

the other Las Vegas

an urban design prototype in New Mexico

... by Anthony C. Antonaides, AIA

It is unfortunate that there are often name confusions. Las Vegas in Nevada, is notorious for its gambling glamour, its eccentricities in lifestyles and for its recent urban design acclaim;¹ the "other" Las Vegas, in New Mexico, nationally unknown today,² is socially suffering³ and for our purposes is urbanly deteriorating and urban design wise, totally neglected.⁴ According to this writer, however, Las Vegas, N. M., is a unique case of urban design and a potential node of unique future planning significance. This paper reveals some of the qualities hidden today under the veil of current deterioration, identifies and presents by means of diagrams and visual evidence the hibernating urban structure and summarizes the reasons for the town's urban growth and decline. Further, this work suggests reasons and recommendations for meaningful urban revitalization.

Urban Design Framework

Las Vegas, New Mexico fits exactly the definition of urban design as stated by Stanley Tankel a few years back: "Urban design deals with the spatial community which is not a product of mere ideology or an aesthetic, but rather the physical expression of basic social needs and processes."⁵ The urban space of Las Vegas evolved through distinctive sequences of social and economic conflicts, through the experience of violent political intrigues⁶ on one hand, and carelessness and indifference on the other. The study of this process of urban dynamics reveals that Las Vegas was, and perhaps still is to some extent, an arena for the case study of what heterogeneous urban dynamics of a socio-cultural nature may produce, if not disciplined by ties of civic spirit⁸ and co-operation, or for our purposes if they remain outside the concern of conscientious planning. The summary of the process of urban dynamics demonstrates parameters corresponding to "native," "outsider,"

"nationality," "mentality nature" as crisscrossed in a matrix of social, economic, political, indifference, growth vs. non-growth items.

	MEXICAN	IMMIGRANTS	ANGLO RAILROADS	OTHERS
SOCIAL	•			
ECONOMIC			•	
POLITICAL	•	•	•	•
INDIFFERENCE	•	•		
GROWTH			•	•

URBAN DYNAMICS LAS VEGAS

For details of these considerations the inquiring reader will find an adequate evidential discussion in Callon's *History of Las Vegas*, cited in our references. For the purposes of the urban design scholar this town demonstrates the following unique qualities:

1. High density, expressed physically in a compact manner.
2. Well proportioned urban spaces possessing human scale characteristics. (Fig. 1)

3. Legible skeleton of "capital design." (Fig. 2)
4. Unique urban rhythm evolving in the sequence of "Urban voids" (streets and plazas) (Fig. 9)
5. Ingenious case of integration of two grid coordinates; one 90° and the other 45°. (Figs. 2, 10)
6. Continuity of the physical impression due to the "Texture" of street elevations. (See drawings pages 14, 15, 16)
7. Outstanding examples of individual building architecture. (Cover, Figs. 5, 13, 14)
8. Sophisticated details of Urban Typology significance. (Figs. 3, 4)
9. Abundance of open space with a great planning significance for the future. (Figs. 2, 11)
10. Good eventual physical integration of an earlier laissez-faire evolving town as connected to a later linear city.

Growth of The Town

The current physical milieu is

Figure 1. Old Town Plaza during Fiesta.



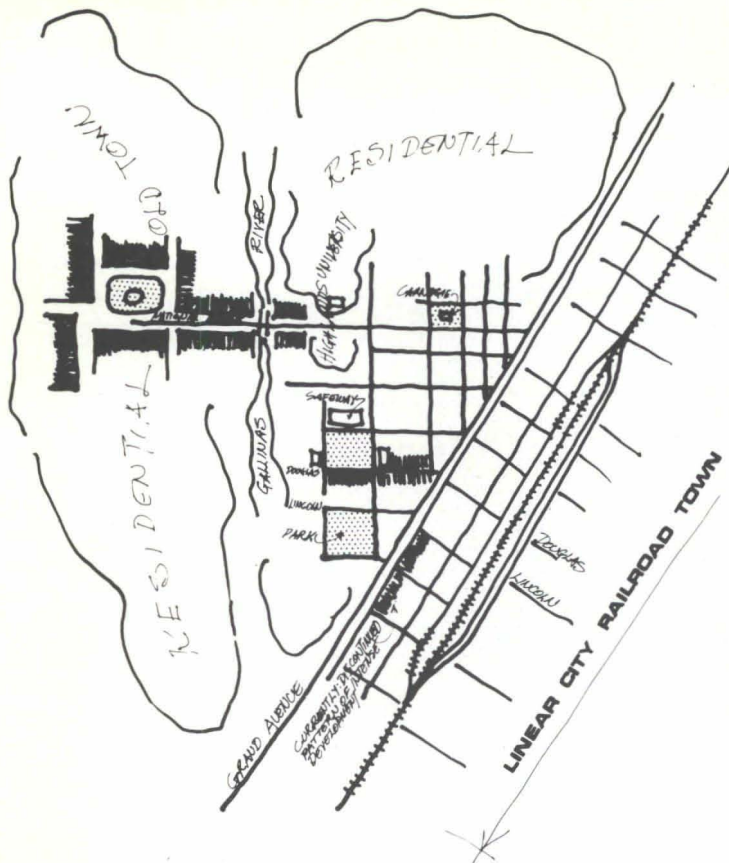


Figure 2. The hibernating structure of capital design.

