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The Other Las Vegas

A rich architectural legacy survives the passage of time in New Mexico

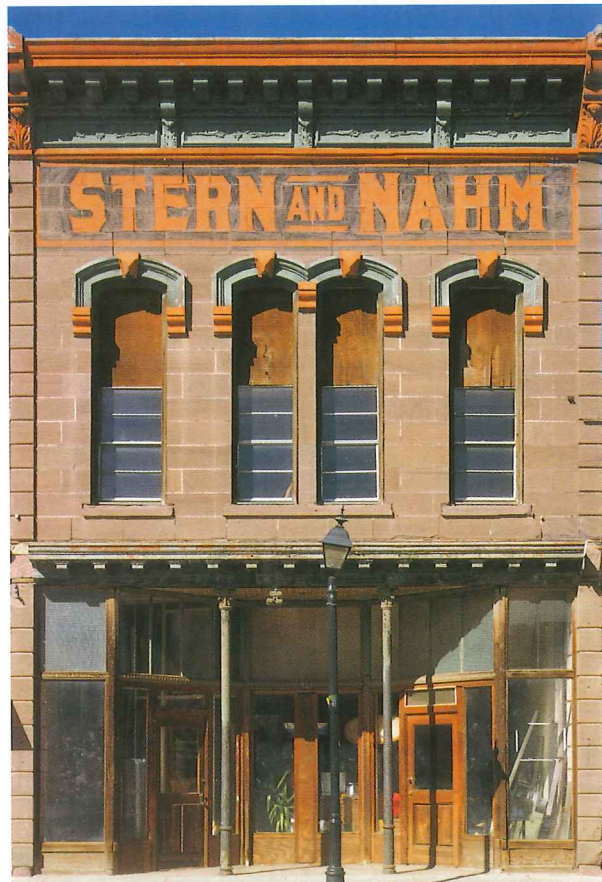
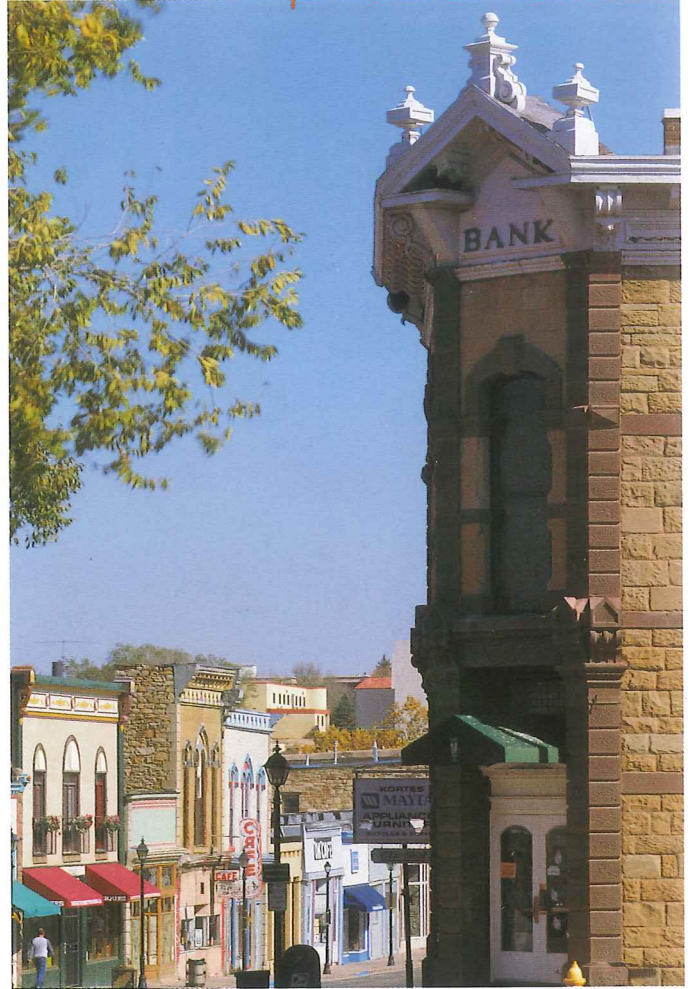


The history of Las Vegas, New Mexico, is told through its remarkable architectural fabric. Italianate structures face Bridge Street (top), and the rehabilitated Plaza Hotel (above) dates to 1882.

