

7-2-2011

An Evolving Main Street: The Impact of Urban Renewal on Downtown Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1966-1974

Hannah R. Wolberg

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**AN EVOLVING MAIN STREET:
THE IMPACT OF URBAN RENEWAL ON DOWNTOWN
LAS CRUCES, NEW MEXICO, 1966–1974**

BY

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**B.A., HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2005
B.A., PORTUGUESE, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2005**

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts
History**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 2011

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I heartily acknowledge Dr. Durwood Ball, my advisor and committee chair, for supporting me through the years and helping me stay focused on finishing my thesis and my degree. His guidance, expertise, and impeccable editing helped me improve the quality of my writing and the quality of this thesis.

I also thank my committee members, Chris Wilson, and Dr. Andrew K. Sandoval-Strausz, for their invaluable expertise and assistance with my project and in my career as a graduate student.

And to my husband, Rafael, and to my family, your love and support has sustained me through the most difficult times. Rafael, your presence is always loving, enriching, and fulfilling. I look forward to a lifetime of memories with you.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how the process of urban renewal affected the City of Las Cruces, its population, and its urban landscape between 1966 and 1974. It tells the story of municipal planning in Las Cruces, New Mexico, a small southwestern city, following the Second World War. This thesis tries to answer the question of why officials favored the application of suburban planning solutions to the downtown. What reasoning led to the adoption and construction of the ill-fated pedestrian mall in Las Cruces? Finally, this analysis assesses urban renewal's results and its true costs in Las Cruces, some of which can be measured in public opinion and in loss of regional culture and history to rational planning and its all-too frequent partners, the wrecking ball and bulldozer.

City leaders encouraged low-density development through annexations and approval of subdivision and commercial strip construction, to the detriment of an ailing downtown. Las Cruces officials embraced suburban trends and transformed downtown into an outdoor-covered shopping center. With the demolition of hundreds of structures, municipal leaders replaced Main Street's rich, regional history with expansive parking lots and an unsuccessful pedestrian mall that mimicked enclosed shopping centers.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Twice a week on Wednesdays and Saturdays residents from all over Las Cruces and Doña Ana County visit the city's downtown pedestrian mall to purchase a variety of locally produced foods, art work, household items, and souvenirs. The sound of music from a neighborly musician or band fills the spaces between the vendor stalls. Freshly made burritos, kettle popcorn, and coffee sustain shoppers who walk up and down the multiple-blocks-long mall early in the morning. The sites and sounds of Las Cruces's Farmers' Market are a brief reprieve for Main Street, which is empty and quiet during other days of the week. This is a scene that has played out weekly in the city core since the beginning of the urban renewal process and construction of the pedestrian mall between 1966 and 1974. Established in 1973, the Farmers Market breathes life into the central business district (CBD) twice a week, something that the twelve-million-dollar urban renewal project could not do.¹

This thesis explores how the process of urban renewal affected the City of Las Cruces, its population, and its urban landscape between 1966 and 1974. It tells the story of municipal planning in Las Cruces, a small southwestern city, following the Second World War. This thesis especially tries to answer the question of why officials favored the application of suburban planning solutions to the downtown. What reasoning led to the adoption and construction of the ill-fated pedestrian mall in Las Cruces? Finally, this analysis assesses urban renewal's end, and its true costs in Las Cruces, some of which

¹ "Farmers' Market Approved," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 8 May 1973.

can be measured in public opinion and in loss of regional culture and history to rational planning and its all-too frequent partners in those years, the wrecking ball and bulldozer. City planners and leaders encouraged low-density development through annexations and approval of subdivision and commercial strip construction, to the detriment of an ailing central business district. Las Cruces officials embraced suburban trends and transformed downtown into an outdoor-covered shopping center. With the demolition of hundreds of structures, municipal leaders replaced Main Street's rich regional history with expansive parking lots and an unsuccessful pedestrian mall that mimicked enclosed suburban shopping centers. The city would struggle over the next thirty years with how to mitigate the damage done to the downtown and how to address the bitterness that erupted from the urban renewal process.

Urban renewal in Las Cruces was part of a much larger history of urban America in the twentieth century. Local, state, and federal governments attempted to address the blight and decline affecting central cities throughout the country. The three decades after World War II saw massive infusions of government money funneled into the hands of municipal leaders, who embarked on slum clearance, building demolition, and revitalization attempts primarily in their central business districts. Las Cruces was just one of hundreds of cities that participated in these efforts to rehabilitate downtowns struggling from a lack of economic investment and the abandonment for suburban paradises. Unlike most municipalities however, Las Cruces decided to coordinate renewal plans with the completion of a full pedestrian mall that closed traffic to Main Street and

created a shopping-mall atmosphere.² Canopies covered the walkway, and landscaping and water features provided visitors with a suburban ambiance that they would normally have found in an enclosed shopping center. City leaders and urban-renewal-agency officials, encouraged by positive feed-back from residents, followed the path of complete downtown reconstruction. This journey, however, proved to be long and drawn-out, and wracked with citizen discontent and frustration, lawsuits, and threats of condemnation and eminent domain. Property owners within the central business district, desperate for help in reversing the trend of downtown abandonment, urged municipal officials to address their problems. The results, however, left few people satisfied. Although the municipality actively searched for ways to reverse the decay in its core, city leaders failed to address factors contributing to Main Street's decline. Municipal officials and planners still encouraged low-density suburban growth in the city outskirts through the approval of subdivision developments and shopping centers, the continual annexation and the expansion of city limits, and the embrace of new interstate highway traffic and commerce, all of which undermined growth in the downtown district.

The desperate condition of Las Cruces's city core could only be tackled with the help of federal and local money and an urban renewal plan. This government intervention led, however, to confrontations with locals, who became dissatisfied with the slow pace of the project—which would take almost ten years—and who became embittered with the methods that the city used to condemn and purchase property and enforce design plans. With good intentions, the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency (LCURA) and the city attempted to tear down and reconstruct Main Street, hoping the long battles in court and

² Comprehensive Urban Designs and Planning Services, "Introduction," *Schematic Design and Concept Report, Las Cruces Downtown Revitalization*, Community Development Department, City of Las Cruces, New Mexico.

with residents would pay off with a successful and thriving business district. The loss of countless historic buildings, including the sacred St. Genevieve Catholic Church, and the shock of condemnation and eminent domain procedures, in addition to the sad realization that the years-long project did not revitalize the downtown district, created a sense of disillusionment and bitterness in the minds of many inhabitants. This undercurrent of discontent continues to flow through Las Cruces today, as residents drive by the sea of parking lots surrounding the empty pedestrian mall.

Although Las Cruces is the second largest city in New Mexico and has maintained its position as the commercial and cultural hub of the Mesilla Valley and the southern half of the state since the mid-nineteenth century, very little has been written on the city's history and almost nothing on urban renewal in the area. Historian Jon Hunner provides a brief history, accompanied by photographs, of the southern Rio Grand Valley and of the city in *The Mesilla Valley: An Oasis in the Desert* (2008) and *Las Cruces* (2003). Linda G. Harris and Gordon Owen have published additional pictorial histories of the city in *Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1849–1999: A Multi-Cultural Crossroads* (1999) and *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History* (1993). While the Mesilla Valley boasts a stronger historiography, very few authors have published on the topic of Las Cruces, in particular, and its history. The sparse selection of existing works on this southern New Mexico region only briefly address the issue of urban renewal, with almost nothing mentioned on factors contributing to the decline of the city's central business district and the residential reaction to government intervention and to the urban renewal process.³

³ Jon Hunner, et al., *Las Cruces* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia, 2003); Jon Hunner, *The Mesilla Valley: An Oasis in the Desert* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Sun Stone Press, 2008); Linda G. Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History* (Las Cruces, N.Mex.: Arroyo Press, 1993); Gordon Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1849-1999: Multi-Cultural Crossroads* (Las Cruces, N.Mex.: Cultural Society of Mesilla Valley, 1999); and Las

The historiography on the national movement of urban renewal is highly varied and dependent on the region and city discussed. Urban historians and planners have produced ample research on town planning and the establishment, development, and consequences of urban renewal projects situating their works in the context of the planning and urban history of specific regions throughout the United States. Larger cities that dealt with acute problems of urban blight and slum clearance, in particular, are the focus of many monographs that address the history of urban planning. Other histories have focused on general themes like Main Street. Historian Alison Isenberg's *Downtown America: A History of the Place and People Who Made It* (2004) concentrates on the evolution of the central business district. In Robert M. Fogelson's *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880–1950* (2001), the author describes the people, businesses, and ideas that shaped Downtown U.S.A. and addresses the decisions that led to the ups and downs of the central business district in major cities across the country. Other works like Carol Rifkind's *Main Street: The Face of Urban America* (1977) discuss historical and cultural attachments to downtowns.⁴

Historians and planners, in particular, have produced a substantial number of histories on the evolution of cities and town planning and the consequences of the automobile and suburban trends. Harland Bartholomew's *Land Uses in American Cities* (1955), Herbert R. Lottman's *How Cities Are Saved* (1976), Tom Martinson's *American*

Cruces Bulletin, *Las Cruces and Doña Ana County: A Pictorial History* (Marceline, Mo.: D-Books Publishing, Inc., 1999).

