HISTORIC

South Sixth Avenue, Armory Park Historic District, circa 1915. Turn-of-the-century American neighborhoods distinguished themselves from Hispanic neighborhoods through broad tree-lined streets and spacious front yards that placed buildings such as the Carnegie Library (now the Tucson Children's Museum, far right in photograph) as objects in a landscape. (Photograph courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society, AHS B38149)

NEIGHBORHOODS

Celebrating our past and connecting to our future ▸

BY R. BROOKS JEFFERY / PHOTOS ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Like many Western cities, Tucson's spectacular landscape dwarfs any attempt by humans to define a sense of place. As a society, however, we require our built environment to provide orientation in our everyday lives, allowing us to connect to the surroundings, the culture that defines us and the community to which we belong. Our city isn't defined by a downtown, as in many locales, but rather in the special, individual places that represent chapters of our urban history: Tucson's historic neighborhoods.

Tucson derives its cultural identity from Native American, Spanish, Mexican, American, Chinese, African-American and other diverse groups. Accordingly, our built environment has an equally pluralistic expression, with each culture defining its identity with its own physical representation of community. Sometimes this took the shape of a sense of open space, such as a plaza, park or a natural landscape, or by a particular building type, such as a house of worship, school or market. These became orienting devices that provided the inhabitants a sense of place. The anonymity sometimes perceived in today's neighborhoods lies in the public's inability to distinguish one from another. As we Tucsonans explore the definitions of our community identity, it's important that we learn to recognize our historic buildings and neighborhoods, and understand how the past can inform the future.

Although Tucson's first neighborhoods can be traced back to the initial settlements of the Hohokam and earlier cultures along the rivers of the Tucson Basin, the context of these ancient communities has been all but lost. When the Spaniards arrived in Southern Arizona at the end of the 17th century, they not only established mission churches alongside the existing villages of Bac and Tucsón, but also founded communities in which Spanish methods of farming, livestock-raising and building crafts were passed from one culture to the other. As hostility increased with the local native groups, the Spanish created a presidio, or garrison, in 1775 that housed the families of Spanish soldiers and protected the region. It is inside the presidio that Tucson began developing the elements of a Spanish community, including plazas, streets, rowhouses and a church, the remains of which can be seen today in what is now El Presidio Historic District.

As Tucson passed through the Mexican Revolution (1810-21) and the Mexican-American War (1846-48), there were timid attempts to build outside the presidio walls, but it wasn't until the Americans subdued the Apache raiders in the second half of the 19th century, that Tucson broke out of the presidial compound and established new neighborhoods. The first of these was a series of barrios south of the presidio that were built and occupied by the increasingly mixed populations of Mexican and Native American descent. Even as those arriving from the Eastern United States intermixed, their architecture remained steeped in the form and materials typical of the Mexican-Sonoran tradition, which is still visible in the Barrio Libre Historic District. The original municipal church and plazas remained the town's focus, but these adjacent barrios had their own distinct identities, including *El Hoyo*, named after the well from which much of Tucson's drinking water came, and *Barrio Libre*, a so-called "free zone" outside the limits of civil jurisdiction. This sense of common identity also carried down to the scale of the neighborhood block, where rowhouses placed right against the street defined a perimeter around a central open area. Here, families and neighbors shared common purposes that extended from security to raising domestic crops and animals.

By the time the railroad arrived in Tucson in 1880, there was an increasing Americanization that was taking place, evident in everything from fashions and food to buildings and neighborhoods. American houses were set back from the street, incorporated the imported styles popular throughout the East and Midwest, and used new materials, such as brick, milled lumber and pre-manufactured decorative items that arrived on the same trains as the people. In Tucson's attempt to become "American," it chose to import all the trappings with which its newly arrived residents would feel right at home. But the transition from "Sonoran" to "American" wasn't overnight, nor black and white. It was reflected in a variety of existing Sonoran houses that were transformed by new materials made available by the railroad (see ►