the result of a process of laissez-faire evolution. The first part of the town, known initially as Las Vegas Grandes,⁹ as Old Town,¹⁰ as West Town,¹¹ or Town of Las Vegas,¹² evolved around The Plaza, which was built mainly for purposes of fortification with not much attention given to other constraints,¹³ such as orientation, wind direction, etc. This part was created by the settling practices¹⁴ of the initial Mexican settlers and the first merchant immigrants of European descent.¹⁵ The second part of the town, referred to as New Town,¹⁶ East Town,¹⁷ or "The City of Las Vegas"¹⁸ was developed by "Anglo" merchants and railroad companies,¹⁹ as a railroad town, — expediently, efficiently and competitively. The old and new towns today appear as one town, hardly divided by the approximate 60° diagonal street pattern while the initial dividing open space, which appears in early lithography (Fig. 10), has disappeared from the view of the urban stroller. The physical milieu, which today appears as one, in the past could



Figure 3. A landscaped triangular node.

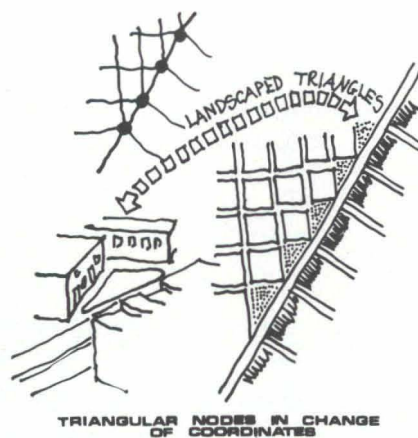


Figure 4.

Figure 5.



not be conceived as such. The socio-economic-political antagonism, which has been so well documented elsewhere,²⁰ eventually succeeded through practices of growth to make the town one physical continuum, yet it also succeeded, through its violent non-compromising and careless character to bring the town to the state of its current physical deterioration. The above statements summarize historical facts of socio-economic significance, yet they suggest an urban design situation experienced in so many other towns, and especially in the downtowns of most American cities: that is, physical deterioration due to socio-economic conflict and regional competition. The sequence of Diagrams 1, 2, 3, indicate the process of physical growth of Las Vegas, New Mexico as suggested by the study of historic evidence. (Fig. 6)

The Town Was Great In The Past

In the process of its growth and decline Las Vegas experienced peaks of urban greatness. It had a high degree of diversified uses

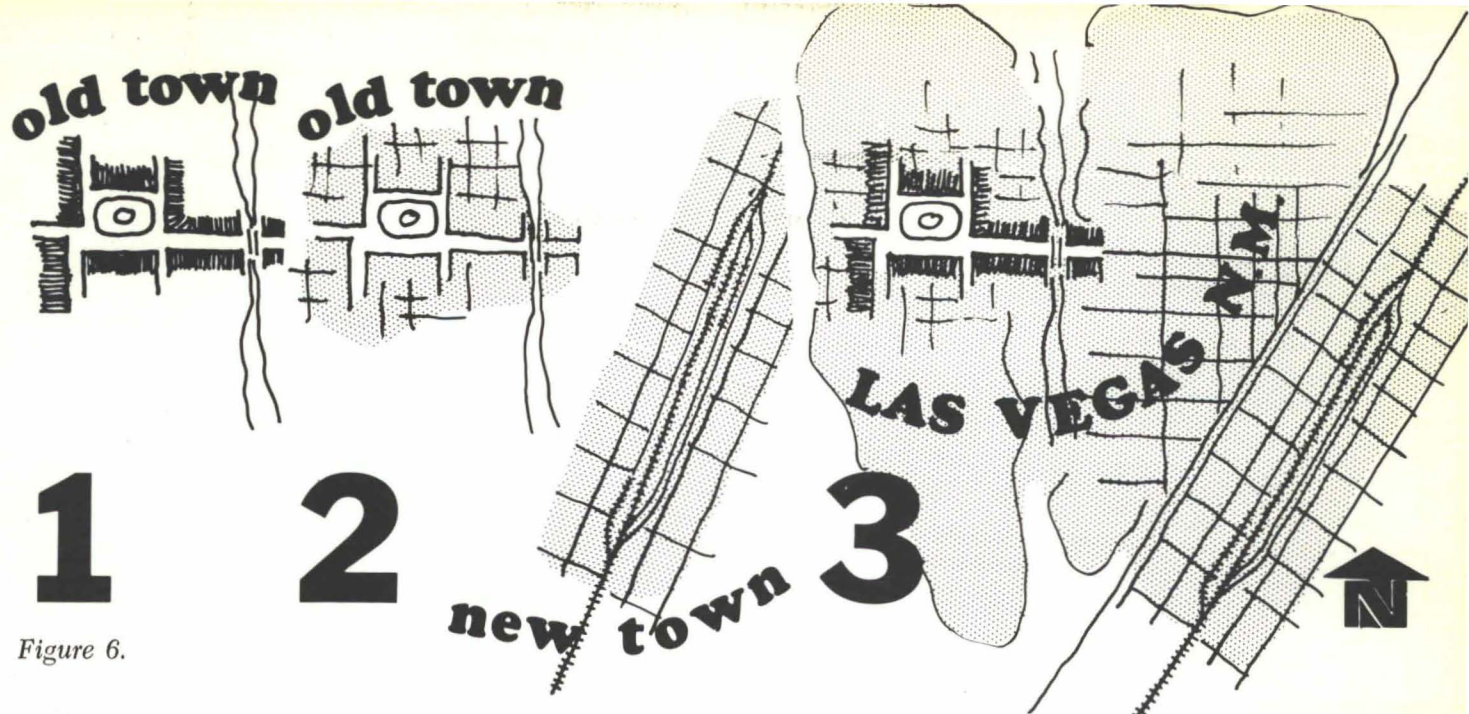


Figure 6.