⁴ For an example of a general history of town planning, see Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880–1950* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001); Carol Rifkind, *Main Street: The Face of Urban America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); Carl Smith, *The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and John W. Reys, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965).

Dreamscape: The Pursuit of Happiness in Postwar Suburbia (2000), and Robert A. Beauregard's *When America Became Suburban* (2006) are just a few examples of this prolific topic. Most of these monographs focus on large American and even international cities.⁵ Within this genre, numerous works have been published on the topic of planning and suburban sprawl in the Sunbelt, but these studies do not touch on Las Cruces. Histories on the urban Southwest tend to focus on larger cities like Phoenix, Tucson, Amarillo, Dallas, Ft. Worth, San Antonio, Los Angeles, and Albuquerque. Carol Abbot's *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (1981) examines the impact of urban growth on several major cities in the Sunbelt. Michael F. Logan's *Fighting Sprawl and City Hall: Resistance to Urban Growth in the Southwest* (1995) discusses Tucson and Albuquerque and the effects of sprawl and city planning on the population of these two cities. Other histories of the Sunbelt and the urban Southwest include: *Amarillo: The Story of a Western Town* (2006) by Paul H. Carlson; *Quest for the Golden Circle: The Four Corners and the Metropolitan West, 1945–1970* (1994) by Arthur R. Gómez; and *The Failure of Planning: Permitting Sprawl in San Diego Suburbs, 1970–1999* (2003) by Richard Hogan. These are just a few of the many works on the urban history of the West. Despite the ample supply of research and published histories in this field of study, no historian researched a scholarly monograph on Las Cruces's urban history.⁶

⁵ Harland Bartholomew, *Land Uses in American Cities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955); Herbert R. Lottman, *How Cities are Saved* (New York: Universe Books, 1976); Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Tom Martinson, *American Dreamscape: The Pursuit of Happiness in Postwar Suburbia* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 2000).

⁶ Carl Abbot, *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Michael F. Logan, *Fighting Sprawl and City Hall: Resistance to Urban Growth in the Southwest* (Tucson, Ariz.: University of Arizona Press, 1995); Paul H. Carlson, *Amarillo: The Story of a Western Town* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2006); Arthur R. Gómez,

This study lays the foundation for future research into the history of city planning and urban renewal in Las Cruces and other southern New Mexico communities that have received relatively little attention from historians compared to towns and cities in the northern half of the state. The history of Las Cruces also offers a unique look into the impact of urban renewal and the adaptation of a pedestrian mall in a southwestern community. The extent to which the full pedestrian mall altered Las Cruces's downtown was unique in New Mexico and not common within the context of urban renewal projects in the United States, with perhaps only little over a hundred examples created throughout the country. This work will provide insight into the decision making behind the revitalization efforts and into their impact on residents. This project also looks at how city and urban renewal officials addressed urban blight and suburbanization in Las Cruces and enforced federal and local guidelines in downtown reconstruction, building codes, and town planning. In Las Cruces, the urban renewal process evolved from community caution toward, but general acceptance of government intervention to cure the city's Main Street ills, to doubt, disillusionment, and outright hostility when residents encountered the true price of federal and local aid.

The historical sources on urban decline and renewal in Las Cruces are rich and varied. The St. Genevieve Historical Society and Church Archives provided an in-depth look into the history and eventual demolition of the historic church through parishioner interviews, correspondence, images, and documents. The Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Records, housed in the Archives and Special Collections at New Mexico State University, provided great insight into the inner workings of the City Commission, the

Quest for the Golden Circle: The Four Corners and the Metropolitan West, 1945–1970 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Richard Hogan, *The Failure of Planning: Permitting Sprawl in San Diego Suburbs, 1970–1999* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003).

LCURA Board of Commissioners, and the local and regional urban renewal agencies. In these records are meeting minutes from commissioner and board meetings, and a variety of other documents such as court filings, resolutions, correspondence, and appraisals. The addition of the City of Las Cruces and Doña Ana County's reports and planning documents aided in obtaining information that helped in the construction of a multidimensional story. The city's comprehensive plans and its commissioned studies not only present the contemporary zoning, ordinance, and planning issues of the period in which they were published, but also furnish statistical data that would otherwise be very difficult to obtain. These reports discuss the class, age, education, size of family, and ethnicity of Las Cruces's population in addition to describing the economic picture of the city and county in the period under study. These primary records are instrumental in revealing important information about the population and the issues affecting the city, residents, and businesses. They also unveil the important planning decisions municipal leaders made and, to some extent, the reasoning behind those choices. These sources open a window into the planners' and officials' assessments and resolutions that would determine the evolution of the city's urban landscape and into how and where residents lived, worked, and played.

Another primary source served as a barometer of constantly changing public opinions and offered a look into choices made by citizens and city leaders. Local newspaper articles provide a bird's-eye-view of the oscillating relationships between city and LCURA officials, residents, business owners, and federal urban renewal agents. The *Las Cruces Sun-News*, *Citizen*, and *Bulletin*, were particularly useful in their thorough coverage of the urban renewal process from beginning to end. Their coverage of citizen

and municipal interviews, editorials, and reports on city and agency meetings helped to formulate a more complete history of this period than I might have otherwise. These newspapers are an invaluable source of public information and were instrumental in creating a story that included the view point of Las Cruces's inhabitants and city government.

The first chapter discusses a brief history of the St. Genevieve Church in Las Cruces and the eventual sale and demolition of the property that would usher in the urban renewal process. The loss of the historic church and land had a profound impact on locals, and this issue remains to this day a sensitive and sometimes bitter topic for many parishioners and residents. The resentment that lingered in Las Cruces who mourned the destruction of this cultural and historic landmark carried over to the urban renewal project that immediately followed. For many inhabitants, these two events are inextricably linked. Although some city officials maintained that the demolition of the St. Genevieve Church was an issue separate from the urban renewal project, many residents continue to believe that the urban renewal process could not have started without the clearance of the church's sacred structures. In their eyes, the sale and demolition of St. Genevieve Church was the first phase in the revitalization project, one that ultimately failed.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide a background to the story of urban renewal in Las Cruces. This section of the study offers a historical overview of the Mesilla Valley and the evolution of Las Cruces from a small satellite village of Mesilla to the second-largest city in New Mexico. The city thrived as the commercial hub of southern New Mexico and benefited from productive agricultural lands, federal installations, and a large state

university. The fourth chapter describes the beginning of decline in the central business district in Las Cruces and how the city's planning decisions affected the deterioration of the central core's infrastructure and patronage. Municipal leaders encouraged suburban sprawl by approving annexations of outlying areas and plans for subdivisions and shopping centers, and by failing to address adequately the concerns of downtown business owners. City officials tried simultaneously to promote the outward spread of low-density development and to address the central business district's descent into obsolescence. This juggling act culminated with the urban renewal project for downtown Las Cruces in the 1960s and 1970s.

