were many other private and public stakeholders in the development of this postwar urban and suburban landscape – just like in previous decades of development. On this note, historian Carroll Pursell writes:

The houses of the sitcom suburbs, their design, and the technologies that filled them were not the way they were by accident or consumer preference, but through the hard work and cooperation of the real estate, banking, and construction industries, the electrical appliance manufacturers, and electric utilities, with the full support of federal, state, and local governments.<sup>130</sup>

Once again, there was "cooperation" and deal making between private and public stakeholders in the construction – literally and figuratively – of the landscape along and near commercial thoroughfares. And, inevitably, this new landscape was shaped by race and gender. New development and construction was hailed by local leaders, with many shopping center groundbreakings and store ribbon cuttings in Las Vegas attended by the mayor, county commissioners, and even a state senator.<sup>131</sup> What may be perceived as a chaotic landscape with a lack of planning, has actually been carefully constructed and regulated. This has been

accomplished through negotiations between real estate developers, banks, corporations, title companies, savings and loan associations, and local officials<sup>132</sup> – as well as through varying levels of community input and the use of planning tools, such as local zoning ordinances (including planned unit developments). Most importantly, these stakeholders have largely agreed upon the form of commercial thoroughfares, including strips, nodes, and their placement (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11: The commercial strip is carefully planned, constructed, and regulated, contrary to what some may observe. There are strong connections between real estate developers, local officials, and other stakeholders, and their interest in shaping the commercial thoroughfare's development. For example, in January 1977, Las Vegas' Meadows Lane, which connects Decatur Boulevard to Meadows Mall, was officially dedicated by Dayton Hudson Properties. Here, a small thoroughfare is planned and executed – with community buy-in – to facilitate consumption by local residents. [Source: *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 12, 1977.]

As the decades went by, more Sun Belt cities joined the top ten and pushed out the cities of the industrial Midwest: Dallas (1970), San Diego (1980), Phoenix (1980), and San Antonio (1990).<sup>133</sup> Kenneth Jackson boldly writes: “In 1970, for the first time in the history of the world, a nation-state counted more suburbanites than city dwellers or farmers.”<sup>134</sup> This growth in the Sun Belt cities and their corresponding suburbs was supported by the interstate highway system, but also by the numerous commercial thoroughfares stretching out across the landscape from the cities’ centers. Inevitably, cities and their downtowns suffered – particularly in the Northeast and Midwest – through the 1960s and 1970s, as numerous residents and various businesses left for new residential subdivisions and recently constructed suburban developments. This well-documented process has been referred to as “White Flight.”

Kenneth Jackson lists “five common characteristics” found in these new residential subdivisions and suburbs from 1945 to 1973.<sup>135</sup> These subdivisions were, and continue to be, important to commercial thoroughfares’ strips and nodes of development, as subdivisions provided the local residents that patronized the shopping centers, supermarkets, discount retailers, and fast food restaurants found along thoroughfares. The “common characteristics” are: “peripheral location,” “relatively low density,” “architectural similarity,” “easy availability” to middle-income Americans, and “economic and racial homogeneity.”<sup>136</sup> As is the case in other American cities, Las Vegas’ residential neighborhoods from this period adhere to these five patterns. One portion of a 1963 map of Las Vegas encapsulates some of Kenneth Jackson’s points.<sup>137</sup> The map shows scattered residential subdivisions springing up on the edge of Las Vegas near major, newly constructed (or soon to be constructed) thoroughfares. Superimposed onto the map is a cartoon sketch of the ideal family of the era – composed of a white father in a



cities in the top ten were located in the Sun Belt region.<sup>138</sup> Thus, the timespan used in the Las Vegas case study ends here at 1990. The period of 1960 to 1990 also corresponds with the six selected commercial thoroughfares at the center of this study, since the thoroughfare portions selected were widely developed in the 1960s through 1980s. Nonetheless, despite these temporal boundaries, Sun Belt cities have continued to dominate American society and culture into the 21<sup>st</sup> century – with San Jose, slightly north of the defined Sun Belt region, since joining the top ten list, and Phoenix becoming the nation’s fifth largest city in 2020.<sup>139</sup>

### Background on Las Vegas’ History, Growth, and Development

Like other Sun Belt cities following World War II, Las Vegas – with approximately 25,000 people in 1950<sup>140</sup> – became a boomtown, quickly leaving behind its Latter-Day Saint (Mormon) roots and railroad heritage. Las Vegas’ growth, which is indicative of what was happening elsewhere in the nation at the time, can be traced to a variety of influences and factors. For instance, just prior to World War II, Las Vegas benefited from its close proximity to Hoover (Boulder) Dam, a massive federal government project to dam the Colorado River. This led to the establishment of Boulder City and created Lake Mead – a source of power and water, as well as a place of outdoor recreation.

Around this same time, Las Vegas was becoming known as a center of leisure and entertainment, thanks to Nevada’s legalization of gambling in 1931.<sup>141</sup> An article in *Time* from 1953 reflects on this: “In the center of town, ‘Glitter Gulch’ [Fremont Street] the greatest concentration of inert gas in the world, now casts a neon glow for 30 miles into the desert. Along Highway 91, on which the Californians stampede into Vegas in their Cadillacs at the rate of 20,000 each weekend, lies the Strip, a celebrated three-mile stretch of real estate bounded

by seven enormous, luxury hotels.”<sup>142</sup> In similarly colorful language, *Time* describes the city just over ten years prior as “a scraggly tank town with a tumbleweed economy.”<sup>143</sup>

In addition to its beginnings as “Sin City,” one factor in particular shaped Las Vegas and the surrounding communities of Clark County in the decades following World War II. Historian Raymond A. Mohl mentions the federal spending – during both World War II and the Cold War – appropriated for military purposes and defense-related industries in the Sun Belt region.<sup>144</sup> The Las Vegas Valley is home to Nellis Air Force Base and is just southeast of the Nevada Test Site, now the Nevada National Security Site,<sup>145</sup> which was most prominent during the Cold War as a site of nuclear weapons testing (Fig. 13). Therefore, people moved to Las Vegas for its weather, but more importantly, for its jobs in hospitality and defense-related industries. In turn, this created jobs in other sectors: retail, education, law, medicine, etc.

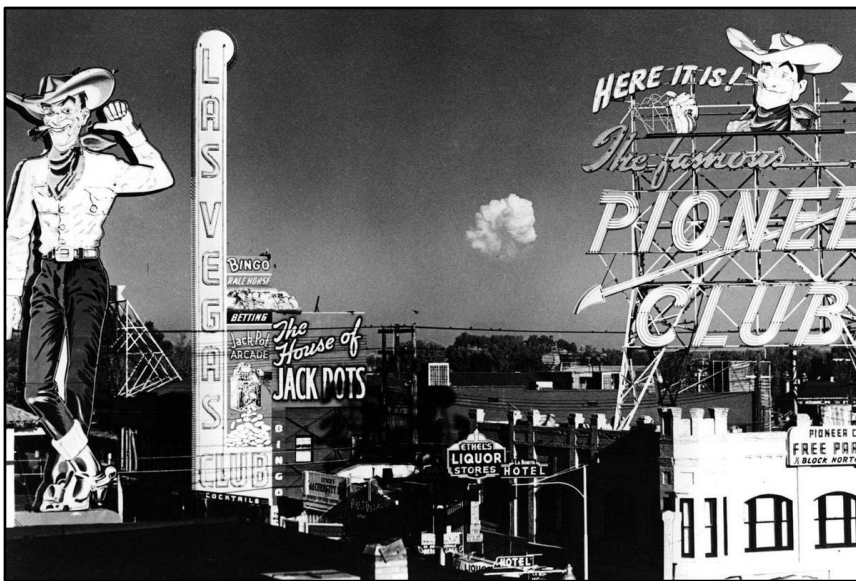


Fig. 13: A nuclear explosion at the Nevada Test Site, as seen from Fremont Street in Downtown Las Vegas in 1951. Like other Sun Belt cities, Las Vegas’ postwar growth was heavily-influenced by the nearby defense-related industries and federal spending that had started just prior to World War II. [Source: *Las Vegas Review-Journal*/*Las Vegas News Bureau*, 2021.]

A 1962 newspaper advertisement for Charleston Hills, a residential subdivision just off West Charleston Boulevard, illustrates some of these Sun Belt region and Las Vegas-specific jobs. The ad includes a cartoonish “nuclear family” (i.e., White, middle-income) and a simple map with arrows pointing to “Nellis A.F.B. [Air Force Base],” “Lake Mead,” and “Mercury”<sup>146</sup> – the latter of which being the declared “gateway to the Nevada Test Site.”<sup>147</sup> These jobs brought an influx of White Americans, as well as African Americans, to Southern Nevada. In turn, the city grew, and residential subdivisions, commercial thoroughfares, and shopping centers sprang up in this wide, bowl-like valley of the Mojave Desert.

As for specific businesses and industries that shaped the city’s development and demographics, one of particular interest is Basic Magnesium, Inc., which is closely linked to the African American community of Las Vegas, as African American families migrated from the Southern United States to work and reside in Las Vegas.<sup>148</sup> Claytee D. White, a historian with a focus on oral histories, mentions how this facility “processed the magnesium used to build aircraft and ammunition for the [World War II] war effort.”<sup>149</sup> Illustrating the deep connections between these federal projects, the county’s growth, and the area’s uptick in racial diversity, White says: “At the end of BMI [Basic Magnesium, Inc.] employment, men entered the gaming industry through the backdoor, but many accepted positions at the Nevada Test Site...men who worked at BMI claimed the first black [sic] seats in the state assembly, ran the NAACP branch, and founded churches of all denominations that reflected life in the South.”<sup>150</sup>

Unfortunately, Las Vegas was not a racial utopia, and the integration of the African American community was hard-fought over a period of years. An *Ebony* magazine article from 1954 has the subheading: “Nevada gambling town has more racial barriers than any other place



outside of Dixie.”<sup>151</sup> Echoing this, Las Vegas has been referred to as, “The Mississippi of the West,” when discussing this history.<sup>152</sup> African Americans were relegated to the Westside, near Downtown – “the area is separated from White communities by a yard of railroad tracks and a pedestrian-auto underpass which Negroes jokingly refer to as the ‘Iron Curtain.’”<sup>153</sup> There were issues with jobs (“Whenever a Negro is spotted in a downtown gaming hall, it is safe to wager that he is behind a broom, mop, or dish cloth.”) and housing.<sup>154</sup> The *Ebony* article chalks this discrimination up to White vacationers and permanent residents from the Southern United States: “World War II stimulated another great migration of Dixie whites to the town. They were attracted by what was the beginning of the boom era for Vegas gambling operations. Today two or three of the town’s top gaming clubs are run by former Texans.”<sup>155</sup>

As was the case in other Sun Belt cities and their new, air-conditioned residential subdivisions, Las Vegas’ African American residents did not initially enjoy the growth in the same way as White residents. Harris writes about this situation: “Although African American suburbs and housing tracts developed in specific settings and circumstances...they were nonetheless rare, and obtaining decent housing remained a primary concern for nonwhites in the postwar era.”<sup>156</sup> Las Vegas did have at least one postwar residential subdivision geared towards African Americans: Paul R. Williams’ Berkley Square, which is just north of the Westside, and is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>157</sup> By and large, White Americans, whether in Las Vegas or elsewhere, moved into the new residential subdivisions near the recently platted commercial thoroughfares and new shopping centers.

Nonetheless, like other African American neighborhoods around the country, “a vibrant African American community” developed in the Westside, and “the only major businesses

lacking in West Las Vegas were clothing stores, so white merchants sold to black [sic] customers – but refused to allow them to try on products in their stores.”<sup>158</sup> There was certainly an initial division and de facto segregation in place, as the new commercial thoroughfares and their retailers appear to have catered primarily to White, middle-income families, as illustrated by numerous local newspaper advertisements from the early 1960s through the late 1980s.

But within two decades of activism, the local culture started to see some changes. Historian Michael S. Green writes, “With the continuing boom of the 1950s came more educated African Americans and more enlightened whites to lead the fight for civil rights.”<sup>159</sup> One notable moment occurred in 1960 at the famous Moulin Rouge Hotel – which catered to African Americans on the Westside – as it was “the location of the meeting that integrated the Strip and downtown hotel casinos. Black leaders who threatened a march on the Strip sat down with the governor, mayor, and other officials and agreed that blacks [sic] could become customers in city and county gaming establishments.”<sup>160</sup> About ten years later, this agreement was followed by a consent decree that came about due to discrimination that was ongoing in the 1960s.<sup>161</sup> Therefore, “plaintiffs who signed agreeing to adhere to the stipulated terms that twelve percent (12%) of all jobs in the resort industry would go to blacks [sic] included the Nevada Resort Association” and 17 resorts along and near the Las Vegas Strip.<sup>162</sup>

Thanks to these two momentous events, *Ebony* magazine was leading with a much more positive subheading by 1972: “Once segregated town is Mecca for blacks [sic] seeking exciting living.”<sup>163</sup> *Ebony* credits a list of individuals, including William “Bob” Bailey.<sup>164</sup> The article continues:

It was Bailey who, as a member and then chairman of the Nevada Equal Rights Commission, fathered the civil rights law...that was later passed by the state legislature,

requiring a fairer share for blacks [sic] of the city's half-billion dollar annual income. ...But when hotels were slow to comply with the new law, it was Bailey who...gave Strip bosses 30 days to make changes or else he would call in the Justice Department.<sup>165</sup>

In addition to this, according to a 1988 article in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*: "In 1972 he [Bailey] founded the non-profit Nevada Economic Development Co., which aids minorities who are starting up small businesses."<sup>166</sup> This was around the same time that Bailey purchased Golden West Shopping Center, which is located on West Owens Avenue at H Street near the Berkley Square subdivision (Fig. 14).<sup>167</sup>



Fig. 14: A young African American couple seen in the parking lot of Golden West Shopping Center (the sign is visible on the right side of the frame) on West Owens Avenue near the Westside neighborhood. African American businessman later purchased the shopping center. [Source: Shopping Center, Baby C and Maderson, image 12, 1964, Clinton Wright Photographs, Special Collections & Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada.]

Like many American cities at the time, Las Vegas suffered from race riots. On October 5, 1969, a speeding driver was pulled over, which devolved into “a minor verbal altercation” between two police officers and two individuals who were not connected to the driver, yet became interested and involved in the incident.<sup>168</sup> The situation escalated to “disorderly conduct and assault with a deadly weapon” and the two men were arrested.<sup>169</sup> This sparked a car burning and then rioting in the “trouble area,” as defined by the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.<sup>170</sup> The next day, the *Review-Journal* described the looters at Golden West as “roving bands of black [sic] youths.”<sup>171</sup> The following day, additional rioting and looting prompted the *Review-Journal* to write: “The shopping center took on the characteristics of a battlefield as officers wearing gas masks, armed with tear gas guns and rifles started to break up the groups” (Fig. 15).<sup>172</sup> Despite the unrest in 1969, it was outweighed by the positive political, social, and business activism of the era, which forever changed Las Vegas and Clark County – and Southern Nevada’s trajectory into the closing decades of the 20th century.



Fig. 15: In 1969, Las Vegas witnessed race riots, which targeted, amongst other places, the Golden West Shopping Center on West Owens Avenue. This shopping center was later purchased by local African American businessman Bob Bailey. Despite a history of segregation, stretching back to when African Americans first arrived in Southern Nevada, and the unrest in 1969, Las Vegas has become a diverse and multicultural city that is representative of the Sun Belt region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Its history and built environment is much more multidimensional than strictly a city of neon signs and casinos. [Source: *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 7, 1969.]

In addition to the African American community, Las Vegas and the surrounding municipalities of Clark County contain many other diverse communities. In 1965, Congress passed and President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which, amongst other major immigration policy changes, “lifted the cap on entries for family reunification.”<sup>173</sup> This has certainly enhanced racial and ethnic diversity in the decades since. For instance, an essay about the law says:

Total immigration grew to more than 450,000 annual entries, with only one in five coming from Europe. Much of the increase in Asian migration to the United States came through the family reunification clause. ...Although the new law affected each community in America differently, the rising immigration rates from China, India, Japan, and the Philippines, in particular, helped reshape America’s social landscape.<sup>174</sup>

Las Vegas’ commercial thoroughfares and corresponding commercial spaces are physical evidence of this changed “social landscape.”

Early on, there were glimpses of diversity at the city's shopping centers. In addition to Bob Bailey and his purchase of Golden West, there is Wing Fong. Fong, a Chinese American businessman and developer, was called "a pioneer in shopping centers and other projects" in a 1977 profile in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.<sup>175</sup> Amongst other properties, he developed Imperial Plaza on Vegas Drive, just off Decatur Boulevard, which was constructed adjacent to Wonder World in the early 1960s.<sup>176</sup> The profile presents Fong as an influential visionary: "All the projects broke tradition in Las Vegas, for they were located on the city's outskirts. But the shrewd, precise, planning-oriented Fong knew where the city would spread. He was there first."<sup>177</sup> Nonetheless, the full social evolution along the city's commercial thoroughfares would take place later on in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and into the 21<sup>st</sup>.

By 1990, the end point of this case study's historic period (which starts at 1960<sup>178</sup>), approximately 26,000 "Asian or Pacific Islander[s]" and approximately 83,000 "persons" of "Hispanic origin (of any race)" lived in Clark County – which, at the time, had nearly 750,000 residents.<sup>179</sup> Thus, at the time of the 1990 Census, Asians/Pacific Islanders and Hispanics made up 3.5% and 11.2% of the county's population, respectively.<sup>180</sup> In the 2020 Census, Clark County was 31% (701,416) "Hispanic or Latino," 12.7% (286,684) "Black or African American alone," 10.5% (237,663) "Asian alone" and 0.9% (20,572) "Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone" – "alone" meaning no "racial combination."<sup>181</sup> In the course of 30-years, the Asian/Pacific Islander share of the population has increased by roughly 8% and the Latinx share has increased by almost 20%. Particularly noteworthy is that many Hawaiians have also moved to Las Vegas, and the city is sometimes referred to as "the 9<sup>th</sup> Hawaiian Island."<sup>182</sup> One article

claims the following: “More than 50,000 Hawaiian’s live and work in Las Vegas,” and over “300,000 Islanders annually visit Las Vegas.”<sup>183</sup>

At 2.2 million people, Clark County – which is a large county by land area, but is mainly defined by the population center of Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, Henderson, and other neighboring municipalities – was the nation’s 13<sup>th</sup> most populous county in the 2020 Census.<sup>184</sup> This growth in population, particularly among Latinx and Asians/Pacific Islanders, further highlights the Las Vegas metropolitan area’s importance, and its relevance to the nation’s built environment.

Despite its years of segregation, from its casinos in downtown and on the Strip to the Westside neighborhood, residential segregation – while still a significant national and local problem – is less prominent in Las Vegas and many other cities of the Sun Belt region. The Brookings Institution says that following the Fair Housing Act of 1968, “segregation levels declined in southern metro areas...and stayed lower in western metro areas. Today, many metro areas in the South and West register segregation index values below 60. In contrast, many northern areas with long-standing Black populations continue to show segregation levels into the 70s, reflecting the persistence of past patterns.”<sup>185</sup> This is certainly helped by more recent development in an era of fair housing, rather than a period of racially restrictive covenants. Thus, on a scale spanning from integration (0) to segregation (100), “Black-White Neighborhood Segregation Levels” has Milwaukee as the most segregated (79) and Las Vegas-Henderson-Paradise as the least (41) – of 51 metropolitan areas.<sup>186</sup> Comparatively, the Las Vegas metropolitan area, which is approximately 20% more “Latino or Hispanic” than “Black,” does not score as well when it comes to “Latino or Hispanic-White Neighborhood Segregation

Levels.”<sup>187</sup> It gets a score of 42 (only a one point difference from the first score), but is ranked 39<sup>th</sup> of 52 metropolitan areas, with Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim in first place (61).<sup>188</sup>

Las Vegas is an increasingly diverse metropolitan area that is reflective of the Sun Belt region’s development and demographics, and the city’s history, social culture, and political activism is much more layered and multidimensional than strictly being a locale of neon signs, contrived Venetian canals, splashing fountains, and a reproduction of the Eiffel Tower. A *Docomomo US* series covering Las Vegas’ modern architecture – mainly its residential iterations – is called, “The Other Las Vegas.”<sup>189</sup> This term could also be applied to the city’s commercial thoroughfares, which cater to in-city residents going about their daily routines. These thoroughfares represent a complex cultural landscape that has evolved over time. The “flows of life,” to quote Dovey, along these other, less famous commercial thoroughfares make Las Vegas an excellent location for developing and applying an evaluative framework that will guide historic preservation professionals in their own communities, as they acknowledge and document these types of landscapes.

#### Local, Regional, and National Trends: Las Vegas’ Commercial Thoroughfares, 1960 to 1990

As one drives along the contemporary commercial thoroughfare, they will see fast food restaurants and auto parts stores, gas stations and big-box stores, two-or-three-story office buildings and professional plazas, and numerous turn-offs to residential subdivisions – sometimes behind an uninviting gate. They will likely see civic buildings and religious institutions as well, such as a local high school and its football field, and churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques. And as they look closer, they will notice a pattern of commercial nodes and strips. These nodes of commercial development – illustrated by at least one



shopping center – typically occur at major intersections. In between these commercial nodes are commercial strips (Fig. 16). In Las Vegas, a major thoroughfare is crossed by another major thoroughfare approximately every one-mile (i.e., section line roads). As the city developed, thoroughfares traced these section lines and this created massive blocks that resemble a super-grid. These thoroughfares increased in width and importance – many becoming boulevards – as the surrounding parcels were developed with homes and businesses (Fig. 17).

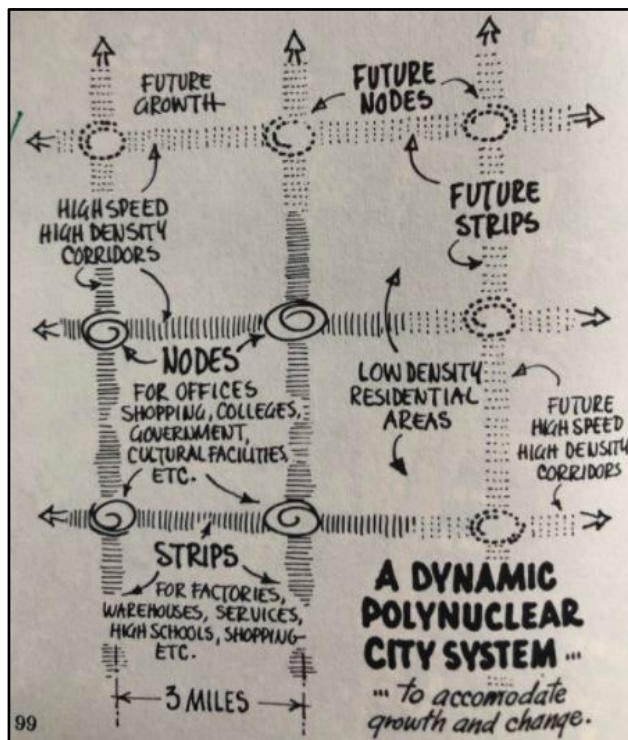


Fig. 16: Illustration provided by Grady Clay in *Close Up, How to Read the American City*. This drawing of “nodes” and “strips” is representative of commercial thoroughfares in Sun Belt cities like Las Vegas. [Source: *Close Up, How to Read the American City*, Grady Clay, The University of Chicago Press, 1980.]



landscape. On the older stretches of commercial thoroughfares, dating to the 1960s and earlier, shopping center buildings often sit adjacent to the roadway and sidewalk, with a minimal setback, if any at all. Two illustrative examples in Las Vegas are Hyde Park Shopping Center (1954) and West Gate Shopping Center (1962) on West Charleston Boulevard. One can draw a direct link between Washington, DC's Park and Shop (1930) and the West Gate, as both are small in scale, from the buildings to the somewhat enclosed parking lot. The biggest difference is the architectural styles, as West Gate was not designed in a revival style, but rather in a minimalist style with a lack of ornamentation – reflecting its 1960s construction date. This commercial format, while stagnant for about three decades, was about to change drastically, especially in terms of scale. (Fig. 18) Additionally, Hyde Park is an especially good example of a postwar shopping center, as the parking lot is hidden from the thoroughfare.



Fig. 18: Park and Shop (1930) in Washington, DC (top) and West Gate Shopping Center (1962) in Las Vegas (bottom). The scale of these two shopping centers' buildings and parking lots is similar. Despite a somewhat stagnant commercial format for about three decades, shopping centers would soon change drastically, as stores' square footage and parking lots' square acreage would expand drastically, and free-standing signs would grow taller. Thus, the West Gate would have more in common with the earlier Park and Shop than the coming shopping centers of the late 1960s and beyond (see Fig. 19). [Source: Photos by author, October 23, 2021 (LV) and January 23, 2022 (DC).]

By the 1970s and 1980s, the shopping center format that is widely recognized today had arrived on the “newer” sections of these commercial thoroughfares – often times featuring Postmodern-inspired designs. As architectural styles changed, the size of shopping centers increased dramatically, as both stores and parking lots got bigger (Fig. 19).





Fig. 19: Shopping center (1989) on Rainbow Boulevard at West Charleston Boulevard, featuring the increase in size – both inside and out – at later shopping centers, as well as echoes of the Spanish Revival style which helps identify this shopping center with the Southwestern United States. [Photo by author, October 23, 2021.]

Additionally, starting much earlier, in the 1930s, there had been important advances in materials and design<sup>193</sup> – something articulated by Mike Jackson in his article discussing Mid-Century, modernized storefronts on the first-floor of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings (i.e., “half-modern buildings”).<sup>194</sup> He highlights aluminum and “structural glass and porcelain enamel panels,” as well as neon and fluorescent lighting.<sup>195</sup> Although Jackson is focused on America’s downtowns, the designers and builders of the postwar commercial thoroughfare also

adopted this future-oriented aesthetic in their new buildings and structures, including signs. Therefore, the early shopping centers of Las Vegas reflect this international advancement.

This is most apparent in what Mike Jackson calls the “open front,” described as “large areas of glass, including all-glass doors.”<sup>196</sup> He continues, “Lighting was also important to this look, and publications often featured nighttime views to emphasize the illuminated shop interior.”<sup>197</sup> This very much brings to mind the Mid-Century Modern, glass-fronted Safeway, as well as numerous other supermarkets and discount retailers on the nation’s postwar commercial thoroughfares. Nonetheless, like today’s big-box stores, there were plenty of retailers who used a limited amount of glass, as the stores were well-lit inside – with windows not serving any purpose in an automobile-centric landscape.

Despite the interwar beginnings of these aesthetic advances, Jackson points out the postwar embrace of the open front, and how it “was accomplished more easily in new one-story buildings than in the renovation of older structures.”<sup>198</sup> On this same note, Longstreth writes, “Here, ample space existed for a large store on a single level; most developers discouraged basements or second floors due to the construction costs they incurred. Developers also sought to create a generally uniform appearance for shopping center exteriors, minimizing differences between one storefront and another.”<sup>199</sup> Thus, by the early 1960s, the buildings along commercial thoroughfares, in places like Las Vegas, were wholly modern, typically one-story, and usually setback from the curb behind a parking lot. (Fig. 20).



Fig. 20: Local discount retailer Wonder World on Decatur Boulevard in 1967. Its large, thoroughfare-facing parking lot, one-story format, and notable signage is representative of the postwar commercial thoroughfare's shopping centers and other businesses. This building has since been demolished. [Source: Photograph of Wonder World store, Las Vegas (Nev.), December 12, 1967, Frank Mitrani Photograph Collection, Southern Nevada Jewish Heritage Project, Special Collections & Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada.]

In the seminal Postmodern text, *Learning From Las Vegas*, published in 1972, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour highlight how parking and signage are paramount at the businesses along commercial strips. They write, "The vast parking lot is in front, not at the rear, since it a symbol as well as a convenience. The building is low because air conditioning demands low spaces, and merchandising techniques discourage second floors; its architecture is neutral because it can hardly be seen from the road."<sup>200</sup> This description brings

to mind the numerous shopping centers and other retailers along commercial thoroughfares, from the 1960s to today. The large, towering, free-standing signs were not strictly a phenomenon of the Las Vegas Strip, but of multiple thoroughfares around the city and beyond. Illustrating the prominence of these free-standing signs, some 1960s and 1970s newspaper advertisements for Las Vegas' shopping centers and retailers included sketches of their distinctive signs. Local discount retailer Vegas Village specifically marketed itself this way, as its ads typically included a sketch of its arrowhead-shaped signs (Fig. 21).



Fig. 21: Some newspaper advertisements from the 1960s and 1970s included sketches of shopping center and retailers' distinctive signs. This speaks to *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972), which highlights the commercial strip's eye-catching signage, particularly on the Las Vegas Strip in the early 1970s. [Source: *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, August 30, 1964 (Golden West), June 20, 1966 (Parkway Plaza), and December 21, 1975 (Vegas Village) (compiled by author).]



It is understandable why retailers placed their signs prominently along the commercial strip – and the bigger, the better. Venturi et al. write, “He or she relies on signs for guidance – enormous signs in vast spaces at high speeds.”<sup>201</sup> A few pages later they continue: “The big sign leaps to connect the driver to the store, and down the road the cake mixes and detergents are advertised by their national manufacturers on enormous billboards inflected toward the highway. The graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this landscape.”<sup>202</sup> This idea of speeding along the commercial thoroughfare is echoed in the writings of J.B. Jackson. After all, this is not a pedestrian-friendly landscape. Therefore, the retailers and corporations need to grab the driver’s (i.e., consumer’s) fleeting attention, so that they can sell their products and make a profit (Fig. 22). Buildings and signs along commercial thoroughfares come in a standardized format that has been influenced by numerous trends and shaped by many factors, from corporate marketing to local zoning ordinances. Supermarkets and discount stores represent this particularly well.



Fig. 22: While covered extensively in *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972), free-standing signs still figure prominently on contemporary commercial thoroughfares, as seen here at the major commercial node of West Charleston and Decatur boulevards. These signs, whether in the 1970s or the 2020s, are designed with the speeding driver/consumer in mind. [Photo by author, October 23, 2021.]

By the 1960s, supermarkets had arrived on Las Vegas' postwar commercial thoroughfares, including Mayfair Market at Twin Lakes Plaza (1956) on Rancho Drive and Food Fair at Decatur Shopping Center (1964).<sup>203</sup> Longstreth describes how the modern drug store and "limited-price variety (or five-and-ten-cent) store" were shaped by the supermarket.<sup>204</sup> He writes, "Increasingly, too, the drug store's exterior appearance approximated that of the supermarket, sometimes to the point that only corporate signs distinguished one from the

other.”<sup>205</sup> One can see how – in conjunction with new materials and designs – supermarkets, drug stores, and discount retailers all started to adopt a similar look. Longstreth adds:

From the developer’s perspective, both supermarket and variety store were essential – complimenting and competing against each other – to draw the vast middle market that was resettling on the urban periphery. Combined, the two types provided the anchor for the increasing number of community shopping centers and were key components for regional centers as well.<sup>206</sup>

One can see the evolution of shopping centers – with their supermarkets, pharmacies/drug stores, and discount retailers – and their growth in acreage as they drive any number of commercial thoroughfares from Downtown Las Vegas to the edges of the city and its suburbs. The history and development of these retailers is also closely linked to the rise of self-service, a newly invented aspect of shopping.<sup>207</sup> Simultaneously, in 1947, a staple of the commercial strip, the self-service gas station appeared.<sup>208</sup>

By the 1960s and 1970s, Las Vegas had a variety of local, regional, and national retailers, with the latter increasing in importance as the city grew larger. These retailers opened standardized, self-service businesses, inside and out, from the spaces of the parking lot to the rows of aisles in the sporting goods department (Fig. 23).



Fig. 23: Thanks to local, regional, and national trends in retail, the standardization of the shopping experience, including self-service, was well-established by the time of this photo inside Wonder World, a local discount retailer, in 1968. [Source: Photographs of Wonder World Interiors (Interiors of Dept), image 08 Las Vegas (Nev.), Frank Mitrani Photograph Collection, Southern Nevada Jewish Heritage Project, Special Collections & Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada, February 28, 1968.]