ranging from sophisticated entertainment, such as opera,²¹ resort facilities,²² glamorous commercial center,²³ University Town,²⁴ and, finally, selective residential.²⁵ Almost all of the histories of the town build up into a crescendo of a dynamic social beehive in a paradisaical physical setting²⁶ during the days of its peak. The town possessed public transit which other towns of similar size today would be unable to even dream about. It also experienced certain peaks in practices of controls favoring climates for beautification,²⁸ prohibiting parking of vehicles on street and plazas, and suggesting a need for and finally an implementation of proposals for landscaping, especially in the plaza when the coaches were asked to leave the space.²⁹ All these have been well documented and all histories are in agreement of the major cause of the town's physical deterioration. The urban scholar of course believes in the strength of regional dynamics and in the regional competition which cause the growth of some centers and the decline of others. The local and historical evidence, however, suggests here a strong case of indifference which is attributed as the major reason for the town's decline. The street cars, the great hotels, the opera, all belong to the past; yet there is still much left. It is this remaining physical evi-

dence which must be studied for the historic lessons to be learned, but more importantly for the town's own future potential. This study may permit future planning to take into consideration a positive evolution of what is already there and

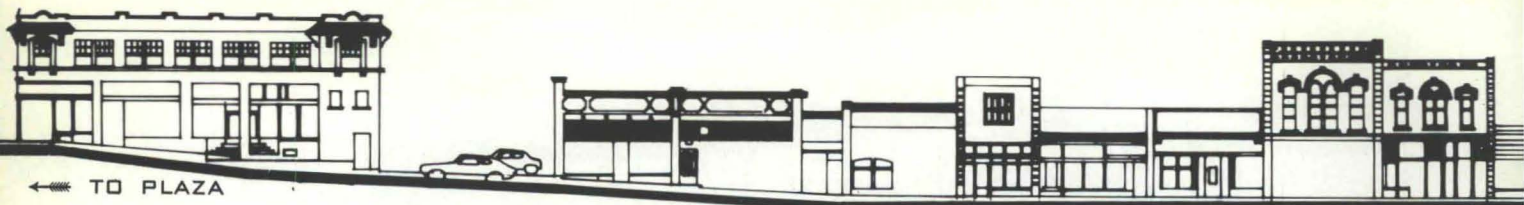
is worth keeping and restoring. With these goals in mind, the highlights of the still existing urban qualities are discussed and summarized below under the two general categories of "high density" first and "urban rhythm" second.

Figure 7. Once, a good public transit system.

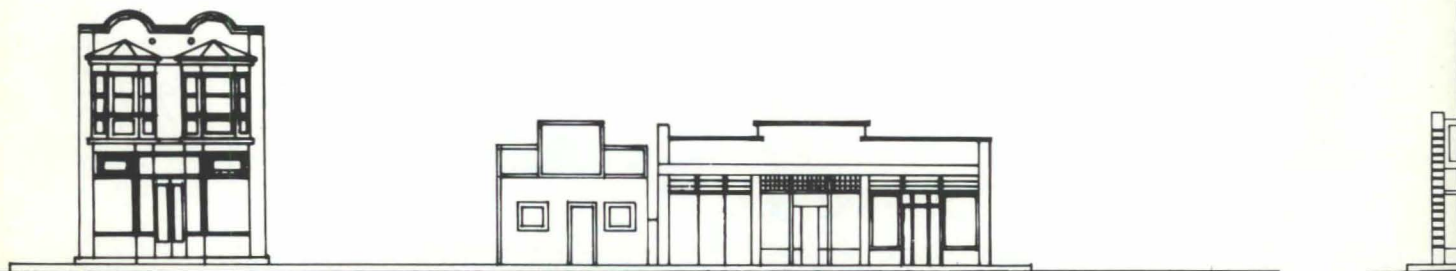


Figure 8. A well landscaped Plaza.





NATIONAL STREET - NORTH ELEVATION



NATIONAL STREET - SOUTH ELEVATION

High Density

The high density which appears today along the element of "capital design" or along the major axis of "imageability" is a result of laissez-faire happening. (Fig. 2) Some of the existing spaces (i.e. the open space in front of the Safeway market) happened in the process, without ever having been planned with the concept of open space in mind. Other spaces evolved similarly as triangular nodes for change in the layout coordinates and in the process

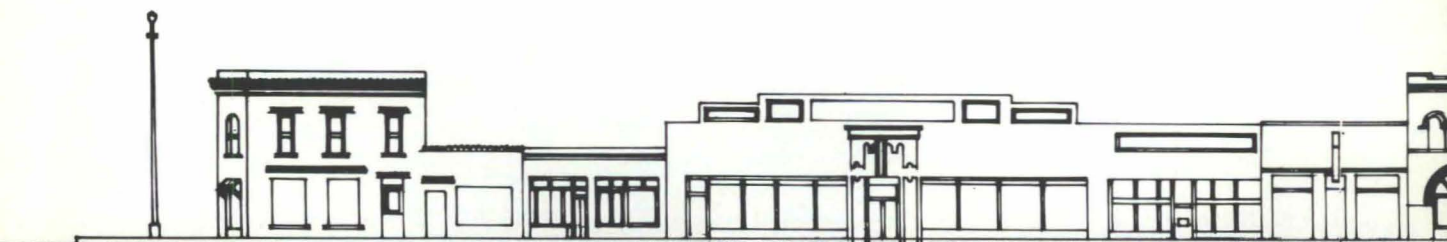
have been appropriately emphasized. (Fig. 3)