The fifth and sixth chapters cover the almost ten-year-long urban renewal project that aimed to transform Las Cruces's downtown from a once dense and thriving commercial district into a sprawling shopping complex that mimicked the enclosed malls sprouting up around the city and across the country. The beginning of the project starts in chapter 5, when the city and the public come together to develop revitalization plans and the municipal officials begin the initial phase of land purchasing. Although the city invested large amounts of time and money into the CBD's rehabilitation, their efforts were thwarted by an ongoing encouragement of suburban development that directly competed with Main Street. Chapter 6 completes the project. As planning gave way to action, the city and the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency confronted complicated issues of private land acquisition, demolition, and eventual redevelopment. The project had to overcome numerous obstacles such as lawsuits, a Grand Jury investigation, and public discontent. Las Cruces, once hopeful that the drawn-out and intrusive urban renewal program would pay off in the end with a downtown revival, became disillusioned

with the slow progress and the consequences of government intervention in the life of the downtown.

Las Cruces officials believed they were building a downtown that generations of citizens could enjoy. Instead of embracing their town's cultural and historic heritage, however, the city chose to expunge a traditional Main Street landscape, instead welcoming modern, suburban trends that had already spread across the city and the country and that enjoyed economic and cultural success. Urban renewal left an indelible mark on the urban landscape of Las Cruces; many residents cannot escape the bitterness associated with this project when they look upon the desolate pedestrian mall that replaced Main Street.

Chapter 2

Prologue: St. Genevieve Church

“The thing I remember most about St. Genevieve’s, was that it was a place of faith,” recalled Alfred Barrio. Anne Apodaca Jaurique remembered, “St. Genevieve’s was the center for everything, and everything centered around St. Genevieve’s.” Another parishioner, Corinne Maynez, recollected, “What I remember most, was that the church was always open. Always! It was never locked. From the time I was a little girl and for many years, even until the church was torn down. That church was always open.”⁷

In January 1967, ownership of St. Genevieve Catholic Church was handed over to the Farmers and Merchants Bank in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Swelling discontent and uncertainty swirled among parishioners, who grappled with the endless rumors of the deterioration and destruction of their beloved church. Transfer of ownership from the church to the Farmers and Merchants Bank, with the encouragement of the City of Las Cruces, transpired quickly and relatively smoothly. The sale of the property, however, discomfited the dedicated families who attended mass regularly and, for many, could trace family patronage to the church’s original construction in the heart of the Mesilla Valley in 1859. This purchase and eventual clearance of the property resonated within Las Cruces’s community for the next forty years as many residents still recall fond memories and a sense of loss when they forfeited their church. The sale of the St. Genevieve Church also symbolized the beginning of the city’s journey down the path of

⁷ Alfred Barrio, interview in *Voz del Valle*, February 1995, provided by Rosemary Leyva, President of St. Genevieve Historical Society, Las Cruces, New Mexico; Anne Apodaca Jaurique, interview in *Voz del Valle*, February 1995, provided by Rosemary Leyva, President of St. Genevieve Historical Society; and Corinne Maynez, interview in *Voz del Valle*, February 1995, provided by Rosemary Leyva, President of St. Genevieve Historical Society.

urban renewal, which was marred with bitterness and frustration as the urban renewal project claimed and destroyed tangible connections to Las Cruces's history, represented by its culturally and historically significant structures in the downtown district.

The centrality of the St. Genevieve Church in the original farming village harkened back to the Laws of the Indies issued by Spanish royal decree in 1573. Spain based its innovative methods of planning on Roman and Renaissance city development, in which settlements were located on high ground with access to water, pasturage, and timber. The Spanish plan gave the church the first choice of land, which in colonial New Mexico, translated into a church set on elevated ground and surrounded by its community.⁸ This arrangement carried into American governance beginning in 1848.

The Catholic Church immediately became the heart of the community, both figuratively and literally, and St. Genevieve Church in Las Cruces was no exception. Two local residents donated land to the Roman Catholic Church in 1855, and the church and residents built the initial structure in 1859. The small adobe building served an estimated six hundred residents living in the village of Las Cruces. The nearby county seat of Mesilla, with about three thousand inhabitants, dwarfed its neighbor and had its own church, San Albino, which was established in 1855 and continues to serve the Mesilla community today. The arrival of the railroad reversed Mesilla's growth, however, and Las Cruces quickly surpassed the former county seat in population and importance.⁹

⁸ Gilbert R. Cruz, *Let There Be Towns: Spanish Municipal Origins in the American Southwest, 1610–1810* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1988), 4–7, 20–22; and John W. Reys, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), 29–32, 358, 378–80.

⁹ Gordon R. Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1849–1999: Multi-Cultural Crossroads* (Las Cruces, N.Mex.: Cultural Society of Mesilla Valley, Red Sky Publishing, 1999), 33, 77, 26–27; and Land Deed, 1855, Las Cruces Parish, New Mexico.

Fr. Manuel Chavez became the first pastor of St. Genevieve Church on 3 January 1859. This date coincided with the feast day of the church's patron saint, Genevieve. A statue of Saint Genevieve was imported from France prior to 1881 and was shipped by oxcart to Las Cruces. Church officials relocated the original sculpture of the patron saint to the new St. Genevieve Church on 100 Espina Street.¹⁰ In 1868, the church, previously supported by the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, fell under the authority of the Bp. Jean-Baptiste Salpointe and the Vicariate Apostolic of Arizona. Eventually, authority would again transfer from distant Arizona to nearby El Paso, Texas, where the Bishop of El Paso made the final decision to sell the church.

Prior to this, however, the structure of the church underwent significant changes in 1862 and 1863. The tight-knit community of Las Cruces pooled its resources to furnish its church with two bells. Scrap metal and jewelry were collected, melted, and cast into the bells. One bell was completed in 1862; the other, a year later. Prior to the arrival of the railroad, southern New Mexico residents imported, by oxcart and wagon, goods that could not be manufactured locally. The difficulty and expense of importing valuables did not hinder patrons, however, from surrendering their valuable possessions for the benefit of St. Genevieve Church.¹¹

The church, profoundly important to Las Cruces, had its share of visiting priests including Bp. Jean Baptiste Lamy.¹² For almost thirty years, St. Genevieve Church remained one of only a few church communities in the Mesilla Valley. The St. James

¹⁰ Rosemary Leyva, President of St. Genevieve Historical Society, interview with the author, February 2009; and Paul Horgan, *Lamy of Santa Fe: His Life and Times* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), 312.

¹¹ Rosemary Leyva, President of St. Genevieve Historical Society, interview with the author, February 2009; Paul Horgan, *Lamy of Santa Fe*, 312; *Rio Grande (Las Cruces, N.Mex.) Republican*, 19 August 1882; and Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1849–1999*, 77.

¹² Rosemary Leyva, interview with the author.

Episcopal Church and the Episcopal Grace Mission, both built in the 1870s, along with Mesilla's San Albino and Las Cruces's St. Genevieve Church, served the southern Rio Grande community until other denominations organized and built their own churches. According to author and New Mexico resident Annie Lux: "In New Mexico, historic churches are as much a part of the cultural landscape as adobe and green chile."

Architectural historian Chris Wilson states in *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition* (1997) that architecture can "evoke romantic associations with historic periods and exotic lands." These historic Catholic churches occupy a special place culturally and historically in the minds of New Mexicans, much more so than the Protestant churches.¹³

In 1881, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad reached Las Cruces, bypassing Mesilla. Las Cruces experienced tremendous growth with the arrival of the AT&SF Railroad. With the increase in population, St. Genevieve Church needed to expand. A new structure was built around the original adobe church building in 1886. The new building, constructed with the architectural characteristics common to New Mexico Catholic Churches during the Railroad Era, resembled its Gothic predecessors in Europe. The unplastered fired-brick exterior, reinforced by what appeared to be concrete buttresses in the 1930s, provided a medieval-style façade that seemed somewhat alien to the distinctly southwestern landscape in which the structure sat. The single nave church was built with towering forty-four-foot-high bell towers capped with steeply pitched, rounded roofs that culminated in spires shaped like crosses. This hybrid of the Gothic and Romanesque styles, typical in New Mexico churches built or remodeled after the arrival

¹³ Annie Lux, *Historic New Mexico Churches* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Gibbs Smitt, 2007), xi; Chris Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 54; and Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1849–1999*, 79.

of Bishop Lamy in 1851, also symbolized the influx of newer, more fashionable architectural styles commonly expressed in government, merchant, and residential buildings throughout the territory after the coming of the railroad. Building materials and fashion trends traveled east to west along the newly laid tracks.¹⁴

Shortly after the construction of the new church building and installation of bells in the new towers, parishioners held a dedication ceremony for the new structure on 10 October 1887. Sometime before 1904, a new set of bells replaced the old pair, which showed significant wear and tear, and the church sold and shipped the older bells to St. Louis, Missouri. The affinity that patrons felt for their church is evident in their memories of the new bells' melodic tones. Corrine Maynez recalled: "St. Genevieve's bells had the most memorable sound. They were heart-warming. If it was early in the morning, you knew it was Mass. If you heard them in the afternoon, you knew it was time for the novena or time for a rosary. The bells were a joy to hear."¹⁵ The church building and bells symbolized parishioners' attachment to their heritage, culture, and strong faith.