Both Vegas Village, founded in 1953, and Wonder World, established in 1962, had four locations each,<sup>209</sup> including stores in west and east Las Vegas – on Decatur Boulevard and Maryland Parkway, respectively. Vegas Village, which operated until 1981, was referred to, by the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, as “the valley’s first superstore.”<sup>210</sup> Wonder World labeled itself as “Las Vegas’ Quality Discount Department Store.”<sup>211</sup>

Another early “super department discount store” was Fantastic Fair, which opened a store on West Sahara (then San Francisco) Avenue at Valley View Boulevard in 1962, and sold everything from pillows to ground beef and tire pumps.<sup>212</sup> Montgomery Ward (i.e., “Wards”)

first opened its doors – not counting “catalog stores” – in 1963 at East Charleston Boulevard’s Sunrise Shopping Center, which was noted shortly before its opening as “the largest shopping center in the state.”<sup>213</sup>

On the other side of the city, in the Charleston Heights Shopping Center (1964) on Decatur Boulevard, another national brand, W.T. Grant Co. (i.e., “Grants”), opened in 1964.<sup>214</sup> Notably, Grants’ advertisement in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* says, “Your Family Friendly Store.”<sup>215</sup> This terminology was common at the time, reflecting the widely-promoted ideal of the nuclear family. An advertisement for Grand Central – at East Sahara Avenue and Eastern Avenue – calls the retailer the “Family Savings Store,” while Skaggs is marketed as the “Family Store,” with an promoting the tagline: “The Smartest Women SAVE HERE!”<sup>216</sup> Overall, these retailers along postwar commercial thoroughfares catered to White, middle-income families, and the advertising from this period illustrated this (Fig. 24). Besides race and income, advertisements depicted overtly feminine and masculine sketches and/or photos of models (Fig. 25). This normative messaging is also found in the physical landscape, including at The Family Center (1974-1975), which is across Decatur Boulevard from the Westland Mall (now Westland Fair) Shopping Center (see Fig. 22 for The Family Center sign).



In 1969, Westland Mall – “with [at the time] parking facilities for more than 3,500 cars” – opened a Woolco, part of F.W. Woolworth Co.<sup>217</sup> This was Las Vegas’ “second Woolco Department Store,” as the retailer’s first location in the city opened near Downtown in 1965 – thus, reflecting the city’s growth to the west by the end of the decade.<sup>218</sup> Woolco sought “to sell department-store merchandise, including nationally-known brands, at competitive prices...to operate in modern structures with convenient selling space on one floor.”<sup>219</sup> By the early 1970s, Las Vegas also had two Kmart locations, one on Rancho Drive and another on East Sahara Avenue.<sup>220</sup> Store locations on commercial thoroughfares in both west and east Las Vegas was common, as supermarkets, discount retailers, and other chain stores sought premier real estate on these thoroughfares – particularly at commercial nodes where two major thoroughfares intersected. In turn, they sought to control local residents’ consumer tastes.

Simultaneously, these commercial thoroughfares became a postwar version of the earlier “shopping streets” and shopping centers became the new “taxpayers.” By the mid-1960s, it is clear that Clark County was thinking about these roadways and their commercial development. A “Coordinated General Plan, Las Vegas Valley” from this period shows a color-coded grid of streets (i.e., a super-grid of the major commercial thoroughfares) with various strips, squares, and circles of color – with orange-red squares and circles representing “planned commercial centers.”<sup>221</sup> These symbols appear at nodes around the valley. The plan says, “The General Plan recommends the establishment of modern shopping centers to provide goods and services to residents in outlying areas in the county, rather than the continuation of the practice of stripping arterials with commercial zoning.”<sup>222</sup> Similar to the FHA bulletin three decades earlier, this plan appears to articulate a desire for concentrated commerce at nodes, as

opposed to commercial strip development stretched alongside the city's thoroughfares. It defines smaller "neighborhood convenience center" and larger "major shopping center," with the latter's "location at the intersection for two arterial highways, or preferably near a freeway interchange."<sup>223</sup> Therefore, during this time, the county was embracing nodes and the "interchange land rush" trend then sweeping the nation.

The Coordinated General Plan says, "The visual quality of a community is often greatly depreciated by extensive strip development since unfenced outdoor storage, lack of reasonable setbacks, excessive signs and billboards all tend to locate in these areas;" thus, an interest in "adequate parking and building setbacks."<sup>224</sup> Here is an example of a local policy embracing parking lots and shopping centers along thoroughfares. Despite an interest in reigning in the unplanned nature of the commercial strip, this plan is very much trading one form of sprawl for another. Regardless, this sprawl further eroded Downtown Las Vegas' importance to local consumers.

Over the years, downtown, specifically Fremont Street, lost its stores to these newly-platted commercial thoroughfares. Fremont Street initially competed with Commercial Center, which first opened in the early 1960s on East Sahara Avenue near Maryland Parkway.<sup>225</sup> With its "superb location," Commercial Center was labeled "the Downtown of tomorrow."<sup>226</sup> At the time, this new downtown was very much on the edge of the city, just outside the city limits and surrounded by patches of desert (Fig. 26). Although Commercial Center includes buildings that were constructed adjacent to Sahara Avenue, a landscape of parking spaces is visible once the driver turns into the shopping center, past these perimeter buildings. A rendering from 1962 shows an outline of these short, wide buildings and the large, interior parking lot still seen



today, as well as what appears to be a never constructed seven-or-eight-story office building at the center of the development.<sup>227</sup>



Fig. 26: Just outside the city limits, Commercial Center – with its low-slung buildings and expansive parking lot – was marketed as a new type of downtown, despite being in the partially-developed desert. Soon, Downtown Las Vegas would lose many of its retailers to these newly-platted commercial thoroughfares' shopping centers, as well as the Boulevard Mall on Maryland Parkway (that thoroughfare is seen at the bottom of the photo). In the photo, just below Commercial Center, with a parking lot full of cars, is local retailer Vegas Village. [Photo: *Vintage Las Vegas* (blog), August 24, 2021; Culinary Workers Union Local 226 Photographs, UNLV Special Collections, 1963.]

At the time, this Paradise Homes development was said to include “more business space than the entire downtown Las Vegas area,” and “distinctive styling, fine quality woods, advanced materials and textures, and original landscaping.”<sup>228</sup> Even in then-small Las Vegas, there was a movement towards commercial thoroughfares and away from the city center, reflecting the national trend. Home developers either built new shopping centers, like Commercial Center, or spurred new commercial developments through the construction of

their residential subdivisions. This is seen across Las Vegas, with residential subdivisions and corresponding shopping centers: Hyde Park and Hyde Park Shopping Center on West Charleston Boulevard, Twin Lakes Village and Twin Lakes Plaza on Rancho Drive, and Charleston Heights and Charleston Heights Shopping Center on Decatur Boulevard, just to name a few.<sup>229</sup>

Paradise Homes' Paradise Palms, just east of Maryland Parkway and south of Desert Inn Road, was marketed in conjunction with the Boulevard (originally, Parkway) Mall, as an advertisement in late-1963 says: "Soon to be constructed adjacent to Paradise Palms...the fabulous PARKWAY MALL Nevada's first Regional Shopping Center Home of the new SEARS, ROEBUCK and COMPANY Store."<sup>230</sup> As expected, Sears closed its Fremont Street location ("LV Landmark Closing") in 1965,<sup>231</sup> which was an early sign of the movement towards commercial thoroughfares.

The true turning point was the opening of the Boulevard Mall on Maryland Parkway in 1968. Although commercial thoroughfares were extending in every direction, Maryland Parkway stands out as it had Las Vegas' only indoor shopping mall until the national department store chain Dayton Hudson established Meadows Mall at U.S. Highway 95 near Decatur Boulevard in 1978.<sup>232</sup> A *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article from 1968 says:

There is no gathering place in the city with as much charm and grace. It will partially fill a void produced by the absence of auditoriums, museums, parks and other public facilities in Las Vegas. ...Protected from the winds of winter and the desert heat of summer, the mall offers opportunity for art displays and other types of shows and exhibits, some of which will not be of a commercial nature.<sup>233</sup>

Also described in the article as "a showplace," the mall was clearly an institution for the small and growing city. One can see how Fremont Street was being supplanted as the city's retail

moved south along Maryland Parkway – in addition to other competing commercial thoroughfares: West Charleston Boulevard, East Sahara Avenue, and Decatur Boulevard.

When the Boulevard Mall opened, Ronzone’s (“The largest independently owned merchandising outlet in the state.”) established a branch of its department store in the new “picturesque mall.”<sup>234</sup> By 1970, Ronzone’s closed its Fremont Street store, followed by J.C. Penney (“the last to leave Fremont Street”) in 1982.<sup>235</sup> An early aerial photograph of the mall shows Sears, Penneys (J.C. Penney), and The Broadway, a Los Angeles-based department store, as well as a large sign reminiscent of a radio tower and an expansive number of parking spaces fronting Maryland Parkway<sup>236</sup> (Fig. 27).



Fig. 27: The Boulevard Mall, a first for Nevada. It was built between the Maryland Parkway commercial thoroughfare and the Paradise Palms subdivision, with plenty of parking in-between. The mall contributed to retail leaving Downtown Las Vegas, and helped establish Maryland Parkway as a major thoroughfare of shopping centers. [Source: *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 2013.]

Approximately a decade after the Boulevard Mall's much-discussed grand opening, a 1979 advertisement for Park Place ("A Shopper's Delight") presents the soon-to-open shopping center on Maryland Parkway – with elegant horse and carriage imagery – as "Las Vegas' Newest and Most Sophisticated Shopping Center in the Heart of Las Vegas' Shopping District Directly across from Boulevard Mall."<sup>237</sup> Therefore, by the late 1970s, Maryland Parkway – not Fremont Street – was the local "shopping district." And there were other commercial "shopping street" thoroughfares around the Las Vegas Valley, which catered to in-city residents with a car.

In the late 1970s, Paradise Homes continued their shopping center expansion along Maryland Parkway towards Flamingo Road, with the Mission Center – designed with Mission and Spanish Revival style motifs.<sup>238</sup> By the 1980s and early 1990s, thanks to various local, regional, and national trends – from new designs and styles to the loss of downtown retail – commercial thoroughfares had come to dominate Las Vegas, the cities of the Sun Belt region, and any number of towns and cities throughout the country.

#### Looking Ahead: The Commercial Thoroughfare's Transformation

Inevitably, cultural landscapes change, and they may not have the same physical features and meanings in the present, as they did in the past. Commercial thoroughfares are no different, as they developed from the traditional American thoroughfare on the East Coast and in the Midwest, through the interwar era's Miracle Mile and Park and Shop, to the postwar commercial strip of the Sun Belt city – with its huge signs, large parking lots, and one-story shopping centers. This historic narrative presents commercial thoroughfares and their shopping centers as locations that generally served White, middle-income families – with some diverse outliers. Since 1990, this power dynamic has started to shift, as these thoroughfares and their

commercial spaces, particularly in the Sun Belt region, have become more diverse. Chapter III will explore this important concept of changing uses and communities served in repurposed spaces. This social evolution that has occurred makes these cultural landscapes worthy of preservationists' attention.

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<sup>52</sup> Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile, American Roadside Architecture* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>53</sup> Liebs, 7, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Liebs, 11.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Kenneth T. (K.T.) Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier, The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1985), 135.

<sup>57</sup> K.T. Jackson, 133.

<sup>58</sup> K.T. Jackson, 122.

<sup>59</sup> Greg Bunce, "The Western Grid, Explained," Utah Geospatial Resource Center, March 11, 2019, <https://gis.utah.gov/the-western-grid/>.

<sup>60</sup> Campbell Gibson, "Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places In The United States: 1790 to 1990," Working Paper Number POP-WP027, Census Working Papers, U.S. Census Bureau, June 1998, <https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/POP-twps0027.html>.

U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 8. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1850," June 15, 1998, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/pop-twps0027/tab08.txt>.

<sup>61</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 9. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1860," June 15, 1998, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/pop-twps0027/tab09.txt>.

<sup>62</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 12. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1890," June 15, 1998, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/pop-twps0027/tab12.txt>.

U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 14. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1910," June 15, 1998, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/pop-twps0027/tab14.txt>.

<sup>63</sup> Liebs, 12.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Liebs, 15.

<sup>66</sup> K.T. Jackson, 164.

<sup>67</sup> K.T. Jackson, 181.

<sup>68</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 15. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1920," June 15, 1998, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/pop-twps0027/tab15.txt>.

<sup>69</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 10. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1870," June 15, 1998, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/pop-twps0027/tab10.txt>.

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U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 13. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1900," June 15, 1998, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/pop-twps0027/tab13.txt>.

<sup>70</sup> Liebs, 29.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas W. Hanchett, "U.S. Tax Policy and the Shopping-Center Boom of the 1950s and 1960s," *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 4 (October 1996): 1088, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2169635>.

<sup>72</sup> Hanchett, 1089.

<sup>73</sup> K.T. Jackson, 176.

<sup>74</sup> Mamie J. Meredith, "'Miracle Miles' in the U. S. A.," *American Speech* 31, no. 3 (October 1956): 230-31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/453690>.

<sup>75</sup> Homer Aschmann, "Miracle Mile," *American Speech* 32, no. 2 (May 1957): 157, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/453038>.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> K.T. Jackson writes, "The number of electric streetcars peaked in 1917 at 72,911, while total ridership crested in 1923 at 15.7 billion nationwide. ...By 1948 the number of streetcars in service had fallen to 17,911."

K.T. Jackson, 171.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Longstreth, *The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 154.

<sup>79</sup> The term "shopping center" refers to a type of development found along commercial thoroughfares. They are usually one-story, but can be two, and are anchored by a supermarket/grocery store, pharmacy, and/or big-box discount store(s) selling everything from clothing to office furniture and party supplies to lumber. Crucially, they have ample parking and large free-standing signs facing the thoroughfare. They also include additional stores and restaurants, and typically a gas station, in the same complex of buildings as the anchor stores or as individual buildings in the parking lot. They come in a variety of Modern and Postmodern styles – usually region-specific. They are different than "strip malls," which are literally a simple "strip" of five-to-seven smaller businesses, like coffee shops, nail salons, and dry cleaners. Shopping centers and strip malls are not the same as the "indoor shopping mall," with its department stores, kiosks, food court, multi-screen movie theater, and other amenities. Shopping centers are sometimes referred to as "shopping malls," but I have avoided that specific term to decrease confusion.

<sup>80</sup> See: Richard Longstreth's "Is Main Street Doomed?" in *The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941*.

<sup>81</sup> K.T. Jackson, 258, 263.

<sup>82</sup> Longstreth, 160.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Longstreth, 161.

<sup>85</sup> Longstreth, 162.

<sup>86</sup> Longstreth, 148-149.

<sup>87</sup> Longstreth, 148, 151.

<sup>88</sup> "Cleveland Park Historic District Contributing Structures," Historic Preservation Office, District of Columbia Office of Planning, April 5, 2016, <https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/Cleveland%20Park%20HD%20Contributing%20Structures.pdf>.

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- <sup>89</sup> Federal Housing Administration (FHA), *Planning Neighborhoods for Small Houses*, Technical Bulletin No. 5, July 1, 1936, Washington, DC, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=dtBJAQAAAMAJ&pg=GBS.PA26&hl=en>, 26-27.
- <sup>90</sup> FHA, 26-27.
- <sup>91</sup> FHA, 27.
- <sup>92</sup> Carl Abbott, "Southwestern Cityscapes: Approaches to an American Urban Environment," in *Essays on Sunbelt Cities and Recent Urban America*, edited by Robert B. Fairbanks and Kathleen Underwood, 64 (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1990).
- <sup>93</sup> Longstreth, xiv.
- <sup>94</sup> River Oaks is one of these eight.
- K.T. Jackson, 259.
- <sup>95</sup> K.T. Jackson, 239.
- <sup>96</sup> K.T. Jackson, 266.
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>98</sup> Ed Ruscha, "12 Sunsets," J. Paul Getty Trust, accessed November 19, 2021, <https://www.12sunsets.getty.edu>.
- <sup>99</sup> John Brinckerhoff (J.B.) Jackson, "The Vernacular City," in *Landscape in Sight, Looking at America*, edited by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, 245 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).
- <sup>100</sup> Liebs, 31.
- <sup>101</sup> "National Interstate and Defense Highways Act (1956)," 100 Milestone Documents, Our Documents, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=88>.
- <sup>102</sup> Liebs, 36.
- <sup>103</sup> Joel Garreau, "EDGE CITIES," *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, December 1988, 48-55, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44677370>.
- <sup>104</sup> Two examples of "edge cities" are Tysons Corner, Virginia, which sits on the western edge of the "Capital Beltway" (Interstate 495), and Buckhead in Atlanta, which is located where the curving Peachtree Road, a well-known thoroughfare, crosses a major highway north of downtown Atlanta.
- <sup>105</sup> K.T. Jackson, 260.
- <sup>106</sup> Dave Cornoyer, "The Other Las Vegas Part Four, A Paradise Worth Waiting For," Newsletter, Docomomo US, August 3, 2021, <https://docomomo-us.org/news/a-paradise-worth-waiting-for>.
- <sup>107</sup> Hanchett.
- <sup>108</sup> Hanchett, 1083.
- <sup>109</sup> Hanchett, 1095.
- <sup>110</sup> Kim Dovey, "Place as Assemblage," in *Becoming Places: Urbanism/Architecture/Identity/Power* (London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 15-16.
- <sup>111</sup> Dovey, "Place as Assemblage," 15.
- <sup>112</sup> K.T. Jackson, 265.
- <sup>113</sup> Hanchett, 1098.
- <sup>114</sup> Hanchett, 1106.
- <sup>115</sup> Dolores Hayden, *A Field Guide to Sprawl*, with Aerial Photographs by Jim Wark (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004), 10-11.

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<sup>116</sup> Hayden, 66-67.

<sup>117</sup> Hayden, 10-11.

<sup>118</sup> Sonia A. Hirt, *Zoned in the USA, The Origins and Implications of American Land-Use Regulation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 36.

<sup>119</sup> Hirt, 39.

<sup>120</sup> Hirt, 46.

<sup>121</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 19. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1960," June 15, 1998, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/pop-twps0027/tab19.txt>.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> K.T. Jackson, 281.

<sup>124</sup> Andrea Vesentini, "It's Cool Inside: Advertising Air Conditioning to Postwar Suburbia," *American Studies* 55/56, no.4/1 (2017): 95, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44982621>.

<sup>125</sup> Vesentini, 102-103.

<sup>126</sup> Vesentini, 105-106.

<sup>127</sup> Dianne Harris, "Clean and Bright and Everyone White," in *Sites Unseen: Landscape and Vision*, edited by Diane Harris and D. Fairchild Ruggles, 241-62 (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).

<sup>128</sup> Richard H. Schein, "A Methodological Framework for Interpreting Ordinary Landscapes: Lexington, Kentucky's Courthouse Square," *Geographical Review* 99, no. 3 (July 2009): 377-402, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40377399>.

<sup>129</sup> Harris, 262.

<sup>130</sup> Carroll Pursell, "The Geography of Everywhere," in *Technology in Postwar America: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 34.

<sup>131</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), March 17, 1966: 55, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16C184954C382F0D%402439202-16C1806FAAEC27A8%4054-16C1806FAAEC27A8%40>.

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), September 14, 1967: 31, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16CBB2468B173E40%402439748-16CBA1208A033F0B%4030-16CBA1208A033F0B%40>.

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), February 25, 1990: 133, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16E3CF7F40A4CB8C%402447948-16E253CE141B411C%40132-16E253CE141B411C%40>.

<sup>132</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), September 14, 1967: 31.

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<sup>236</sup> Untitled and undated photo of the Boulevard Mall, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, accessed January 29, 2022, [https://www.reviewjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/web1\\_boulevard\\_2.jpg](https://www.reviewjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/web1_boulevard_2.jpg).

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<sup>237</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), July 8, 1979: 146, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16DA6E89476713C9%402444063-16DA6B5A536219E1%40145-16DA6B5A536219E1%40>.

<sup>238</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), March 10, 1978: 5, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16DB4E3AACC52255%402443578-16DB4D353587C664%404-16DB4D353587C664%40>.

### CHAPTER III

## THE SOCIAL EVOLUTION: REPURPOSED COMMERCIAL SPACES ALONG DIVERSE AND MULTICULTURAL COMMERCIAL THOROUGHFARES

### Introduction

Commercial thoroughfares and their commercial spaces have evolved over the past two centuries, reflecting local, regional, and national trends. These trends have included changes in transportation, such as the streetcar being eclipsed by the automobile and bus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, architectural styles, and local and federal policy choices related to taxation, housing, zoning, and immigration. Additionally, the Cold War, economics, and climate have influenced industries, the availability of jobs, and where people have selected to live. This, in turn, spurred growth in the Sun Belt region and cities like Las Vegas. With these trends, the United States went from a nation dominated by Northeastern and Midwestern metropolises to a highly-suburbanized country with over 70 million Americans in the major metropolitan areas of the Sun Belt region – which spreads across 15 states from California to Florida.<sup>239</sup>

Phoenix overtook Philadelphia in population count, while Sun Belt metropolises like San Jose, Dallas, and Houston – which, in 1960, became the first Sun Belt city after Los Angeles to rank as one of the nation’s top ten largest cities – are pillars of the American economy. These trends also spurred the lengthening of commercial thoroughfares, which now extend farther out than ever before – from downtown and the streetcar suburbs, through the “Miracle Mile,”



the postwar commercial strip, and the residential subdivisions of the suburbs, to the “edge city” and beyond.

Commercial thoroughfares are once again evolving. These changes along commercial thoroughfares have been especially pronounced in recent years, as the Sun Belt region continues to grow, attracting Americans from other regions and immigrants from around the world. In turn, this region’s demographics have changed drastically since 1990. Immigrants, in particular, have found lower-priced real estate for their stores and restaurants, in addition to affordable housing.<sup>240</sup> For the most part, immigrants no longer settle in dense, downtown neighborhoods. Instead, many Americans are learning that the most authentic, ethnic cuisines are found along the old Miracle Mile or in the suburban strip mall just off the thoroughfare. Therefore, despite the postwar commercial thoroughfare’s central role in the daily routines of White, middle-income families – thanks in large part to mass marketing by retailers – these same thoroughfares and their corresponding commercial spaces, in Sun Belt cities like Las Vegas, have become increasingly diverse and multicultural.

While still lined with the standard supermarkets, discount retailers, shopping centers, strip malls, and big-box stores, the commercial thoroughfares’ strips and nodes – dating to the 1960s through 1980s – are evolving into something more interesting. Here, one can see firsthand the diverse and multicultural communities served in these repurposed commercial spaces. This social evolution and change, which has both tangible features and intangible aspects, is the focus of this chapter’s discussion. In particular, three patterns are presented as representative examples of this evolution: two discount retailer spaces that became swap meets, a shopping center that has taken on an international character, and an indoor shopping

mall that has embraced entertainment and non-retail functions as the surrounding neighborhood and city has changed. In addition to these three examples, various other examples will be provided, including former fast food restaurants that now house various ethnic cuisines. These are just some of the examples that highlight the important social and cultural narratives found along contemporary commercial thoroughfares.

Analyzing and understanding this social change and its physical manifestations is important. According to cultural geographer William Wyckoff: “As strip landscapes grow increasingly complex, revealing an accumulating palimpsest of activities and architectures, it becomes more difficult to read their meanings and to interpret their significance in the built environment of the late-twentieth century American city.”<sup>241</sup> A multicultural palimpsest has developed along these commercial thoroughfares, as diverse individuals and communities add newer layers of meaning to older layers. This layering can be both tangible – a new sign in Spanish added to a shopping center’s façade or a remodel to update a 1960s storefront – and intangible – a new restaurant serving Ethiopian cuisine or a store that provides meeting space for a local church group.

Historians and scholars, such as Timothy Davis, push the reader – as well as historic preservation practitioners – past traditional storylines and an architectural-centric perspective, towards a focus on the social narratives expressed through the “lived in” landscape, to quote cultural geographer Richard H. Schein. This chapter analyzes this cultural landscape and its social evolution since the 1960s through 1980s period discussed in Chapter II. First, it presents a scale of change and way to classify this evolution, which is represented by both physical features and use. It then discusses the diverse and multicultural communities along the

commercial thoroughfares of Las Vegas, with an emphasis on the conversion and repurposing of these commercial spaces that were constructed between 1960 and 1990. This chapter highlights that these spaces are inherently flexible, which has attracted many new types of businesses, from restaurants to retailers, that cater to different ethnic communities – in contrast to the White, middle-income narrative at the center of Chapter II. Following this overview, this chapter presents three patterns – each of which represents a notable change along Las Vegas’ thoroughfares. Finally, this chapter closes with a discussion of historic integrity, in the context of the National Register of Historic Places, and its many limitations. This overview lays the groundwork for the conclusions and evaluative framework found in Chapter V.

#### Classifying the Evolution of Commercial Thoroughfares and Commercial Spaces

Several authors have examined commercial thoroughfares and their evolution. For example, Wyckoff analyzes Denver’s Colfax Avenue and its transition in uses in his article “Denver’s Aging Commercial Strip.” Colfax Avenue is reminiscent of Charleston Boulevard in Las Vegas, as it is a commercial thoroughfare that is adjacent to a downtown area, and it has attracted businesses and consumers for many decades. However, unlike Charleston, Colfax has always catered – especially in the past – to many travelers, as it is also U.S. Highway 40.<sup>242</sup> While still important to cross-country travelers and in-city residents, U.S. Highways were especially crucial prior to the establishment of the Interstate Highway System in 1956. Therefore, Wyckoff describes Colfax as having a “nonlocal commercial orientation,”<sup>243</sup> which stands in contrast to this study’s focus on commercial thoroughfares in Las Vegas that cater to in-city residents. Thus, at one point, Colfax had many motels; so, Wyckoff tracks the “motel evolution,” which he places into

four “stages,” starting in 1959 and ending in 1990.<sup>244</sup> As times changed, the motels’ uses evolved, and there was an increase in the “adult motel” – which is one of his classification “types.”<sup>245</sup>

Despite the motel-centric study, this article presents a useful template for classifying commercial development over the years, whether it be change, no change, some change, etc. Change can be through physical alteration (complete or partial) or use to a property, or both. Thus, Wyckoff presents a scale of change. Although he starts with complete change, it is more useful to start with the status quo. Thus, on one end of the scale would be the status quo and no change in the physical building and its use (“functional and formal continuity”), while on the other end of the scale is a complete evolution and change (“functional and formal transformation”).<sup>246</sup> In between are two additional variations: “functional continuity and formal transformation” and “functional transformation and formal survival.”<sup>247</sup>

Wyckoff looks at this motel evolution from roughly 1960 to 1990, and sees some significant change. This also happens to be the same timespan at the center of this study. However, this study views that window of three-decades as a period of stability, where Las Vegas’ commercial thoroughfares and their businesses generally catered to the White, middle-income families. That time period stands as a point of comparison to show how now, in the third-decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these same commercial thoroughfares are quite different, specifically in their changing uses and communities served. Regardless of these fundamental differences between Colfax Avenue and Las Vegas’ thoroughfares, the commercial development along these thoroughfares can be categorized using Wyckoff’s scale and classifications. Nonetheless, the examples presented later in this chapter illustrate that

commercial spaces can fall into more than one of Wyckoff's classifications, as these large shopping centers and indoor shopping malls can have features and aspects of both "continuity" and "transformation."

*Functional-Formal Continuity:* In this classification, a 1960s era shopping center may have different stores and restaurants, but it generally functions the same and looks the same as it did when it was constructed. Another variation on this would be businesses that still serve a commercial purpose, but a drastically different one, such as swap meets and thrift stores that replaced supermarkets and discount retailers. This category includes Commercial Center on East Sahara Avenue and Rancho Swap Meet on Rancho Drive. *Functional Continuity-Formal Transformation:* Many shopping centers and strip malls throughout the city still serve customers, as they did at the time of their opening in the 1960s through 1980s, but have undergone stylistic updates as architectural tastes have changed. Wyckoff refers to this as "a common evolutionary trend."<sup>248</sup> This category includes the Boulevard Mall on Maryland Parkway and Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet on Decatur Boulevard.

*Functional Transformation-Formal Survival:* Many buildings along commercial thoroughfares would be recognizable, at least in their physical format, to past business owners or customers, but now these same buildings have a very different use. This includes shopping centers with churches and government agencies, or a store that has been repurposed into a gym. Also, some buildings, particularly along the older sections of commercial thoroughfares, have become vacant, while some former single-family homes fronting thoroughfares have been rezoned for commercial or office use. Commercial Center and the Boulevard Mall would also be classified under this category.

*Functional-Formal Transformation:* Some businesses have been demolished and replaced with another, completely different type of business, while other buildings have been demolished and not replaced. This type of change appears to be the least common type found along Las Vegas’ commercial thoroughfares. For the most part, commercial use has continued, regardless of the physical format. This contrasts with Wyckoff’s study of Colfax Avenue, which started with a strip of motels that have become more so a “franchised blur of the modern strip that provides local retailing services.”<sup>249</sup> The commercial thoroughfares at the center of this study were already lined with local, regional, and national retailers. The difference between now and the 1960s through 1980s are the specific businesses and customer bases. Therefore, this classification will not be considered (Table 1).

<i>Functional-Formal Continuity</i> Unchanged physical format, unchanged use	Examples: Commercial Center Rancho Swap Meet
<i>Functional Continuity-Formal Transformation</i> Changed physical format, unchanged use	Examples: Boulevard Mall Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet
<i>Functional Transformation-Formal Survival</i> Changed physical format, changed use	Examples: Commercial Center Boulevard Mall

Table 1: William Wyckoff’s scale and classifications, as applied to four commercial developments along Las Vegas’ thoroughfares. Both Commercial Center and the Boulevard Mall fall into more than one classification, since both commercial properties have had some physical alterations, particularly the mall, and various changes in use, some of which are discussed in this chapter. Simultaneously, there are aspects of these properties that are almost completely unchanged since their initial construction, including Mid-century Modern design features and continued commercial uses, including retail.

Despite the utility of this descriptive scale, there are limitations, particularly with some of the language that is used. For example, Wyckoff highlights the “pattern of decline” on Colfax

Avenue.<sup>250</sup> While there has been some deterioration and vacancy along the older sections of Las Vegas' commercial thoroughfares, there is not necessarily decline. Saying there has been decline is very much a White, middle-income normative perspective. For example, an editorial in the *Las Vegas Sun* entitled "Urban decay" bemoaned the change that was visible in parts of the city by the late 1990s. Journalist Geoff Schumacher writes, "The effects of our lack of control and foresight are felt everywhere, even in the oldest neighborhoods."<sup>251</sup> Specifically, he targets the city's "sprawl" and the resulting "inner-city void."<sup>252</sup> He continues, "Sprawl also is hurting older neighborhoods that only 20-25 years ago were on the city's edge. Supermarkets, drugstores and other retail outlets that citizens rely on have abandoned lower-middle-class areas in recent years and opened new, bigger boxes in developing parts of the valley."<sup>253</sup>

Schumacher accurately speaks to this trend and it is concerning, considering the major issue of "food deserts."<sup>254</sup> Also, he is knowledgeable about important urban planning problems and solutions. But his focus on retailers like Kmart, Albertson's, Wonder World, and Lucky supermarket give the reader a sense that he very much has a normative perspective and opinion on what a commercial thoroughfare should look like, and what retailers it should include.

Now, in Schumacher's defense, he is concerned about the need for retailers that serve lower income communities, and this op-ed could have been written at a time of especially high vacancy in these areas – before new supermarkets, restaurants, and other small businesses moved in. He may or may not be pleased with the change that has occurred over the past 20 to 30 years. It is likely that he would be happy, considering his opinion piece ends with the following statement: "Restoring urban shopping centers should be a top priority."<sup>255</sup> Despite

on-going vacancy issues and some demolition, many shopping centers and strip malls along Las Vegas' commercial thoroughfares have reinvented themselves – very much in the mold of Wyckoff's scale and its classifications.

Therefore, descriptions of these commercial thoroughfares are complicated and require a broad viewpoint that incorporates and considers the many diverse communities that now use these corresponding commercial spaces. A Kmart leaving a shopping center and a swap meet taking its place does not necessarily mean decay – a specific example referenced by Schumacher (“It’s an improvement, perhaps, but it’s just not the same.”<sup>256</sup>) and discussed in this chapter – and a minority-owned store or restaurant moving into a strip mall is not an example of deterioration. Instead, this change illustrates the continuing social evolution of commercial thoroughfares. This study and its evaluative framework provide a way for historic preservationists to consider the palimpsest of the commercial thoroughfares' cultural landscape.