Speaking in urban design terms one can not deny the strength of containment and continuity as positive qualities for an urban space. Yet in the case of Las Vegas, containment exists only in the case of pedestrians or crowds in the main plaza (Figs. 1, 8) and continuity only in the case of National Street as it leads to the plaza. (Page 14) Although the ideogram presented here (Fig. 2) suggests a total scheme of capital design, the cur-

rent state of affairs permits the writer to speak solely on "the future possibility as suggested by the unique samples that have remained today." The continuity is broken down by scattered development, unorganized open space (vacant land and parking lots) and by disproportionate land allocation for organized open space with no appropriate density around. This, however, does not exclude the possibility for outstanding architecture of individual buildings. Although the plaza and the existing



GRAND AVENUE - WEST ELEVATION



GRAND AVENUE - EAST ELEVATION

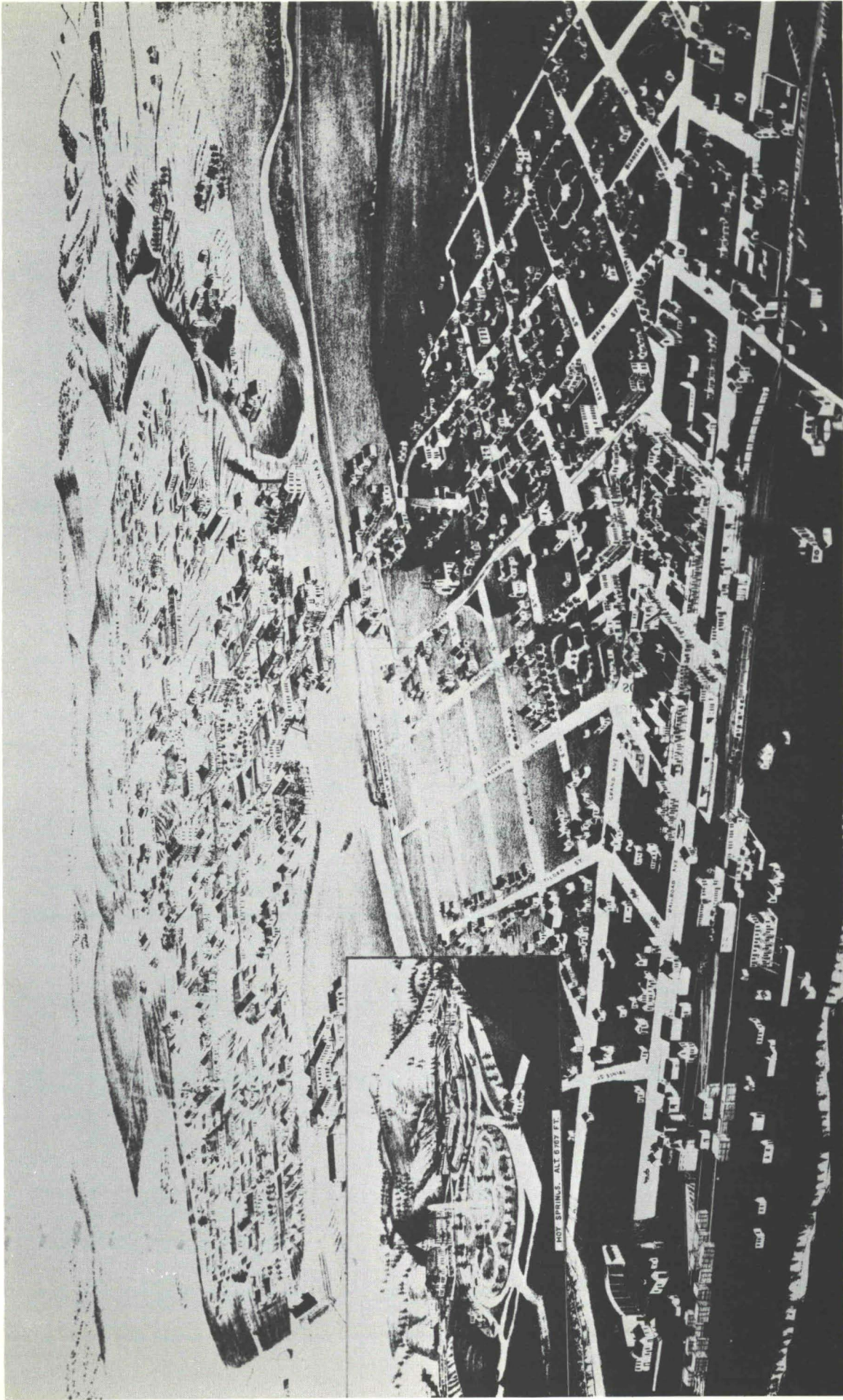


Figure 10. Las Vegas, New Mexico in the late 19th Century.



of Urbanism while they are rather difficult to be pin-pointed by the non-analytical observer.