South Convent Street in the Barrio Libre Historic District, circa 1896. Tucson's Spanish and Mexican barrios, or neighborhoods, are characterized by rowhouses placed right against the street that define a perimeter around a verdant central open area. There, families and neighbors defined a sense of community through a shared common purpose that extended from security to raising domestic crops and animals. (Photograph courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society, AHS 24329)

Aerial view, El Encanto Estates (foreground) and Colonia Solana (upper portion of photograph) Historic Districts, circa 1940. Beginning in the late 1920s, alternatives to the gridiron subdivision layout were planned as part of a larger development, including the El Conquistador Hotel (far left in photograph) and the Tucson Golf and Country Club. This was done to promote a sense of exclusivity and lure the affluent to desert estate living in what was then outside Tucson's city limits. (Photograph courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society, AHS 51992)

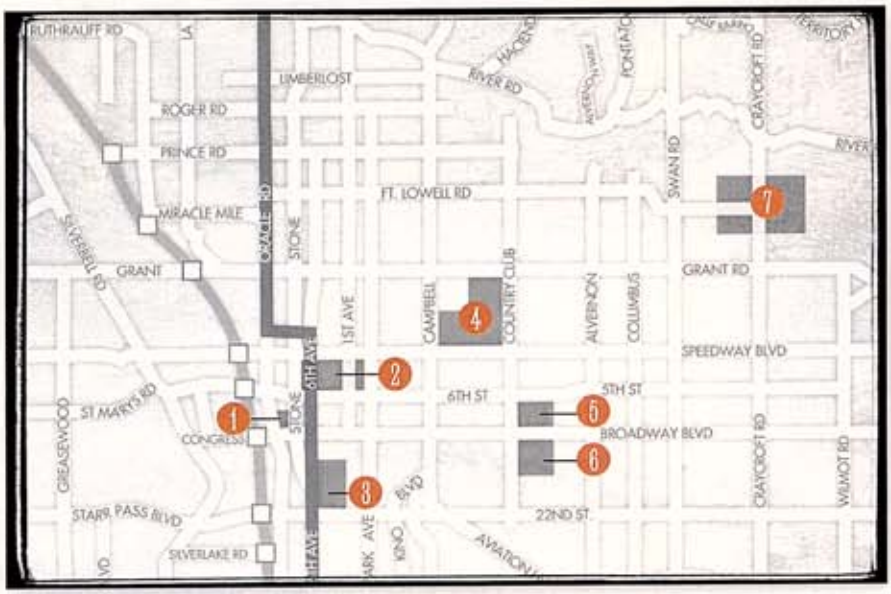
McCleary House on page 72). Moreover, there were houses that intentionally mixed various qualities of each of the two architectural expressions to create a hybrid style (see Royal Elizabeth Bed and Breakfast on page 76).

When Tucson became incorporated in 1872, it was required to submit a city plan for its initial township. Following early American traditions of urban planning, a gridiron pattern of streets and blocks was established that facilitated the efficient division and sale of property, whose central public amenity was a school.

By the turn of the 20th century, new neighborhoods were being established that catered specifically to the newly arriving Americans by distinguishing themselves from the Hispanic neighborhoods. There were affluent ones, including Snob Hollow (now incorporated into El Presidio Historic District), to cater to Tucson's elite; working-class like Armory Park, created to serve the needs of the railroad workers; and middle class, such as West University that bridged Tucson's downtown business district with a new magnet for subdivision development, The University of Arizona. The neighborhoods adhered to the strictly orthogonal layout as established in the initial town plan, but were also defined by emerging commercial districts and schools.