#### Flexibility along Commercial Thoroughfares: Serving Diverse and Multicultural Communities in Repurposed Commercial Spaces

The flexibility in converting commercial spaces, including physical alterations, is why so many individuals, including business owners, have chosen to repurpose this particular cultural landscape. This decision is likely driven by the lack of control (comparatively) in the shopping centers and strip malls along commercial thoroughfares – which Davis touches upon.<sup>257</sup> This stands in contrast to the indoor shopping mall, something geographers Lynn A. Staeheli and Don Mitchell write about. They present a case study from an indoor mall in Syracuse, New York to demonstrate how the management of malls exert “control,” via three “regulating” methods, over shoppers, visitors, and tenants.<sup>258</sup> Staeheli and Mitchell write, “We conclude by arguing



that these new community spaces blend public and private in ways that can be used to enhance the profitability of malls and to muffle political opposition and critique in the name of civility.”<sup>259</sup> While the authors are focused on the larger threat to democracy and the American public, their point is an important one, as it shows no cultural landscape is truly neutral and that the indoor mall is a restricted commercial space.

Regarding indoor shopping malls, Staeheli and Mitchell write, “Mall owners are clear that malls are first and foremost spaces of consumption and so they will try to create a retail mix that will attract a particular segment of the consuming public.”<sup>260</sup> Despite rules that all tenants and customers abide by – and the overarching goal of consumption – there is an inherent flexibility in many of the commercial spaces found along commercial thoroughfares. For instance, a wider array of businesses can be found at shopping centers and strip malls than at indoor shopping malls, as the latter heavily regulates the types of stores that locate there. Rarely, will someone find a liquor store, pawn shop, psychic, and/or tattoo parlor at an indoor mall, and given the costs of operating in many malls, one is unlikely to encounter many small businesses.<sup>261</sup> Indoor malls also control access through a limited number of entrances, which are opened and closed at certain times.

Therefore, control, power, race, gender, and income shape cultural landscapes, including commercial thoroughfares and their strips and nodes of shopping centers and indoor shopping malls. As countless commercial thoroughfares and residential subdivisions were springing up in the 1960s through 1980s, viewing a cultural landscape and finding these meanings became more complicated. As Deryck W. Holdsworth, a geographer, puts it: “We do not simply read.”<sup>262</sup> This is clearly directed at earlier cultural geographers like Peirce Lewis and

his well-known “Axioms for Reading the Landscape,”<sup>263</sup> which will be discussed in-depth in Chapter IV.

Art historian and scholar Dell Upton writes, “The conjunction of seen and unseen, then, draws our attention to the experience of landscape as well as its initial creation.”<sup>264</sup> As the years went by, cultural landscape theorists started to point out the landscape’s “seen and unseen”<sup>265</sup> features and aspects, and the flaws inherent in simply viewing or “reading” a landscape. A cultural landscape is constructed by multiple private and public players, such as when the commercial thoroughfare is initially graded and the first cement is poured at the shopping center. The landscape and its various meanings then evolve through the years. In Las Vegas, this is illustrated through social change, particularly since 1990. This evolution has corresponded with a change in the built environment of commercial spaces, which are inherently flexible.

For purposes of this study, the most important aspect of this flexibility is found through the physical format of shopping centers and strip malls. Most of these commercial spaces are one-story “boxes” with minimal ornamentation. They can be repurposed in various ways – especially on the interior – and the signage of past businesses can easily be swapped out. Through this flexibility, many innovative conversions have occurred. These conversions have occurred as commercial thoroughfares’ strips and nodes have changed. For example, Journalist Kevin Williams has reported on the one-time staple of the thoroughfare, Kmart, and the many conversions that have taken place at its large and numerous stores.<sup>266</sup> Kmart was a major discount retailer in many towns and cities long before Target, Walmart, and other

contemporary big-box stores. Now, Williams writes, “Some former sites have been overhauled as flea markets, car dealerships, driving schools and even funeral homes.”<sup>267</sup>

Reflecting this trend, Las Vegas, like other cities and suburbs of the Sun Belt region, is experiencing this conversion creativity. Davis echoes Williams in his description of repurposing properties. Davis writes:

Thrift stores, furniture outlets, recycling businesses, aerobics parlors, day-care centers – even churches – are taking advantage of defunct supermarkets to satisfy their need for spacious, low-cost quarters. State and municipal governments have recognized that cast-off supermarkets are both more affordable than new buildings and ideally located for providing community services.<sup>268</sup>

In Las Vegas, many of the commercial spaces that once housed gleaming grocery stores and popular discount retailers have been repurposed – sometimes, for surprising uses. Driving along the city’s commercial thoroughfares, one finds evidence of what Williams and Davis both highlight.

There are thrift stores and retailers with heavily-discounted pricing: 99 Cents Only Stores, Big Lots, DollarPlus Discount Center, Dollar Tree, Family Dollar, Five Below, Goodwill, and Opportunity Village Thrift Store. Churches can be found in some shopping centers: The Crossing Church Midtown on West Sahara Avenue, and The Potter’s House at Meadows Lane and Decatur Boulevard.<sup>269</sup> Government agencies and healthcare/educational uses are also found in these commercial spaces: the Southern Nevada Health District on Decatur Boulevard, the State of Nevada Division of Welfare and Supportive Services at Nucleus Plaza (the former Golden West Shopping Center) on West Owens Avenue, Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield and United Education Institute (UEI Collage) at the Boulevard Mall on Maryland Parkway, and Home Health Care Las Vegas on West Sahara Avenue.<sup>270</sup>

Therefore, not only have commercial thoroughfares lengthened, from the city center to the exurbs, and widened, to accommodate the increase in automobile traffic and congestion, but specific sections – particularly the older stretches – of thoroughfares have changed dramatically. This concept is similar to Wyckoff’s study of Colfax Avenue in Denver, but Davis also looks at “transitional areas” in the context of race, income, and conflict.<sup>271</sup> These particular areas that he describes contain a mix of new businesses and customers of varying backgrounds and interests. Davis notes how this can cause “tensions.”<sup>272</sup>

This inevitably happens, considering the location of small businesses, such as family-owned shops and restaurants, and chain supermarket and discount retailers along commercial strips, next to businesses serving a particular clientele from nearby neighborhoods or the wider city (e.g., marijuana dispensaries, LGBTQ bars/clubs, adult stores, strip clubs, tattoo parlors, etc.). The inclusion of LGBTQ bars/clubs may seem odd at first glance, but LGBTQ-oriented businesses have only recently gained wider acceptance with the general public. In addition to buildings that house stores and restaurants, there may be mobile/temporary businesses and services, such as food trucks and, nowadays, COVID-19 testing centers – and even sex workers (Fig. 28).



Fig. 28: In addition to the speeding cars, there are mobile/temporary businesses and services along commercial thoroughfares. Here, in the parking lot of the Boulevard Mall on Maryland Parkway, is a taco truck. Next to this truck, just out of frame, is a temporary structure for COVID-19 testing. Therefore, this cultural landscape includes more than just permanent buildings and structures. [Source: Photo by author, October 24, 2021.]

Davis elaborates on these areas: “Along with cheap lodgings, the strip provides an array of services geared toward the needs of single men, day laborers, and families down on their luck. Pawn shops, check cashing services, liquor stores, laundromats, and thrift shops abound in old shopping centers and declining strips.”<sup>273</sup> Thus, the longstanding neighborhood bank may now be a payday center and the once popular supermarket, a 99 cent store.

Charleston Heights Shopping Center (1964) on Decatur Boulevard illustrates this particular type of evolution. The onetime home of Grants and numerous other businesses – Charleston Heights Barber Shop, Charleston Heights Laundramat [sic] & Dry Cleaners, Decatur Drug, Larry’s Shoes, Lola’s Little Dolls & Guys, Mama Mia’s Italian Kitchen and Pizza House, Marty’s Charleston Heights Beauty Salon, Pat-A-Cake Bakery, Uncle Bob’s Luncheonette,

Sears<sup>274</sup> – is now home to some national brands, like Ross Dress for Less and Pep Boys, but also the Las Vegas Antique Center and Charleston Antique Mall, Decatur Liquor, Smoke Shop, a pawn shop, a used record store, a psychic, and other businesses – in addition to vacant storefronts. The nearby Hyde Park Shopping Center (1954) on West Charleston Boulevard is almost completely vacant, except for a handful of businesses and churches, including Flex Cocktail Lounge, a gay bar (Fig. 29 and Fig. 30).

In addition to housing new businesses, some commercial spaces in these areas that Davis describes may be vacant, while others may have been demolished. Brenda Case Scheer references this as well, writing, “In closer-in urban arterial locations, abandoned or downtrodden businesses line congested streets that were once intercity highways. These areas suffer from a distinct set of problems and have a very different physical feel.”<sup>275</sup> While her point certainly makes sense in the context of Northeastern and Midwestern cities like Buffalo, Cleveland, or Cincinnati – the latter of which is the focus of her research – at first glance, it seems to not apply to Las Vegas and other cities in the Sun Belt region. Sun Belt cities have exploded in population over the past half-century, so it is hard to imagine vacant and derelict properties. However, Sun Belt cities have similar challenges, as articulated by Schumacher.



Fig. 29: Sun Belt cities, like Las Vegas, also struggle with vacancy along their commercial thoroughfares. Here is the mostly derelict Hyde Park Shopping Center (1954) on West Charleston Boulevard. [Source: Photo by author, October 23, 2021.]



Fig. 30: Hyde Park Shopping Center has managed to attract and retain Flex Cocktail lounge, a gay bar. In addition to ethnic cuisine and minority-owned businesses, commercial strips and nodes include many businesses serving patrons from near and far – with Flex being an example of this. [Source: Photo by author, October 23, 2021.]

Overall, Davis' concept of "recycling" (i.e., repurposing) of commercial spaces in these areas is most intriguing. Often times, minority-owned businesses and retailers catering to minority communities have moved in and converted these older commercial spaces into lively businesses. For example, Decatur Boulevard at Spring Mountain Road is dominated by businesses catering to Asian Americans, as this minor commercial node is within Chinatown Vegas, a string of shopping centers and strip malls concentrated along Spring Mountain Road. Since its 1995 establishment by James Chih-Cheng Chen at Chinatown Plaza, a shopping center, Chinatown Vegas has expanded along this section Spring Mountain.<sup>276</sup> In addition to restaurants serving various ethnic cuisines and grocery stores with international products, are billboards advertising services (e.g., attorneys) in Korean, amongst other East Asian languages. Chinatown Vegas likely attracts people from throughout the Las Vegas Valley, as well as visitors from around the world, considering Las Vegas' status as a vacation destination. The website for Chinatown Vegas proudly proclaims:

Chinatown Vegas is constantly growing and to date has more than 20 strip malls with 150+ restaurants, 6 Asian Supermarkets, dozens of Chinese and Asian Churches, more than 40 foot and massage spas and so much more. There are also marijuana dispensaries, shooting ranges, various martial art schools, a theater and dozens of unique things that you can do in this Chinatown that you can't do anywhere else.<sup>277</sup>

With its shopping centers and parking lots fronting a wide commercial thoroughfare, Chinatown Vegas stands in contrast to the long-established and iconic Chinatowns found in the centers of San Francisco and New York City.

Besides the many restaurants and stores, with their intangible culture, Geographer and historian Alec R. Stewart brings attention to "architectural and programmatic theming" (Fig. 31).<sup>278</sup> Chinatown Plaza, which was described in 1996 as "a one-of-a-kind shopping center in Las



Vegas,”<sup>279</sup> is a particularly good example of this. Facing Spring Mountain Road is a large Chinatown-style arch. The buildings, which form a “U”-shaped around the parking lot, are styled in traditional Chinese colors and have the swooping, tile roofs that one would expect to see if traveling to China.



Fig. 31: Although not in Chinatown Vegas, “architectural and programmatic theming” can be found throughout the city, including at this Chinese restaurant housed in a building constructed on West Sahara Avenue in 1982. Similar to distinctive signage, building design can also speak to passing drivers. [Source: Photo by author, October 24, 2021.]

Like the shopping centers, supermarkets, and discount retailers of the past, commercial spaces along these thoroughfares have adjusted with the times – as local consumers desire different products and services. Davis writes, “A closer look at the hand-me-down landscape that has developed between the old commercial centers and thriving suburbs of practically every North American city reveals the ingenious manner in which a wide range of businesses and individuals have appropriated and adapted these architectural cast-offs to serve their social and economic needs.”<sup>280</sup> Davis gives some examples, including gas stations and garages repurposed as restaurants or even a “flea market.”<sup>281</sup>

There are also plenty of less unusual conversions, such as the former A&W Root Beer stand in Twin Lakes Plaza (1956) on Rancho Drive that is now El Manantial Mexican Restaurant; the one-time Dairy Queen and Sizzler on Decatur Boulevard that are now Doña Lisset Cuban Food and Pepe's Tacos, respectively; and the former Burger King that now houses Mount Everest India's Cuisine.<sup>282</sup> Sometimes one ethnic cuisine has been converted to another, such as the L&L Hawaiian Barbeque in the one-time Taco Charley – located in Mission Center (1977-79) on Maryland Parkway.<sup>283</sup> Therefore, buildings that once housed fast food restaurants now provide a space for restaurants, many of which are small businesses, to operate. This provides a whole new meaning to fast food, and how social and cultural change is manifested in the commercial thoroughfare's landscape. Overall, these examples fit in with the capitalist landscape of these commercial spaces, which allow for a flexibility that fits the ever-evolving local economy and its changing demographics (Fig. 32).



Fig. 32: The one-time A&W Root Beer stand in Twin Lakes Plaza (1956) on Rancho Drive is now the home of El Manantial Mexican Restaurant. Many commercial thoroughfare buildings, like those found at shopping centers, have been repurposed to reflect the city’s social evolution, and to serve new communities. Additionally, many longstanding buildings, such as the one seen here, provide critical space for small businesses. [Source: Photo by author, October 23, 2021.]

Charleston West Plaza (1977), at West Charleston and Jones boulevards, illustrates these changing demographics particularly well. According to a 1978 article in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, this simple strip mall originally contained the following: “A florist shop, leather craft store, plumbing store, a fast food restaurant and a realty company. Soon to open will be a beauty salon, sandwich shop, jeans boutique and a foreign auto parts store.”<sup>284</sup> Today, Charleston West Plaza includes Las Tapatias Neveria & Paeteria [ice cream shop], Panaderia Y Pasteleria [bakery and pastry shop] Latina Fresh Bakery, and Tacos El Compita.<sup>285</sup> In addition to these businesses, there is a sports bar, hair and nail salons, a car stereo store, smoke shop, and Farm Basket Chicken & Turkey – a barn-shaped business, with weathervane, facing West Charleston (Fig. 33).



Fig. 33: Storefronts at Charleston West Plaza (1978). This simple strip mall, with a sloping roofline and standardized signage, now serves tacos and includes a Latinx ice cream shop and Latinx bakery – in addition to other businesses. [Source: Photo by author, October 23, 2021.]

Over on West Sahara Avenue, between Valley View Boulevard and Arville Street, there is a long row of multiple strip mall buildings and a string of narrow parking lots. The most eye-catching structure along this stretch of Sahara is a reproduction of the Statue of Liberty, proving that not all imitations are relegated to the Las Vegas Strip's hotels and casinos. Lady Liberty overshadows the diverse businesses located in these strip malls: Ariana Market – which has the flag of Afghanistan and an outline of that country on its sign – The Phoenix Bar & Lounge, an LGBTQ-oriented business, as well as Hawaiian, Japanese, Kosher, Thai, and Vietnamese restaurants. Nearby, at the major commercial node of Decatur Boulevard and Flamingo Road, are more businesses serving various ethnic cuisines. The businesses catering to the Ethiopian community are especially noteworthy, as they seem to be concentrated at this commercial node (Fig. 34).



Fig. 34: The shopping centers at the major commercial node of Decatur Boulevard and Flamingo Road have attracted various ethnic cuisines, from Cajun to Kosher. Notably, all three shopping centers include businesses that serve the Ethiopian community and any other customers seeking out this nation's cuisine, including this restaurant, with Amharic script, at the Flamingo Business Center (1986). [Source: Photo by author, October 23, 2021.]

In addition to small businesses, ethnic supermarkets and discount retailers – most of which cater to Latinx and Asian customers – have moved into commercial spaces that once included local, regional, and national retailers that primarily marketed to White, middle-income consumers.<sup>286</sup> These new retailers include 99 Ranch Market, Cardenas Markets, ElSuper Markets, Fallas Discount Stores, La Favorita Market, Mariana's SuperMarkets, Marketon, Seafood City Supermarket, and Shun Fat "SF" Supermarket. 99 Ranch Market bills itself as the "Best Asian Grocery Since 1984," Seafood City caters to Filipinos, and SF Supermarket has products that bring together different nationalities and ethnicities from Asia to Latin America – hence the word "supermercado" on the building's façade, next to Chinese and Vietnamese scripts (Fig. 35).<sup>287</sup> Mariana's, with five locations around the city, says, on its website, that it "is the hispanic [sic] supermarket for Las Vegas."<sup>288</sup> Fallas, which mainly sells clothing, proudly



proclaims on its website: “Fallas is typically located in the same communities our customers and staff call home.”<sup>289</sup> These retailers serve many in-city residents, and are centers of diversity, culture, and community.



Fig. 35: Shun Fat “SF” Supermarket at the minor commercial node of Decatur Boulevard and Spring Mountain Road. This commercial space at the Spring Oaks Shopping Center (1977, 1983) once housed a Lucky supermarket, but is now within Chinatown Vegas, which stretches along Spring Mountain Road. SF Supermarket sells products from Asia and Latin America. Here, multiple layers and meanings are visible in the commercial thoroughfare’s cultural landscape: A Spanish Revival style “supermercado” with Chinese and Vietnamese scripts on the façade. [Source: Photo by author, October 23, 2021.]

Therefore, diverse individuals and communities, including immigrants who have arrived since the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, have had an especially important influence on these commercial spaces along the older sections of commercial thoroughfares. As discussed, vacancy and demolition have occurred along these thoroughfares, so it is quite possible that without these newer arrivals there would be more of this loss in the Sun Belt cities’ built environment.

Historian A.K. Sandoval-Strausz provides one example of a Sun Belt city neighborhood with population loss prior to new residents moving in. He looks at Dallas’s Oak Cliff

neighborhood and the arrival of Latinx immigrants – but clarifies that this is not the only example of this happening in an American city. Rather, this is just one of many examples and this particular narrative hints at a wider social history that needs to be told: “But the Latinization of the national landscape is no longer the exception; it is increasingly the rule.”<sup>290</sup> Sandoval-Strausz writes, “Latino history is the key to rethinking urban history because Latinos have been central to stabilizing numerous U.S. cities that would otherwise have suffered drastic demographic loss.”<sup>291</sup> He also references Asian Americans, who have moved into cities as well, and “whose history is also essential to reinterpreting postwar urbanism.”<sup>292</sup>

Contrary to the statistics presented in Chapter II, Sandoval-Strausz cautions against this focus on “numbers,” and writes, “Equally important were the culturally specific ways they occupied and produced urban space: their everyday behaviors, residential practices, ownership and patronage of small businesses, and commitment to public presence.”<sup>293</sup> In the 1960s through 1980s, a partnership of White – except for notable minority businessmen like Bob Bailey and Wing Fong – private interests and public officials constructed the urban and suburban landscape found along these commercial thoroughfares. They then regulated this landscape for many years, as White, middle-income families, who lived nearby in residential subdivisions, purchased and consumed the products and services sold at the various shopping centers and strip malls. Latinx and other minority communities have since “occupied” and repurposed these same commercial spaces, as well as created their own “urban space.” In turn, multiple meanings and layers fuse together into a multicultural palimpsest.

Similar to Las Vegas’ social evolution and changing built environment, Sandoval-Strausz writes, “Looking at *nuevo* Oak Cliff more broadly, we can see how its new residents initiated a

large-scale process of urban reinvestment: Latinos not only devoted a great deal of economic capital to their homes and businesses but they also built up social capital in the neighborhood.”<sup>294</sup> Along Sun Belt cities’ commercial thoroughfares, Latinx, Asians/Pacific Islanders, and other immigrant communities have established businesses catering to in-city residents.

#### The Multicultural Palimpsest: From Discount Retailers to Swap Meets

Las Vegas’ commercial thoroughfares – composed of strips and nodes of shopping centers, strip malls, and other buildings and structures – provide numerous examples of the city’s social evolution over the past few decades, and the corresponding conversions of commercial spaces. Therefore, it is a rich cultural landscape with a palimpsest of meanings that have developed throughout the years as this landscape has changed. For purposes of this study and its evaluative framework, it is important to focus on three patterns that represent notable changes. This is not meant to limit historic preservationists utilizing this study, its framework, and its cultural landscape approach. Nor is it suggesting the use of a traditional architectural survey. Rather, these patterns provide useful examples of the city’s social evolution and, in turn, shaped the development of the study’s evaluative framework. When studying these commercial thoroughfares and using a cultural landscape approach, preservationists should look broadly at the buildings and structures, their intangible culture – including their businesses and customers, both past and present – and their multiple meanings. These examples illustrate how that can be done.

This first pattern looks at a common condition: a vacant retail space that gains a new type of commercial use. In this case, commercial spaces that once housed discount retailers



now housing swap meets. These two swap meet examples each fall into one of Wyckoff's classifications (see Table 1). The first is categorized as *Functional-Formal Continuity*: Rancho Swap Meet, at the minor commercial node of Rancho Drive and Washington Avenue, is housed in a one-time Kmart (1971, 1979).<sup>295</sup> The shopping center, with no ornamentation and a large parking lot, is the typical commercial format of supermarkets and discount retailers from the 1960s to 1970s. The building does not appear to have undergone any stylistic updates and it continues to serve a commercial purpose. The second is categorized as *Functional Continuity-Formal Transformation*: Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet, at Decatur and Oakey boulevards, is located in a former Vegas Village (1968), a once popular, local discount retailer.<sup>296</sup> The building has definitely undergone some physical alterations – most notably, the large sign (“IT’S... FANTASTIK”) which seems to embrace the writings of Venturi et al. It is worth noting that the spelling of “Fantastik” on the façade is a remnant of Fantastik Furniture Warehouse, which was in this space after Vegas Village but before the swap meet.<sup>297</sup> Nonetheless, like the first example, it continues to serve a commercial purpose, even if a swap meet is different than a traditional discount retailer (Fig. 36).



Fig. 36: The prominent Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet on Decatur Boulevard has taken the place of a local discount retailer, Vegas Village (top), while Rancho Swap Meet is housed in a space on Rancho Drive that once served as a Kmart (bottom). These swap meets, like others in Las Vegas and in Sun Belt cities such as Los Angeles, provide a venue for small businesses. Swap meets sell innumerable products and services to local consumers, typically in disinvested neighborhoods along and near older sections of commercial thoroughfares. [Source: Photo by author, October 23, 2021.]

Swap meets easily fit into large commercial spaces that once housed supermarkets, discount retailers, and department stores, and would otherwise be vulnerable to vacancy and demolition. Alec Stewart, a geographer and historian who has a strong interest in and academic focus on swap meets – specifically in the Los Angeles area – writes, “Scattered throughout

lower-income neighborhoods across greater Los Angeles, the bazaars have long acted as micro shopping malls where mainstream malls refuse to operate.”<sup>298</sup>

Contrary to what some may think when they hear the word “swap meet,” the format is not significantly different than an indoor shopping mall, food hall, or other indoor market. Stewart writes, “Unlike outdoor swap meets...known for their secondhand merchandise, indoor swap meets are multi-tenant marketplaces filled with *permanent businesses* on monthly leases *selling new goods* [emphasis added].”<sup>299</sup> Thus, these often stereotyped retail operations are not flea markets or yard and garage sales. Rather, they sell a variety of products, including packaged products, food, and services. They are very much a venue for small businesses in disinvested neighborhoods.

Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet’s website says it “is the Ideal Solution for New Business Owners & Established Businesses who may want to test market new products or create a high volume outlet to sell their regular line of merchandise or as an outlet market for stock overflow of quality products.”<sup>300</sup> The outreach continues: “Space rental starting at \$600 per 4 week block, plus electric and cam costs (10X10 Booth)...Enclosed 135,000 Sq. Ft. building with over 600 Booths.”<sup>301</sup> The webpage presents a flexible commercial space (i.e., booth) that would likely be enticing for many up-and-coming business owners and entrepreneurs who cannot afford the costs associated with locating in traditional indoor shopping malls – or even shopping centers and strip malls. Fantastic’s “Merchant Directory” includes an incredible variety of product and service categories: “Aerosol Accessories,” “Religious,” “Lingerie,” “Handbags and Luggage,” “Silk Flowers,” “Insurance,” “Exotic Plants,” “Food,” and many more.<sup>302</sup>

Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet prides itself on its longtime businesses, including 14 alone that have been located there for over 20 years.<sup>303</sup> Nonetheless, Fantastic does have its critics. In 2020, one reviewer, Ed M., on the customer review website Yelp, wrote: “Vendors stay away!! [Fantastic] lies about the foot traffic and then attempts to unjustly charge vendors every chance they get. ...I was told 7,000 people per weekend currently come through there and it’s an absolute lie. The place is dead and you’ll regret signing the lease.”<sup>304</sup> Therefore, like all commercial spaces, swap meets have their own challenges.

Swap meets serve a diversity of individuals and communities in a number of ways. This makes them important commercial spaces to study and document. A swap meet will often have jewelry, electronics, and furniture, but may also include clothing booths and ethnic cuisines that cater to families. Beyond sales, Stewart highlights “culturally significant activities” and “the performance of ethnicity” at swap meets.<sup>305</sup> The same can be said for other commercial spaces along these thoroughfares, such as at the Boulevard Mall, which will be discussed below. This may be seen through intangible culture and meanings – including food, dance, festivals, etc. – as well as the design of the buildings, like those found in Chinatown Vegas.

In a 2015 Yelp review for Rancho Swap Meet, Ana A. wrote: “The reason I’m reviewing is [because] this place contains the most amazing little Mexican store that sells nothing but Mexican delicacies. Aguas frescas [beverages], dulce[s] [sweets], tacos, etc. but the reason I come back time and time again is because of the tostilocos.”<sup>306</sup> Ryan C., in reviewing Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet in 2018, wrote: “The fee to enter is a \$1 [sic], a super small price to pay for the interesting artifacts hidden within. You can find everything from birds, to various stores selling wigs, a metal statue creator, knock-off jewelry and even samurai swords.”<sup>307</sup> Overall, a

swap meet is reminiscent of a county or state fair, with their various booths and vendors, as well as element of intrigue.

Los Angeles has an especially significant swap meet culture – “retailing phenomenon” – as highlighted by Stewart.<sup>308</sup> Las Vegas’ proximity to Los Angeles has likely influenced Southern Nevada’s own swap meet culture. The Los Angeles area’s swap meets have been driven “by Korean investors, who located indoor swap meets in the region’s underserved neighborhoods.”<sup>309</sup> Similar to Las Vegas’ examples, Stewart adds: “Starting in the early 1980s, they recognized that the recent departures of inner suburban chain retailers and department stores created lucrative opportunities to serve growing retail deserts.”<sup>310</sup> Most importantly, this resulted in diverse tenants and customers interacting in these swap meets developed through Korean investment and marketing – hence the “multiethnic retailscape.”<sup>311</sup>

Notably, Stewart writes, “Indoor swap meets exemplify a kind of public space in which Asian, Latinx, and Black people have *negotiated* [emphasis added] differences and articulated their identities in relation to one another rather than within a Black-White paradigm where Whiteness is considered normative.”<sup>312</sup> The Kmart or Vegas Village of the past has been replaced by a swap meet with multiethnic consumers shopping for all types of goods and services, representing a variety of nationalities and ethnicities. This also includes tenants with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

It is also important to highlight that Stewart uses the term “negotiated,” which is very much a word associated with the cultural landscape approach. Richard H. Schein, whose work is incorporated into this study’s evaluative framework, speaks to these types of interactions between individuals in cultural landscapes. His article focuses on the Courthouse Square

landscape in Lexington, Kentucky and its racial history, including its connections to African American enslavement, the Confederacy, and White supremacy.<sup>313</sup> But this interaction can be extended to a less racially charged landscape, such as a swap meet with its mix of nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures.

In his review of cultural landscape literature, Schein writes:

Still other studies focus more particularly on cultural landscapes as facilitators and mediators of political, social, cultural, and economic intention and debate. ...Landscapes are also seen as sites of contest, through which competing values and interpretations are mediated. That mediation often transcends the particular landscape to encompass broad cultural challenges mediated at various scales and in sites beyond the landscape first being explored.<sup>314</sup>

Therefore, the swap meet is a location for *negotiation*, as well as *facilitation* and *mediation*, between different ethnic communities, as well as business owners, tenants, and customers; and these interactions extend “beyond” swap meets to the surrounding commercial thoroughfares. Therefore, swap meets are fascinating commercial spaces to observe and consider, and represent the larger social evolution and cultural landscape of commercial thoroughfares.

In Sun Belt cities, such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas, a layered, multicultural palimpsest has developed over the decades. Stewart writes, “Whereas many bazaars served a multiethnic clientele from their inception, others...initially served a mostly Black population. As immigration from Latin America accelerated during the late 1980s and early 1990s, many swap meets began explicitly catering directly to this population through architectural and programmatic theming.”<sup>315</sup> Like other commercial spaces in Sun Belt cities, these discount retailers and swap meets have changed with the times. The businesses found along commercial thoroughfares have reoriented their marketing, products, and services to meet this new customer base. The swap meet is a microcosm of the larger social evolution and physical change that has occurred

in Las Vegas. These diverse and multicultural spaces serve local communities, and are, therefore, important places to consider.

#### A Local Shopping Center with International Character

This second pattern looks at Commercial Center. This shopping center, which was marketed as “the Downtown of tomorrow” in 1962, fits into two of Wyckoff’s classifications (see Table 1). The first is *Functional-Formal Continuity*, as this development has likely had many storefront changes over the past six decades, but still serves a largely commercial purpose through its many shops, bars, and restaurants. The second is *Functional Transformation-Formal Survival*, considering there are some non-commercial uses at Commercial Center. For example, there are at least three churches at the shopping center. However, the development may have always had some non-commercial uses. This particular question has not been explored further.

Regardless of use, Commercial Center does not appear to have had many, if any, physical alterations and stylistic changes – other than being constructed into the 1970s. It is still very much a typical shopping center from this period, and continues to have its distinctive format of perimeter buildings and a large, interior parking lot. The Vegas Village at the southeast corner of this development has since been demolished, which would possibly place Commercial Center into Wyckoff’s category of *Functional-Formal Transformation* – although, Commercial Center is by and large intact, and this category related to demolition is not being considered here.

Commercial Center has a variety of businesses which could be described as “international” in character. The storefronts reflect the diverse and multicultural city that Las Vegas has become in the decades since Commercial Center first opened in the early 1960s.

Some of the shopping center's businesses include Arawan Thai Bistro and Dessert, Assa Karaoke, Badlands Las Vegas (gay bar), Balkan Bar and Grill, Brasa Roja Las Vegas (Columbian cuisine), La Vecindad (Mexican cuisine), Las Vegas Cue Club (billiards), Lotus of Siam (Thai cuisine), Madang Garden (Korean cuisine), Pasabocas Colombian Bakery, Nigerian Food Las Vegas, two barber shops, and two tattoo parlors.<sup>316</sup> There is also Crystal Hall Banquets and Palacio Del Sol, also a banquet hall, with the former bilingually labeling itself as both a "Salon De Fiestas" and a "Banquet Hall" (Fig. 37).

Within this global, multilingual context, some older businesses continue to exist, such as John Fish Jewelers, which has been in Commercial Center since 1976.<sup>317</sup> Additionally, there are at least three churches, including Iglesia Cristiana Trono de la Gracia [Throne of Grace Christian Church]. Illustrating its well-established history and connection to the community, a mock-up of the world-famous "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas Nevada" sign hangs on a light post proclaiming: "Welcome to the Historic Commercial Center of Las Vegas." The shopping center is not a designated historic landmark (Fig. 38).