Las Vegas, New Mexico, has urban rhythm suggested by means of "activity" or "light-shadow" and they are both overlapping. "Shade" overlaps "movement" while "static activity" overlaps "light." At present, the rhythm is of one quality occurring at one symphonic pace. This observer has been able to point to a quality of rhythm occurring at points A, AB, B, (Fig. 9) A being the University, AB the connection of University to plaza, and B the plaza itself. The University, especially at the Library and the Gallery, generates movement. The stores on National Street accommodate this movement and eventually the plaza stops this movement for further activities of

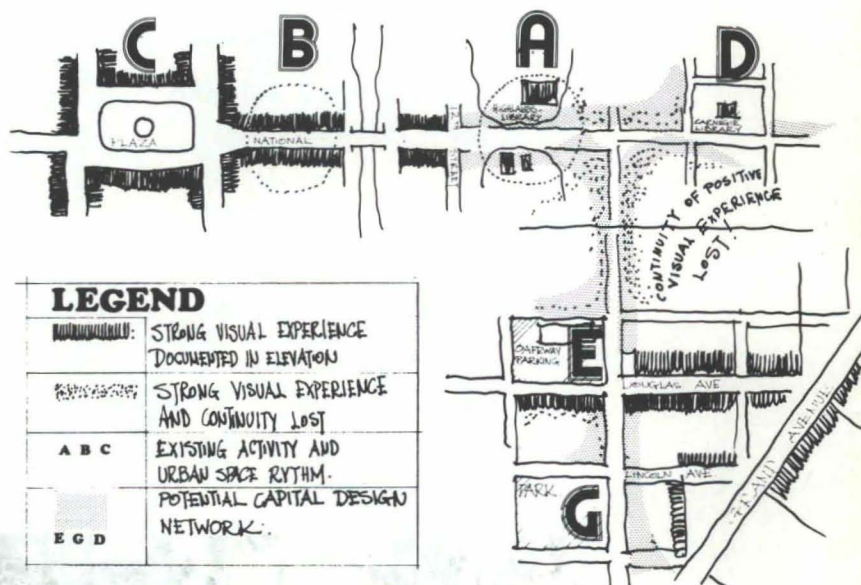
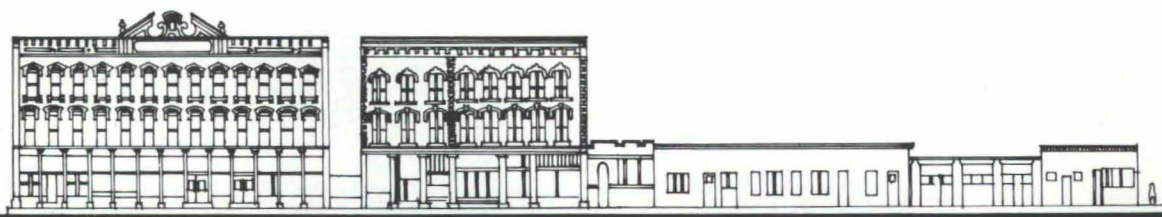


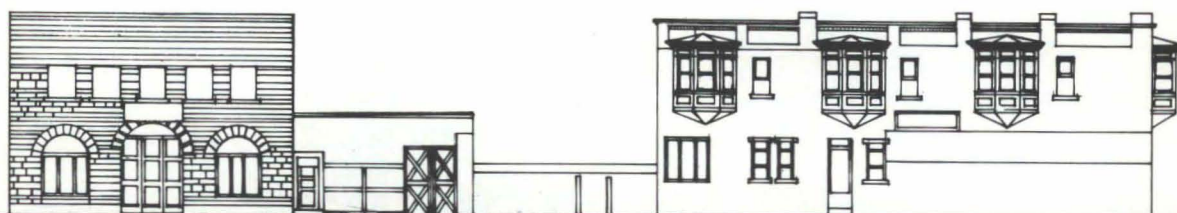
Figure 9.



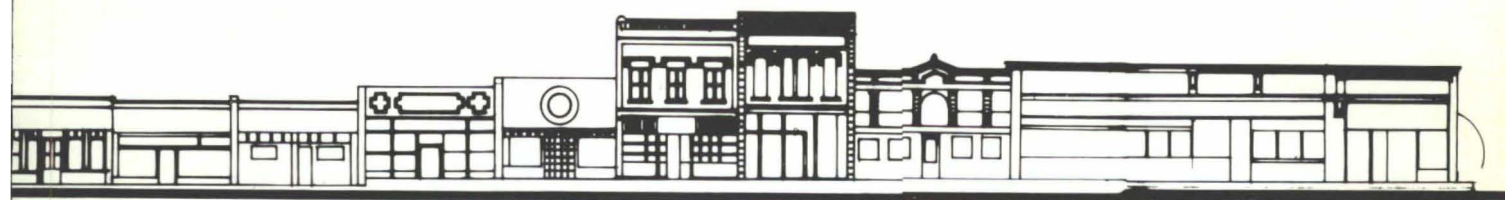
PLAZA HOTEL ILFELD BLDG. DICE APARTMENTS
OLD TOWN PLAZA NORTH



OLD TOWN PLAZA WEST



12TH STREET - WEST ELEVATION



RI



remains of National Street represent the positive elements of the whole experience, the newer plazas, some of which were intentionally designed as plazas (The Carnegie Library Plaza) while others were unintentionally developed the open space in front of the Safeway on Douglas Street), provide insignificant cases for containment and continuity. This is due to the disproportionate amount of open space in regard to the density that borders them. (Fig. 11)