The arrival of a new pastor initiated rapid change for the new church building and its surrounding property. Fr. Michael Vandermaessen, a Belgian, came in October 1909 and swiftly instituted structural changes. He ordered the renovation of the rectory as well as the pouring of concrete steps in front of the church. A new wrought-iron fence now wrapped around the property, and freshly planted flowers and trees grew throughout the yard surrounding the church. Vandermaessen also purchased stained-glass windows, new

¹⁴ Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe*, 54–57; Chris Wilson, "Southwest Architecture and Cultural Landscapes: Course Outline," University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 9, 13; Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1849–1999*, 77; and Norman Tyler, *Historic Preservation: An Introduction to Its History, Principles, and Practice* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000), 117–18.

¹⁵ Corinne Maynez, interview in *Voz del Valle*, February 1995, provided by Rosemary Leyva, President of St. Genevieve Historical Society.

furnishings, and vestments for St. Genevieve Church.¹⁶ The priest, or one of his successors, perhaps witnessed signs of deterioration already visible in the relatively young building, and ordered the installation of concrete buttresses to reinforce the exterior walls. These buttresses, however, proved to be a stop-gap measure that only delayed the inevitable structural weakening.¹⁷

St. Genevieve Church's parishioners enjoyed Vandermaessen's improvement projects and renovations. Las Cruces took pleasure in the church's verdant gardens. Many city and community events utilized church grounds, taking advantage of the plentiful shade provided by the large trees during the long, hot summer days. Between Vandermaessen's tenure and the 1930s, however, parishioners and Catholic authorities could not ignore structural deterioration to the church building. On his arrival in 1909, Vandermaessen quickly took inventory of the entire property and noticed something was wrong with the church. He commented: "Buildings: One brick church, 40 by 90 ft. with cracked walls propped up on one side."¹⁸ Fear for the structure's stability induced the town to condemn it sometime during this period. The addition of concrete buttresses to the exterior walls, which appeared to be giving way, allowed parishioners to continue using the building. Sometime around 1926, shorter towers replaced the taller, rounded ones; the building could no longer support the massive weight of the original ones.¹⁹ The removal of the taller towers and the buttressing of the walls appear to be linked. Another

¹⁶ Fr. Michael Vandermaessan, Inventory of St. Genevieve Church, 28 November 1909, St. Genevieve Church Archives, Las Cruces, New Mexico.

¹⁷ Aerial Photograph of St. Genevieve Church, ca. 1926, Rosemary Leyva, St. Genevieve Historical Society, Las Cruces, New Mexico, FBPC1.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Father Michael Vandermaessan, Inventory of St. Genevieve Church, 28 November 1909; and Fr. William H. Ryan to St. Genevieve Parishioners, 27 August 1966, St. Genevieve Church Archives, Las Cruces, New Mexico.

thirty years passed before the church and town officials questioned the church's structural stability and whether the building should be saved.

In 1914, during Father Vandermaessen's tenure (1909–1922), the St. Genevieve Church was transferred from the Vicariate Apostolic of Arizona (now the Diocese of Tucson) to the Diocese of El Paso. Instead of looking to Tucson for direction, St. Genevieve Church now had to look to the bishop in El Paso.²⁰



Ill. 2-1. St. Genevieve Church Prior to the Addition of Buttresses to Exterior Walls, date unknown

The original towers are visible as well as the lack of landscaping. Father Vandermaessen planted extensive gardens on the church grounds during his tenure.

(Photograph courtesy Rosemary Leyva, St. Genevieve Historical Society, Las Cruces, New Mexico FBPC1)

²⁰ Rosemary Leyva, interview with the author.



III. 2-2. Aerial View of St. Genevieve Church, date unknown

The new plantings in the yard and the concrete buttresses are clearly visible. Father Vandermaessen planted the lush gardens surrounding the church and rectory.

(Photograph courtesy Rosemary Leyva, St. Genevieve Historical Society, Las Cruces, New Mexico, FBPCI)



Ill. 2-3. St. Genevieve Church, ca. 1926

The original towers have been removed and replaced with a smaller tower on the right; a tower on the left was eventually added.

(Photograph courtesy Rosemary Leyva, St. Genevieve Historical Society, Las Cruces, New Mexico, LSS65)



Ill. 2-4. St. Genevieve Church, date unknown

(Photograph courtesy Rosemary Leyva, St. Genevieve Historical Society, Las Cruces, New Mexico, FBPC5)

Las Cruces experienced dramatic changes after the Second World War. The increase in automobile use, the tremendous infusion of federal dollars into the Southwest, and the latest trends in suburban living and shopping all worked to transform the population and landscape of the city. The heart of town, the old central business district, dramatically declined in the 1950s and 1960s. Some business owners worried about their livelihoods, and residents, old and new, flocked to the outskirts of the city. The construction of modern shopping centers and new homes in subdivisions drew Las Cruces away from the city's core. Merchants, who remained in the downtown area, feared the worst for the future of the business center and urged city officials and planners to take action. Few realized the impact that city involvement would have on St. Genevieve Church, located in the heart of downtown, and its community.²¹

By the 1960s, the grounds and structures of St. Genevieve Church had deteriorated to the point that Fr. William H. Ryan, who arrived in 1960, claimed that the structures on church grounds were a hazard to anyone who entered the buildings. In a letter written to his parishioners shortly after the sale of the church to the Farmers and Merchants Bank, Ryan stated that the city had once again condemned the church in October 1965 and that "the only reason we are not ordered to vacate the building and commence demolition was because it was a Church, and they were assured that we appreciated the problem and intended to remedy it." Ryan went on to proclaim that the weaknesses in the foundation were so serious that the church could not be repaired and must be replaced entirely.²²

²¹ "What's Happening to Main Street?" *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 1 January 1964, p. 1; "How Come Nobody's Home in Downtown Las Cruces Lately?" *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 1 January 1964, p. 2; and "Merchants Who Moved Give Reasons—Results," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, pp. 1, 7.

²² Fr. William H. Ryan to St. Genevieve Parishioners, 27 August 1966.

Ryan recognized the emotional connection his parishioners maintained not only with the church but also with its location in the heart of town. Since the lot, originally designated as Lot 0, was donated to the Roman Catholic Church, St. Genevieve Church remained the center of Las Cruces, even as the town grew into a bustling western city. Post–World War II-era city planning and settlement, however, made Ryan realize that the center of town no longer drew residents to transact business, shop, or live. Brand-new suburban neighborhoods and large shopping centers popped up on the outskirts of the city and residents, given the new choice of unlimited parking and modern air-conditioned malls, slowly abandoned downtown Las Cruces. In his letter to patrons, Ryan addressed this issue: “Serious thought was given to replacing the Church Building where it now is; but it was thought impossible. Furthermore, a downtown Church is not where the people are. They are sometimes helpful in large cities for the benefit of people working downtown, but do not serve as Parishes. The only avenue to provide safe and adequate Church space in Las Cruces was to use the present site for business purposes.”²³

The outcry against St. Genevieve Church’s removal was enormous; but the final decision lay with Bp. Sydney Matthew Metzger of the Diocese of El Paso, not with parishioners. His office approved the sale of the church, which was finalized in January 1967. Las Cruces lamented the impending loss of their beloved church building and property. One citizen mourned the loss in a poem published in the *Las Cruces Citizen*:

The Bishop and the Banker
Have agreed, and they have won.
So it’s all legal and proper;
It’s all said and done . . .
There was speculation
Ideas, schemes, plans, dreams
To Restore the old or build a

²³ Ibid.

new
 Church in the same location.
 Still to say to all in view;
 "I am here. Lift up your
 heart.
 You who are weary, come apart
 And rest awhile.
 I'll refresh you."
 However word was spread,
 Unless the land was sold
 There weren't funds enough
 For a church new or old.
 Yes the Bishop and the Banker
 Have agreed and they have
 won.
 So it's all legal and proper;
 It's all said and done,
 Hearts cried out,
 "If not for the church
 Let's at least keep the land
 As our City Square;
 For a park, a museum that
 Shows²⁴

Church, city, and bank leaders carried out the sale of the church despite the outpouring of support for renovations and protests against demolition and relocation.