Fig. 37: A “Salon de Fiestas” next to John Fish Jewelers, the latter of which has been in Commercial Center since 1976. This development, an early leader in Las Vegas’ shopping centers, now includes a variety of businesses and international cuisines, including Balkan and Nigerian dishes. [Source: Photo by author, October 24, 2021.]



Fig. 38: Despite not being historically designated, Commercial Center has certainly been recognized by some as an important part of Las Vegas’ built environment, and social and economic history. [Source: Photo by author, October 24, 2021.]

In a 2011 Yelp review, Philippe C. wrote: “[Commercial Center] has the same ironic quality the Boulevard Mall has, once glamorous and filled with celebrities, now rundown, shells of their former selves. Commercial Center is different though. Over the years, it has started serving many different purposes, such as having a collective of Asian owned businesses and serving as a sort of enclave for the local LGBT community.”<sup>318</sup> Philippe clearly has respect for Commercial Center as a “place,” and recognizes its centrality to past and current communities in Las Vegas. They add: “It’s a shame though. It’s so grungy and the place just has a very lifeless, abandoned feel. ...It could be restored to it’s [sic] former glory if it’s just made more aesthetically appealing.”<sup>319</sup>

The shopping center does seem to have a certain “reputation,” which Margret C. spoke about in 2010: “This place has a reputation for being sketchy. ...I’ve seen some homeless people and some druggie types, but it’s fine.”<sup>320</sup> Stéphanie S. had an especially colorful description in a 2015 review: “This is one of the weirdest areas of Sin City. A complete rundown collection of strip malls that form an enclosed area. It would make a great setting for a sort of post apocalyptic drama... and yet, there’s a great collection of good restaurants here that are completely fine once you get inside.”<sup>321</sup> In other words: “Don’t judge a book by its cover.”

Therefore, Commercial Center is the perfect example of social and cultural narratives being lost and/or unrecognized, strictly because of how a particular building looks and the stereotyping of many shopping centers, strip malls, and other businesses along commercial thoroughfares. Many historic preservationists – in addition to the general public – may think that there is not much to discover at a 1960s to 1970s era shopping center with simple architecture, a large parking lot, and a seemingly random assortment of businesses. Instead,

this shopping center, like many throughout Las Vegas and the nation, contains a variety of ethnic cuisines which reflect the overall demographic shift in the city and county. Like the swap meets, Commercial Center provides a critical space for small businesses and other, non-retail cultural activities – the latter of which take place at the shopping center’s banquet halls and churches. Because of this shopping center’s inherent flexibility, it will likely continue to change.

#### An Innovative Evolution of an Indoor Shopping Mall

This third and final pattern looks at the Boulevard Mall, an indoor shopping mall that opened in 1968. This indoor mall was a major turning point in Las Vegas’ economic and retail history, as retailers moved out of Downtown Las Vegas. The Boulevard Mall has aspects in common with Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet and Commercial Center. After all, it is a large commercial development, so, naturally, it includes spaces that represent continuity and spaces that illustrate change. Therefore, it falls into two of Wyckoff’s classifications (see Table 1). The first is *Functional Continuity-Formal Transformation*, as the indoor shopping mall is still just that, a mall. Although it no longer has Sears, J.C. Penney, and Dillard’s, it continues to house the typical shops and eateries found in a mall, like Bath & Body Works, Foot Locker, Hot Dog on a Stick, Journeys, and Old Navy.<sup>322</sup> However, as retailers have changed throughout the decades, the mall has undergone some stylistic updates and additions – hence this classification (Fig. 39).



Fig. 39: The Boulevard Mall, which opened on Maryland Parkway in 1968, helped spur retail's movement away from Downtown Las Vegas to the city's commercial thoroughfares. While still very much an indoor shopping mall, it now includes entertainment and non-retail functions as well, such as an aquarium and even classroom space. Additionally, the mall has undergone some modifications and additions, as seen here. [Source: Photo by author, October 24, 2021.]

The second is *Functional Transformation-Formal Survival*, as the Boulevard Mall, despite some modifications and additions (including parking garage structures), still has the format that it had in the 1960s and 1970s – fronting the Maryland Parkway commercial strip, between Desert Inn Road and Twain Avenue. For example, on the north end of the mall, the faded Sears sign is visible above the Mid-Century Modern folded-plate overhang (Fig. 40).



Fig. 40: Retailers change and vacancy sometimes arises, but this former Sears at the Boulevard Mall, which first opened in 1965, would still be recognizable to past Las Vegans. [Source: Photo by author, October 24, 2021.]

Nonetheless, to survive, the mall has attempted to change with the times. The mall's website says, "The Boulevard Mall is located in the vibrant heart of the city of Las Vegas. ...Over the past five decades, the Boulevard has continually evolved in ways that best reflect the changing needs of our community and our clientele."<sup>323</sup> Relevance to a surrounding neighborhood and city that has undergone a social and economic transformation is difficult to achieve. In a 2021 Yelp review for the Boulevard Mall, Laura R. wrote: "Very disappointed, have not been here in some time and i [sic] didn't expect for everything to look as it once did, but i [sic] was not expecting just how bad this place is now. ...If you want to go on a good shopping spree better go somewhere else."<sup>324</sup> Jenn M. also left a review in 2021: "I use to come to this mall so much when I was younger. Now it's an odd mall with not many known stores. ...They do

have Seaquest [sic] and a Galaxy Movie theatre so that's one unique thing. But I wouldn't go here just to shop."<sup>325</sup>

As mentioned, the Boulevard Mall now includes SeaQuest Las Vegas, an aquarium, and Rex Center, an activity center that has laser tag, miniature golf, and even axe throwing.<sup>326</sup> There are also non-entertainment and retail functions that may spur additional foot traffic, such as UEl College. Notably, the mall now contains El Mercado [The Market], which includes the following businesses, amongst others: 911 Taco Bar, Anabel's Flowers, El Vaquero [Cowboy] Western Ware, Joyeria Los Mochis [Mochis Jewelry], M&M Productos De Limpieza [M&M Cleaning Products], Oscarito's Party Supply, Sabor a México [Taste of Mexico], and Tienda del Museo del Juguete [Toy Museum Store].<sup>327</sup> The mall's website also includes an events page with numerous photographs of "past events."<sup>328</sup>

Customer reviews, which are generally mixed, have acknowledged these changes that have taken place. In 2018, Judy C. wrote:

During my recent visit, I was surprised to see the many changes and that I wish I had gone to another mall instead, but seems that this mall changed for the better. ...There is a Good Will, Furniture store, 99 Ranch Market, and lots of businesses for children and family, like SeaQuest...Rex Center, even a Magic Show on the weekends. Galaxy Luxury Theater and King Putt Adventure will be opening soon. This is great idea in my opinion, more family like activities but I do miss the old Boulevard Mall.<sup>329</sup>

The Boulevard Mall is an interesting commercial development because it includes elements of both the past – when it was first constructed – and present. It contains stores that are typical of an indoor shopping mall, as well as innovative, non-retail functions, and even some vacancy. It has Postmodern features adjacent to Modern designs. It continues to serve as a community institution, as illustrated by its many events and the COVID-19 testing center in its parking lot – next to a food truck (see Fig. 28). And as it serves in-city residents, it has changed with the

times to reflect the local demographic shift – best reflected by the tenants at El Mercado. In Chapter V, the Boulevard Mall will once again be presented, as this study’s evaluative framework will be applied to this mall’s particular cultural landscape.

Considering Change, Historic Integrity, and the “50-Year Rule”

For the most part, these commercial spaces from the 1960s through 1980s were constructed relatively quickly with little forethought – as illustrated by the 1950s federal tax law change of accelerated depreciation. They were built to house goods and services that were then marketed to the in-city residents of the nearby residential subdivisions and suburbs. As discussed, these commercial spaces are inherently flexible, which has allowed for an assortment of conversions. Davis writes:

The bare-bones Colonial Revival and modernist architecture of most strip developments provides a ready medium for small-scale recycling and creative adaptation. Generic facades and malleable open plans are ideally suited to repeated remodelings and a wide variety of uses. The names and types of stores may change repeatedly, but the strip mall’s interchangeable retail spaces afford the same sort of *utilitarian flexibility* [emphasis added] as nineteenth-century cast-iron storefronts or the rental stalls of traditional urban markets.<sup>330</sup>

The three examples presented above illustrate this. Anchor stores at shopping centers and indoor shopping malls overshadow the many restaurants, nail and hair salons, video stores, accountants, toy stores, insurance agents, etc. that have moved in-and-out of innumerable commercial developments over the years. A good analogy of this continual process is a picture frame. The frames (i.e., shopping centers, strip malls, and indoor shopping malls) stay the same, but the photographs (i.e., storefronts) get swapped out and replaced as times change.

Although architect and historic preservationist Mike Jackson, in his journal article, is speaking to a different type of commercial development – “half-modern buildings in downtown

areas – he makes an important point that can be applied to these commercial spaces: “Further complicating the topic of preservation of mid-century storefronts is the rapid rate at which businesses changed.”<sup>331</sup> This change makes commercial strips and nodes fascinating cultural landscapes to observe, but it poses particular challenges for historic preservation scholars and practitioners.

The concept of change is also found in Scheer’s work. Scheer classifies development as “urban tissue.”<sup>332</sup> In particular, she discusses “elastic tissue.” She writes, “I have called it ‘elastic’ because one of its chief characteristics is that it changes rapidly compared to the other two tissue types.”<sup>333</sup> Unlike Davis, who is human-centered, Scheer is more so fabric-centered, as she talks about property and building layouts.<sup>334</sup> Nonetheless, she does touch upon an important point regarding changing use, when she references residential to commercial repurposing.<sup>335</sup> Many Americans have driven down a major thoroughfare and seen a dentist office or law firm and maybe even a tattoo parlor or nail salon in what was once a single-family home. This type of conversion can be quite obvious, especially if the business appears to have once had a garage and/or driveway.

Sometimes, as the surrounding neighborhoods and city continued to develop and the thoroughfare became busier, residential use was replaced by commercial/office use – thanks to local zoning law revisions. An example of this can be found along the edges of Hyde Park, which is a notable postwar era residential subdivision with a large circular park at its center. Hyde Park is bordered by the commercial thoroughfares of West Charleston and Decatur boulevards; therefore, it is adjacent to the major commercial node surrounding this intersection. Most of the one-time homes along these busy boulevards are now zoned for commercial or office use.



According to Las Vegas' Department of Planning, these revisions took place between 1960 and 1985.<sup>336</sup> Thus, the initial rezoning occurred shortly after the residential development's first homes were completed. These former homes now contain a variety of offices for doctors, dentists, attorneys, accountants (and other tax services), insurance agents, and chiropractors – in addition to a salon, psychic, stereo repair business, and even a wedding chapel to remind the passing driver that they are still in Las Vegas. Some of these buildings still look like homes, while others have been heavily remodeled to have a more commercial appearance. Regardless, this particular type of repurposing is an important feature of change along commercial thoroughfares, as not all change has been one business replacing another (Fig. 41).



Fig. 41: Some repurposing along commercial thoroughfares has entailed residential to commercial and office conversions, rather than one store or restaurant replacing another. These two buildings, which used to be single-family homes, are on West Charleston Boulevard in the postwar era Hyde Park residential subdivision. They now house insurance services and a dentist. [Source: Photo by author, October 23, 2021.]

Regardless, changing use almost always means physical alterations to a building's interior space, and often times means alterations to a building's exterior. After all, real estate

developers and retailers often feel that older buildings need to keep up with new construction and the ever-changing architectural styles, which fluctuate with professional and public opinion. The architectural style of postwar commercial strip businesses is described by historian Chester Liebs as “Exaggerated Modern.”<sup>337</sup> This description is appropriate, considering the funky store and sign designs seen during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in cities and towns throughout the United States, including Las Vegas.

Near the end of this Modernist period, in the early 1970s – when Venturi et al. published *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) – Postmodernism came to the forefront of architectural styles. This broad architectural style can be subtle or loud, depending on the design of a particular building – with the latter versions usually getting the most attention. Scheer humorously calls Postmodern commercial buildings “stucco muffins,” which are “plain commercial buildings decorated to comfort people with a more traditional look: cornices, mullioned windows, wooden doors, even fake second floors.”<sup>338</sup> Postmodern buildings may have many of these faux architectural features, as well as geometric shapes and colors. Postmodernism is important, as it was extremely influential and supplanted the postwar Modernism that Venturi et al. had decried.

Since change is constant and architectural tastes are ever evolving, many Postmodern buildings from the 1970s through 1990s are now being renovated – just like the Modern buildings that preceded them – to look more contemporary. These physical alterations challenge historic preservationists. Generally speaking, preservationists prefer buildings and structures to have had a limited number of physical alterations. Alterations are anathema to the NPS’s National Register program and its practitioners at the local, state, and federal levels,

since a property's historic significance is often tied to its architectural features that represent the historic period that has been deemed significant. If these features are lost – due to a remodel, for instance – then it is more difficult to argue for a property's historic significance. As Mike Jackson notes: “In general, preservation guidelines prefer harmony rather than contrast, even though the evaluation of contributing buildings to historic districts often calls for recognition of change over time.”<sup>339</sup>

Mike Jackson makes an important point here, as change is sometimes allowed and even embraced by NPS. But change has to be grounded in some kind of historic and/or architectural significance, and this change needs to be well in the past. An example of this would be Chinatown in New York City – or any other urban neighborhood from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was shaped by diverse immigrant communities. After referring to the neighborhood's buildings, including tenements and “Federal and Greek Revival townhouses,” NPS says, “New York's Chinatown was built by modifying the buildings that existed there to conform to Chinese uses and tastes.”<sup>340</sup> This is not unlike the immigrants who have settled in the Sun Belt region, “modifying” strip malls and other commercial spaces along cities' commercial thoroughfares. Unfortunately, for purposes of National Register listing, this social evolution is incredibly recent.

Criteria Consideration G states: “The National Register Criteria for Evaluation exclude properties that achieved significance within the last fifty years unless they are of exceptional importance.”<sup>341</sup> This is the oft-referenced “50-year rule.” Although important, many of the commercial properties discussed in this study would not be considered “exceptional,” in terms of the National Register. Thus, the National Register program does not provide many options

for preservationists wanting to document significant social change that is less than 50-years old – like what has occurred along the commercial thoroughfares of Las Vegas.

However, some of the properties discussed in this study are over 50-years old, or will soon will be. For example, the Boulevard Mall opened in 1968 – following Sears’ opening in 1965 – and Commercial Center first opened in the early 1960s. Therefore, these properties would meet this threshold – or at least portions of these properties would be eligible in this respect. But this historic significance would have to be tied to its initial construction and use. The social evolution at the center of this study, and the more recent changes to these commercial properties, are not yet 50-years old nor “exceptional.” But when the time comes, the National Register program allows for multiple, distinct historic contexts: “A specific property can be significant within one or more historic contexts, and, if possible, all of these should be identified.”<sup>342</sup> Thus, in the future, a preservationist could argue for significance in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as at a later point.

Regardless of the significance selected – whether it be for an “event” (Criterion A) and/or for “design/construction” (Criterion C)<sup>343</sup> – the particular narrative and argument for significance has to be tied to a “period of significance.”<sup>344</sup> In the case of Criterion A, this period could span years or decades, depending on what historic events or “pattern of events or a historic trend” took place and how long they were associated with the nominated property.<sup>345</sup> In the case of Criterion C, this period could cover multiple years, but is often times the year that construction was completed – as well as the years that any major additions were completed.

The selected period is then supported by “character-defining elements” – tangible features – that represent the property’s history.<sup>346</sup> When looking at a “historic” shopping

center or supermarket, these elements would likely include: the open-front glass windows, one-story format, big-box scale, setback with front parking lot, and free-standing sign (and/or other interesting signage, such as neon). Because of this focus on physical features that speak to a certain historic period, any alterations that occurred after the selected period may be considered problematic – unless, of course, there is an alteration, like an addition, that carries its own significance and is connected to the significant event(s) and/or social history. New York City's Chinatown is a good example of this. Overall, these elements represent the historic and/or architectural significance, Criteria A and C, respectively.

Las Vegas' West Gate Shopping Center (1962) on West Charleston Boulevard would likely be a good contender for listing in the National Register (see Fig. 18). Its tangible features and intangible aspects speak to the postwar era of shopping center design, and the rise of automobile-centric commercial development along commercial strips – in this case, West Charleston Boulevard. The West Gate features a low-rise, Modernist building emblematic of the early 1960s, and includes a building setback behind a front parking area. The storefronts also continue to house commercial functions. The period of significance could be the construction date (1962) or could extend over a period of years, depending on what the documentation reveals. Overall, the West Gate appears to have high historic integrity.

Sharon C. Park, of NPS, writes, "Integrity, in the language that relates back to the Venice Charter, is clearly related to the *tangible* [emphasis added] historic materials and design that give a building its architectural appearance."<sup>347</sup> The National Register program, and the highly regarded *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* and their accompany guidelines emphasize this historic fabric, including physical features and

materials, whether it be roofing, cladding, windows, etc.<sup>348</sup> Park writes, “The standards were based on the premise that the tangible aspect of a resource was its link to history and the basis of its significance.”<sup>349</sup> This position advocates that historic significance should relate to preserved historic features, and if the features are not preserved, then they should be restored or reconstructed. While this approach works for various types of properties, and has been quite successful, it is more problematic for the commercial thoroughfare landscape where no reasonable preservationist is going to argue for restoring a shopping center to its 1960s through 1980s appearance – nor should they, especially if new communities are now using the space.

But restoration does not have to be an option, if the focus of significance is on historic events (Criterion A) over architecture (Criterion C). After all, this study is focused on the social evolution along these commercial thoroughfares, not the specific buildings and their architectural styles. The National Register program explicitly references the “seven aspects of integrity,” which are: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.<sup>350</sup> Technically, in relation to Criterion A, a preservationist could argue solely for a property’s historic significance, and its location, setting, feeling, and association. As stated in National Register Bulletin 15, “Feeling is a property’s expression of the aesthetic or historic sense of a particular period of time. ...Association is the direct link between an important historic event or person and a historic property.”<sup>351</sup>

This presents an interesting challenge for properties that have undergone functional and formal transformations, like the ones discussed here. Can Commercial Center and the Boulevard Mall have the feeling and association of both the 1960s through 1980s, *and* a more recent period of time connected to social change? Theoretically, yes, as individuals visiting

these properties could have emotions tied to the past and present, as both of these properties have features and aspects that span decades. But such a dynamic approach to integrity is beyond the scope of the National Register program. Regardless, integrity must tie back to a period of significance, as it is not an independent assessment without a historic reference point. When applying the elements of integrity to the examples from this chapter, only a limited number apply, as the properties have undergone a mix of both physical alteration and change in use (Table 2). And even the properties (or portions of properties) with minimal alteration, such as Rancho Swap Meet or the Sears at the Boulevard Mall, are not paragons of design, materials, and workmanship.

Commercial Development	Relevant Aspects of Integrity
Rancho Swap Meet	Location, Setting
Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet	Location, Setting
Commercial Center	Location, Setting  <i>Maybe: Design, Feeling, Association</i>
Boulevard Mall	Location, Setting  <i>Maybe: Design, Feeling, Association</i>

Table 2: Applying NPS's integrity standards (seven aspects) to the four properties discussed in this chapter. These properties easily meet Location and Setting, but Feeling and Association is complicated – due to the functional and formal changes that have occurred at the properties – and Design, Materials, and Workmanship are further complicated by physical alterations, as well as the less than remarkable initial construction and design of these properties.

Properties that have undergone changes throughout the decades are difficult to consider within the National Register's guidelines, but listing is still possible. Overall, the major

obstacles are historic integrity, which encompasses seven elements, and the “50-year rule” (Criteria Consideration G). Many of the commercial spaces along these commercial thoroughfares are incredibly complicated. Even without the issue of physical alterations, the social and cultural evolution makes historic designation incredibly difficult, as the argument for significance would have to encompass multiple narratives and distinct periods that fall within recent decades.

Because of this, a cultural landscape approach is necessary when looking at commercial thoroughfares and their commercial spaces. As Chapter V will show, NPS and its National Register program consider change and promote cultural landscape theory, particularly with regards to tangible features. However, as shown above, this discussion is still within the context of a period of significance, historic integrity, and properties older than 50-years old. A cultural landscape approach must also consider intangible aspects, which cannot be placed into this NPS context. This is something that the evaluative framework will emphasize.

#### Looking Ahead: Documenting the Social Evolution through a Cultural Landscape Approach

This study recognizes the 1960s through 1980s commercial development found along Sun Belt cities’ thoroughfares, and the White, middle-income, family-oriented narrative that they embody. In addition to this, this study acknowledges and integrates into the narrative the social evolution that has occurred in Las Vegas since 1990, and the corresponding commercial conversions that have taken place and physically represent this evolution. In doing so, this historic and social narrative responds to Sandoval-Strausz’s challenge: “But we must also consider the influence of millions of people from East Asia, South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, in particular by analyzing how they adapted their respective urbanisms to the United



States and reconnected them with their homelands.”<sup>352</sup> Sandoval-Strausz is referencing these other communities, in addition to the “Latino landscapes” he focuses on in his article.

Stewart takes a similar approach while highlighting the importance of swap meets and their diversity, writing, “As built environments, the markets prompted everyday encounters across class, race, and immigration status, provoking interethnic tensions and solidarities. These cases reveal a need for landscape historians to think beyond the agency of single immigrant or ‘ethnic’ groups in shaping the urban landscape, and to consider the relationships between multiple sets of actors.”<sup>353</sup> Therefore, this is not a simple narrative about one minority community adding its tangible and intangible layers to an existing cultural landscape. Rather, this is a new, multiethnic narrative that compliments the story presented in Chapter II.

By focusing on change, through a cultural landscape lens, and accepting both its tangible features and intangible aspects, new and significant social narratives come to the forefront. This ever-evolving social narrative is what is most fascinating about these commercial thoroughfares and their commercial spaces, from the discount retailers that became swap meets, to the international character found at Commercial Center, to the continuity and change found at the Boulevard Mall. Despite some discussion of architecture and design, this study is primarily concerned with the people who have interacted with and converted these “lived in” commercial spaces. The commercial thoroughfares’ strips and nodes of development are significant as a cultural landscape that has changed with the times, as new communities have moved in and repurposed properties – both internally and externally – to meet their needs. This social evolution and its multicultural palimpsest pushes historic preservationists to move beyond a “period of significance” and “historic integrity,” as defined by the National Register

program, and acknowledge, document, and possibly even designated properties within this larger cultural landscape.

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<sup>239</sup> “The Urban Sun Belt: An Overview” (Houston, TX: Rice University Kinder Institute for Urban Research, 2020), <https://kinder.rice.edu/sites/default/files/documents/KIUR%20-%20The%20Urban%20Sun%20Belt%205.pdf>, 4-5.

<sup>240</sup> Timothy Davis, “The Miracle Mile Revisited: Recycling, Renovation, and Simulation along the Commercial Strip,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 7, Exploring Everyday Landscapes (1997): 97, 101-102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3514387>.

<sup>241</sup> William Wyckoff, “Denver’s Aging Commercial Strip,” *Geographical Review* 82, no. 3 (July 1992): 290, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/215352>.

<sup>242</sup> Wyckoff, 284.

<sup>243</sup> Wyckoff, 282.

<sup>244</sup> Wyckoff, 286-291.

<sup>245</sup> Wyckoff, 290-292.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Wyckoff, 292.

<sup>249</sup> Wyckoff, 290.

<sup>250</sup> Wyckoff, 292.

<sup>251</sup> Geoff Schumacher, “Urban Decay,” *Las Vegas Sun* (Las Vegas, Nevada), May 24, 1997: 33, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16F89FDBC26C1410%402450593-16F6DCC76DF30A98%4032-16F6DCC76DF30A98%40>.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Schumacher does not use the term “food desert,” but what he is describing would be classified as that. This term typically refers to areas without a grocery store. Therefore, locals have to rely on unhealthy food from convenience stores and fast food restaurants.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Davis, 98-99.

<sup>258</sup> Lynn A. Staeheli and Don Mitchell, “USA’s Destiny? Regulating Space and Creating Community in American Shopping Malls,” *Urban Studies* 43, no. 5/6 (May 2006): 982-89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43197512>.

<sup>259</sup> Staeheli and Mitchell, 978.

<sup>260</sup> Staeheli and Mitchell, 983.

<sup>261</sup> Older and less economically successful indoor shopping malls are probably more likely to have small businesses, as one can presume that the rents would be lower for tenants.

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<sup>262</sup> Deryck W. Holdsworth, "Landscape and Archives as Texts," in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, edited by Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi, 55 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>263</sup> Peirce Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape, Some Guides to the American Scene," 1-12, (1979), [https://www.uky.edu/academy/sites/www.uky.edu.academy/files/Lewis,%20Axioms%20for%20Reading%20the%20Landscape\\_0.pdf](https://www.uky.edu/academy/sites/www.uky.edu.academy/files/Lewis,%20Axioms%20for%20Reading%20the%20Landscape_0.pdf).

<sup>264</sup> Dell Upton, "Seen, Unseen, and Scene," in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, edited by Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi, 174-79, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>265</sup> Upton, 176.

<sup>266</sup> Kevin Williams, "When Kmart Moved Out, Churches and Flea Markets Moved In," *New York Times*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/business/kmart-stores-reuse.html>.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Davis, 99.

<sup>269</sup> Safeway appears in newspaper advertisements at both 3535 West Sahara Avenue (now The Crossing Church Midtown) and 3631 West Sahara Avenue (now a Mariana's Supermarket). It is unclear if the supermarket moved or addresses were switched over the years.

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), December 18, 1980: 66, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&doref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16E20BD9632716A2%402444592-16E1B186973A2E21%4065-16E1B186973A2E21%40>.

"Safeway Opens New Market Here," *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), November 16, 1969: 63, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&doref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16CAC1B0574D6D13%402440542-16CABE7023FD97BC%4062-16CABE7023FD97BC%40>.

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), April 30, 1980: 21, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&doref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16D9D70D79BB8E73%402444360-16D9D434195684CC%4020-16D9D434195684CC%40>.

<sup>270</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), April 20, 1993: 74, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&doref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16F038080E9985A5%402449098-16ECF6C7CC29714D%4073-16ECF6C7CC29714D%40>.

Home Health Care Las Vegas is located at 3872 West Sahara Avenue, #43, but according to Clark County, Nevada's zoning website, *OpenWeb*, the address for this section of the shopping center is 3864 West Sahara Avenue, which was determined to have once been an Albertson's grocery store (that address was searched in *NewsBank*).

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), October 30, 1994: 36, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&doref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16EFA01D1648EABD%402449656-16EF303788D27CEA%4035-16EF303788D27CEA%40>.

<sup>271</sup> Davis, 101.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Davis, 100.

<sup>274</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), September 20, 1964: 44, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&doref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16EFA01D1648EABD%402449656-16EF303788D27CEA%4035-16EF303788D27CEA%40>.

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<sup>275</sup> Brenda Case Scheer, "Strip Development and How to Read It," in *Retrofitting Sprawl: Addressing Seventy Years of Failed Urban Form*, edited by Emily Talen, 33 (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

<sup>276</sup> Michelle DeArmond, "Chinatown Plaza finding its LV Niche," *Las Vegas Review-Journal and Las Vegas Sun* (Las Vegas, Nevada), May 27, 1996: 22, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16F81AAC8314CA21%402450231-16F6C455E3D65A85%4021-16F6C455E3D65A85%40>.

<sup>277</sup> Chinatown Vegas, accessed February 11, 2022, <https://chinatownvegas.com/>.

<sup>278</sup> Stewart, 34.

<sup>279</sup> DeArmond.

<sup>280</sup> Davis, 96.

<sup>281</sup> Davis, 99-100.

<sup>282</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), May 1, 1974: 51, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16D6565D993C9341%402442169-16D652CFC7FEB35B%4050-16D652CFC7FEB35B%40>.

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), March 17, 1976: 31, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16CB275A19900B32%402442855-16CB1F0B84E1EF5E%4030-16CB1F0B84E1EF5E%40>.

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), January 3, 1965: 34, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-16C182FF9672E33A%402438764-16C1808164BFB597%4033>.

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), May 9, 1988: 52, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16E56B22DA0BEA80%402447291-16E410F9DD77F0AF%4051-16E410F9DD77F0AF%40>.

<sup>283</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), October 6, 1978: 56, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16D9C6736DFDD176%402443788-16D9C4C72BA9FBA5%4055-16D9C4C72BA9FBA5%40>.

<sup>284</sup> "Shopping center now open," *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), June 30, 1978: 52, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16DBCEAD346CFF0D%402443690-16DBCD2A766BB9D0%4051-16DBCD2A766BB9D0%40>.

<sup>285</sup> I used Google Translate for Spanish words. See: <https://translate.google.com/>.

<sup>286</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), October 28, 1971: 22, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16D345A47419A466%402441253-16D1D5943162B237%4021-16D1D5943162B237%40>.

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), July 10, 1991: 26, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16D345A47419A466%402441253-16D1D5943162B237%4021-16D1D5943162B237%40>.

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*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), April 29, 1964: 38, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16C18E7F56EBFCD7%402438515-16C184C7B015C9F4%4037-16C184C7B015C9F4%40>.

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), March 22, 1979: 61, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16E31E5728F7C6A8%402443955-16E213802E7B4B7B%4060-16E213802E7B4B7B%40>.

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), July 16, 1992: 95, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16EE4FE7B414920F%402448820-16EE4A38DC2959FA%4094-16EE4A38DC2959FA%40>.

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), April 7, 1980: 130, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16D9D7EC099F4DEE%402444337-16D9D0FC1C9E4D67%40129-16D9D0FC1C9E4D67%40>.

“Safeway Opens New Market Here.”

<sup>287</sup> 99 Ranch Market, accessed February 11, 2022, <https://www.99ranch.com/>.

“Our History,” Our Story, Seafood City Supermarket, accessed February 11, 2022, <https://www.seafoodcity.com/our-story/history/>.

“About,” SF Supermarket, accessed February 11, 2022, <https://www.shunfatsupermarket.com/about/>.

<sup>288</sup> Mariana’s Supermarkets, accessed February 11, 2022, <https://www.marianasmarkets.com/>.

<sup>289</sup> Fallas Discount Stores, accessed February 11, 2022, <https://www.fallasstores.net/>.

<sup>290</sup> A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, “Latino Landscapes: Postwar Cities and the Transnational Origins of a New Urban America,” *The Journal of American History* 101, no. 3 (December 2014): 829, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44286298>.

<sup>291</sup> Sandoval-Strausz, 807.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Sandoval-Strausz, 808.

<sup>294</sup> Sandoval-Strausz, 825.

<sup>295</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), November 11, 1970: 33, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16D20C6163063CA9%402440902-16D207F24D97680C%4032-16D207F24D97680C%40>.

<sup>296</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), January 4, 1970: 49, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-16CAF53743421015%402440591-16CA9637EAA520C8%4048>.

<sup>297</sup> “Fantastik Company History,” About Us, Fantastik Realty, accessed April 24, 2022, <http://www.fantastikrealty.com/about-real-estate-agency/about-fantastik-harry-brown>.

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<sup>298</sup> Alec R. Stewart, "Los Angeles's Indoor Swap Meet Boom and the Emergence of a Multiethnic Retailscape," *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/buildland.28.2.0025>.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> "Sellers," Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet, accessed February 13, 2022, <https://fantasticindoorswapmeet.net/sellers/>.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> "Merchant Directory," Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet, accessed February 13, 2022, <https://fantasticindoorswapmeet.net/directory/>.

<sup>303</sup> "About Us," Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet, accessed February 13, 2022, <https://fantasticindoorswapmeet.net/about-us/>.

<sup>304</sup> Ed M., "Fantastic Indoor Swapmeet," Yelp, reviewed December 4, 2020, <https://www.yelp.com/biz/fantastic-indoor-swapmeet-las-vegas>.

<sup>305</sup> Stewart, 35.

<sup>306</sup> Ana A., "Rancho Swap Meet," Yelp, reviewed June 7, 2015, <https://www.yelp.com/biz/rancho-swap-meet-las-vegas>.