Urban Rhythm

The most fundamental quality of an urban space is to be found in the Time-Space experiences it suggests, enhances, or stimulates. Time-Space experience may be seen in terms of activities (dynamic), assembly activities (static)

or intermediate situations occurring at the various nodes or intersections. A well balanced sequence of activities and the rules-of-the-game in which these activities occur suggest what we may call urban rhythm. Urban rhythm occurs because the physical elements of linear urban voids, such as streets and static urban voids, such as plazas and other open spaces of varying classifications permit by means of planning or otherwise the occurrence of successful sequence of events. Urban rhythm also may be explained by physical rather than by activity means. One way of looking at urban rhythm is from the point of view of a sequence of "light" vs. "in shade" experiences. The length and the "section" (width of street and height of building facades) of a narrow street determine the time

and shade element while the proportions and the "section" of an open space determine the time and light element in a plaza. "Light" succeeds "shade" and visa versa, or a certain "tone" of "shade" succeeds another "tone." The time spent experiencing these situations at a pedestrian or at a mechanical movement pace has a quality which is to be found in the intervals or in the parts into which these small "shade vs. light" experiences occur. The discussion on the subject could of course be expounded and other interpretations of urban rhythm be presented; some could be based on the sequence of textures, others on the sequence of urban landmarks and others on an architectural excellence vs. background architecture. These discussions are meaningful and necessary for the urban designer and the student



LINCOLN STREET

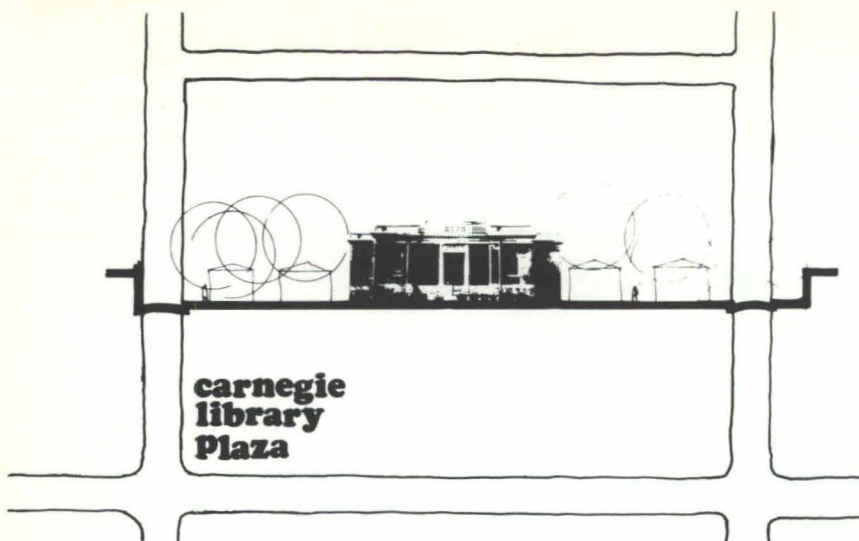
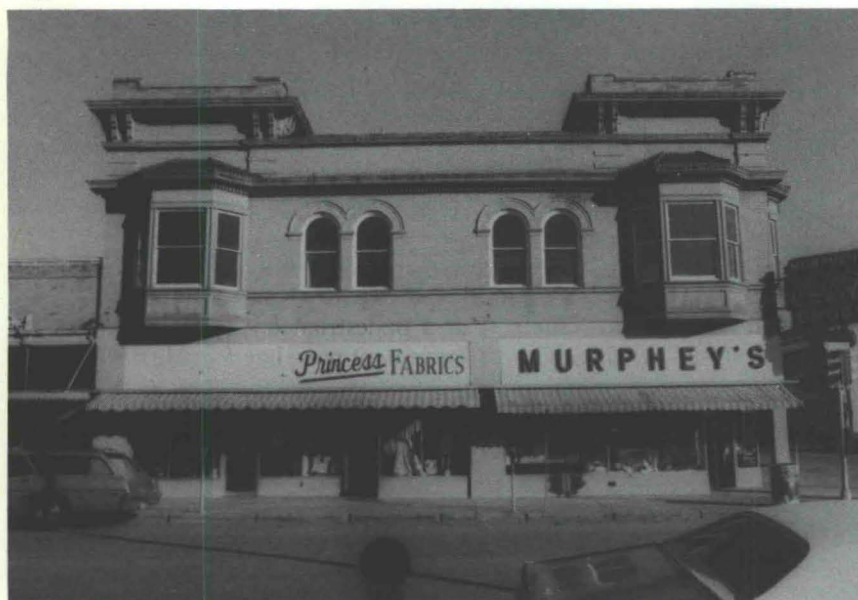


Figure 11.



Figures 12 — 13.



a static character. (The plaza activity becomes very dynamic during the fiestas and during these occurrences the plaza experiences a rhythm of its own which could be the subject of a separate inquiry.) The rhythmic experience thus presented has an end at A and B with insignificant connections to three other points of potential activity. Of these three points the Carnegie Library Square is an insignificant open space as far as activity goes (Point D in Fig. 9). The same, of course, is true for the Safeway parking lot, which as we suggested, could be a potential plaza (E); minimal activity also occurs in the adjacent park (G). The pedestrian rhythm of Las Vegas is somewhere there, just distinguished in ABC and abruptly dying. Another situation occurs on the 60° diagonal street pattern but this is a motor car rhythm which is suggested mainly by the rather chaotic situation of strip development, and it is a negative quality for urban environment, and, of course, is proper for us not to even consider it for Las Vegas. The inquiry of strip development has already taken place, glorified and argued in the synonymous town in Nevada.³⁰ What must be said here is that the rhythm of Las Vegas, New Mexico may be further enhanced just by planning some new and meaningful activity generators in the streets and open spaces of the capital design network already available in the town and lying unexploited in the main skeleton. The buildings remaining today suggest a state of affairs which offers another unique aspect in the rhythmic experience of the town. As is suggested by the selective street facades of this study, certain buildings stand out due to their architectural quality. In all these cases they are the taller buildings and the ones possessing certain unique facade qualities. Almost all of these remaining examples of what Las Vegas architecture was, incorporate symmetric design for their individual facades; there is almost always a relief texture on the facade achieved through expression