While city residents mourned the impending loss of their church, the City of Las Cruces and the *Las Cruces Sun News*, with some help from Father Ryan, waged a campaign to convince residents that the best solution to the problem of their deteriorated church was to move to another location. City officials had already begun working on a major redevelopment plan to revitalize the central business district, for the core of the town showed significant signs of decline in the early 1960s. At first residents resisted the proposed urban renewal plans, but the city, with the help of the *Las Cruces Sun News*, whose managing editor, Jeter Bryan, eventually became a commissioner on the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency board, persistently pursued an urban renewal path to

²⁴ "Requiem," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 2 November 1967, p. 2.

downtown revitalization.²⁵ Father Ryan himself made note of the decline of the city core and used this issue as one of the reasons for not rebuilding the church on the same location.²⁶

By early 1967, the city and the Mesilla Valley Chamber of Commerce utilized nearby newspapers to advocate urban renewal. The *El Paso Herald Post* published a full-page spread on Las Cruces's urban renewal plans. The newspaper printed a large image of St. Genevieve Church in the article with the caption: "Landmark going—St. Genevieve's Catholic Church will be torn down to make way for the new Farmers and Merchants Bank in Las Cruces. Protests over its removal died down when it was found the building is badly cracked and the church is not as old as was first reported."²⁷ Scarcely two months after the finalized purchase of St. Genevieve Church, regional newspapers declared the issue dead. Patrons, however, still mourned their beloved church, as evidenced in the "Requiem" poem written to the *Las Cruces Citizen* in November 1967. An icon of capitalism, a bank, would soon replace a house of worship that represented a tangible symbol of the spirituality and heart of Las Cruces's Catholic congregation.

Las Cruces businessman and president of the Farmers and Merchants Bank, D. A. Weckwerth, oversaw the purchase of the property from the Roman Catholic Church. The purchase price amounted to \$300,000; the bank appraised and paid for what it thought was the fair market value of the land only. Any buildings on the property were considered of no value to the bank. The lot, comprised of roughly sixty-seven thousand square feet,

²⁵ "Urban Agency Board Hears Latest Actions," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 13 July 1967.

²⁶ Fr. William H. Ryan to St. Genevieve Parishioners, 27 August 1966.

²⁷ "How Is Urban Renewal Financed? No. 3: New Look for Las Cruces," *El Paso (Texas) Herald Post*, 1 March 1967.

was priced at approximately \$4.47 per square foot: “As far as the ‘buyer’ was concerned . . . the total price was attributable to LAND.”²⁸ The St. Genevieve Church also happened to be struggling under a \$300,000 debt prior to its sale to the bank. The deal appeared to benefit all parties involved. Church officials rid themselves of a preservation nightmare, the Farmers and Merchants Bank obtained prime downtown property without having to pay for the structures (also called improvements) already on the lot, and the City of Las Cruces was one step closer to realizing its dramatic urban renewal plans.²⁹ City leaders saw historic sites like St. Genevieve Church as obstacles to their revitalization plans. The *Santa Fe New Mexican* worked closely with Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency officials to write a story on the downtown revitalization project, which the periodical published over several issues.³⁰ *Santa Fe New Mexican* editor Al Duitman wrote, “Similar to Santa Fe, one of the first obstacles which had to be hurdled was historical sites within the urban renewal area.”³¹ Had the church remained, the city’s urban renewal plan, as it was carried out in downtown Las Cruces, would have had to be drastically altered to accommodate the church and its parishioners.

By June 1967, Weckwerth and his bank were chomping at the bit to start building a multi-story bank building on the former site of St. Genevieve Church, even though the church had yet to be demolished and cleared from the lot. In an *El Paso Times* article written about the economy in Las Cruces and in the Mesilla Valley, Weckwerth claimed

²⁸ City of Las Cruces, “Opinion of Fair-Market Value,” folder “Block 20, Parcel 1,” box 47, Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library, Las Cruces, New Mexico.

²⁹ Fr. William H. Ryan to St. Genevieve Parishioners, 27 August 1966.

³⁰ Al Duitman to J. Earl Whelply, Las Cruces, 18 July 1967, box 1, Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency, A74-093, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library, Las Cruces, New Mexico.

³¹ Al Duitman, “Urban Renewal Project Is Hoped to Return ‘Beat’ to Heart of Las Cruces,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 16 July 1967.

that construction on the new multi-story building would start before the end of the year.³² His time-table was slightly premature for almost four more months would pass before the church and its subsidiary buildings were demolished.

The president of the Farmers and Merchants bank was not the only person highly anticipating the demise of the church. The Las Cruces City Council hired J. Earl Whelply, as executive director of the newly established Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency in July 1967. He was highly qualified, having previously worked on urban renewal projects in Texas. Whelply and his counterparts in the city government recognized the obstacle St. Genevieve Church presented to their revitalization plans. In the *Santa Fe New Mexican* article, Whelply stated, “St. Genevieve Church, which was as old as the city (1848) [*sic*] was to be included in the plan. And even after it appeared resolved when the church sold its property to a local bank there was still some public sentiment towards keeping it intact.” The article went on to say that “public sentiment” had died down due to the fact that little of the original church remained. The *Santa Fe New Mexican*’s storyline shared similarities with other articles published in regional newspapers. The media ignored the emotional and symbolic attachment of Las Cruces to their church. Instead, these articles inferred that parishioners’ affection for the St. Genevieve Church was a product of its supposed age. According to these articles, after residents realized that the contemporary structure was not original and that the existing building was not as old as previously thought, protest to the sale and demolition on sacred ground supposedly subsided.³³

³² “Economic Picture in Las Cruces, Mesilla Valley Area Good,” *El Paso (Texas) Times*, 4 June 1967.

³³ Al Duitman, “Urban Renewal Project is Hoped to Return ‘Beat’ to Heart of Las Cruces,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 16 July 1967.

This assumption, however, was incorrect, as witnessed in the “Requiem” poem dedicated to the church and in the recollections of church patrons. Parishioner Alfred Barrio stated, “The thing I remember the most about St. Genevieve’s was that it was a place of faith” Another parishioner, Ann Apodaca Jaurique, said, “St. Genevieve’s was the center for everything, and everything centered around St. Genevieve’s.”³⁴ For many parishioners, urban renewal ripped the cultural and spiritual heart from their city.

The attachment residents and parishioners felt toward their city’s oldest church was ignored in regional newspapers. Editor Duitman showed a fondness for Whelply, the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency director. After he published a series of articles on Las Cruces’s renewal plans in July 1967, Duitman wrote to Whelply: “Your project, I’m sure, is and will continue to be an outstanding success—reflecting your understanding of people’s problems, and willingness to cooperate with them and the news media.”³⁵ *Las Cruces Sun-News* managing editor Jeter Bryan, like Duitman, failed to publish resident or parishioner accounts of the sale and pending demolition of the church. Instead, Bryan printed one-sided articles and editorials that advocated urban renewal, and he dismissed local sentiment towards St. Genevieve Church, minimizing protests against demolition, and reminding readers that the structure was far too damaged to be salvaged.³⁶ Duitman, also complicit in Las Cruces officials’ support of demolition, interviewed only Whelply

³⁴ Alfred Barrio, interview in *Voz del Valle*, February 1995, provided by Rosemary Leyva, President of St. Genevieve Historical Society; and Ann Apodaca Jaurique, interview in *Voz del Valle*, February 1995, provided by Rosemary Leyva, President of St. Genevieve Historical Society.

³⁵ Al Duitman to J. Earl Whelply, Las Cruces, 18 July 1967.