<sup>307</sup> Ryan C., "Fantastic Indoor Swapmeet," Yelp, reviewed December 19, 2018, <https://www.yelp.com/biz/fantastic-indoor-swapmeet-las-vegas>.

<sup>308</sup> Stewart, 27.

<sup>309</sup> Stewart, 29.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

The term used in the title of Stewart's article.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Richard H. Schein, "A Methodological Framework for Interpreting Ordinary Landscapes: Lexington, Kentucky's Courthouse Square," *Geographical Review* 99, no. 3 (July 2009): 377-402, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40377399>.

<sup>314</sup> Schein, 382.

<sup>315</sup> Stewart, 34.

<sup>316</sup> This listing is from Google Maps in April 2022.

<sup>317</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), November 21, 1976: 96, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvccld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&doref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-178C72E356D9B035%402443104-178C6F771C792096%4095-178C6F771C792096%40>.

<sup>318</sup> Philippe C., "Commercial Center District," Yelp, reviewed April 19, 2011, <https://www.yelp.com/biz/commercial-center-district-las-vegas>.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> Margret C., "Commercial Center District," Yelp, reviewed September 16, 2010, <https://www.yelp.com/biz/commercial-center-district-las-vegas>.

<sup>321</sup> Stéphanie S., "Commercial Center District," Yelp, reviewed May 3, 2015, <https://www.yelp.com/biz/commercial-center-district-las-vegas>.

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<sup>322</sup> “Directory,” Boulevard Mall, accessed March 12, 2022, <https://boulevardmall.com/boulevard-mall-directory/>.

<sup>323</sup> “About Us,” Boulevard Mall, accessed March 12, 2022, <https://boulevardmall.com/about-us/>.

<sup>324</sup> Laura R., “The Boulevard,” Yelp, reviewed, September 19, 2021, <https://www.yelp.com/biz/the-boulevard-las-vegas-2>.

<sup>325</sup> Jenn M., “The Boulevard,” Yelp, reviewed December 20, 2021, <https://www.yelp.com/biz/the-boulevard-las-vegas-2>.

<sup>326</sup> Rex Center Vegas, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://rexcentervegas.com/>.

<sup>327</sup> “Mercado Directory,” El Mercado, Boulevard Mall, accessed February 11, 2022, <https://boulevardmall.com/mercado-directory/>.

<sup>328</sup> “Events,” El Mercado, Boulevard Mall, accessed February 11, 2022, <https://boulevardmall.com/events/>.

<sup>329</sup> Judy C., “The Boulevard,” Yelp, reviewed February 15, 2018, <https://www.yelp.com/biz/the-boulevard-las-vegas-2>.

<sup>330</sup> Davis, 98.

<sup>331</sup> Mike Jackson, “Modernism on Main Street: The Dilemma of the Half-modern Building,” *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 48, no. 2-3 (2017): 35, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26250097>.

<sup>332</sup> Scheer, 37.

<sup>333</sup> Scheer, 38-39.

The other two are “static tissue,” which is largely represented by neighborhoods of homes and housing subdivisions, and “campus tissue,” which is large-scale and generally single-use development, such as a college campus. Neither is specifically-relevant to thoroughfares and this study.

<sup>334</sup> Scheer, 38-39.

<sup>335</sup> Scheer, 44.

<sup>336</sup> Steve Gebeke, Planning Supervisor, Las Vegas Department of Planning, email message to author, February 23, 2022.

<sup>337</sup> Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile, American Roadside Architecture* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 59-64.

<sup>338</sup> Scheer, 34.

<sup>339</sup> Mike Jackson, 33.

<sup>340</sup> “Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District New York, New York,” Place, National Park Service, last modified March 4, 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/places/new-york-chinatown-and-little-italy-historic-district.htm>.

<sup>341</sup> National Park Service, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, National Register Bulletin 15, 1990, revised for Internet 1997, [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15\\_web508.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15_web508.pdf), 41.

<sup>342</sup> National Register Bulletin 15, 9.

<sup>343</sup> National Register Bulletin 15, 12-13, 17-20.

<sup>344</sup> National Register Bulletin 15.

<sup>345</sup> National Register Bulletin 15, 12.

<sup>346</sup> National Park Service, “Architectural Character – Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings an Aid to Preserving their Character,” by Lee H. Nelson, *Preservation Briefs* (#17), Technical Preservation Services, National Park Service, September 1988, <https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/17-architectural-character.htm>.

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<sup>347</sup> Sharon C. Park, "Respecting Significance and Keeping Integrity: Approaches to Rehabilitation," *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 37, no. 4 (Design Excellence and Historic Preservation, 2006): 15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40004145>.

<sup>348</sup> National Park Service, *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring & Reconstructing Historic Buildings*, revised by Anne E. Grimmer, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards/treatment-guidelines-2017.pdf>.

<sup>349</sup> Park, 20.

<sup>350</sup> National Register Bulletin 15, 44-45.

<sup>351</sup> National Register Bulletin 15, 45.

<sup>352</sup> Sandoval-Strausz, 830.

<sup>353</sup> Stewart, 39.



## CHAPTER IV

### USING FIELDWORK AND RESEARCH TOOLS TO UNDERSTAND THE SELECTED COMMERCIAL THOROUGHFARES AND THEIR PHYSICAL FEATURES

#### Introduction

The cultural geographer Peirce Lewis provides important insight related to “reading the landscape.” Prior to visiting and observing the six selected commercial thoroughfares in Las Vegas, Nevada in October 2021, I became familiar with Lewis’ tips and sought to apply them when viewing the city’s cultural landscape. Therefore, this chapter provides an overview of Lewis’ seven axioms. Following the analysis, this chapter will explain – through text, maps, and graphics – why these six thoroughfares were selected and how they correspond with the commercial properties discussed in chapters II and III. In closing, I will briefly explain my methods, specifically my fieldwork and the research tools that I used.

#### Cultural Landscapes: Through the Eyes of Peirce Lewis

This study was inspired by Lewis’ seminal set of seven axioms, which were first articulated in 1979 and are seen as a milestone in cultural geography scholarship.<sup>354</sup> Despite their limited approach – as they are mainly focused on the cultural landscape’s tangible features and do not delve into unseen issues and controversies, such as power, race, gender, and income – they are informative and practicable. Their succinct message also makes them approachable. Importantly, they are very much in-line with the National Register’s guidelines on identification, documentation, and designation.

Lewis writes, “Our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form.”<sup>355</sup> Lewis was talking about “reading the landscape” and his axioms are applicable to all types of cultural landscapes, including commercial thoroughfares. These “rules,”<sup>356</sup> with a corresponding “corollary” or multiple corollaries when appropriate, can guide anyone, including historic preservationists, as they view and study the built environment.

In his first axiom, Lewis writes about the interconnectedness of culture and landscape.<sup>357</sup> Thus, the commercial thoroughfares of 1970s Las Vegas speaks to a specific culture when compared to the same commercial thoroughfares of 2020s Las Vegas. The past culture was White, middle-income, and family-oriented – as represented by specific retailers and their newspaper advertisements at the time – whereas the current culture is much more diverse and multicultural – as illustrated by contemporary businesses found along commercial thoroughfares, from swap meets to ethnic restaurants in converted spaces. The commercial thoroughfares of Las Vegas also represent the culture of a Sun Belt city that boomed in population following World War II – in addition to trends in consumerism and automobile-centric development.

Lewis also writes specifically about change, an important theme of this study and cultural landscape theory, in general. In “The Corollary of Cultural Change,” which is part of Lewis’ first axiom, he writes, “Our human landscape...represents an enormous investment of money, time, and emotions. People will not change that landscape unless they are under very heavy pressure to do so,” and connects this to “national culture.”<sup>358</sup> The one-time supermarket or discount retailer reveals culture, just like the contemporary swap meet. The change reflects

the social evolution found along the commercial thoroughfares of Sun Belt cities like Las Vegas. Also, as automobiles became the dominant form of transportation and shopping centers became the preferred retailing format on a national scale, the urban landscape changed to a more suburban landscape to reflect these important trends. This change also reflects “convergence,” another corollary of Lewis’ first axiom,<sup>359</sup> as many postwar and suburban landscapes throughout the nation look strikingly similar – and have been widely-criticized because of this.

Under this same axiom, Lewis also discusses “diffusion” and how “the look of a landscape often is changed by imitation.”<sup>360</sup> He writes, “The timing and location of such imitative changes are governed by various forms of geographic and social diffusion.”<sup>361</sup> In this study, various references have been made to Los Angeles, a close metropolitan neighbor of Las Vegas. There is certainly an argument to make for diffusion, whether it be commercial strips or swap meets, from Los Angeles to Las Vegas. This same corollary is closely tied to Lewis’ corollary on regions, which says, “If one part of the country (or even one part of a city) looks substantially different from some other part of the country (or city), then the chances are very good that the cultures of the two places are different also.”<sup>362</sup> Thus, this study is most relevant to other Sun Belt metropolitan areas.

Finally, under this same axiom, Lewis mentions “taste,” and writes, “But we know enough about taste to know that it is a powerful cultural force...and those tastes do not come about by accident.”<sup>363</sup> Las Vegas’ commercial development changed as tastes changed, from architectural styles – diffused from Los Angeles and the Southwest, more generally – to a literal change in taste, as diverse and multicultural communities settled in the metropolitan area and

established restaurants and stores catering to their respective ethnic cuisines. All of this is reflective of the local and regional cultures, as well as its social evolution.

Lewis' second axiom speaks to a theoretical underpinning of this study. He writes, "Nearly all items in human landscapes reflect culture in some way. ...Thus, the MacDonald's [sic] hamburger stand is just as important a cultural symbol (or clue) as the Empire State Building, and the change in design of MacDonald's [sic] buildings may signal an important change in cultural attitudes."<sup>364</sup> This study focuses on shopping centers and other commercial development found along these wide thoroughfares – and the individuals and communities that use these commercial spaces, both in the past and in the present – because they illustrate an extraordinarily important aspect of the American built environment, its historic narrative, and its social evolution. They may not be the most prestigious or aesthetically pleasing type of urban and suburban development, but they are important to people. Also under this axiom, Lewis touches upon change, which in this study has been illustrated by the repurposing and conversion of commercial spaces, and has clearly "signal[ed] an important change in cultural attitudes." This cultural change is also a social change.

In his third axiom, Lewis writes, "Common landscapes...are by their nature hard to study by conventional academic means."<sup>365</sup> The commercial thoroughfare, its buildings, and its structures, including signs, appeared straightforward and simplistic at first glance, but the more I researched and learned, the more complex and layered this landscape became. This complexity is most apparent in the social narrative and its evolution that came to the forefront. This required using "nonacademic literature,"<sup>366</sup> which I will discuss near the end of this chapter.

Lewis' fourth axiom says, "In trying to unravel the meaning of contemporary landscapes and what they have to 'say' about us as Americans, history matters. ...Furthermore, a large part of the common American landscape was built by people in the past, whose tastes, habits, technology, wealth, and ambitions were different than ours today."<sup>367</sup> This study traces the development of Las Vegas from the 1960s through the 1980s to today, its lengthening commercial thoroughfares, changing shopping centers and retailers, expanding and evolving residential developments, etc. This historic narrative and background – revealed through historic newspaper articles and advertisements, maps, and photographs – informed the contemporary observations conducted via on-the-ground fieldwork, and through analyzing zoning maps, Google Maps, and Google Street View.

In one corollary under his "Historic Axiom," Lewis highlights the importance of "know[ing] in particular about the mechanics of technology and communications that made the element possible."<sup>368</sup> He writes, "Every step of the way we are investigating the evolution of American culture: where things started, when, and how."<sup>369</sup> Therefore, the historic narrative presented in Chapter II was driven by technology, first the streetcar and then the automobile; and the commercial thoroughfare – which is infrastructure that facilitates both technology and communication – has been at the center of this study's story. The historic narrative presents cities' outward growth and development along thoroughfares, from downtown to the streetcar suburbs, and then from the interwar Miracle Miles to the postwar commercial strips and interstate highway system. This narrative was not overly "mechanical," but it did highlight technology.

Under Lewis' fifth axiom, focused on the "ecologic," he articulates the need for "geographic (i.e., locational) context."<sup>370</sup> Context is certainly at the center of this study and any other study utilizing a cultural landscape approach. After all, a cultural landscape perspective believes in highlighting the palimpsest of layers and the wider context surrounding a building, structure, neighborhood, and so on. The graphics in this chapter adhere to this contextual approach, as it is important to understand how a particular commercial thoroughfare's strips and nodes relate to one another, and fit into the wider context of the Las Vegas Valley and Clark County, Nevada.

The same could be said for Lewis' sixth axiom on "environmental control," where he writes, "Thus, the reading of cultural landscape also presupposes some basic knowledge of physical landscape."<sup>371</sup> Physical landscape is tied to geography, and geography – specifically, the nation's ten largest cities throughout history and their major thoroughfares, and the vast Sun Belt region – has been referenced throughout this study, further echoing Lewis's theoretical standpoint.

Lewis' seventh and final axiom has very much guided this study's in-depth research. Although many landscape features and their meanings are understood – or presumed to be understood – just by passing through and observing a commercial strip or node, additional background information is needed to fully appreciate and understand this "ordinary man-made landscape."<sup>372</sup> Lewis writes, "Most objects in the landscape...do not convey those messages in any obvious way. The landscape does not speak to us very clearly. At a very minimum, one must know what kinds of questions to ask."<sup>373</sup> Therefore, Lewis advocates: "But the alternation of looking, and reading, and thinking, and then looking and reading again, can yield remarkable

results, if only to raise questions we had not asked before.”<sup>374</sup> I started this study by conducting research on cultural landscape theory, and the history and development of commercial thoroughfares, nationally. I then narrowed my focus to the Sun Belt city and commercial strips and nodes in Las Vegas, both past and present. I then conducted in-person fieldwork, which was followed by more research and writing to understand both this cultural landscape’s evolution. This, in turn, informed my “reading” of the commercial thoroughfare’s landscape.

For the most part, Lewis’ perspective on cultural landscapes is focused on the tangible features of a landscape. After all, his axioms are about “reading the landscape,” which requires visual cues for the reader (i.e., observer). Lewis’ views, articulated over 40-years ago, are very much in-line with the viewpoint of NPS and its National Register program. This is discussed in detail in Chapter V.

#### The Selection of the Six Commercial Thoroughfares

The following portions of Las Vegas’ commercial thoroughfares were selected for their relevance to this study’s 1960 to 1990 timespan. These thoroughfares include a variety of commercial strips and nodes that contain numerous shopping centers, strip malls, an indoor shopping mall, and other commercial properties indicative of a Sun Belt city’s cultural landscape. These commercial developments illustrate the social evolution that has taken place in Las Vegas, with the three patterns discussed in Chapter III as the most representative examples. These commercial thoroughfares were selected for the following reasons:

- They are major roadways that fit the general description of a commercial thoroughfare in a Sun Belt city: a wide, urban boulevard with corresponding commercial buildings and structures

- They include major and minor commercial nodes when they intersect with other major roadways, usually at one-mile intervals (i.e., section line roads)
  - Major commercial node: Typically includes two to four shopping centers and strip malls (e.g., one per corner), in addition to plenty of parking and other commercial developments; some of these commercial nodes are linear, and may stretch from one major intersection to the next, thus becoming a strip within the larger commercial strip (e.g., Maryland Parkway between Desert Inn and Flamingo roads); these strips may also include other commercial developments, such as car dealerships
  - Minor commercial node: At least one shopping center, in addition to other commercial developments, including strip malls
  - Other commercial developments may include, but are not limited to: gas stations, car washes, fast food restaurants, sit-down restaurants, banks, office buildings, medical and professional plazas, etc. Overall, these developments are representative of the type of buildings and structures found along commercial thoroughfares in Sun Belt cities.
- Between these major and minor commercial nodes are commercial strips. Together, the nodes and strips constitute the commercial thoroughfare's physical features.
- The commercial development's use – along with physical features found at shopping centers and other commercial properties – speaks to intangible social and cultural aspects.



- These commercial thoroughfares connect Downtown Las Vegas and/or older (and historic) residential neighborhoods to newer residential subdivisions and suburbs, illustrating the city’s growth and development from the 1960s through today.
  - Since commercial development is supported by residential development, and vice versa, residential subdivisions and master-planned communities constructed between the 1950s and 1990s are relevant, and these commercial thoroughfares are the “armature” linking them.
  - A 2010 map from the City of Las Vegas, which shows “historic” (1962 and earlier) and “potential historic” (1963 to 1972) neighborhoods, has been edited to highlight the six commercial thoroughfares. This map further illustrates the linkages made by these thoroughfares and their relevance to Las Vegas’ 1960s and 1970s residential development (Fig. 42).
- These thoroughfares are mainly zoned for commercial (or related) use – with limited residential zoning and some civic zoning.

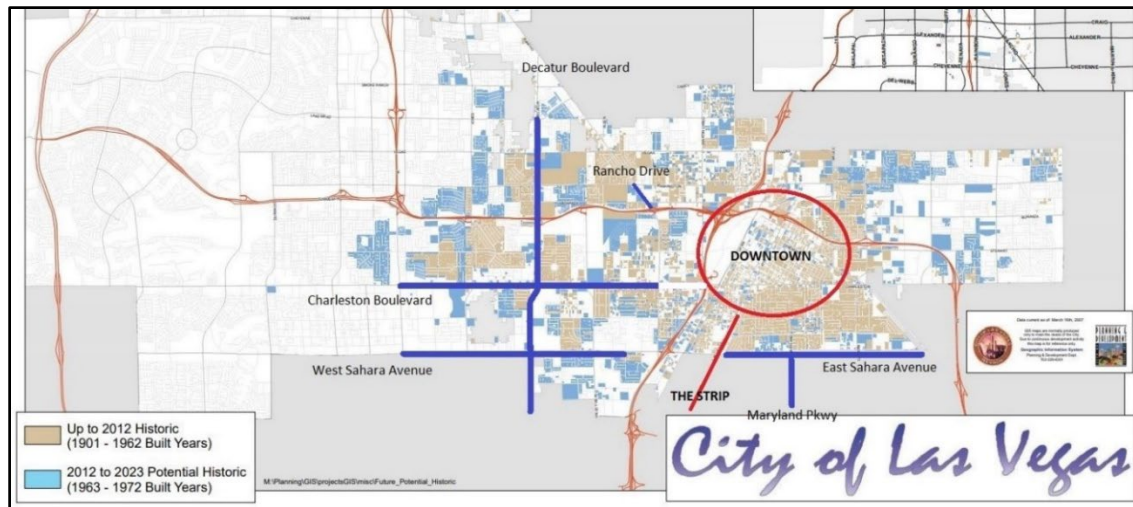


Fig. 42: This map from the City of Las Vegas shows “historic” (tan/lighter color) and “potential historic” (blue/darker color) neighborhoods. The map has been edited to highlight the six commercial thoroughfares (blue and bolded). As shown here, the selected thoroughfares correspond with the city’s development up through 1972 (the end point for this particular map). [Source: City of Las Vegas, Nevada, *Historic Properties & Neighborhoods Preservation Plan Element of the Las Vegas 2020 Master Plan*, adopted in 2007 and revised in 2010 (modified by author).]

- Although some of the referenced commercial thoroughfares’ names reflect Las Vegas’ world-famous casinos (e.g., Sahara, Desert Inn, and Flamingo) – not to mention, the skyline of hotels looming in the background – this study largely ignores this much-discussed narrative.

### Visualizing the Six Commercial Thoroughfares

The following maps and graphics provide context for the selected commercial thoroughfares, which I visited in October 2021. When looking at a cultural landscape, whether an entire commercial strip or a single shopping center, it is important to visualize the particular landscape’s context and make connections to the wider, surrounding landscape and its properties. The examples presented in Chapter II – the two swap meets, Commercial Center, and the Boulevard Mall – are located along these selected thoroughfares, and are noted.

The following key assists with reading the maps (Fig. 43). These maps, graphics, and descriptions demonstrate that a commercial thoroughfare's character can also be captured through a high-level overview – not just through a traditional building-by-building survey and its documentation. Most importantly, these maps and graphics show that these cultural landscapes have numerous physical features, including (but not limited to) signs, palm trees, vacant buildings, parking lots, wide thoroughfares, cars, bus stops, washes/arroyos, shopping centers, etc. These tangible features and the intangible social and cultural aspects come together to form a palimpsest of past and present meanings.

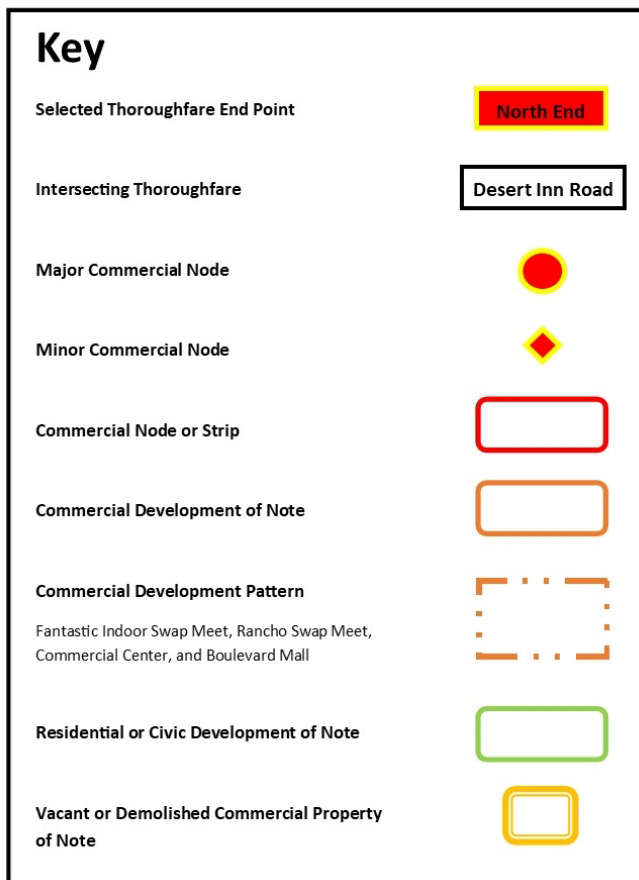


Fig. 43: Key to assist with reading the following maps. [Source: Created by author, 2022.]

Charleston Boulevard is an especially significant thoroughfare in Las Vegas, as it forms a “break”<sup>375</sup> – east of the area under study – between the Downtown Las Vegas gridiron plan and early residential subdivisions to the south. At Charleston Boulevard, streets change from their angled orientation, which are aligned with the railroad tracks, to become north-south roadways – except for Las Vegas Boulevard (i.e., the Las Vegas Strip and, historically, 5<sup>th</sup> Street in the gridiron). The east end of the selected portion is Rancho Drive, as east of here is Interstate 15, the railyards, and downtown.

West Charleston Boulevard – which differentiates it from the portion adjacent to downtown and farther east – passes through two major strips: The Las Vegas Medical District and a strip of commercial properties between Decatur and Jones boulevards. Near Decatur is the postwar era Hyde Park subdivision. The one-time single family homes along West Charleston have been converted to commercial and office uses.

The thoroughfare also passes two early shopping centers – Hyde Park (1954) and West Gate (1962) – in addition to Charleston West Plaza (1977) and its storefronts serving the Latinx community. There are two major commercial nodes, including at Decatur Boulevard. This node includes the popular and massive Westland Fair Shopping Center, which first opened in the late 1960s. The west end of the selected portion is Rainbow Boulevard. By the mid-1980s, Rainbow was the edge of most development (see Fig. 3 in Chapter I). West of this point, the residential and commercial development becomes much more associated with the 1990s and later (Fig. 44).

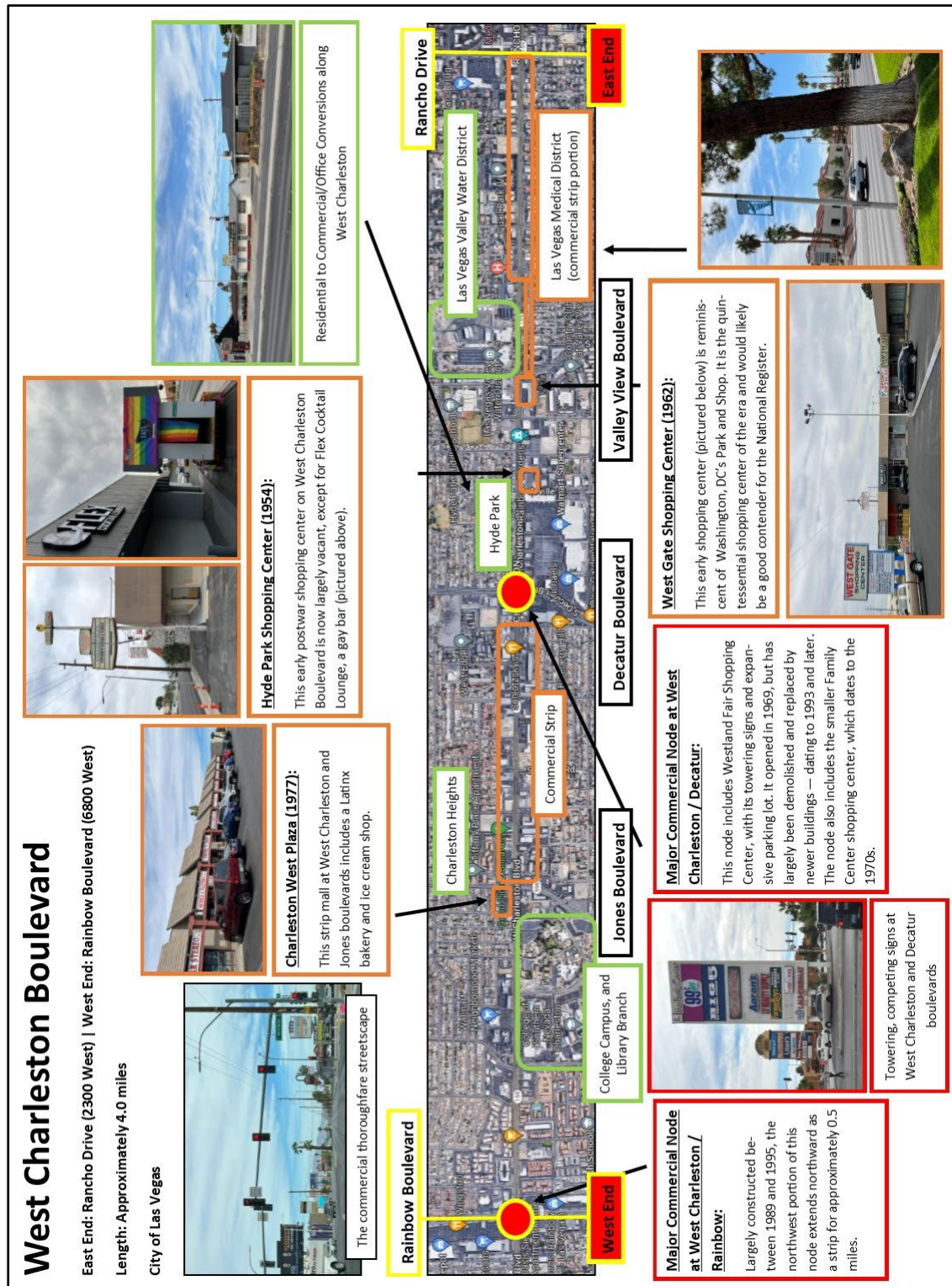


Fig. 44: West Charleston Boulevard, from Rancho Drive (east end) to Rainbow Boulevard (west end).  
 [Source: Compiled by author; photos by author, map from Google Maps, 2022.]

In 1960, Decatur Boulevard was on the western fringe of the city. However, by 1990, Decatur had become the center of west Las Vegas and a major commercial thoroughfare that connected numerous shopping centers and residential subdivisions. Today, as the city and its suburbs have continued to expand, Decatur is practically in the center of the Las Vegas metropolitan area.

Lake Mead Boulevard is the north end of the selected portion, as, north of this point, Decatur Boulevard becomes less of a major roadway. Additionally, in both 1960 and 1984 (the years of the two historic maps available), there was little development north of this point (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 in Chapter I). Along this northern section of Decatur is the former site of a Wonder World, Wing Fong's Imperial Plaza (1963), and the Decatur Shopping Center (1964). Decatur Shopping Center and Charleston Heights Shopping Center (1964) are two of the oldest extant shopping centers found along Decatur. South of U.S. Highway 95 are two major commercial nodes at Meadows Drive and Charleston Boulevard. Additionally, as the city grew, the single-family homes of the postwar era Hyde Park subdivision were repurposed for commercial and office uses (Fig. 45).



# Decatur Boulevard (North of Charleston)

North End: Lake Mead Boulevard (2000 North) | South End: Flamingo Road (4100 South)

Length: Approximately 5.5 miles

City of Las Vegas

Townships of Spring Valley, Winchester, and Paradise



## Decatur Shopping Center (1964):

One of the oldest extant shopping centers on Decatur Boulevard (pictured above). It originally contained a Food Fair and Sizzler, and was adjacent to a Wonder World. The shopping center now includes a Beauty Supply Warehouse, Family Dollar, and Pepe's Tacos (pictured right).

Just north of here, at Vegas Drive, is Wing Fong's Imperial Plaza (1963).

## Minor Commercial Node at Decatur / Washington

## Major Commercial Node at Decatur / Meadows:

Three shopping centers from the 1970s to 1980s — just west of Meadows Mall, which opened in 1978.

The node now includes Cardenas Markets, The Potter's House (a church), Fallas Discount Stores, Opportunity Village Thrift Store, Dollar Tree, and Southern Nevada Health District (pictured below).



Southern Nevada Health District

## Charleston Boulevard

See West Charleston Map for information about the Decatur/Charleston node

Residential to Commercial/Office Conversions along Decatur

## Charleston Heights Shopping Center (1964):

One of the oldest extant shopping centers on Decatur Boulevard (the sign is pictured above). It once included Grants, but now contains Ross Dress for Less, the Las Vegas Antique Center and Charleston Antique Mall, Decatur Liquor, Smoke Shop, and a psychic.



## Wonder World (Demolished)

## Washington Avenue



One-time Sizzler, now Pepe's Tacos

Meadows Mall

Meadows Lane

Alta Drive

Fig. 45: Decatur Boulevard, northern section, from Lake Mead Boulevard (north end) to Charleston Boulevard. [Source: Compiled by author; photos by author, map from Google Maps, 2022.]

At Decatur and Oakley boulevards is Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet. There are more commercial nodes at Sahara Avenue, Desert Inn Road, Spring Mountain Road, and Flamingo Road. The minor commercial node at Decatur and Spring Mountain is particularly notable, as it is within Chinatown Vegas and includes SF Supermarket, while the major commercial node at Decatur and Flamingo has a variety of ethnic restaurants and businesses catering to different minority communities. Flamingo is also the south end of the selected portion, which aligns with Maryland Parkway's south end (Fig. 46).



# Decatur Boulevard (South of Charleston)

North End: Lake Mead Boulevard (2000 North | South End: Flamingo Road (4100 South)

Length: Approximately 5.5 miles

City of Las Vegas

Townships of Spring Valley,  
Winchester, and Paradise



## Swap Meet Pattern: Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet

*Changed physical format,  
unchanged use (still commercial)*

This eclectic swap meet was once a Vegas Village location, a local discount retailer; the building, with its eye-catching signage, was constructed in 1968 (pictured left)



Shun "SF" Fat Supermarket at shopping center in Chinatown Vegas

Sahara Avenue

## Minor Commercial Node at Decatur / Spring Mountain:

Spring Oaks Shopping Center (mainly constructed in 1977, 1983): This shopping center that once housed a Lucky supermarket is now the home of Shun Fat "SF" Supermarket, pictured above, which sells products from Asia and Latin America.

The shopping center is located within Chinatown Vegas, which is a large area concentrated along Spring Mountain Road's commercial strip. The first businesses opened at Chinatown Plaza in 1995.