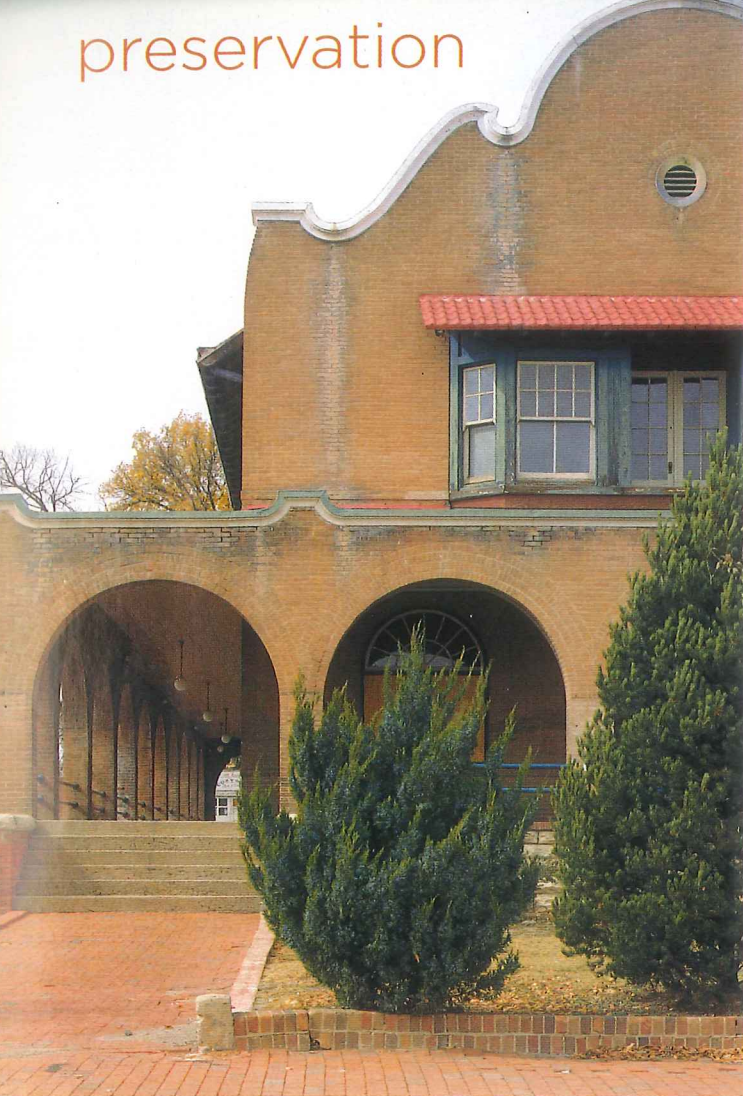
visitors into contact with twelve historic districts incorporating more than a century of architecture, including examples of Territorial, Italianate, Neoclassical and Mission-style buildings.

Vestiges of the past are embedded in the urban landscape, whether in a misspelled painted sign on a brick wall near the downtown plaza that warns visitors of a five-dollar fine for “committing nuisance here” or in a metal hitching rail for horses that protrudes from a concrete sidewalk outside the Center Block building in the city’s railroad district. Restored houses and commercial buildings stand alongside shells awaiting attention. A number of celebrated architects, including John Gaw Meem, Edward Durell Stone and Isaac Hamilton Rapp, designed both houses and commercial buildings in Las Vegas.

“It’s not just the architecture—it’s the land use or land-planning style that you can read,”



clockwise from top left: The Montezuma Castle, a resort in the nineteenth century, is now occupied by the Armand Hammer United World College of the American West. Built in 1880, the First National Bank building overlooks Bridge Street. The Crockett Block structure housing Murphey's Drug Store dates to 1898, which was about the time Stern and Nahm set up their Bridge Street location. Nineteenth-century adobe houses line South Pacific Street.



above: La Castañeda Hotel, constructed in the Mission Revival style in 1898, was part of Fred Harvey's chain of railroad hotels. Located in the once thriving railroad district, the nearly vacant hotel is now for sale. **above right:** As its signage suggests, the Navajo Textiles, Inc., building once served as a parachute factory; an earlier incarnation is reflected by "E. Rosenwald and Son" printed on the rear.

says Katherine Slick, a Las Vegas resident for twenty-two years and the director of the Historic Preservation Division of New Mexico's Department of Cultural Affairs. "You really can see one hundred years of residential design—the adobes that date from the 1850s all the way to the 1950s suburban structures. Unlike most communities, Las Vegas isn't of one time, and unlike Albu-

querque or Santa Fe, Las Vegas has components that are all still here. We didn't erase large parts of the inner city to make things happen."

Las Vegas was established in 1835 and quickly became a mercantile center. When the railroad arrived in July 1879, it revolutionized the city and its economy, even spawning a new town, East Las Vegas. The two sides still reflect their origins. West Las Vegas has a Mexican and Hispanic influence, with the largest concentration of adobe houses and Territorial architecture in the city. Streets follow the landscape, meandering and curving away from downtown's central plaza. East Las Vegas was designed with a more disciplined approach, akin to that of an eastern city, with a grid of streets and parks and eastern-style architecture to match. While the two cities functioned independently for some time, in 1970 Las Vegas unified.

The plaza, a nerve center for the city, was originally built on higher ground so that it wouldn't be flooded every time nearby farmland was irrigated with water from the Gallinas River. In 1846 General Stephen Watts Kearny, who commanded the American Army of the West, spoke from atop a one-story adobe building facing the plaza after he had seized New Mexico for the United States. That very building still stands on the plaza across from a plaque commemorating his speech.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Las Vegas became home to a number of immigrants, among them German-Jewish pioneer families who made the trip west along the Santa Fe Trail. Many of these immigrants started mercantile operations because of the city's strategic location along the trail. Charles Ilfeld and his family, who created a wholesale business that became the largest in the state, constructed a three-story Italianate building between 1882 and 1890 to serve as their headquarters. The family slogan is still painted on the side: "Charles Ilfeld Company Wholesalers of Everything." Next door is the restored 1882 Plaza Hotel, which the owners plan to expand into the Ilfeld building.