³⁶ *Las Cruces Sun-News* managing editor Jeter Bryan published his view of Urban Renewal in an editorial: “The dim light of that candle will do no good if we in Las Cruces do not use it to illuminate our path. Likewise it will do no good if we waste time discussing the quality of the wax in the candle or how long it will burn. We have cursed the darkness too long. Downtown Main Street needs help. Urban Renewal is a way of getting that help.” Jeter Bryan, “The Candle Is Lit,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 24 March 1967; “St. Genevieve Church to Go for New Bank,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 12 September 1967; “Beauty in the Sun,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 15 September 1967; and “Gracious Lady,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 28 September 1967.

for his three-part series on the city's urban renewal plans. He collected other information in the articles from the *Las Cruces Sun-News*.³⁷ The true reaction to the destruction of St. Genevieve Church, however, is apparent today. The church and its demolition still remain vivid in the memories of local residents.

Despite strong attachment to the church among Las Cruces, the plans for demolition moved ahead. The church vacated the property prior to demolition, but the main building remained in use for mass until the end of September 1967. In a *Las Cruces Sun-News* article about the demolition, Father Ryan maintained that the church displayed structural faults and that it was not built to withstand the infrequent but damaging arroyo flooding common to the Southwest.³⁸ On 18 October 1967, The *Las Cruces Sun-News* published the final image of St. Genevieve Church, its nave half demolished and its roof and two walls collapsed into a pile of rubble. The two towers, which had carried the weight of the bells that chimed melodically during rosaries and mass, stand tall against the encroaching bulldozers.³⁹ Father Ryan was perhaps the most influential in helping his parishioners accept, although grudgingly, the fate of their church. His words of encouragement in his letter reassured patrons that the St. Genevieve Church community would not tumble into the rubble of the church: "We must all realize that WE ARE THE CHURCH—not the buildings that we use for convenient worship. The Parish is not going to disappear—because WE ARE THE CHURCH...."⁴⁰ The discontent associated with the

³⁷ Jeter Bryan, "The Candle is Lit," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 24 March 1967; "St. Genevieve Church to Go for New Bank," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 12 September 1967; "Beauty in the Sun," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 15 September 1967; and "Gracious Lady," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 28 September 1967.

³⁸ "With Prices of Services: Las Cruces Proves the Cost of UR Goes Up," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 17 July 1967; and "St. Genevieve Church to Go for New Bank," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 12 September 1967.

³⁹ "Planned Progress," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 October 1967.

⁴⁰ Fr. William H. Ryan to St. Genevieve Parishioners, 27 August 1966.

removal of this iconic anchor from downtown followed locals and city and agency officials throughout the long journey of urban renewal. This dissatisfaction with government interference did not subside with the construction of a new church outside of the city core. Instead, the events surrounding the church's demolition sparked an undercurrent of bitterness toward the urban renewal process that only strengthened as the project progressed. However, although the church's historic structures fell to the fate of urban renewal, Las Crucens keep the memory of this church alive today.



Ill. 2-5. The Former Location of the St. Genevieve Church

The Farmers and Merchants Bank high-rise was never built on the site, and instead, a memorial to the church was constructed. The location continues to exist as the true heart of Las Cruces and remains the meeting point for organizations and residents today.

(Photograph courtesy Rachel Gallagher)

Chapter 3

A Coming of Age for Las Cruces

Southern New Mexico has a rich and varied history of human settlement that dates prior to Spanish Colonial settlement and the establishment of villages like Doña Ana, Las Cruces, and Mesilla. Spanish colonists traveling along *El Camino Real* encountered Apaches and Pueblo Indians in the valley of the Rio Grande. Hispanic settlement of the immediate Las Cruces area officially started with the establishment of Doña Ana as a colony under Mexican rule in 1840. By 1848, however, the old Mexican territory of New Mexico, which included Las Cruces, belonged to the United States under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. The population of the Mesilla valley remained small but vital to the southern region of New Mexico, the arrival of the railroad in 1881, however, dramatically changed the landscape of the valley and its residents. The railroad helped make Las Cruces and its neighboring villages retain a centrality in regional commerce, in addition to encouraging agricultural and population growth along the river valley. The construction of a dam along the Rio Grande north of Las Cruces, and the eventual establishment of government and military installations nearby contributed to the economic and population growth the railroad sparked.

The Mesilla Valley followed a trajectory similar to that of many southwestern regions. As the population grew, settlement concentrated within the cores of the small southern New Mexico towns until the end of World War II, when an influx of government jobs and the wide availability of vehicles helped residents look for cheaper

land on the outskirts of Las Cruces and its satellite communities. Today, Las Cruces remains an anchor and a focal point for southern New Mexico and as a commercial center for the lower-Rio Grande Valley. However, the city suffered from an identity crisis and a dying central business district in the 1960s and 1970s when it encountered the side-effects of rapid growth and utilized town planning that had little effect in discouraging low-density settlement in its ever-spreading suburbs. Despite a departure from its southwestern heritage and embrace of what planners predicted would be the future of American cities, Las Cruces's unique New Mexican culture remains dormant below the sprawling tract housing, sea of parking lots and roads, and air-conditioned shopping malls, ready to resurface in a revitalized downtown that does not hide from its past, but embraces it.

Athapaskan-speaking ancestors of Navajos and Apaches migrated to the Southwest around 1450. The arrival of these nomadic and sometimes hostile tribes coincided with worsening drought conditions that served to drive already dwindling Mesilla Valley Pueblo Indian communities to abandon their villages.⁴¹ Spanish colonists followed soon afterward. Francisco Vázquez de Coronado arrived in New Mexico in 1540 on an expedition exploring the Southwest for potential wealth and Christian converts for the Spanish Crown. Despite Coronado's disappointment in not finding the fabled riches of the Seven Cities of Cibola, his travels helped "pave the way for future colonization of New Mexico." The road to settlement continued with the Franciscans, who attempted to establish missions throughout the territory and to find native converts. By the 1590s, the Spanish had made several attempts to establish settlements in New

⁴¹ Gordon Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999: Multicultural Crossroads* (Las Cruces, N.Mex.: Cultural Society of Mesilla Valley, Red Sky Publishing Co., Inc., 1999), 3; and Linda G. Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History* (Las Cruces, N.Mex.: Arroyo Press, 1993), 14–17.

Mexico. Success finally came with the expedition of don Juan de Oñate, who eventually settled in San Gabriel, near the San Juan (Ohkay Owingeh) pueblo, and designated it the capital of the Spanish kingdom of New Mexico. Santa Fe, nearby, would become the next capital around 1610.⁴²

Before Oñate's arrival in northern New Mexico, he embarked on a grueling journey through Mexico to the Rio Grande and up the river valley to near present-day Santa Fe, on what would become the royal road, *El Camino Real*. Oñate reached the banks of the Rio Grande in April 1598 and proclaimed that the province of New Mexico belonged to the Spanish Crown. The expedition continued north along the river valley and past the Mesilla Valley along the foothills of the Organ Mountains, just east of what would later become Las Cruces. After six months, Oñate finally pulled into the future site of his new capital San Gabriel. While doing so, he extended the Camino Real over 1600 miles from San Gabriel to Mexico City.⁴³

The Mesilla Valley remained important to Spanish settlement because of its proximity to the Camino Real and the presidio of El Paso. By 1810, however, discontent with Spanish rule swept across Spain's territories, and the start of Mexico's war for independence led to the establishment of the independent Mexican nation in 1821. Prior to Mexico's independence, interest in the river valley north of El Paso and Juarez had already increased. Juan Garcia de Noriega settled thirty miles north of El Paso, in Brazito

⁴² Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 6–8; Bainbridge Bunting, *Early Architecture in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), 52; Gilbert R. Cruz, *Let There Be Towns: Spanish Municipal Origins in the American Southwest, 1610–1810* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1988), 22–23; Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, 21–22; and Jerry L. Williams, ed., *New Mexico in Maps*, 2d ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), 243.

⁴³ Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 8–9; Jon Hunner, *Las Cruces* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 7; Jon Hunner, *The Mesilla Valley: An Oasis in the Desert* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Sunstone Press, 2008), 12; and Cruz, *Let There Be Towns: Spanish Municipal Origins in the American Southwest, 1610–1810*, 37.