Ethiopian restaurant with Amharic script

Twain Avenue

## Major Commercial Node at Decatur / Flamingo:

Three shopping centers (1986-88) — all "L"-shaped in format — with a mix of typical shopping center retailers, in addition to various ethnic cuisines, most notably Ethiopian (the Flamingo Business Center (1986) pictured above)

Flamingo Road

Oakey Boulevard

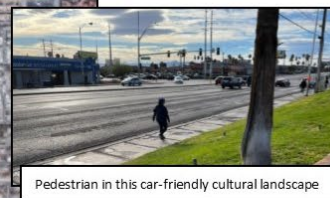
See West Sahara Map for information about the Decatur/Sahara node



1980s design features

Desert Inn Road

Spring Mountain Road



Pedestrian in this car-friendly cultural landscape

South End

Fig. 46: Decatur Boulevard, southern section, from Charleston Boulevard to Flamingo Road (south end). [Source: Compiled by author; photos by author, map from Google Maps, 2022.]

Like Charleston Boulevard, Maryland Parkway is closely linked to Downtown Las Vegas. Maryland Parkway is technically 12<sup>th</sup> Street in the city's original gridiron plan. When Maryland reaches Charleston, it changes from its angled orientation to become a north-south roadway. Some of the city's first residential subdivisions are adjacent to Maryland, between Charleston Boulevard and Sahara Avenue. Once Maryland reaches Sahara it becomes more commercial – hence Sahara being the north end of the selected portion.

Between 1960 and 1990, Maryland Parkway became a major commercial thoroughfare in the city and county, as Sears opened here in 1965, followed by the adjoining Boulevard Mall in 1968. Many more shopping centers, strip malls, and retailers – including Wonder World<sup>376</sup> – also located within this “shopping district” along Maryland between Desert Inn and Flamingo roads. Flamingo is the south end of the selected portion, as south of here Maryland becomes associated with the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) campus before this northern section of Maryland ends at Harry Reid International Airport.

Maryland Parkway is significantly shorter than many of the city's other major thoroughfares. However, its connection to Las Vegas' history and its impact on the city's commercial and economic development is of outsized importance. The thoroughfare's social evolution from primarily catering to White, middle-income in-city residents to diverse and multicultural communities is apparent (Fig. 47).

# Maryland Parkway

North End: Sahara Avenue (2500 South) | South End: Flamingo Road (4100 South)

Length: Approximately 2.0 miles

Townships of Winchester and Paradise

See East Sahara Map for information about the Maryland/Sahara node

North End

Sahara Avenue



Main Entrance of the Boulevard Mall



The wide, multilane commercial thoroughfare of Maryland Parkway

Hospital

Desert Inn Road

## Major Commercial Nodes at Desert Inn and Flamingo roads:

This section of Maryland Parkway contains two commercial nodes, which extend along the thoroughfare from Desert Inn Road to Flamingo Road. Most notable is the Boulevard Mall, which opened in 1968 as Las Vegas' first indoor shopping mall. Its development was a turning point in the city's economic development, as it drew retailers away from Downtown to this commercial strip along Maryland Parkway (i.e., "Shopping District"). The first retailer to arrive was Sears in 1965 (pictured right).



Mission and Spanish Revival styles at Mission Center (1977-79), a large shopping center at Maryland Parkway and Flamingo Road



Mostly demolished Maryland Square (1970), which once included Wonder World

Vacant Sears (1965)

## Indoor Shopping Mall Pattern:

### Boulevard Mall (1968):

Changed physical format, some change in use

This mall, pictured left, once included Sears (1965), J.C. Penney, The Broadway, Ronzone's — and later Dillard's. It now includes El Mercado [The Market], amongst other retailers, as well as some entertainment and non-retail functions, including Seaquest Las Vegas, an aquarium, and Rex Center, an activity center.

Flamingo Wash

South End

Flamingo Road

Fig. 47: Maryland Parkway, from Sahara Avenue (north end) to Flamingo Road (south end). [Source: Compiled by author; photos by author, map from Google Maps, 2022.]

Rancho Drive was once known as the Tonopah Highway – Tonopah, Nevada being an old mining town over 200 miles away – prior to the construction of the limited-access U.S. Highway 95, which connects Las Vegas to its northern metropolitan neighbor, Reno. With its northwest orientation, Rancho was also the connection between Las Vegas and the Nevada Test Site, the home of nuclear testing during the Cold War. Bonanza Road is the south end of the selected portion, considering the historic importance of Bonanza in connecting the Tonopah Highway to the historically African American Westside and Downtown Las Vegas (see Fig. 3 in Chapter I). Additionally, south of Bonanza, Rancho becomes more associated with the Las Vegas Medical District.

Rancho Drive is adjacent to the early residential subdivision of Twin Lakes Village and passes Twin Lakes Plaza (1956), a postwar era shopping center that now illustrates Las Vegas' social evolution and the growth of the city's Latinx population. Also at the minor commercial node of Rancho Drive and Washington Avenue is a one-time Kmart (1971, 1979) that has since been converted into the Rancho Swap Meet. The north end of the selected portion is at Vegas Drive.

East of here, Vegas Drive becomes Owens Avenue. Owens passes Nucleus Plaza, which was historically known as Golden West Shopping Center (1964). This shopping center catered to African Americans and was once owned by African American businessman Bob Bailey. It was also damaged and looted in the 1969 Riots (Fig. 48).



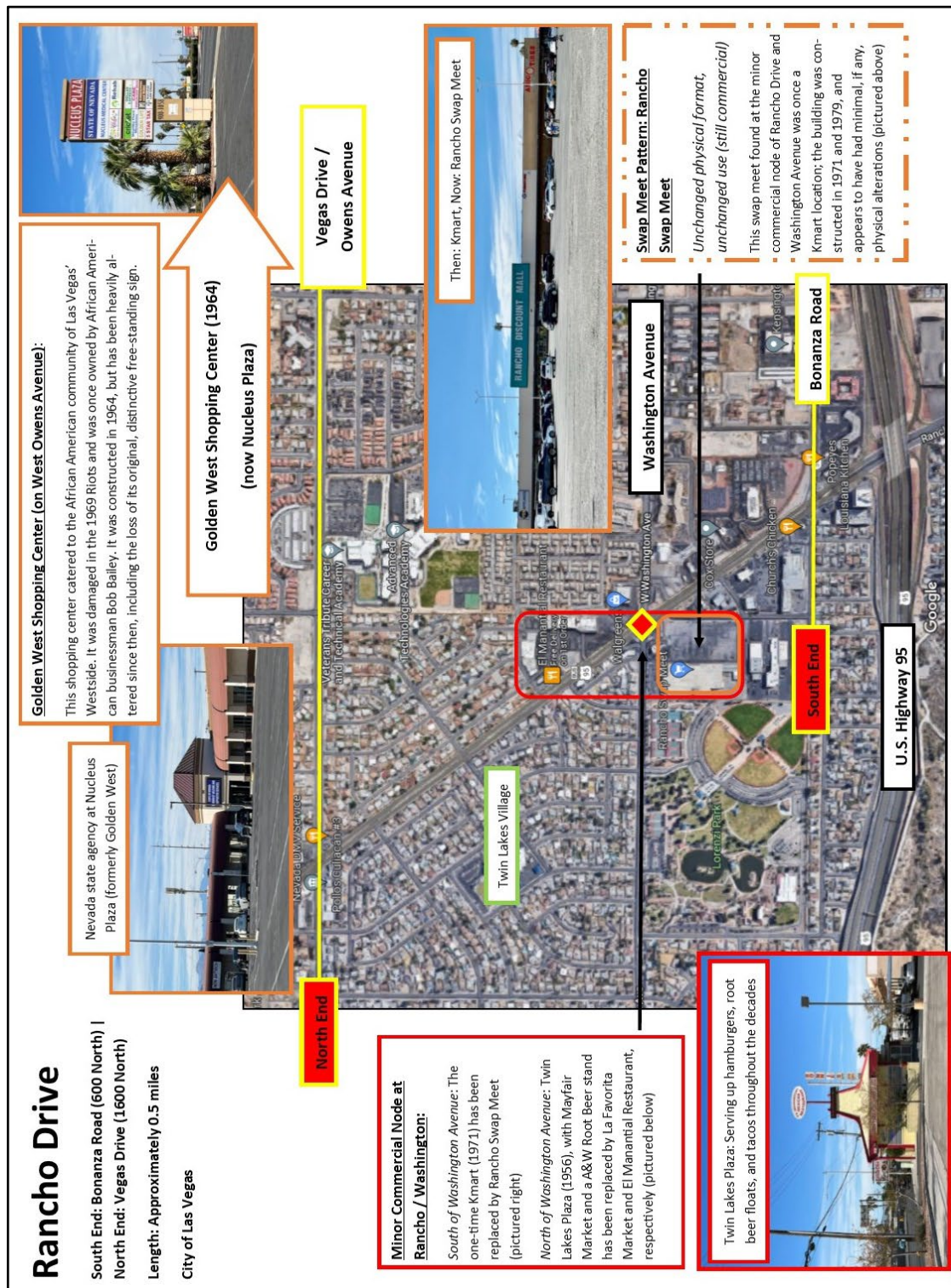


Fig. 48: Rancho Drive, from Bonanza Road (south end) to Vegas Drive (north end). [Source: Compiled by author; photos by author, map from Google Maps, 2022.]

Originally known as San Francisco Avenue, Sahara Avenue was once the southern edge of Las Vegas' development (see Fig. 3 in Chapter I). The commercial thoroughfare was renamed in 1962 following lobbying by the Sahara Hotel and Casino<sup>377</sup> – which opened in 1952 at the southeast corner of the Las Vegas Strip and then-San Francisco Avenue.<sup>378</sup> This name change reflects the longtime influence of the city's gambling and entertainment industries. The west end of the selected portion of East Sahara Avenue is Paradise Road, as west of this point is the Las Vegas Strip. Past the Strip, the other selected portion of Sahara begins.

The most notable commercial development along East Sahara Avenue is Commercial Center, which first opened in the early 1960s. Reflecting early commercial strip development, Commercial Center's northern buildings are located adjacent to the thoroughfare, with no setback. Drivers on Sahara can turn into an entrance between these buildings to enter the large, interior parking lot. The perimeter buildings wraparound to Karen Avenue on the south. The one-time Vegas Village, at the southeast corner of Commercial Center, has since been demolished. Another early shopping center is found at the major commercial node of East Sahara Avenue and Maryland Parkway: the "L"-shaped Parkway Plaza (1961). Its distinctive free-standing sign is still extant.

Farther east at McLeod Street and Fremont Street/Boulder Highway are an abandoned Kmart (1969) and Gemco (1979),<sup>379</sup> respectively. Fremont/Boulder is the east end of the selected portion and its role as a major highway in the area makes it a natural end point for this area under study (Fig. 49).



# East Sahara Avenue

West End: Paradise Road (200 East) | East End: Fremont Street/Boulder Highway (approximately 3300 East)  
Length: Approximately 3.0 miles  
City of Las Vegas, Townships of Winchester and Sunrise Manor,  
Unincorporated Clark County

**Major Commercial Node at East Sahara / Maryland:**  
Three shopping centers (1961, 1987, and 1999) are at this node, including the "L"-shaped Parkway Plaza (1961). Even though businesses have changed, the distinctive free-standing signage is still extant (pictured above).

**Shopping Center Pattern: Commercial Center**  
Unchanged physical format, unchanged use (with some exceptions)  
This large shopping center with a vast interior parking lot opened in the early 1960s — with construction into the 1970s — to compete with Downtown Las Vegas. It is now filled with restaurants serving various international cuisines, and also includes a karaoke bar, gay bar, and at least three churches. The southeast corner once included a Vegas Village, a local discount retailer. It has since been demolished.

**Minor Commercial Node at East Sahara / Eastern**  
Left: Abandoned Knart (1969) (pictured below), Right: Gemco (1979)

**East End**

**West End**

**Paradise Road**

**Maryland Parkway**

**Fremont Street/ Boulder Highway**

**East End**

**Left: Abandoned Knart (1969) (pictured below), Right: Gemco (1979)**

**Minor Commercial Node at East Sahara / Eastern**

**Eastern Avenue**

**Major Commercial Node at East Sahara / Maryland:**

Three shopping centers (1961, 1987, and 1999) are at this node, including the "L"-shaped Parkway Plaza (1961). Even though businesses have changed, the distinctive free-standing signage is still extant (pictured above).

**Shopping Center Pattern: Commercial Center**

Unchanged physical format, unchanged use (with some exceptions)

This large shopping center with a vast interior parking lot opened in the early 1960s — with construction into the 1970s — to compete with Downtown Las Vegas. It is now filled with restaurants serving various international cuisines, and also includes a karaoke bar, gay bar, and at least three churches. The southeast corner once included a Vegas Village, a local discount retailer. It has since been demolished.

183

The east end of the selected portion of West Sahara Avenue is Richfield Boulevard. Just east of this point is Interstate 15 and the Las Vegas Strip. Past the Strip, the other selected portion of Sahara begins. West Sahara includes physical features that illustrate some of the concepts discussed in this study. At Valley View Boulevard are some unusual conversions, including a shopping center with a church. There is also a supermarket catering to the city's Latinx community. Near here, there is a commercial strip of numerous strip malls serving a variety of ethnic cuisines.

Between approximately Decatur and Rainbow boulevards, West Sahara Avenue passes through a commercial strip of car dealerships. Grady Clay references these "specialized" commercial "pit strips," which cater to "special markets."<sup>380</sup> Clay gives examples of thoroughfares with strings of motels or fast food restaurants.<sup>381</sup> Another example of this "specialization" is Chinatown Vegas, which is found along Spring Mountain Road. This selected portion's west end is at Rainbow Boulevard. This aligns with West Charleston Boulevard's end point, as Rainbow was very much the edge of the city's development by the mid-1980s (Fig. 50).



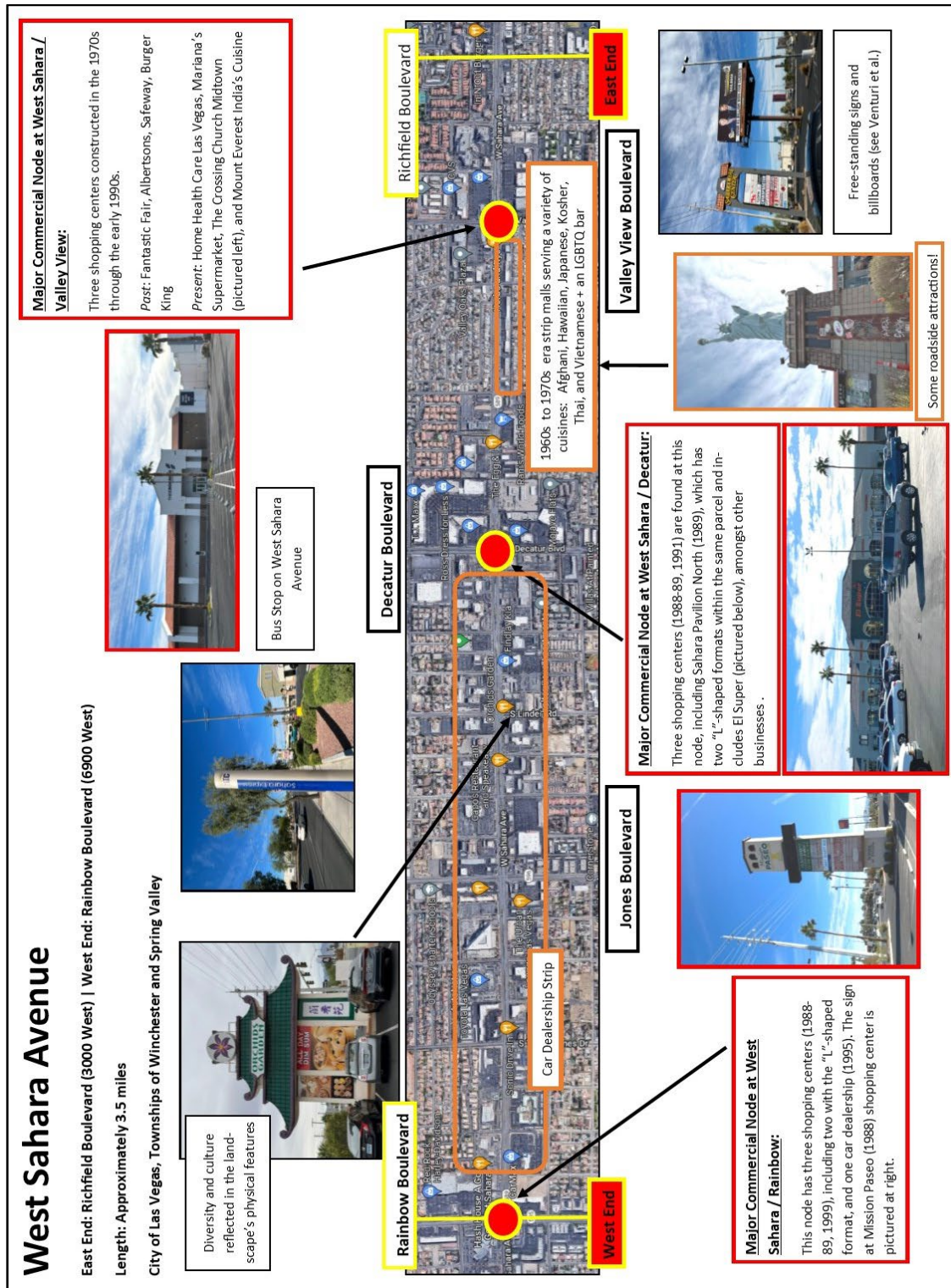


Fig. 50: West Sahara Avenue, from Richfield Boulevard (east end) to Rainbow Boulevard (west end).  
 [Source: Compiled by author; photos by author, map from Google Maps, 2022.]

### Fieldwork

In October 2021, I visited Las Vegas, Nevada to conduct fieldwork. I observed the six selected commercial thoroughfares on October 23 – 24, 2021. This fieldwork resulted in photographic documentation, via an iPhone 13, and field notes. Due to the extensive length of the commercial thoroughfares and their automobile-oriented development, driving was necessary. At various points, I would stop and document something of interest, such as the swap meets, Commercial Center, and the Boulevard Mall. Sometimes, a stop would result in some limited walking in the immediate vicinity. On day one, I observed and documented West Charleston Boulevard, Rancho Drive – plus Golden West Shopping Center (now Nucleus Plaza) on West Owens Avenue – Decatur Boulevard, and West Sahara Avenue. On day two, I observed and documented East Sahara Avenue and Maryland Parkway.

Prior to and following the fieldwork, I used research tools to inform and shape my observations. I have a personal and familial connection to Las Vegas, so this background certainly influenced my approach to the cultural landscapes of the commercial thoroughfares. However, the research tools, including archival research, have led to a more informed approach than I had at the outset of this study. Thus, research was sometimes used to support or negate previous notions from my own lived experience.

Finally, although all physical features of the commercial thoroughfare landscape were observed, I gave the most attention to commercial developments constructed between 1960 and 1990, followed by commercial properties constructed prior to 1960, specifically the 1950s. This small set of properties from the 1950s influenced and shaped the development that occurred in Las Vegas in the 1960s through 1980s. I also acknowledged commercial properties

constructed after 1990, considering their current visibility in the contemporary landscape. But these more recently constructed buildings and structures were given the least consideration.

To determine a commercial development's construction date(s) and land use (zoning status), I referenced Las Vegas and Clark County's interactive zoning maps. Sometimes, additional data gathered from these zoning maps provided me with a fuller picture of the commercial thoroughfares' development – especially when combined with information gathered from historic newspaper advertisements and articles. Thus, information related to ownership and addresses was useful in helping me understand these commercial thoroughfares and their physical evolution.

### Research Tools

Prior to and following my fieldwork, I conducted research to gain a better understanding of these six selected commercial thoroughfares. This, in turn, helped inform and guide my fieldwork, and how my on-the-ground observations fit into the city's larger historic narrative and social evolution. References to the streetscapes, buildings, structures, and retailers – both past and present – rely upon a mix of the following research tools, in addition to photographs and notes taken during my October 2021 fieldwork. I used the following tools:

- Las Vegas' *Zoning Interactive Map*<sup>382</sup> – I initially used this online zoning map to find properties' construction dates and zoning status. Eventually, I switched to only using Clark County's interactive zoning map, *OpenWeb*, as it is more user-friendly and provides similar information.
- Clark County's interactive zoning map: *OpenWeb*<sup>383</sup> – This online zoning map includes data for both the City of Las Vegas and Clark County's unincorporated townships. I used

it for obtaining information related to properties' Construction Year, Zoning Classification, Owner Name, Site Address, and Jurisdiction (e.g., City of Las Vegas or an unincorporated township).

- Google Maps and Google Street View<sup>384</sup> – I used this website in close conjunction with the photographic documentation from my fieldwork to gain a complete picture of Las Vegas' contemporary landscape. This tool was crucial, considering I was only able to visit Las Vegas in-person once (in October 2021).
- Las Vegas-Clark County Library District's *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (historical) database<sup>385</sup> – I used this archive for finding historic newspaper advertisements and articles from approximately 1960 to 1990. I used a variety of search terms related to the specific commercial thoroughfares and their commercial developments – in addition to terms related to certain residential subdivisions, etc.
- Special Collections & Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas<sup>386</sup> – I used this archive for finding historic photographs and maps.
- Facebook – I initially used this social media website to find photos posted by local residents of and travelers to Las Vegas – both past and present. I ended up not using the website, but one Facebook Group led me to the tumblr blog *Vintage Las Vegas*.<sup>387</sup> Here, I found additional photos.
- Yelp<sup>388</sup> – I used this popular website for obtaining customer reviews related to the specific commercial development examples: Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet, Rancho Swap Meet, Commercial Center, and the Boulevard Mall.

- Various retailer websites<sup>389</sup> – I used these retailer websites to gain an understanding of current retailers found along the commercial thoroughfares, and to gain insight about their individual customer bases.

I will now give an example of my research process. A relevant commercial property – found to be relevant, thanks to the interactive zoning maps – may have been visited during my fieldwork. The property’s address and/or name was then searched in the historic newspaper archive to determine its evolution, in addition to past retailers. The photographic archive was then searched. Retailer websites were found via Google. Any other current information, not gathered up to this point, was observed through Google Maps and Street View. By following this process, I adhered to geographer Deryck W. Holdsworth’s statement: “To get behind and beyond the landscape, the archives...provide firmer evidence and encourage a richer analysis of social and economic change.”<sup>390</sup> Therefore, these methods revealed the cultural landscapes’ history and meanings.

Lastly, the research tools are varied, as I tried to gain the broadest understanding possible of the six selected commercial thoroughfares. This mix of local government and archival sources, and retailer websites and Yelp customer reviews, fits in with Lewis’ “Axiom of Common Things,” which says, “Common landscapes [in this case, a commercial thoroughfare and its development] – however important they may be – are by their nature hard to study by conventional academic means. ...But it is hard to find intelligent writing which is neither polemical nor self-consciously cute on such subjects as mobile homes, motels, gas stations, shopping centers, billboards, suburban tract housing design...[etc.].”<sup>391</sup> Because of this challenge, Lewis presents “The Corollary of Nonacademic Literature,” which includes sources

like “trade journals” and “advertisements for commercial products.”<sup>392</sup> Therefore, if alive today, Lewis would likely support my approach of using Google Maps and Street View, social media and a blog, retailer websites, and online customer reviews.

#### Looking Ahead: Using Fieldwork and Research to Shape the Evaluative Framework

These commercial thoroughfares have a larger historic and contemporary context that includes physical features, such as buildings and structures, as well as intangible aspects, like past and present communities, that come together to form the ever-evolving landscape and its meanings. As this chapter illustrated, I gathered this information through a variety of methods over a period of months. Now, with this information established, the evaluative framework and conclusions of Chapter V can be presented.

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<sup>354</sup> Peirce Lewis, “Axioms for Reading the Landscape, Some Guides to the American Scene,” 1-12, (1979), [https://www.uky.edu/academy/sites/www.uky.edu.academy/files/Lewis,%20Axioms%20for%20Reading%20the%20Landscape\\_0.pdf](https://www.uky.edu/academy/sites/www.uky.edu.academy/files/Lewis,%20Axioms%20for%20Reading%20the%20Landscape_0.pdf).

<sup>355</sup> Lewis, 1.

<sup>356</sup> Lewis, 3.

<sup>357</sup> Lewis, 3-5.

<sup>358</sup> Lewis, 3.

<sup>359</sup> Lewis, 3-4.

<sup>360</sup> Lewis, 4.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Lewis, 3.

<sup>363</sup> Lewis, 4-5.

<sup>364</sup> Lewis, 5.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Lewis, 6-7.

<sup>367</sup> Lewis, 7.

<sup>368</sup> Lewis, 8.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>371</sup> Lewis, 9.

<sup>372</sup> Lewis, 1.

<sup>373</sup> Lewis, 9.

<sup>374</sup> Lewis, 10.

<sup>375</sup> On page 42 of *Close-Up, How to Read the American City*, Grady Clay defines this feature as the following: "Where there is an abrupt, visible switch in the direction and/or the design of streets – especially where the pattern shifts diagonally." There are many cities with these "breaks," and Clay includes Las Vegas' Charleston Boulevard as a notable one (see the diagrams on page 45).

<sup>376</sup> "FOR THURSDAY, Wonder World Opening Slated," *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), February 29, 1968: 47, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvcld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16CAD80B6A378B5A%402439916-16CA9B8FB567B4DE%4046-16CA9B8FB567B4DE%40>.

<sup>377</sup> Colin McKinlay, "Sahara Avenue Okayed," *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), December 6, 1962: 1-2, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvcld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16C1666AF8B6B9EB%402438005-16C1648A2CA9F8D3%400>.

<sup>378</sup> Stefan Al, *The Strip, Las Vegas and the Architecture of the American Dream*, inside cover (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017).

<sup>379</sup> Gemco is described as a "discount membership department store."

*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), November 16, 1979: 59, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.lvcld.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1508AFD0E83DBED6%40EANX-NB-16D97FE96D4176B2%402444194-16D97E4EDC7DD288%4058-16D97E4EDC7DD288%40>.

<sup>380</sup> Grady Clay, *Close-Up, How to Read the American City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 101, 108.

<sup>381</sup> Clay, 101, 108.

<sup>382</sup> City of Las Vegas Department of Planning, *Zoning Interactive Map*, <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=5f614f3de1134ff7b1644ceaccf50894>.

<sup>383</sup> Clark County, Nevada, *OpenWeb* (zoning map), <https://maps.clarkcountynv.gov/openweb/>.

<sup>384</sup> Google Maps, Google, <https://maps.google.com/>.

Google Street View, Google Maps, Google, <https://maps.google.com/>.

<sup>385</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (historical) database, *NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current*, Las Vegas-Clark County Library District, Clark County, NV, <https://lvcld.org/resources/newspapers/>.

<sup>386</sup> Special Collections & Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada, <https://special.library.unlv.edu/>.

<sup>387</sup> *Vintage Las Vegas* (blog), tumblr, <https://vintagelasvegas.com/>.

<sup>388</sup> These citations can be found in Chapter III.

<sup>389</sup> These citations can be found in Chapter III.

<sup>390</sup> Deryck W. Holdsworth, "Landscape and Archives as Texts," in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, edited by Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi, 44 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>391</sup> Lewis, 5.

<sup>392</sup> Lewis, 6-7.

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Lewis also references Grady Clay and J.B. Jackson – sources of this study.



## CHAPTER V

### COMMERCIAL THOROUGHFARES AS A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: AN EVALUATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR THE SEEN FEATURES AND UNSEEN ASPECTS, AND NEXT STEPS IN ACKNOWLEDGING THESE COMMON LANDSCAPES

#### Introduction

The evaluative framework presented in this chapter melds two existing cultural landscape approaches. The first approach, from the National Park Service (NPS), is based on the tangible, physical features of a cultural landscape. In other words, the seen features.<sup>393</sup> The second approach, from cultural geographer Richard H. Schein, also encompasses these visible features, but is more comprehensive, as this approach allows for the inclusion of the intangible and unseen aspects of the cultural landscape. When combined into one evaluative framework, these approaches present historic preservationists with a template for acknowledging and documenting landscapes like commercial thoroughfares. This is important, as this study seeks to highlight the social and cultural evolution found along these thoroughfares.

This chapter will open with an overview of the first approach, as articulated by NPS through its National Register of Historic Places program and its bulletins, particularly its *Historic Residential Suburbs* bulletin, published in 2002. This bulletin, which is currently used in practice, lists and describes 11 tangible “landscape characteristics.” It has a similar perspective to that of cultural geographers like Peirce Lewis – and the axioms presented in Chapter IV. This chapter

will discuss these characteristics, their usefulness and limitations, and modify them to make them more applicable to this study and its evaluative framework.

The second approach, which appears in Richard Schein's 2009 article "A Methodological Framework for Interpreting Ordinary Landscapes," will then be presented. Schein's approach and his framework of four-steps encompass both the tangible features and intangible aspects of a cultural landscape. It builds upon the NPS approach – which is focused on the physical characteristics of a landscape – but then goes a step further in presenting the landscape as a place of "mediation" and "discourse." Following the introduction of these two approaches, they will be combined to create this study's comprehensive evaluative framework. This evaluative framework, which is first focused on the "seen," tangible features, and then on the "unseen," intangible aspects, can then be used by preservationists as a template and guide for studying commercial thoroughfares in Sun Belt cities – or any other type of landscape, big or small. This provides for a more accurate analysis of these commercial thoroughfares, and their historic, social, and cultural importance.

In his article, Schein also discusses "interventions," which can be viewed as actionable steps that preservationists can take – once they acknowledge and document a cultural landscape like that of the commercial thoroughfare. This chapter will then briefly cover types of actions, which fall along a spectrum, from relatively simple actions – like creating a cellular phone application about the historic and cultural significance of a thriving shopping center – to more complicated endeavors – such as historically designating a commercial strip. In closing, the evaluative framework will be applied to Las Vegas' Boulevard Mall, located on Maryland Parkway. This example will show the practicality and usefulness of the framework in analyzing

commercial development in Sun Belt cities, as it allows for the consideration of change, as well as the inclusion of the landscape's historic and cultural palimpsest of meanings.

### The NPS Approach: The Seen Cultural Landscape

NPS's National Register program extensively references cultural landscapes in the following National Register bulletins: *Historic Residential Suburbs: Guidelines for Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places*, *How to Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes* (Bulletin 18), and *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes* (Bulletin 30).<sup>394</sup> The *Designed Historic Landscapes* and *Rural Historic Landscapes* bulletins have been referenced by historic preservationists for many years. For example, the *Rural Historic Landscapes* bulletin was first published in 1989. Because of this, many preservation professionals have a limited perspective of what constitutes a cultural landscape, and many would not think of urban and suburban areas in cultural landscape terms. The *Historic Residential Suburbs* bulletin, published in 2002, has somewhat altered and expanded this perspective within the preservation field, and is the most useful National Register bulletin for the purposes of this study.

The authors of *Historic Residential Suburbs*, David L. Ames and Linda Flint McClelland, use cultural landscape theory in their approach to residential development and suburbanization, particularly in the context of visible "landscape characteristics." They write, "Subdivision development typically occurred in several clearly defined stages, which can be read as a series of *layers* [emphasis added] imprinted on the land."<sup>395</sup> The use of the term "layers" is notable, as it is a common cultural landscape term, along with "palimpsest." More importantly, Ames and McClelland note that cities and suburbs can have layers of history, just

like a farm, plantation, cemetery, public park, battlefield, or any other location that is seen as the traditional representation of a cultural landscape. As Lewis wrote in 1979, “It rarely occurs to most Americans to think of landscape as including everything from city skylines to farmers’ silos...from famous historical landmarks to flashing electric signs that boast the creation of the 20 billionth hamburger.”<sup>396</sup> Nonetheless, it appears to have taken NPS much more time than Lewis to come to this realization about cultural landscapes, and the National Register program’s approach is still limited by norms of what exactly is considered historic.

The bulletin also points to the results from using a cultural landscape approach, as it “will better equip preservationists to recognize these important places as having multiple aspects of social and design history, identify significant values and characteristics, and assist in planning their preservation.”<sup>397</sup> This brings to mind the social evolution and multicultural palimpsest presented in this study, in addition to the meanings (i.e., “values”) found in the landscape, such as control, power, economic profit, race, gender, income, etc. Unfortunately, despite this promising language, the guidelines present a somewhat simplistic picture of the suburban landscape and its residential development. The bulletin’s narrative only references certain individuals involved in this landscape’s initial design and construction, as well as those who continue to live in suburban landscapes as homeowners. There is less of a focus on the many individuals who indirectly shaped this landscape, such as business owners and customers, and renters – which have much less of an influence on planning and design (i.e., tangible features).