of structural bays and through further expression of minor structural elements such as roof joists, etc. (Figs. 12, 13) Ornament is often distinguished and in certain cases glamorous ornamentation on an entrance way or on the articulation of the cornice enhances further inquiring attention by the stroller. In consideration of the total facade experience, these unique remaining buildings, suggest a rhythm noted in Fig 9. The purpose here is not to argue whether this rhythm was imposed conscientiously, but to learn from whatever exists today and appears to be an asset of the urban experience. In fact we know that the town developed in a laissez-faire way. A careful study of old pictures and lithographs suggests that there was higher density than what is witnessed today. There were also many more buildings of positive architectural significance similar to ones remaining today. The rhythm in those days was different and, perhaps, more intense. Yet, today's rhythm is still unique and could perhaps, be brought out in more clear ways. Because of the deteriorating situation of most buildings, due to neglect and blight, the greatness of the remaining "high tones," as suggested by the elevation drawing in this paper, is not easily comprehended. The existing rhythm as experienced today, is like a tape of a great musical score when played in a tape recorder whose magnetic heads have not been cleaned for a long time. The whole tape sounds totally blurred, the high points are missed, no one listens to the tape, and furthermore, no one cares to play it once he has already experienced an unpleasant experience. The existing framework of Las Vegas is the potentially great tape and the current state of affairs is the dusty and not cleaned heads of the machine. A process of careful cleaning, a process of total, careful and caring environmental restoration will bring an unexpected melody out of what is already there. This process will require minimal efforts such as cleaning the total environment, replacing

broken windows, correcting non-functioning signs, repainting of signs and buildings, clearing the few open-space parking lots and adding some street furniture.

In view of the above this paper may be looked upon as a fundamental suggestive introduction into the solution of the problem, which is the physical state of affairs of Las Vegas, New Mexico today. The study of its history evidenced that Las Vegas was a unique town from the urban design point of view. Yet it might be totally Utopian to think of restoring the town to its previous glamour if further planning on a larger scale and concern is not undertaken. The town can clean up, renovate and restore its physical appearance in the short term. This can be accomplished by mere civic concern and appreciation of what is there already; because what is there is of a quality rarely met in other towns in this part of the United States.

Las Vegas, A New Town

If long range planning is undertaken now, if national planning goals evolve in the future for the building of a sufficient number of New Towns, (as in fact ought to have happened a long time ago), Las Vegas, New Mexico should be a top priority candidate for such development. The whole town, the old plaza with National Street, the University, and the total capital design network that lies sleeping today could very well wake up as a strong, dense, full of people, lively downtown. Las Vegas today represents in size and intensity an ideal core for a great New Town of the Future. This writer believes strongly in the inevitability of the need for New Towns for the solution of the urbanization problem in the United States and he believes that sooner or later New Towns will become the concern of the government of this country. In Las Vegas, the motto in the past was "some come, some go,"³¹ yet this motto, or rather attitude, let civilization come, impress itself upon it and then go by; this should not happen again and the town should ser-

iously look to planning for solutions. Admittedly there will be regionalists who may not want growth,³² and admittedly the town, its people and its government should have the prerogative of deciding for or against growth. Yet even if no growth is their verdict, restoration, renovation, cleaning up and socio-economic upgrading will undoubtedly be their concern. Such concern has been already evidenced by this writer's research. One is the evidence that was suggested by discussions with numerous individuals, inhabitants of Las Vegas, while the other is the current concern of the group standing for historic restoration. This group has already done sufficient homework and stands on good grounds for seeking grants and the establishment of programs for restoration of individual buildings.³³ A number of papers by a top Las Vegas Academic, Professor Perrigo outline the history and the physical state of affairs of certain buildings of the old town and are valuable beginnings for the process of restoration. Yet, this present paper, although applauding the already undertaken efforts, argues for a total and comprehensive way of looking at Las Vegas.

Conclusions and Suggestions

From the General Environmental design point of view, this paper stresses the importance of already existing seeds for the further creation of urban space rather than suggesting a radical proposal for changes or new design. In other words, this paper looks at individual buildings of architectural significance, not in an isolated way or as ends in themselves, but rather, in a way that may suggest that the process of conservation can be used as a tool for the restoration of the town as a whole in an urbanly meaningful and coherent manner.

A major recommendation within the general framework of this paper is to give priority to the restoration of individual buildings which fall within the capital design spine of Las Vegas. Whereas the process of historical restoration often tends



Figure 14 — The Plaza from National Street.

to concern itself with individual projects, a total coherent concern would be able to achieve that, while developing an aesthetic of public continuity. Similar strategies have been already suggested elsewhere,³⁴ yet the final implemented processes missed the point by not following such similar recommendations. Hopefully, this article argues how much more important the idea of an existing design framework is, intentionally

or unintentionally evolved but lying buried — nay hibernating — in the city-scape, than is the development of single romantic projects.

Las Vegas, New Mexico has a great history as its asset. This alone should make it a top priority candidate for planning attention and revitalization.