(little arm or tributary), where he maintained a peaceful relationship with Apaches. Originally settled in 1776 as Huerto de los Brazitos, Juan Garcia received the Brazito land grant in 1822.⁴⁴ Juan Garcia's heirs could not hold on to the land, however, and were forced back to El Paso by Indians. Settlement around the area of Brazito remained intermittent due to the lack of protection from raiding Indians until 1839, when a group of settlers from Juarez established a settlement north of Brazito. The site, which dated back to Doña Ana María de Córdoba's ranch in 1693, and thirty-five thousand surrounding acres were designated the Doña Ana Bend Colony in 1840, "the oldest continuously inhabited community along the Rio Grande in southern New Mexico."⁴⁵ It took several years, however, for the petitioners, whose numbers dwindled eventually from one hundred and sixteen to fourteen, to begin construction on an acequia in 1843. The acequia was finally completed within the year, and by 1844, additional families moved to Doña Ana and helped begin construction on a village church.⁴⁶

The Mesilla Valley proved fruitful for Mexican settlers. Doña Ana, which belonged to the New Mexico Territory of the United States by 1848, continued to grow. Some Mexican families, however, chose to remain under Mexican rule and moved west of the Rio Grande to a "mesita" or small hill in 1850. The Mexican-American War had taken its toll on the Southwest, and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty decreed that land north of the Gila River and east of the Rio Grande be ceded to American control. The territory west of the Rio Grande and south of the Gila remained in Mexican hands,

⁴⁴ Robert H. Julyan, *The Place Names of New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 49; and Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 18–19.

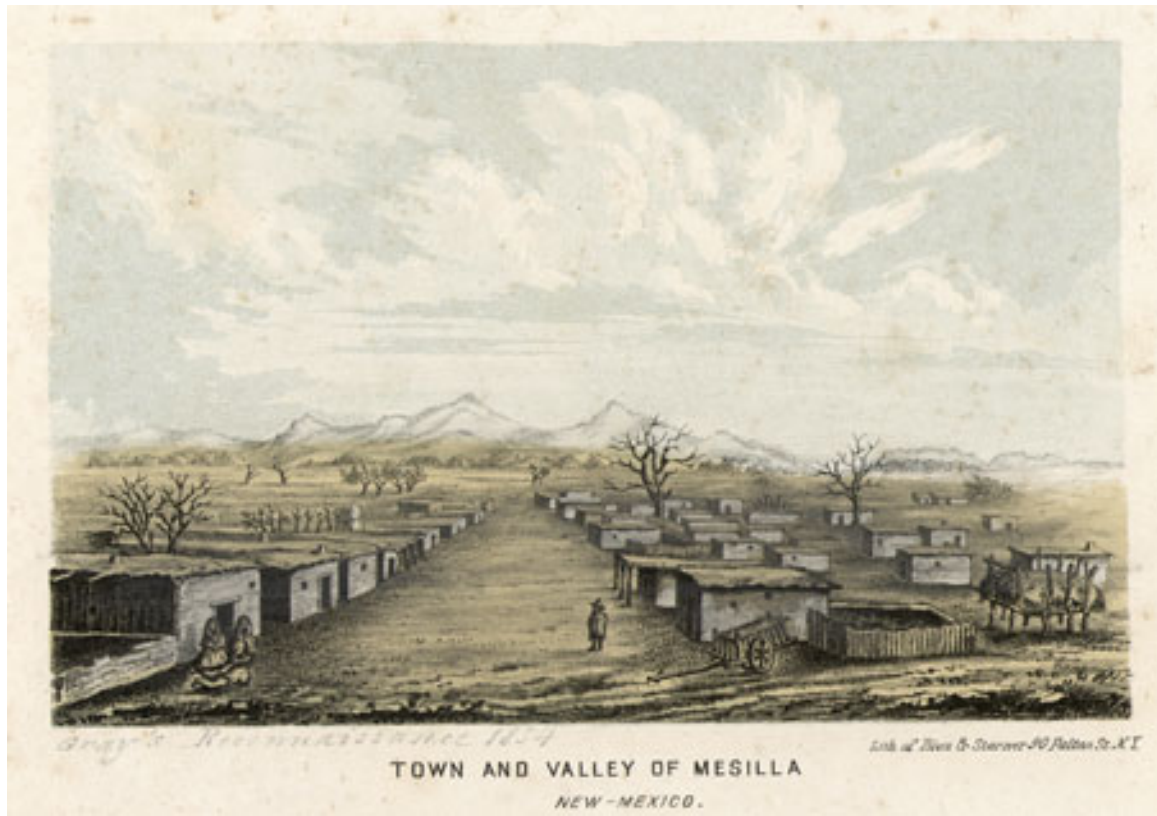
⁴⁵ Julyan, *The Place Names of New Mexico*, 112–13.

⁴⁶ Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 19–21; Hunner, *The Mesilla Valley*, 12; and Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, 32–33.

and a small number of settlers from Doña Ana moved to the Mexican side and established the village of Mesilla on the mesita.

Only a few years later, in 1853, Minister of the United States John Gadsden helped broker a ten-million-dollar deal between the United States and Mexico. The United States purchased a strip of land extending west from the Rio Grande. Mesilla, already a larger town compared to neighboring villages, now lay on the American side. The New Mexico territorial legislature saw the potential for Mesilla as a commercial crossroads and declared the town the county seat of the newly established Doña Ana County. In 1882, the county seat was transferred to Las Cruces. Despite the transition of the county seat, Mesilla continued to grow into the agricultural and commercial center of the southern Rio Grande valley. The territorial government strongly encouraged growth in the Mesilla valley. Annual fairs, fiestas, and tax incentives to promote commercial development helped create vibrant and growing communities. Mesilla was “the largest town between San Antonio and San Diego” and, by 1861, the village, with 2,420 residents, was second in New Mexico in population only to Santa Fe. Its satellite villages of Doña Ana and Las Cruces also continued to grow, but it took only a few decades and the help of the railroad for Las Cruces to catch up to and surpass Mesilla in growth and commercial importance.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 25–27; Hunner, *Las Cruces*, 8; Williams, *New Mexico in Maps*, 245; Hunner, *The Mesilla Valley*, 13; Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, 37; and Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Bulletin, *Las Cruces and Doña Ana County: A Pictorial History* (Las Cruces, N.Mex: Kilpatrick Newspapers, Inc. and D-Books Publishing, Inc.) 4–5.



Ill. 3-1. Early Lithograph of Mesilla by Carl Schuchard, ca. 1854

Schuchard traveled with a crew from the Texas Western Railroad Company that was surveying along the 32nd parallel for a transcontinental railroad route.

(Image courtesy Rio Grande Historical Collections, New Mexico State University Library, Las Cruces, New Mexico)

Mesilla and Doña Ana enjoyed steady growth, even with the establishment of the new town site Las Cruces, located south of Doña Ana and east of Mesilla. In order to ease overcrowding, Doña Ana's alcalde don Pablo Melendres urged U.S. troops stationed in his village to survey a new town site in 1849. Although there were already settlers living in the area, Lt. Delos B. Sackett surveyed and established the town on a grid pattern preferred by Anglo-Americans. The platted site, however, retained characteristics of the traditional Spanish town plan derived from the Laws of the Indies of 1573, which