*Historic Residential Suburbs* covers three broad themes of suburbanization, from 1830 to 1960: “Transportation,” “Land Use and Site Development,” and “House and Yard.” Much of

the historic narrative included in the bulletin is not relevant to this study, considering it is focused on residential development and the analyzed time period ends in 1960 – which coincides with when this study’s historic time period begins. Nonetheless, there is some overlap between the bulletin and this study regarding transportation and “cluster” (i.e., nodal) development.

Despite incorporating cultural landscape theory, the bulletin’s authors have a normative view of residential suburbs, with a focus on planning and continuity – as opposed to a largely unplanned, changing landscape. In *Historic Residential Suburbs*, these areas are described as the following:

A geographic area, usually located outside the central city, that was historically connected to the city by one or more modes of transportation; subdivided and developed primarily for residential use according to a plan; and possessing a significant concentration, linkage, and continuity of dwellings on small parcels of land, roads and streets, utilities, and community facilities.<sup>398</sup>

This definition illustrates a completely different perspective on suburbanization than that of this study. For one, many Sun Belt cities, like Las Vegas, have grown exponentially since 1950 – even in the past few decades alone. Therefore, as discussed in Chapter II, these cities were not necessarily “historically connected.” Because of this, there was only one transportation type: the automobile. Cities like Las Vegas never had a streetcar system, and no one ever imagined any other transportation method other than the individual drivers’ cars that would connect the city to its neighboring suburbs.

Much of the Sun Belt cities’ surrounding land was used for suburban residential subdivisions and master-planned communities, but many pieces of land – particularly along major thoroughfares (i.e., strips) and where major thoroughfares intersected (i.e., nodes) –

were set apart and zoned for commercial development, such as shopping centers and strip malls. For the most part, “planning” related to commercial development appears to have been much more piecemeal than what occurred residentially. There may have been plans to develop certain commercial nodes,<sup>399</sup> but it is not necessarily comparable to the large-scale planning that went into residential development. In the bulletin, commercial development plays a secondary role to residential development. For example, the bulletin lists “stores,” amongst other “institutions and facilities that supported and enhanced suburban domestic life.”<sup>400</sup> In reality, the two land uses are directly linked and depend upon the other.

Ames and McClelland point to one potential survey area: “residential clusters along streetcar lines or major thoroughfares.”<sup>401</sup> The use of the term “major thoroughfares” notes the important subject of this study. However, by using the term “clusters” in conjunction with “thoroughfares,” the bulletin neglects commercial strip development. Thus, commercial development at transportation nodes is deemed relevant, while linear, strip development is almost completely ignored – at least at this point. Later on, the bulletin includes language that is more inclusive of both commercial nodes and strips: “Retailing facilities migrated to the suburbs and were clustered in community shopping centers or along commercial strips. Large regional shopping centers began to appear first along arteries radiating from the center city and then along the new circumferential highways.”<sup>402</sup>

Along these lines, the bulletin says, “Nonresidential resources [i.e., shopping centers] located within or adjacent to a historic neighborhood may contribute to significance if they are integrally related to the neighborhood by design, plan, or association, and share a common period of historic significance.”<sup>403</sup> This may encompass developments like Commercial Center

and the Boulevard Mall, which were both “integrally related” to Paradise Homes’ residential subdivisions. It would possibly include Charleston Heights Shopping Center, next to the Charleston Heights subdivision. However, this point of view only covers a small fraction of the commercial development that is adjacent to, but not necessarily historically associated with, the surrounding residential subdivisions and suburbs. The main example being commercial strip development that sprung up to support the newly-built subdivisions and cater to their residents/commuters, but were not necessarily coordinated in their planning and construction. Not to mention, the number of commercial spaces that have been repurposed and have no direct historical connection to the surrounding neighborhoods.

The bulletin includes some language that appears to broaden its relevance: “It [‘a historic suburb’] applies to newer cities such as Los Angeles, called the ‘suburban metropolis,’ where the single-family home in a subdivision became the building block of the entire city.”<sup>404</sup> At first glance, including Los Angeles seems to position these guidelines as applicable to Sun Belt cities, such as Las Vegas. However, Los Angeles was already one of the nation’s largest cities as early as 1920 – long before Houston, Phoenix, San Antonio, and other Sun Belt metropolises entered the U.S. Census’ top ten rankings. Therefore, with its large network of Huntington’s streetcars and miles of “taxpayers,” Los Angeles’ development is different than the Sun Belt cities that boomed in the 1960 to 1990 period.

In the bulletin’s survey guidelines, it mentions documenting “original or early home owners, noting...ethnic or racial associations.”<sup>405</sup> Additionally, it recommends the following: “Note changing patterns of ownership, indicating approximate dates of general trends and describing the effects of change on the physical character and social history of the

neighborhood.”<sup>406</sup> Thus, there are hints of social history and evolution that get past the traditional historic narrative of the suburbs that emphasizes construction dates and architectural styles. However, these specific guidelines are buried in the bulletin.

Overall, there is clearly a specific kind of residential development in the mind of the bulletin’s authors: the traditional, high-style suburban home on a quiet, gently-winding, tree-lined street or parkway. The bulletin includes many images that hint at what is “historic” and worthy of listing in the National Register. There are many photographs throughout the bulletin that show Arts & Crafts bungalows and Tudor homes with tidy yards on perfectly-platted roadways, streetcar suburbs, and even Washington, DC’s Park and Shop.<sup>407</sup> The bulletin includes the “greatest hits” of American suburban development, from Riverside and Shaker Square to Radburn and Arapahoe Acres.<sup>408</sup>

Of particular interest to this study and the cultural landscape approach are the bulletin’s “landscape characteristics.”<sup>409</sup> These characteristics, which number 11 in total, are also found in the *Rural Historic Landscapes* bulletin.<sup>410</sup> That bulletin presents a useful definition that encapsulates NPS’s perspective on these features: “The tangible evidence of the activities and habits of the people who occupied, developed, used, and shaped the landscape to serve human needs; they may reflect the beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and values of these people.”<sup>411</sup> Notice the use of the term “tangible evidence,” even though the definition is people-centric. Human interaction with the built environment inevitably leads to intangible aspects that may be missed by a preservationist using an approach like the one NPS promotes.

Therefore, an architectural style or designed feature may speak to a community’s “values,” but a cultural practice that takes place at a site in the landscape (e.g., ethnic cuisine



at a local restaurant) would not necessarily be included in this type of survey. Further emphasizing this tangible-centric standpoint, the *Historic Residential Suburbs* bulletin says, “The following landscape characteristics can be used as a guide for examining these layers, describing the physical evolution of a suburb,” and so on.<sup>412</sup> The palimpsest’s layers are touched upon, but in the context of a “physical evolution.” In contrast to this study, this is not a social evolution being surveyed and documented. Instead, it discusses the “selection,” “design,” and “arrangement” found in these historic suburbs – all of which are physical characteristics.<sup>413</sup>

Nonetheless, these landscape characteristics provide a useful guide that can be applied to some features and aspects of the commercial thoroughfare’s development. The 11 characteristics, which have plenty of overlap, are clearly focused on the tangible, physical features of the cultural landscape, rather than the intangible, social aspects. These characteristics can be applied to all development types along commercial thoroughfares, including the specific common types of places: the discount retailers/swap meets, shopping center (Commercial Center), and indoor shopping mall (the Boulevard Mall) (Table 3).

NPS Landscape Characteristic...	...Applied to Las Vegas' Commercial Thoroughfares/Commercial Spaces
Land Use and Activities	Planning and zoning of commercial development along the thoroughfare; strips and nodes
Response to the Natural Environment	Sun Belt region; Mojave Desert; Las Vegas Valley; super-grid of section line roads; washes/arroyos; climate influenced designs, such as sidewalks with overhangs, stucco cladding, and tile roofing
Patterns of Spatial Organization	Super-grid; shopping center setbacks with parking lots in front (e.g., "L"-shaped shopping centers); early postwar shopping centers with no setbacks and parking lots in rear; commercial strips, including strip malls, and nodes; zoning, and the separation of residential and commercial uses
Cultural Traditions	Architectural styles and materials, including regional and national influences (e.g., proximity to Los Angeles, Spanish Revival and Mission styles, stucco cladding and tile roofing); Sun Belt city; retail/consumption; roadside architecture; bilingual signage
Circulation Networks	Commercial thoroughfares and intersections (e.g., super-grid and nodes, width of roadways), parking lots, bus stops/routes, and sidewalks
Boundary Demarcations	Walls and billboards between parcels/businesses; zoning, and the separation of residential and commercial uses
Vegetation	Landscaped medians on commercial thoroughfares, and landscaping within shopping centers, strip malls, and other commercial developments, from palm trees to cacti to rocks
Buildings, Structures, and Objects	Shopping centers, strip malls, and other commercial buildings; distinctive free-standing signage; larger infrastructure of the thoroughfares and parking lots, including lighting, traffic signals, and utility poles; temporary and mobile objects, like food trucks
Clusters	Commercial nodes at thoroughfares' intersections, including shopping centers and strip malls; clustered commercial development of a specific type (e.g., Chinatown Vegas and Las Vegas Medical District)
Archaeological Sites	Undetermined; beyond the scope of this study
Small-scale Elements	Smaller infrastructure of the thoroughfares and parking lots, including fences, walls, small signs, and bus stops; distinctive design features, such as folded-plate roofs and glass blocks

Table 3: NPS' "landscape characteristics," as listed in the *Historical Residential Suburbs* National Register bulletin. Here, the characteristics have been applied to commercial thoroughfares and commercial spaces to show how they apply to tangible features, but do not necessarily capture intangible, social aspects.

While these landscape characteristics are fairly comprehensive and largely useful in the context of surveying and documenting a planned residential suburb or rural farm, for example, they are limited in the context of a commercial thoroughfares' strips and nodes. Thus, they could be revised to be more inclusive, as well as more applicable to this study and the evaluative framework presented in this chapter. The following subsection includes a description of how each characteristic could be improved. These revised landscape characteristics will then be incorporated into the eventual framework.

Land Use and Activities – This characteristic encompasses “the selection of land,” and covers matters like “private deed restrictions,” zoning, and planning.<sup>414</sup> Echoing the earlier guidance where retail and commerce play a secondary role to residential development, “shops” are included as one of the “facilities that support domestic life and provide recreational pleasure.”<sup>415</sup> These are all important factors in land development, whether for residential or commercial use, and this study has touched on some of them. Nonetheless, the use of the term “land use” instead of, say, “land development,” sounds rural landscape-centric. Although it is a form of “land use,” it seems odd to place shopping centers and parking lots in this category. Thus, in the context of commercial thoroughfares and development, this category is better described as *Development and Construction of the Property, and Zoning*.

Response to the Natural Environment – Lewis would likely consider this characteristic as linked to his axiom on ecology. The bulletin lists “climate, topography, soil, and the availability of water” as factors in development.<sup>416</sup> Also, echoing Lewis, the characteristic discusses materials and says, “The diffusion of regional prototypes nationwide...furthered severed the relationship between house design and local sources of building materials.”<sup>417</sup> In addition to

this, the bulletin makes the connection between a “flat” landscape and “extend[ing] the existing rectilinear grid of city streets.”<sup>418</sup> This very much brings to mind the adoption of a super-grid of section line roads in the Las Vegas Valley – further emphasizing how the natural landscape shapes the human-built environment. All of these features are relevant to both residential and commercial development. This category will now be referred to as *Local Ecology*.

Patterns of Spatial Organization – The bulletin says, “Spatial organization applies to both the subdivision of the overall parcel and the arrangement of the yard.”<sup>419</sup> Thus, it can be macro, multiple blocks along a commercial thoroughfare, or micro, an individual store or restaurant and its small parking area, in focus. This characteristic touches on some relevant features, including “the gridiron plan,” building setbacks, and zoning.<sup>420</sup> It, therefore, includes aspects of the other characteristics. For the purposes of this study, this characteristic’s focus should be on commercial thoroughfares’ overall organization and development, which is generally either strip/linear or nodal in its pattern. Thus, this characteristic is simplified to become *Spatial Organization and Development: Commercial Strips and Nodes*.

Cultural Traditions – In the bulletin, this broad characteristic mainly refers to architectural styles, designs, plans, and materials<sup>421</sup> – the tangible features of the cultural landscape. In the mold of Lewis, who references a “national culture,” the bulletin references “nationalization.”<sup>422</sup> Most interestingly, the bulletin references the “middle-class,” and “strong cultural associations derived from the social values and experiences shared by past generations.”<sup>423</sup> Much to the bulletin’s credit, it says, “Having evolved and changed over the course of many years, many neighborhoods have also become identified with a succession of

home owners and residents representing different economic, immigrant, or racial groups that contributed to the prosperity and vitality of the growing metropolis.”<sup>424</sup> Importantly, this characteristic hints at the social evolution found at the root of this study, and seems to accept the fact that change is present. Given the topics discussed in this study, this category is better described as *Social and Cultural Expressions of Past and Present Communities*.

Circulation Networks – This characteristic perfectly encapsulates commercial thoroughfares, as it covers the ubiquitous automobile and the occasional pedestrian or bus moving along the super-grid’s thoroughfares. It also includes the movement through the adjoining parking lots, which can be relatively simple, like at a strip mall, or overly complicated, such as at a large shopping center or indoor shopping mall, which may also include parking garages. Plus, commercial nodes are a critical piece of the circulation network, as they cater to customers driving along the thoroughfares and connecting at major intersections. There is no need to change this characteristic.

Boundary Demarcations – Under this characteristic, the bulletin lists various objects, such as “fences, walls, and planted screens of trees and shrubs,” as well as “gates, gate houses, pylons, signs, and planted gardens;” it also references “unmarked” boundaries.<sup>425</sup> Boundaries found along commercial thoroughfares, just like those found in the residential suburbs, are sometimes obvious – a cinderblock wall between shopping centers or a billboard between fast food restaurants – and sometimes not – a parking lot at one shopping center that subtly connects to a parking lot at another shopping center. Regardless, boundaries are tied into zoning, with its parcels and lots. Thus, this characteristic is now under *Development and Construction of the Property, and Zoning*, established above.

Vegetation – In the context of commercial thoroughfares, which are largely constructed around black asphalt instead of green grass, vegetation is often overlooked for obvious reasons. Nonetheless, it plays a role in the streetscape and the landscapes of parking lots, shopping centers, etc. This characteristic is now under *Local Ecology*, established above.

Buildings, Structures, and Objects – These physical features are clearly at the center of historic preservation, whether a practitioner is surveying a farm, public park, residential subdivision, or commercial strip. Therefore, this characteristic is crucial. On commercial thoroughfares, development generally falls into either strip/linear or nodal patterns. Thus, this characteristic is now included as part of *Spatial Organization and Development: Commercial Strips and Nodes*. Additionally, instead of using the term “objects,” the term “signs” is more relevant to this study, given the great importance of these objects – usually free-standing – along commercial thoroughfares, as articulated by Venturi et al. Thus, this characteristic is better represented as *Buildings, Structures, and Signs*.

Clusters – This type of development, which stretches back to the era of the streetcar and has mainly been referred to as nodes, is a focus of this study. This is the only NPS characteristic that references “social history,” as the bulletin says, “Such clusters are often integral aspects of neighborhood planning and contribute to design and social history.”<sup>426</sup> Like this study, the bulletin hints at the importance of these nodes. This characteristic, renamed *Nodal Format*, is now included as part of *Spatial Organization and Development: Commercial Strips and Nodes* – in conjunction with *Buildings, Structures, and Signs*. So, if the surveying preservationist categorizes commercial development as the latter (i.e., commercial node), they

can then explain its specific format (e.g., an “L”-shaped shopping center with two anchor stores, a handful of smaller businesses, a gas station, and a parking area).

Archaeological Sites – While critical to the work of historic preservationists, this characteristic is outside of the scope of this study. Therefore, it is not considered as part of the evaluative framework.

Small-scale Elements – This characteristic encompasses numerous objects from “lamp posts” to “signs” and “fountains,” just to name a few.<sup>427</sup> While important to any cultural landscape, this characteristic’s name is limiting in the context commercial strips and nodes where bigness dominates. These thoroughfares are long and the commercial development along them is typically large-scale, from the individual buildings’ square footage to the height of the free-standing signs to the acreage of the parking lots and the number of parking spaces. Far from cohesive, these commercial thoroughfares – which are measured in miles – transcend individual shopping centers and residential subdivisions. An individual commercial node, for example, often includes numerous shopping centers and strip malls over multiple acres. Therefore, this characteristic is revised as *Additional Elements*, to cover any physical features that the surveying preservationist deems important, but do not fall within the bounds of the other characteristics.

While the landscape characteristics provide a starting point, I have revised them for the study of commercial thoroughfares (Table 4). All of these characteristics are important to consider, and will have some overlap. For example, development and construction may include issues of spatial organization and circulation networks. However, when applying these characteristics to a development (i.e., landscape), such as the examples presented in this study

– the two swap meets, a shopping center, and an indoor shopping mall – preservationists should think about characteristics/physical features that emphasize adaptation and use by past and present communities.

However, even with these revisions and the *Historic Residential Suburbs* bulletin's partial acceptance of layers and change, they still fall short in surveying and documenting changing uses and communities served in a cultural landscape. Overall, the bulletin's guidelines are biased towards those who created the suburban landscape, rather than the communities and day-to-day inhabitants, both past and present. For example, the bulletin says, "Many of America's residential suburbs resulted from the collaboration of developers, planners, architects, and landscape architects."<sup>428</sup> It does mention that "countless vernacular landscapes have been shaped in tandem by homebuilders...and home owners,"<sup>429</sup> but these two groups of individuals are still middle to upper income, as opposed to tenants and renters. The former group primarily shapes the physical landscape, through developing and owning property, while the latter group of renters has less of an impact on the tangible, built environment. Thus, an important social history is missing. Because of this, there is a need to bring in an additional approach.



Revised Landscape Characteristics for the Commercial Thoroughfare
Development and Construction of the Property, and Zoning
Local Ecology
Spatial Organization and Development: Commercial Strips and Nodes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buildings, Structures, and Signs</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nodal Format (if relevant)</li> </ul>
Social and Cultural Expressions of Past and Present Communities
Circulation Networks
Additional Elements

Table 4: The revised landscape characteristics, which form the evaluative framework's Seen Features.

### Richard H. Schein's Approach: The Seen and Unseen Cultural Landscape

The revised landscape characteristics provide a strong template for evaluating the tangible, physical features of commercial thoroughfares and their development. Although not written with the thoroughfares in mind, they were applied somewhat successfully to this particular landscape in Las Vegas. However, they fell short in revealing the full social evolution found in the landscape, such as particular retailers, and the individuals and communities that have been served in the past and in the present. Therefore, there is a need for an additional, more-encompassing approach.

The National Register's bulletins and guidelines, including its landscape characteristics, are representative of the viewpoints of early cultural geographers, such as Lewis. This first group has been eclipsed by a second group of theorists. This second group seeks to reveal the palimpsest of layers, and issues of control, power, economic profit, race, gender, income, etc. in the cultural landscape. As previously mentioned, Dell Upton referenced "the conjunction of seen and unseen."<sup>430</sup> The first group of cultural geographers interested in cultural landscapes were more associated with the "seen" – after all, Lewis referred to his process as "reading the landscape" – while the second group is more "unseen" in its perspective.

When describing the counterpoints within the cultural landscape approach and the two competing theoretical camps, in 1997, geographer Richard Walker wrote:

To their credit, John Brinckerhoff [J.B.] Jackson and the old cultural geographers tried hard to educate the blind eye of the American public to the landscapes around them. But one must, as a part of ideology critique, denaturalize the everyday, not just appreciate it. Doing so requires a critical stance toward the disturbing social forces, from racism to capital accumulation, at work in the molding of contemporary material culture.<sup>431</sup>

Cultural geographers from the first group – such as J.B. Jackson, Lewis, and Grady Clay – were interested in a landscape's history and context; but this background information tends to shy away from the so-called "disturbing social forces." NPS, through its National Register program, has largely sided with this particular version of the cultural landscape approach. In contrast, later cultural geographers, were interested in additional meanings hidden in the landscape. This viewpoint is reflected by scholars like Don Mitchell, who revised Lewis' axioms in 2008 with "political economy and social justice" in mind.<sup>432</sup>

Walker calls for a third way between the two academic groups, "and for the promiscuous mingling and mutual education of cultural geographers and political

economists.”<sup>433</sup> Richard Schein provides for such a balanced approach with his framework. In turn, this study has embraced Schein’s particular cultural landscape approach. His framework provides a template that all cultural geographers – and, by extension, historic preservationists – can find appealing, as it covers the evolution of cultural landscape scholarship and includes its various viewpoints and theoretical stances. It is grounded in historic context and the tangible, physical features of the cultural landscape, but also seeks to expand the conversation to the landscape’s social context and its intangible aspects. Additionally, these differing viewpoints may be more compatible than expected. Schein writes, “I began to think of work on the cultural landscape as falling into several distinct but often overlapping categories.”<sup>434</sup>

In a case study, Schein applies his “four-part framework” to Courthouse Square in Lexington, Kentucky.<sup>435</sup> Given its location, Courthouse Square has a history heavily shaped and layered by race. Schein writes, “Making the connections [between sites] involves asking how cultural landscapes work and assumes that the palimpsest of landscape is not innocent in a historical geography of race and racism in this southern city [Lexington], at least.”<sup>436</sup>

Despite this particular cultural landscape being about as far as one can get from the wide boulevards of the Mojave Desert, Schein’s framework is applicable to all cultural landscapes, including less overtly controversial ones like commercial thoroughfares and their corresponding development. Whatever the cultural landscape may be, there are both visible and obscured layers, as well as physical landscape characteristics and diverse communities with a range of social histories. Schein writes, “The Courthouse Square holds meaning for a number of central Kentuckians and that the meanings vested in the landscape are not always compatible; in fact, may even conflict.”<sup>437</sup> This is true for all cultural landscapes, from the iconic

to the mundane. Schein's framework accounts for these complexities in a way that the NPS's approach does not.

Many shopping centers and strip malls from the 1960s through 1980s, with their corresponding supermarkets, discount retailers, and fast food restaurants, once catered primarily to White, middle-income families. They practiced either blatant, subtle, or unrecognized racial discrimination. Now, there are new retailers and small business owners that embrace and actively support minority communities and customers through new uses, from swap meets and supermercados to a diversity of ethnic cuisines. Many of these commercial spaces have been physically altered, both inside and out, as they have been repurposed and converted for new uses. This change along Las Vegas' commercial thoroughfares has largely occurred since 1990. This social evolution is complicated, but also fascinating and worth documentation by historic preservationists.

Therefore, a cultural landscape has multiple layers, which are far from harmonious. Some of these layers fit together like two matching puzzle pieces, while other layers are disjointed and overlap. Therefore, there is a need for an approach like Schein's. Without this kind of perspective, cultural landscapes like those of commercial thoroughfares may not be properly acknowledged and documented, and will certainly not be historically designated.

Schein's "methodological framework" is summarized as follows: "To understand how they [cultural landscapes] have come to be, to wonder how they are received and *lived in and through* [emphasis added], to ask how and why they matter, and to figure out how they work."<sup>438</sup> The first-part is related to a cultural landscape's historic background.<sup>439</sup> In the case of this study, Chapter II presented a broad historic narrative, and an emphasis on the White,

middle-income family of Las Vegas in the 1960s through 1980s. The second-part, which relates to “unwitting autobiographies” (a term used by Lewis), incorporates “meaning.”<sup>440</sup> In other words, how is a cultural landscape and its history interpreted by the diversity of individuals and multicultural communities who are associated with it, both past and present? This contemporary angle and focus on meanings in this “lived in and through” landscape obviously hints at the social evolution, as well as issues like control, power, economic profit, race, gender, and income presented in this study.

These first two-steps of Schein’s framework, related to history and meaning in a cultural landscape, are relatively straightforward, while the last two-steps are much more difficult to grasp. Steps three and four of his framework are truly what sets it apart from other cultural landscape approaches, such as the one articulated by NPS. Part three incorporates “landscape as facilitator/mediator,” and part four presents “landscape as discourse materialized.”<sup>441</sup>

These concepts of facilitation, mediation, and discourse/negotiation have been relevant to this study. For example, when discussing swap meets, geographer and historian Alec R. Stewart mentions “negotiated differences” in these “multiethnic” commercial spaces.<sup>442</sup> Using similar cultural landscape terminology to Schein, Stewart also highlights “racialized discourses.”<sup>443</sup> These spaces of retail and community have provided a particular venue for owners and tenants – who may be White and/or minorities – and customers of various ethnicities and backgrounds (race, gender, income, etc.) to cross paths. Negotiation, whether in a legal sense or something less formalized, usually implies that there is some kind of facilitator or mediator, typically an individual.

Applying Schein's framework to Las Vegas' swap meets, and comparing it to the process Schein uses for Courthouse Square, illustrates the four-steps. Step one: These commercial spaces once housed Vegas Village, a local discount retailer, and Kmart, a nationally-recognized discount chain store. Based on past newspaper advertisements, as well as the history and demographics of 1960s to 1980s Las Vegas, these two retailers primarily served White, middle-income customers from the surrounding residential subdivisions. In this study, these retailers were placed in a wider historic context, both locally and nationally, of commercial thoroughfares. Similarly, when discussing Courthouse Square, Schein gives a brief historic overview of both the square and the City of Lexington.<sup>444</sup>

Step two: Over time, the surrounding neighborhoods and commercial thoroughfares changed, and the retailers closed. Eventually, the swap meets – Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet and Rancho Swap Meet, respectively – moved into these commercial spaces and came to reflect this newly, multiethnic Sun Belt city. Schein writes, "We can read the square for its meaning as unwitting autobiography, reflecting our social and cultural predilections and everyday activities. The square was central to people's lives."<sup>445</sup> "Square" could easily be traded for "shopping center," "discount store," "commercial thoroughfare," etc. Thus, "The *discount store* was central to people's lives." But to get past the history to the meaning, takes the preservationist to the second step. Schein writes, "Just what that culture and history mean is subject to debate...as well as the identities of individuals and social groups throughout the city."<sup>446</sup> Schein goes on to discuss Confederate memorials and the one-time slave market – both at the square – and the obvious racial "conflict" here.<sup>447</sup> Schein writes, "In short, the

square has different meanings for different people, and those differences may, in fact, be worked out through the square and its landscape.”<sup>448</sup>

Although far less controversial and racially-charged, these commercial spaces are – like all of the built environment – filled with memory and meaning. A longtime Las Vegas may fondly recall their time working at Vegas Village or shopping at Kmart. They may take this a step further and think that the city has changed, and not for the better. Another longtime resident may recall facing discrimination at one of these retailers or not shopping there for various reasons, such as location or economics. Newer residents may have no knowledge of the history and meaning associated with these commercial spaces, and, therefore, no memory or personal connection to draw upon. They may find the swap meets appealing or undesirable, for reasons of race, economics, etc. Regardless of individuals’ opinions, these swap meets – and other commercial spaces along these thoroughfares, from minority-owned small businesses to grocery stores selling international products – now cater to a diverse mix of individuals and communities that routinely navigate these spaces.

Step three emphasizes the social evolution uncovered in step two, and its ability to illuminate meanings and spur “debate.” Regarding Courthouse Square, Schein writes, “Yet the function of the square has changed since the nineteenth-century heyday of the Lost Cause. The square now seems to facilitate a different sort of social and political meaning, one perhaps more ironic or even self-conscious on the part of those involved in contemporary contests over the site’s meaning.”<sup>449</sup> Similar to this study, Schein “compared” past newspaper articles “with present-day uses.”<sup>450</sup> Discussions about the square’s meanings have ensued over the placement of a historic marker – related to the slave market – and the proposal to construct a

new county courthouse.<sup>451</sup> Therefore, initiatives, including proposals, “facilitated” discussion. In the context of commercial thoroughfares, the social evolution and its physical features – including the repurposing of spaces into swap meets – can serve as a point of “public conversation,”<sup>452</sup> as individuals and communities in the present navigate these longtime spaces intimately linked to the past. The comments on Yelp, presented in Chapter III, illustrate that individuals have opinions – both good and bad – regarding these commercial spaces, and think about them in the context of what they meant in the past and mean in the present.

The daily use of these converted commercial spaces along these thoroughfares inevitably leads to Schein’s final step, which represents “discourse materialized.”<sup>453</sup> Schein writes:

The trick is to connect this site [Courthouse Square] with others throughout the city, sites that may serve as markers of dominant racial situations, structural legacies of past practice, and even possible sites of intervention for a more equitable future...The physical or material Courthouse Square, along with the (socio)spatial descriptions, meanings, associations, and interpretations with and of that place and its tangible, visible scene, illustrates a larger discourse about race and society that takes many forms throughout the city, the state, the region, and even the nation.<sup>454</sup>

Echoing Lewis and the points articulated in Chapter IV, context matters, and connections need to be made. After all, cultural landscape theory is about making connections between the visible features and obscured aspects of the landscape, and the past and present layers of the palimpsest. What one sees is not in a vacuum, as everything is connected in some way, and what one sees is complicated by control, power, economic profit, race, gender, and income.

The Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet is a “lived in” cultural landscape, in miniature, that is part of a larger cultural landscape of shopping centers, strip malls, commercial strips and nodes, commercial thoroughfares, Las Vegas, Clark County, the Sun Belt region, and so on. Each piece



of this cultural landscape has history and meaning, and a contemporary context, and each aspect of the cultural landscape has a role in facilitating a discourse of what these meanings were in the past and are in the present. Finally, by calling for an “intervention,”<sup>455</sup> Schein’s approach establishes the history of a cultural landscape, but then prompts preservationists to consider what to do about this newly uncovered and documented information.

Schein’s order of steps is akin to viewing a landscape painting in a museum and discussing the artwork. Through exploring the landscape’s history and meanings, in steps one and two, the painting’s brushstrokes and colors slowly come into the viewer’s focus. The scene becomes visible. But without a more thorough background, of both the past and present, it can be difficult for one to know what exactly they are observing, other than a particular scene, and why it is important – beyond aesthetical reasons. Step three provides this greater understanding. Similar to how someone learns about an artist, their techniques, and underlying theories related to artwork and its production, someone can come to understand a particular cultural landscape’s evolution in a way that allows them to meaningfully discuss its relevance to the present. Like discussing a painting, one can learn to converse about a cultural landscape. Then, with this understanding, in step four they can make connections to other paintings in the immediate gallery and museum, and see the landscape as part of a larger context. They can also decide what they will do with this knowledge as they move forward.

Using Schein’s four-step approach in conjunction with the revised landscape characteristics from NPS, produces a comprehensive evaluative framework that reveals the full cultural landscape under consideration, whatever it may be (Table 5). In this particular study, the evaluative framework has been structured around Las Vegas’ commercial thoroughfares

and their development in the 1960s through 1980s – in addition to commercial spaces' contemporary format and use. These commercial strips and nodes are not simply parking lots with large, elaborate, and sometimes gaudy free-standing signs, and standardized commercial buildings that have been remodeled, demolished, and rebuilt over the decades. These are commercial spaces that tell a social narrative of a neighborhood and a city's change, which is significant.

EVALUATIVE FRAMEWORK
<u>Seen Features (Tangible)</u>
Development and Construction of the Property, and Zoning
Local Ecology
Spatial Organization and Development: Commercial Strips and Nodes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buildings, Structures, and Signs</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nodal Format (if relevant)</li> </ul>
Social and Cultural Expressions of Past and Present Communities
Circulation Networks
Additional Elements
<u>Unseen Aspects (Intangible)</u>
History of Cultural Landscape
Meaning(s) of Cultural Landscape: Past and Present (control, power, economic profit, race, gender, and income)
Current Cultural Landscape: Compare Past and Present (i.e., social evolution)
Context of Cultural Landscape
<u>Next Steps</u>
Taking Action (including viability of historic designation)

Table 5: The evaluative framework, which can be applied to cultural landscapes like the commercial thoroughfares at the center of this study. This framework incorporates revised NPS landscape characteristics (Seen Features), Richard H. Schein’s four-steps (Unseen Aspects), and Schein’s step of “intervention,” which are Next Steps that pushes historic preservationists and communities to be forward-looking in their actions.