Las Vegas is "a place;" "time" has been on its side; now the clock must be rewound. A. A.

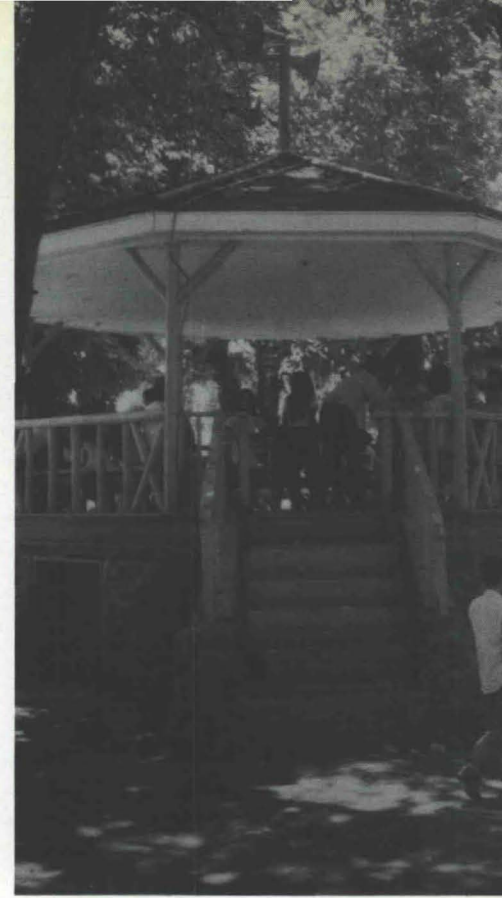


Figure 15 ➡

Footnote References:

¹Reference to R. Venturi's argument and to the recent academic and architectural attention to the aesthetics of the "neon strip" of Las Vegas, Nevada. *Learning from Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1972.

²Las Vegas, New Mexico was well known in the past. Refer to *Harper's Weekly*, Volume XXXIV, No. 1749, June 28, 1890, and Volume XXXIV, No. 1751, July 12, 1890.

³*Harper's Magazine*, February, 1974 general reference: Las Vegas, New Mexico presented from the drug and crime perspectives.

⁴To the knowledge of this writer there has been no consideration of Las Vegas, New Mexico as an urban design example.

⁵Stanley B. Tinkel, "Importance of open space in the urban pattern" in *Cities and Space*, p. 70.

⁶Milton W. Callon, *Las Vegas, New Mexico. . . The Town That Wouldn't Gamble*, Las Vegas Daily Optic, Las Vegas Publishing Co. Inc., Las Vegas, N. M., 1962, p. VII.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 327.

⁸Historic evidence as well as evidence based on private interview.

⁹*Op. cit.* p. 11.

¹⁰Otero: *Events of the Days of 1879-1882*. Former Governor Miguel A. Otero relates the events of the days of 1879-1882. Original typescript. (Carnegie Library), p. 2.

¹¹Callon *op. cit.* p. 118.

¹²Andres S. Hernandez, *Origins of the Names of the Streets in the Town of Las Vegas, New Mexico*. Las Vegas, N. M., December 20, 1954. Unpublished xeroxed typescript, (Carnegie Library), Las Vegas, New Mexico. No page numbers available.

¹³Callon *op. cit.* p. 33.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 17, also *San Miguel County, New Mexico — Homes For All*, published by the Bureau of Immigration of the Territory of New Mexico. Santa Fe, 1907, p. 5.

¹⁵Callon *op. cit.* p. 17.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁸Hernandez *op. cit.* no page numbers.

¹⁹*Op. cit.* p. 18. Also, Footnotes, H. T. Wilson, *Historical Sketch of Las Vegas, New Mexico*, Filmed from original in the Bancroft Library, Sept. 1973. (original: 1880) no page numbers. The Hotel World Publishing Co., Chicago, Ill., Carnegie Library, Las Vegas, New Mexico.

²⁰General reference, Callon *op. cit.*

²¹Dorothy Lea LeGault, *Footlights in the Foothills: A History of the Las Vegas, New Mexico Opera Houses*. Xeroxed copy of unpublished Masters Thesis, New Mexico Highlands University, August, 1971.

²²*San Miguel County*, *op. cit.* Also Callon, *op. cit.* p. 119.

²³Callon *op. cit.* p. 119.

²⁴University still existing.

²⁵Movie stars and television per-

sonalities had their residences in *Las Vegas: Las Vegas, New Mexico Historic Sites*, prepared by Professor Lynn I. Perrigo, Las Vegas — San Miguel Chamber of Commerce, 1963.

²⁶The town has been called "A Princely Domain. . .", refer to *San Miguel County, New Mexico — Homes For All*, *op. cit.* on cover page.

²⁷On street car, Callon, *op. cit.* p. 118.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 120, 121.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 120.

³⁰Robert Venturi, *op. cit.* general reference.

³¹Callon *op. cit.* p. 327.

³²Concerns of Las Vegas, "future" were already stated as far back as 1880. Refer, H. T. Wilson, *op. cit.* Chapter III. Today such concern is only shared by some exceptional few.

³³Lynn I. Perrigo, *The Presbyterian Mission Church, Las Vegas, N. M., 1872*. 1973 xerox typescript. 2. *The Jesuit School Building*, 1973. 3. *The Area South of the Plaza or El Distrito del las Escuelas*, 1973, Carnegie Library, xerox typescripts.

³⁴Rick McBride, *Urban Design for Dallas*, thesis project presented to the Graduate faculty of Cornell University in 1965.

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