By the 1920s, Tucson wanted to break away from the eclectic expressions of its early American identity and decided to reinvent itself as a Southwestern town using architecture as an agent to convey a romantic representation of our Spanish heritage. Spanish Colonial, Mission and Pueblo revival styles were all incorporated in a clever marketing scheme to encourage people to move to Tucson and connect with the imagery of the romantic Southwest. The city was growing, and subdivisions outside the corporate city limits were becoming popular for new neighborhood developments. The orthogonal grid, formerly associated with equitable land distribution, was now becoming associated with middle class living standards with small lots and equally small houses. As a way of distinguishing affluent neighborhoods from those of the middle-class, alternatives to the gridiron subdivision layout were introduced by California developers and landscape architects. In 1928, two innovative subdivisions, El Encanto Estates and Colonia Solana, were planned as part of a larger development, including El Conquistador Hotel (located near Broadway and Alvernon, where El Con Mall is now), and the Tucson Golf and Country Club (now Tucson Country Club, on the east side), both designed to lure the affluent to desert estate living outside the city limits.

Each of these subdivisions provided unique environments and became models for subsequent subdivision development. However, they did incorporate common characteristics: curvilinear street patterns in direct contrast to the existing gridiron ►



1. El Presidio
2. West University
3. Armory Park
4. Blenman/Elm
5. El Encanto Estates
6. Colonia Solana
7. Fort Lowell

(Map of Tucson's historic districts featured in this article.) Tucson boasts more than a dozen residential historic districts, including the ones shown on this map and highlighted in the Arizona Opera League's 2002 Home Tour. For a more detailed map of all of Tucson's historic districts, refer to the city's website, http://www.ci.tucson.az.us/planning/maps/thematic/natlhist.pdf.

standard; the use of existing desert landscape as a marketing tool; exploiting the romantic image of Tucson's relationship to its Spanish heritage; and deed restrictions that controlled homeownership, minimum construction costs as well as the architectural expression of the individual residences.

These subdivisions, and those developed after World War II, when Tucson experienced its largest population boom, also began a shift away from the traditional mix of commercial, retail and residential uses within close proximity of each other. Instead, residents were required to drive to work, shopping or entertainment. But owning a car was associated with affluence and a status meant to be expressed publicly by driving around town. It wasn't until Tucson became full of distinctly residential subdivisions, and their residents desired to live closer to the desert foothills and the streets were extended to accommodate our

increasingly mobile lifestyle, that citizens of the Old Pueblo began to realize that such growth could have consequences for the environment and to the sense of community. By the 1960s, Tucson's downtown as a business and cultural center was slowly dying as an increasing suburban population encouraged businesses to follow residential development to the suburbs. In an attempt to revitalize downtown, Tucson participated in the federal "urban renewal" program that resulted in the creation of the Tucson Community Center complex, but also demolished over 250 buildings that defined our earliest neighborhoods, including the original presidial plazas. The urban renewal program and the resultant demolition of core neighborhoods raised awareness of historic preservation and ultimately led within the next decade to the National Register of Historic Places designation for all of the residential districts surrounding the downtown urban renewal area. By 1972, both the city and county adopted historic district ordinances, that provide an even stronger legal protection. Currently, Tucson has more than a dozen historic districts that, in addition to protecting the architectural and urban characteristics of the neighborhoods, provide a defined sense of place.

Today, Tucson is looking at alternatives to the way we live and how we define a sense of place and community. New residential developments that display sensitivity to our fragile ecosystems, as well as sustainable building strategies, are being incorporated to provide contemporary prototypes for living in and with the desert. An example of this is Adobes del Bosque in the Fort Lowell Historic District whose sense of place is directly tied to the natural environment that defines the Tucson area. In other developments, such as Civano, a sense of community is being redefined in terms of proximity to workplace, and a mixed use of community amenities whose intent is to restrict the dependence on private transportation.

In the next few years, our city will be re-envisioning its civic and cultural identity in a number of new neighborhood developments both on the fringes of the foothills as well as in the downtown Rio Nuevo district. We have a tremendous opportunity to integrate a sensitivity to both environmental and cultural resources with a broader understanding of the qualities necessary to create a sense of community at every scale. We also can embrace the pluralism that defined Tucson's history and create a city that moves beyond a romantic nostalgia into a cultural and architectural identity appropriate for this time and the unique qualities of this place. By doing this, we can honor today's historic neighborhoods while we build new ones the next generation will deem historically significant.