By following the evaluative framework, preservationists can discover commercial thoroughfares' social history and evolution, which has resulted in the commercial spaces of today's contemporary landscape. Diverse and multicultural communities navigate these commercial thoroughfares and corresponding spaces. This, in turn, creates a discourse of sorts in the present, as well as between current and former owners, tenants, and customers. Through this discussion, next steps can be decided upon. These next steps include a variety of options for preservationists and communities, and they may or may not include historic designation.

#### Taking Action in the Cultural Landscape of the Commercial Thoroughfare

A key piece of Schein's approach is "intervention," as he writes, "Landscapes and discourses are thus about intervention, about promising the possibility for human action in order to change the status quo."<sup>456</sup> Even though Schein's framework looks at the past and present, which requires both researching and viewing a landscape, it is also forward-looking – which makes it especially appealing to historic preservationists. Following the evaluative framework, actionable steps can be tailored to the local landscape and its communities (Fig. 51).

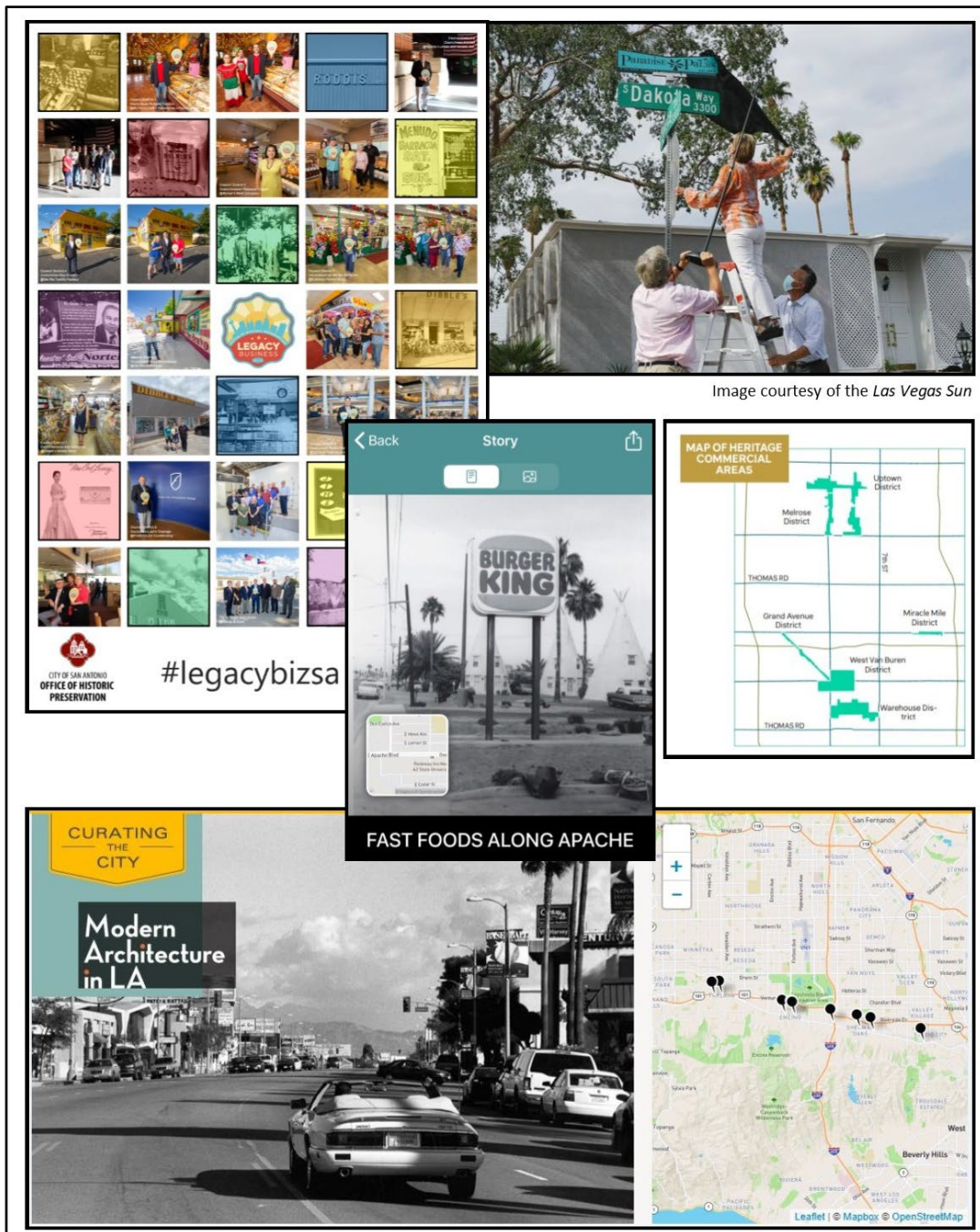


Fig. 51: Examples of various actions taken by local nonprofits and communities to recognize cultural landscapes like the commercial thoroughfare. Clockwise, from top left: San Antonio's Legacy Business Program; new signage in the locally-designated Paradise Palms Neighborhood of Clark County, Nevada; a map of Phoenix's "Heritage Commercial Districts;" the Los Angeles Conservancy's tour of Ventura Boulevard; and "Fast Foods Along Apache," an entry from *Salt River Stories*, a website and cellular phone application focused on the Phoenix metropolitan area. [Sources: San Antonio Legacy Business Program, *Las Vegas Sun*, City of Phoenix and Place Economics' *Preservation Phoenix Style*, "Cruising the Boulevard" from Los Angeles Conservancy, and "Fast Foods Along Apache" from ASU's *Salt River Stories* (compiled by author), 2022.]

This action can encompass a variety of approaches that fall along a spectrum, from simple acknowledgement of the landscape and its importance to historic designation. The main goal is to select an action that is supported by the landscape's communities, and meets their current needs, uses, and desires. On one end of the spectrum could be community-driven and grassroots efforts that highlight a cultural landscape's historic and social narratives. In the context of a commercial thoroughfare, this may be walking and driving tours, additional signage and markers, and cellular phone applications.

It is important to note that properties do not have to be historically designated to have their history and social importance acknowledged by the public. This is sometimes forgotten by historic preservation practitioners who follow the National Register's guidelines, seeking to state a property's historic context, significance, and integrity. The addition of the "Historic Commercial Center" sign at Commercial Center is an example of a small-scale, simple action. By adding that sign to the shopping center, the importance of that development was acknowledged, and may spur interest from the average, daily customer. The City of San Antonio has been innovative with signage, through its community and grassroots-driven Local Markers Program: "There's a Story Here, a crowd-sourced story-sharing and mapping program with stickers or small markers installed at each site, and History Here, a community-reviewed historical marker program that results in a plaque."<sup>457</sup>

On the Los Angeles Conservancy website is "Cruising the Boulevard," which is focused on the San Fernando Valley's Ventura Boulevard.<sup>458</sup> The Conservancy writes, "Along the way, you'll take in some of the best Modern architecture the city has to offer in the form of coffee shops, car washes, churches, banks, office buildings, and commercial strips, all designed to

catch the eye of driving passersby.”<sup>459</sup> While still focused on the physical landscape and its buildings, the tour places the linear, postwar commercial thoroughfare at the center of the storyline. They have also focused on Wilshire Boulevard,<sup>460</sup> clearly realizing the centrality of the thoroughfare to the built environment of Southern California.

On the cellular phone front, the Historic Reno Preservation Society has *Reno Historical*, which includes an interactive map of tagged “Stories” (i.e., sites) and “Tours,” including a tour entitled “Motels and Early Auto Tourism.”<sup>461</sup> This kind of free cell phone application, which relies on Curatescape technology and also includes a website version, has become common in historic preservation education and outreach. A similar app, *Salt River Stories* by Arizona State University and Mark Tebeau, includes “Stories,” such as the “Modernization of Apache Boulevard,” “Local Restaurants and The Development of Apache Boulevard,” and “Fast Foods Along Apache,”<sup>462</sup> which challenge assumptions about historic and cultural significance and put the commercial thoroughfare at the center of the narrative.

Another app, *Roadside America*, incorporates crowdsourced “tips” from users.<sup>463</sup> While it is focused on the typical highway attractions, such as the “Second Largest Statue of Liberty in Las Vegas” on West Sahara Avenue and the “Carpeteria Genie” on West Charleston Boulevard, this kind of format allows for the inclusion of sites that have social importance, but are not yet historically designated and may never be – which is okay! For example, the app includes a sculpture at Chinatown Plaza on Spring Mountain Road, which is part of Chinatown Vegas.

Local nonprofits and government agencies focused on historic preservation should continue to embrace these apps and highlight properties, whether historically designated or not, through site and tour entries. An app focused on Las Vegas’ history and culture could

include a driving tour of West Charleston Boulevard or Maryland Parkway, and its significance to the city's postwar history, and could be curated by both preservation professionals and the public – leading to a needed community discourse. In addition to these coordinated efforts, individuals with varying levels of interest in preservation are posting endless images of landscapes and buildings, both past and present, on social media apps like Instagram. Thus, they are documenting these spaces and building a record for current and future preservationists and communities, whether they consciously realize it or not.

On the other end of the spectrum would be formal historic designation efforts, from individual landmarks (e.g., shopping centers) to even historic districts (e.g., commercial strips). This option would likely be preceded by a historic context or theme study. These studies are often the first action taken by local preservation practitioners, as they began the process of documenting and designating properties in their towns and cities. Given the hurdles presented by the National Register program, as it stands today, designation would require innovative approaches that bend the existing significance criteria and related guidelines to embrace social change. Given the difficulty of this endeavor, historic designation through a local register may be an ideal option, as these inventories are sometimes more accepting of change over time. This would, of course, require buy-in and flexibility from local officials and preservation professionals on certain issues, such as historic integrity and so-called “50-year rules.” For example, the *Transform Clark County Master Plan* recognizes “the Paradise Palms neighborhood – the first and only historic neighborhood in unincorporated Clark County.”<sup>464</sup> The Paradise Palms Neighborhood, which is directly east of the Boulevard Mall, was designated by the local municipality, Clark County.<sup>465</sup>



Thus, urban planning is a tool that should be used in coordination with historic preservation. This is especially important given planners' focus on these commercial spaces and their potential. Under "Adaptive Reuse/Redevelopment," the Clark County plan proposes the following: "Emphasis on flexible strategies for vacant/underutilized buildings and shopping centers."<sup>466</sup> For one, when discussing Downtown South – between East Charleston Boulevard and East Sahara Avenue – the *City of Las Vegas 2050 Master Plan* includes the promising language, "Historic shopping centers and mixed-use corridors may potentially need to be redeveloped over time, especially at key nodes."<sup>467</sup> Ideally, preservationists and planners would push the city to reuse existing commercial spaces – along the lines discussed in this study – as opposed to demolition of these spaces, followed by new construction. The Las Vegas plan seems to be on the right track when it references: "Prioritize cultural and historic neighborhoods and *corridors* [emphasis added]."<sup>468</sup> However, this must be done in a way that does not erase history and the multicultural palimpsest. Thus, the need for this evaluative framework and preservationists' involvement.

Other options short of historic designation include special districts that are not historic districts, but provide some kind of recognition of a neighborhood's special place in a city. For example, many cities have business improvement districts (BIDs), which often create a sense of place – but, depending on the BID, may or may not incorporate community input. It is beyond the scope of this study to say whether these BIDs support existing businesses or bring in new businesses to the detriment of long-standing communities. Nonetheless, this option is worth exploring, as it usually encompasses signage and markers acknowledging the surrounding neighborhood.

The City of Phoenix has six “Heritage Commercial Districts,” and adds, “To understand the value of these *undesigned* [emphasis added] commercial districts, six commercial districts were identified by stakeholders to use as the basis for an analysis of jobs and business.”<sup>469</sup> These districts have a slightly higher “share of small businesses,” when compared to the city at-large.<sup>470</sup> Therefore, a city like Las Vegas could go this route that does not require formal designation, but helps acknowledge and support diverse, multicultural communities and their businesses. Specific commercial strips or nodes in Las Vegas could be recognized as these types of districts. The City of Houston has “Heritage Districts,” which are “intended to foster civic and cultural pride by protecting character-defining elements within neighborhoods, highlighting the significant achievements and contributions of the community and promoting neighborhood stability.”<sup>471</sup> These districts with “ongoing cultural traditions and history that residents generally recognize,” are nonprofit supported.<sup>472</sup>

In addition to these special districts, local organizations and municipalities have recognized Legacy Businesses. The Los Angeles Conservancy defines these as “a community-serving, locally-owned business that has been in operation for at least 20-25 years.”<sup>473</sup> San Antonio’s Office of Historic Preservation has a sophisticated Legacy Business initiative: “The purpose of the program is to *acknowledge* [emphasis added] the contributions businesses have made to the city’s culture and economy. The program aims to champion the continued success of legacy businesses through promotional and educational support.”<sup>474</sup> These businesses are much more than the traditional, long-time retailers and ethnic cuisines, and include an array of businesses, including mortuaries!<sup>475</sup> Las Vegas could adopt a similar initiative that supports, through grant programs, for example, businesses along its many commercial thoroughfares.

Also, taking into consideration the quickly changing economic environment of the commercial strip and its shopping center nodes, a store or restaurant could be considered to have reached legacy status in just ten years, rather than 20 or more.

This study does not endorse one type of action over any other. Instead, this study provides the tool, through an evaluative framework, to acknowledge these urban and suburban landscapes and move forward, one way or another. The options available are limitless and bound to be creative, and historic designation does not always have to be the ultimate goal of historic preservation practitioners. Regardless of the outcome, preservationists have an obligation to *at least acknowledge and document* this kind of commercial development found along thoroughfares, and its contribution to the nation's history, culture, and diversity over the past seven-decades. By documenting historic and social narratives, local communities and officials will gain a new perspective on these cultural landscapes, and be more inclined to address them in some way.

#### Applying the Framework: Las Vegas' Boulevard Mall on Maryland Parkway

The evaluative framework has three main sections: Seen Features, Unseen Aspects, and Next Steps (see Table 5). The framework can be applied to larger cultural landscapes, like an entire commercial strip, or smaller cultural landscapes, such as a single development (e.g., shopping center, strip mall, etc.). For the purposes of this study, the evaluative framework will now be applied to the Boulevard Mall on Maryland Parkway.

*Seen: Development and Construction of the Property, and Zoning* – The Boulevard Mall is located just south of the City of Las Vegas in Clark County's Paradise township. It is on the east side of Maryland Parkway, between Desert Inn Road on the north and Katie Avenue on the

south. It is part of a larger commercial strip of shopping centers and strip malls that stretches south from Desert Inn Road to Flamingo Road – two section line roads in the city’s super-grid of thoroughfares. East of the mall is the Paradise Palms Neighborhood, recently designated by Clark County and initially developed/advertised in conjunction with the Boulevard Mall (then called Parkway Mall).<sup>476</sup> According to *OpenWeb*, it is composed of eight parcels: 3340 Maryland Parkway (1992, General Commercial, C-2), 3450 Maryland (1965, C-2), 3542 Maryland (1968, C-2), 3600 Maryland (1968, C-2), 3634 Maryland (1966, C-2), 3700 Maryland (1991, C-2), 3768 Maryland (1992, C-2), and 3770 Maryland (1968, C-2).<sup>477</sup> The mall was constructed in two stages: 1965 through 1968 and 1991 through 1992 – starting with the construction of Sears on the north end in 1965, and ending with the construction of the Dillard’s parking garage on the south end in 1992.

*Seen: Local Ecology* – The Boulevard Mall is located near the center of the Las Vegas Valley, which is bowl-like in its topography. Therefore, the landscape is flat and the distant mountains are only partially visible from the parking lot. There is some landscaping throughout the parking area that fronts Maryland Parkway. Most notable are the palm trees.

*Seen: Spatial Organization and Development: Commercial Strips and Nodes* – The Boulevard Mall could be described as a major commercial node at the intersection of Maryland Parkway and Desert Inn Road. However, rather than being clustered near this intersection, it is linear in its orientation. Thus, the mall is a commercial strip that parallels Maryland Parkway. It is part of a larger commercial strip of development, roughly one-mile in length, between Desert Inn and Flamingo roads.

*Seen: Buildings, Structures, and Signs* – Comparing historic photographs to current maps and fieldwork show that the Boulevard Mall’s overall, linear format is unchanged. However, the mall’s square footage has increased. Initially, there were three spaces for department/anchor stores: Sears, J.C. Penney, and The Broadway. Now there are four, dating to when Dillard’s was constructed near Twain Avenue in the early 1990s. The surface parking lots are still prominent, but have been altered through the addition of three parking garage structures near the one-time spaces of J.C. Penney, The Broadway, and Dillard’s. In addition to these connected buildings of the indoor shopping mall, the Boulevard Mall has a small detached shopping center on its south-end, between Twain and Katie avenues. Finally, the mall’s current free-standing sign, located along Maryland Parkway, is rather nondescript. But in the past it was quite prominent, reminiscent of a concrete radio tower or today’s Stratosphere tower. Finally, there is lighting in the parking areas, as well as along Maryland Parkway.

*Seen: Nodal Format* – N/A

*Seen: Social and Cultural Expressions of Past and Present Communities* – Reflective of its late-1960s construction date, the Boulevard Mall was built in a simple Modern style, with plenty of right-angles – and a notable folded-plate roofline at the one-time Sears, which dates to 1965. As is typical of department store buildings, there are limited windows, as customers were meant to park their cars and then enter the mall. Thus, “window shopping” takes place inside. The mall’s most prominent architectural feature is the main entrance, with its concrete overhang and vaulted columns. Near this entrance, inside the mall, is a skylight – which was originally a glass dome. At some point, the mall received a Postmodern update, which added plenty of colored stucco and geometric features with a retro Art Deco vibe – despite the mall

having opened roughly 30-years after that style's heyday. The once-rounded glass dome now looks more conical.

The Boulevard Mall, like other commercial developments of the period, was a major draw when completed. For instance, "then-[Governor] Paul Laxalt was there to cut the ribbon."<sup>478</sup> With stores like Sears, J.C. Penney, Ronzone's, B. Dalton Bookseller, Hallmark, and Woolworth,<sup>479</sup> amongst others, and advertising of the time period, the mall clearly served a White, middle-to-upper income demographic. Today, the mall has taken on a more diverse demographic, specifically Latinx, as the surrounding county is now almost one-third "Hispanic or Latino." The mall includes El Mercado, with its numerous Latinx businesses that are reminiscent of a swap meet, and also hosts multicultural festivities and events.<sup>480</sup> Nonetheless, the mall continues to include standard indoor shopping mall retailers, such as Bath and Body Works, Journeys, Old Navy, and Visionworks.<sup>481</sup> Additionally, the mall now houses some new and creative entertainment and non-retail uses that presumably draw a wide-spectrum of individuals from around Las Vegas: Anthem (Blue Cross Blue Shield), Las Vegas Family Puppet Theater, SeaQuest Interactive Aquarium, Rex Center, and UEI College.<sup>482</sup> As the mall's website says, "Over the past five decades, the Boulevard has continually evolved in ways that best reflect the changing needs of our community and our clientele."<sup>483</sup> A perspective also reflected in a *KNPR (Nevada Public Radio)* article: "Instead, mall management is counting on unique experiences to draw customers to the Maryland Parkway shopping center."<sup>484</sup>

*Seen: Circulation Networks* – Located along Maryland Parkway and Desert Inn Road, two wide commercial thoroughfares, the Boulevard Mall is directly tied into the city's network of commercial thoroughfares. The mall is just south of Downtown Las Vegas, east of the world-

famous Las Vegas Strip, and north of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) and Harry Reid International Airport. Additionally, there are plenty of parking spaces throughout the surface parking lots and parking garage structures. Despite the car-centric landscape, there is a nearby bus stop (with shelter) and sidewalks along Maryland Parkway, which hints at a pedestrian presence.

*Seen: Additional Elements* – When visited in October 2021, the Boulevard Mall’s parking area along Maryland Parkway had a food truck – “Tacos De Birria Estilo Jalisco” [Jalisco Style Birria Tacos] – and a temporary structure housing a COVID-19 Testing Center. There were pedestrians patronizing these two mobile/temporary businesses.

Following this process of researching and writing about a cultural landscape’s Seen Features, the important social narrative and evolution of the Unseen Aspects can be explored.

*Unseen: History of Cultural Landscape* – The Boulevard Mall was developed and constructed as Las Vegas, like other Sun Belt cities in the postwar years, was booming – thanks in-part to tourism and entertainment, defense-related industries, and warm weather. Like other downtowns around the nation, Downtown Las Vegas was losing retailers to the ever-lengthening commercial thoroughfares, with their strips and nodes of shopping centers and parking lots. These commercial strips and nodes served the newly built residential subdivisions and suburbs that housed White, middle-income residents. In 1965, Sears left Downtown’s Fremont Street, following its new store opening at the future Boulevard Mall. The mall opened in 1968 and featured – in addition to Sears – J.C. Penney, The Broadway, and Ronzone’s. Ronzone’s, a local retailer, and J.C. Penney closed their Fremont Street stores in 1970 and 1982, respectively.

Meadows Mall, near Decatur Boulevard and U.S. Highway 95, opened as Las Vegas' second indoor shopping mall in 1978. Despite the Boulevard Mall's expansion in the early 1990s, with the opening of Dillard's, the mall continued to lose its appeal to the city's middle and upper income residents. The city continued to grow farther and farther out, making the adjacent Maryland Parkway a "transitional area," in the words of Timothy Davis. Since then, the mall has lost all of its original department/anchor stores, but has converted some of its commercial spaces to new uses – for example, Goodwill, SeaQuest, and El Mercado – that appeal to diverse and multicultural communities.

*Unseen: Meaning(s) of Cultural Landscape: Past and Present* – To fully understand individuals' and communities' perceptions of a cultural landscape and its meanings, interviews would have to be conducted. Oral history was not completed in conjunction with this study and the application of its evaluative framework. Nonetheless, the Boulevard Mall certainly has different meanings to different individuals depending on their race, gender, and income, and some meanings can be surmised. Past advertising related to the mall clearly had White Las Vegans in mind, and masculine and female gender roles were portrayed as the norm. This sort of advertising inevitably shapes an individual's views of the Boulevard Mall's commercial spaces, depending on their background, as well as their own wishes and desires. Particularly in the context of race and/or income, a Las Vegan may view the Boulevard Mall as having symbolized inclusion and "the good old days," while another local resident may have negative opinions of the mall and see it as a commercial space that blatantly or subtly practiced exclusion. More recent arrivals patronizing El Mercado, for instance, may have a completely different perception of the mall's meaning. The Yelp comments touch upon the mall's mixed



reviews. Overall, the Boulevard Mall's main goal was consumption and economic profit – and this has not changed, only the variety of uses to make that profit have.

*Unseen: Current Cultural Landscape: Compare Past and Present* – With this history and its meanings, a social evolution and narrative becomes clear. The evolution of the Boulevard Mall over the past 50 years can be presented in two ways, depending on one's perspective. The second narrative is certainly the more compelling one, and the kind of cultural landscape storyline that this evaluative framework seeks to highlight and acknowledge.

First, the Boulevard Mall was a turning point in Las Vegas' economic and social history, as it symbolized the city's growth away from downtown and towards shopping centers and an indoor shopping mall with plenty of parking for cars. Like other commercial development along the city's thoroughfares, the mall catered to White, middle-income families who were buying newly constructed homes in the ever-expanding residential subdivisions. However, the city continued to grow and eventually the mall and its surrounding "shopping district" lost its attraction to many in-city residents who started to shop at newer commercial developments – which, in turn, gained retailers from the Boulevard Mall. With the exodus of many tenants and customers to newer shopping centers and malls, the mall became a depressed retail center on a deteriorated commercial strip, as illustrated by the vacant space that once housed Sears.

Second, the Boulevard Mall represents the continued vitality and repurposing that takes place in a cultural landscape, such as that of commercial thoroughfares. Opening in 1968, the mall symbolized Las Vegas' economic shift away from Downtown and towards ever-lengthening commercial strips and always-expanding commercial nodes, with their shopping centers and parking lots. Throughout the decades, the city continued to grow and White Las Vegans moved

farther out to newer residential subdivisions and suburbs. Well-known, national retailers closed, and others opened on the city's fringe. But the mall and other postwar commercial development continued to serve local individuals and communities through new uses. Today, the mall serves diverse and multicultural communities in a repurposed commercial space. Most notably, the mall now houses El Mercado, with its collection of Latinx businesses, various entertainment functions, and festivals and events. Thus, commercial thoroughfares from the 1960s through 1980s continue to be relevant to Sun Belt cities like Las Vegas.

With this newly-presented social evolution and narrative, local preservationists and communities can better understand the past and present, and how to move forward – which is helpful in the context of actionable steps, which will require extensive community involvement, discussion, and collaboration.

*Unseen: Context of Cultural Landscape* – The cultural landscapes of the Boulevard Mall and Maryland Parkway can easily be connected to other locations – and their associated meanings, both past and present – along Las Vegas' commercial thoroughfares, such as Fantastic Indoor Swap Meet, Rancho Swap Meet, and Commercial Center, with its many restaurants serving dishes from around the world. In addition to these examples, there are numerous ethnic stores and restaurants in many nondescript shopping centers and strip malls that once housed supermarkets, discount retailers, and fast food restaurants. Las Vegas is known in particular for its Latinx and Asian communities – the latter seen most notably at the stores and restaurants in and around Chinatown Vegas. But many other ethnicities and nationalities are recognized in the city's many commercial strips and nodes. The Boulevard Mall is just one layer in this multicultural palimpsest. (Fig. 52)



Fig. 52: A collection of images that represent the evaluative framework's application to the Boulevard Mall: a distinctive free-standing sign positioned along the Maryland Parkway thoroughfare, a historic aerial photograph and contemporary photographs showing tangible features of the cultural landscape (a commercial strip), a historic advertisement for Sears highlighting the White, middle-income family, and the social evolution since then, illustrated by El Mercado and diverse and multicultural communities who now patronize the mall's commercial spaces – thus, creating new memories and meanings. [Sources: KNPR/Las Vegas News Bureau, *Vintage Las Vegas* (blog), *kmartworld.com* (blog), and The Boulevard Mall (compiled by author), 2022.]

Finally, local historic preservationists can consider Next Steps. This evaluative framework pushes preservation practitioners to be forward-looking, and use the documentation for practical purposes. Most importantly, any option selected has to be community-supported.

*Next Steps: Taking Action* – There are a few viable options for the Boulevard Mall. The first option would be historic designation or some other type of formal recognition. Local designation by Clark County, similar to the action taken regarding the adjacent Paradise Palms Historic Neighborhood, may be possible. Historic designation would, of course, require preservationists to complete and submit a local historic landmark nomination, per local guidance. An argument for “significance” – as articulated in the local ordinance – would need to be developed for the Boulevard Mall, and be supported through archival research and documentation.

Therefore, historic designation would be a tough action to take. It is also difficult because of the following: potential owner and tenant opposition, and challenges related to historic integrity. Instead, Clark County could explore making the Boulevard Mall, and possibly this portion of Maryland Parkway, a Heritage Commercial District, along the lines of Phoenix’s program. This action would recognize this commercial strip’s importance to Las Vegas’ social and economic history and its evolution, without going the route of formal designation.

Other options would be oriented towards education and outreach, rather than some type of local designation. The Nevada Preservation Foundation could partner with Clark County to create a website and cellular phone application of stories and tours, webinars, and walking tours that highlight the mall and the surrounding commercial strip’s important history,

including its social evolution over the past five decades. This would acknowledge the importance of Maryland Parkway and the Boulevard Mall to the Las Vegas community, both past and present, but still allow the cultural landscape to continue to evolve and change without the strict parameters associated with historic landmarks and districts. The Nevada Preservation Foundation and Clark County could also work with the mall's owner to install historic markers and signage at the property. These markers could be created through collaboration with multiple communities, including past and present tenants and customers. This option, which includes acknowledgement and recognition without historic designation, would likely be the most appealing route for the mall's owner and many of its tenants.

### Conclusion

Cultural landscape theory encompasses two main approaches and perspectives that have evolved over the decades. Overall, the approaches can be seen as having varying levels of success in identifying and documenting both the seen features and unseen aspects of any given landscape, from a farm to a public garden to a commercial strip. NPS's approach – through its National Register program, which is similar to Lewis' perspective – is focused on the tangible, physical features of a cultural landscape, and does this quite well through its 11 "landscape characteristics." The NPS approach is comprehensive in surveying and documenting a landscape's design, development, buildings and structures, circulation routes, ecology, and so on. But it does not emphasize the underlying social narrative and its evolution. After all, landscapes change, and these types of approaches do not easily accept this fact and articulate it.

Thus the need for an additional approach like Schein's, which highlights the intangible and cultural aspects, as well as the social evolution and change present in the landscape – while still incorporating the built environment's landscape characteristics. When these two approaches are combined into an evaluative framework, like the one presented in this study, they create a successful template for historic preservationists to use in their own communities. Once these cultural landscapes of commercial thoroughfares are acknowledged, and both visible and hidden layers of the multicultural palimpsest are documented, preservationists can move forward and assist local communities in deciding how to recognize the past, as well as the contemporary "lived in" landscape of commercial strips and nodes.

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<sup>393</sup> Dell Upton references the "seen and unseen."

<sup>394</sup> National Park Service, *Historic Residential Suburbs: Guidelines for Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places*, by David L. Ames and Linda Flint McClelland, National Register Bulletin, 2002, [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB46\\_Suburbs\\_part1\\_508.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB46_Suburbs_part1_508.pdf) and [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB46\\_Suburbs\\_part2\\_508.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB46_Suburbs_part2_508.pdf).

National Park Service, *How to Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes*, by J. Timothy Keller and Genevieve P. Keller, National Register Bulletin 18, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB18-Complete.pdf>.

National Park Service, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes*, by Linda Flint McClelland, J. Timothy Keller, Genevieve P. Keller, and Robert Z. Melnick, National Register Bulletin 30, 1989, revised 1999, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB30-Complete.pdf>.

<sup>395</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 7.

<sup>396</sup> Peirce Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape, Some Guides to the American Scene," 1, (1979), [https://www.uky.edu/academy/sites/www.uky.edu.academy/files/Lewis,%20Axioms%20for%20Reading%20the%20Landscape\\_0.pdf](https://www.uky.edu/academy/sites/www.uky.edu.academy/files/Lewis,%20Axioms%20for%20Reading%20the%20Landscape_0.pdf).

<sup>397</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, iv.

<sup>398</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 4.

<sup>399</sup> As shown in Chapter II, in the "Coordinated General Plan, Las Vegas Valley" from the 1960s.

<sup>400</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 4.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 24.

<sup>403</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 4.

<sup>404</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 6.

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<sup>405</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 87.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>407</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 6, 17, 25, 32-33.

<sup>408</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 21, 40, 46, 50.

<sup>409</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 8-13.

<sup>410</sup> They are almost exactly the same, except that “vegetation” is called “vegetation related to land use” in the *Rural Historic Landscapes* bulletin. For more information, see page 3 of this bulletin: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB30-Complete.pdf>.

<sup>411</sup> *Rural Historic Landscapes*, 15.

<sup>412</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 8.

<sup>413</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 7-8.

<sup>414</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 9.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>417</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 10.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>421</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 10-12.

<sup>422</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 11.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>424</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 11-12.

<sup>425</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 12.

<sup>426</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 13.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>428</sup> *Historic Residential Suburbs*, 8.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>430</sup> Dell Upton, “Seen, Unseen, and Scene,” in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, edited by Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi, 174-79, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>431</sup> Richard Walker, “Unseen and Disbelieved: A Political Economist among Cultural Geographers,” in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, edited by Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi, 167 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>432</sup> Don Mitchell, “New Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Paying Attention to Political Economy and Social Justice,” in *Political Economies of Landscape Change*, edited by James L. Wescoat, Jr., and Douglas M. Johnston, 29-50 (Springer, Dordrecht, 2008).

<sup>433</sup> Walker, 173.

<sup>434</sup> Richard H. Schein, “A Methodological Framework for Interpreting Ordinary Landscapes: Lexington, Kentucky’s Courthouse Square,” *Geographical Review* 99, no. 3 (July 2009): 381, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40377399>.

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<sup>435</sup> Schein, 383.

<sup>436</sup> Schein, 395.

<sup>437</sup> Schein, 392.

<sup>438</sup> Schein, 380.

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