In the 1880s, following the arrival of the railroad, Italianate architecture flourished. Rapp, who was instrumental in developing the Santa Fe style, also lived and worked in Las Vegas. His firm, Rapp and Rapp, designed a number of the city's houses and buildings, including the Carnegie Library—



financed by Andrew Carnegie and modeled after Thomas Jefferson's Monticello—the Masonic Temple, the Crockett Block building and the Herman Ilfeld House. From 1900 through World War I, Neoclassical, Colonial Revival, Mission and bungalow-style residences took hold.

One of the joys of walking through Las Vegas's historic districts is serendipitous discovery. On the plaza the back side of the Rosenwald building, emblazoned with "E. Rosenwald and Son" in large block letters, is a reminder of another mercantile family. The front of the building, however, tells a story from the twentieth century. The sign above the door reads "Navajo Textiles, Inc." and features an emblem combining a Zia, an ancient sun symbol that appears on New Mexico's state flag, and a parachute. During World War II and the Vietnam War the building was used as a parachute factory. These kinds of historical markers wouldn't be present if Las Vegas had received the makeover that many other towns experienced in post-World War II America.

"The reason Las Vegas is so intact is that it flourished and had economic prosperity through the First World War," says Chris Wilson, author of *Facing Southwest: The Life & Houses of John Gaw Meem* and the J. B. Jackson Professor of Cultural Landscape Studies at the University of New Mexico's School of Architecture and Planning. But additional railway lines were built in eastern New Mexico, giving birth to other mercantile towns just as the Depression hit. "There simply weren't resources to build many new structures or to tear down the well-constructed buildings of the pre-World War I generation," he says.

History is embedded in South Pacific Street, which follows the path of the Santa Fe Trail as it leads out of Las Vegas en route to Santa Fe. This district, El Distrito de las Escuelas, is named for the Catholic and Jesuit schools that were once in the area. It contains some of the oldest houses in Las Vegas, including a number of adobe homes that were built right up to the edge of the thoroughfare.

Twentieth-century architects also contributed to the structural landscape of Las Vegas. In the 1920s and 1930s John Gaw Meem designed several of the buildings that are now part of the campus of New Mexico Highlands University. Around the same time, Edward Durell Stone completed a modernist two-story white house for *Collier's* magazine.

While Las Vegas is something of a living museum of architecture, the situation poses some unique obstacles for historic preservation in this low- to moderate-income community. "The challenge is to find a way to maintain the historic fabric so that the people who want to live in those houses can continue to live in them," explains Katherine Slick. To that end, the Las Vegas Design Review Board

By 1882 the city's Douglas Avenue and Sixth Street had become a burgeoning commercial district. At the time, City Hall, the Masonic Temple and the Duncan Opera House were all located in the neighborhood. **above:** One of the most distinctive buildings in the district is the Union Block. Built in 1881, the structure is now home to the First National Bank of Las Vegas.

preservation

publishes a preservation primer for historic houses as one of its outreach efforts. The Las Vegas Citizens' Committee for Historic Preservation also plays an active role and opens historic homes and commercial buildings to visitors during its annual Places with a Past tour.

Several miles northwest of Las Vegas in the village of Montezuma, a monumental building with three metallic towers is nestled in the forested hills of a canyon. Originally a nineteenth-century resort spa that drew visitors to its hot springs, the Montezuma Castle survived two fires, several changes of ownership and years of neglect and deterioration before its 1981 purchase by the Armand Hammer Foundation as a campus for the United World College of the American West. It took two more decades and an aggressive capital campaign for renovations to begin. Today the revitalized 90,000-square-foot Queen Anne-style building is the cornerstone of the campus.

The architectural journey of Montezuma Castle sheds light on the precarious status of other commercial real estate and the substantial costs involved in renovating large-scale buildings, let alone whole districts.

"The dilemma we have in Las Vegas is that we probably have two to three times as much commercial zoning as a community this size needs," explains Slick. "Some of it is a legacy of the historic districts; the other part of it is that the city government was willing to rezone residential or agricultural land. So as a consequence you have this zoning that marches away from the historic commercial district and begins to devalue the extant commercial zoning.

"We still have a lot of unused or underused commercial buildings," she adds. "What's going to happen quickly is that these buildings will erode until the cost becomes too prohibitive." ←

Las Vegas Visitor Tips

Pick up the brochure *Historic Las Vegas, New Mexico: Along the Santa Fe Trail*, published by the Las Vegas Citizens' Committee for Historic Preservation. The committee produces the Places with a Past tour every year on the first Saturday of August. Call 505.425.8803; www.lasvegasnewmexico.com/cchp.

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