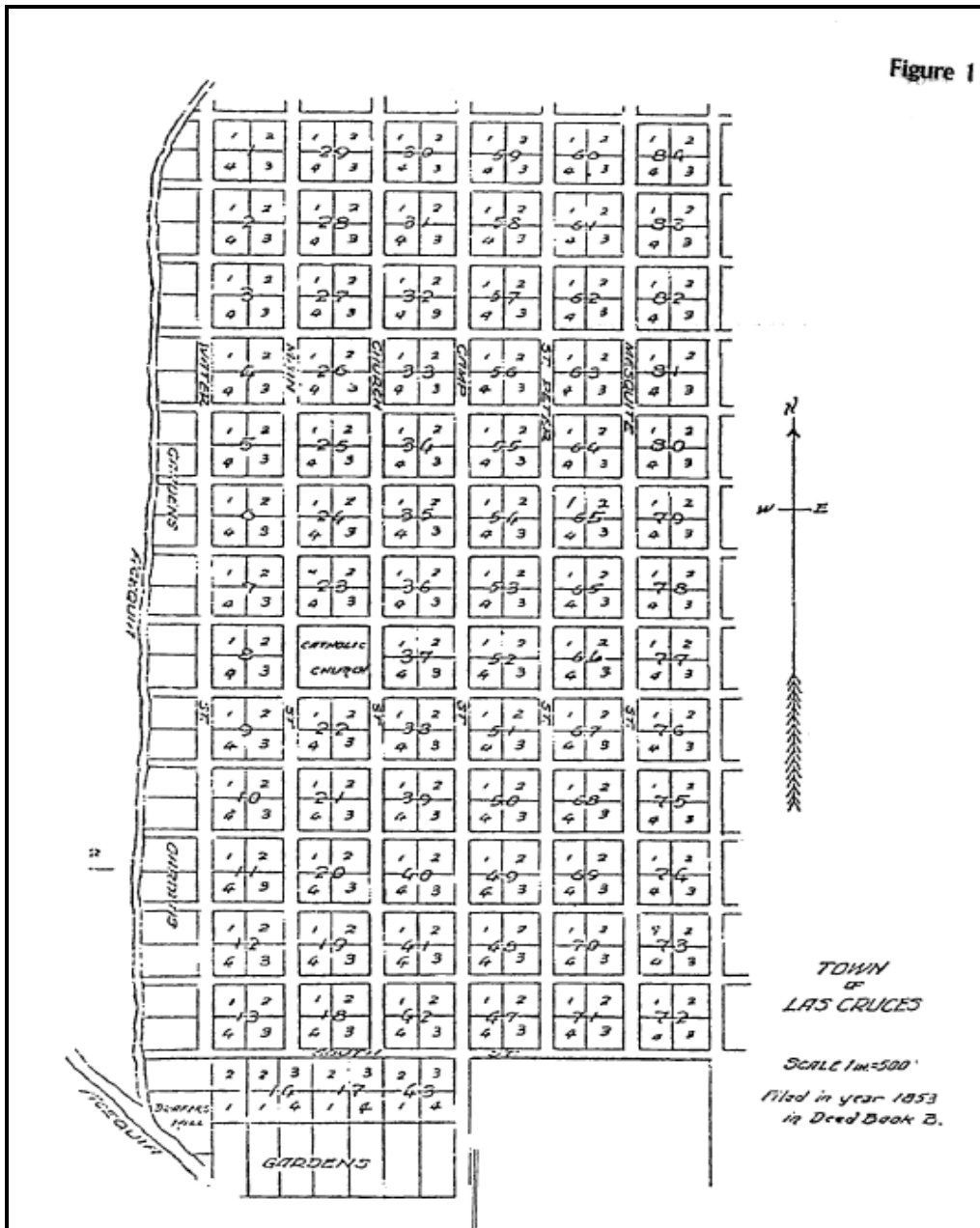
demonstrated the town's strong physical and cultural connection to its Hispanic heritage.⁴⁸

The location of the church plaza in Las Cruces was visible in the center of the platted diagram filed in 1853 (see map 1). The central location of the Catholic Church was a primary symbol to the Spanish colonial communities. Although the Laws of the Indies also dictated a grid pattern, Las Cruces's network of squared and rectangular parcels perhaps derived from the Anglo-American practice of platting over-sized lots on a grid for American cities. In the pre-railroad Romantic era of town planning in the United States, neighborhoods "mostly consisted of the simple platting of regular street grids with either square or, more commonly, rectangular blocks."⁴⁹ Anglo-American town planning and the use of the grid predate the Land Ordinance of 1785, in which men surveyed and measured for six-mile-square townships. This ordinance encouraged, however, the rigid system of rectangular and square platting as the United States expanded westward. Each township was subdivided into square-mile blocks and one hundred sixty-acre lots. This grid system, the application of Enlightenment-era geometry to land dispensation, allowed land to be evenly divided and subdivided regardless of topography, and it also lent itself easily to town and city planning and to the commodification and sale of undeveloped land. The town of Las Cruces was no exception to the era of pre-railroad town planning. The original town site represented a rational expression of the grid system with wide

⁴⁸ Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 28; Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, 37, 40; Cruz, *Let There Be Towns*, 4–7, 20–22; Willams, *New Mexico in Maps*, 245; and John W. Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 35, 43, 425–27.

⁴⁹ Wilson, "Southwest Architecture and Cultural Landscapes: Course Outline," University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 10; Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America*, 303, 425; and Alan Loomis, Gloria Ohland, et al., eds., *Los Angeles: Building the Polycentric Region* (Chicago: Congress for the New Urbanism, 2005), ix.

streets and over-sized lots that could easily subdivide into smaller and more numerous plots of land.⁵⁰



Ill. 3-2. Town of Las Cruces, 1853
 (Map courtesy City of Las Cruces 1999 Comprehensive Plan, "Land Use" [Las Cruces, N.Mex.: Department of City Planning, 1999], 1-5)

⁵⁰ Wilson, "Southwest Architecture and Cultural Landscapes: Course Outline," 14; Loomis, *Los Angeles: Building the Polycentric Region*, xxiii, xxxii; Reys, *Town Planning in Frontier America*, 303, 425-27, 429; and Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849-1999*, 29.



Ill. 3-3. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad Depot, Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1881

The wooden structure was later replaced with a new depot around 1910.

(*Photograph courtesy Jon Hunner, Las Cruces [Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2003], 36*)

The origin of the name Las Cruces has a rich and varied history and it is often difficult to decipher which story is true, or whether the true origin is a mix of the different variations. Most of the stories have similar conclusions that end in crosses erected in the sand dunes at the foothills of the Organ Mountains. For whom and for what reason those crosses were erected remains uncertain and has been mostly left to conjecture. Historian Jon Hunner gives one explanation for the origin of the name in his book *Las Cruces* (2003). Hunner noted the story of a massacre of travelers in a caravan on the Camino Real by Apaches, and the lone survivor of the attack “erected crosses to honor those killed in the sand dunes along the trail.”⁵¹ Travelers along the Royal Road had already noted the name Las Cruces prior to the establishment of an official town site. Susan Shelby Magoffin, an Anglo traveler, made note of the crosses and the name “El Pueblo del Jardin de Las Cruces,” or the City of the Garden of the Crosses, in 1846. The area has

⁵¹ Hunner, *Las Cruces*, 7.

also been referred to as “La Placita de las Cruces.”⁵² Despite the uncertainty surrounding the origin of the town’s name, Las Cruces soon grew from a sleepy satellite village of Mesilla, into a bustling and rapidly growing city within decades of its naissance.

The end of the Civil War ushered in a frenzied and frantic period of railroad construction, in attempts to develop a transcontinental route, so desired by Westerners and eastern cities. The territory of New Mexico participated and, by 1881, railroad engineers faced the major decision of where to locate important railroad lines and depots in the southern Rio Grande Valley. Mesilla seemed an obvious choice when officials with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad arrived to look for rights-of-way and a site to locate a depot. Mesilla residents resisted the overtures of the railroad, however, refusing to grant the right-of-way for the rail lines and depot. So the railroad looked east of Mesilla to its sleepy neighbor Las Cruces.⁵³

Land owners in Las Cruces could not pass up the opportunity the railroad offered. Don Jacinto Armijo and a few other residents created the Las Cruces Town Company and offered the AT&SF Railroad a right-of-way and land from his holdings for a depot west of the town site. The first train arrived in April 1881 at the depot and a few months later, the first passenger train pulled into Las Cruces. The Las Cruces Town Company diverted the course of development in the southern Rio Grand Valley with the establishment of a railroad hub in Las Cruces. Hunner wrote, “Less than a year later,

⁵² Ibid.; Julyan, *Place Names of New Mexico*, 197–98; and Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Bulletin, *Las Cruces and Doña Ana County*, 4.

⁵³ Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 49; Hunner, *Las Cruces*, 8; and Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, 58.

Mesilla had lost the county seat to Las Cruces and became a quiet satellite to the City of Crosses.”⁵⁴

The population of Las Cruces exploded from the 768 residents in 1860 to 2,340 inhabitants by 1890. This number far exceeded Mesilla, which had a population of 2,420 in 1860 that dwindled to 1,389 by the end of the nineteenth century. Las Cruces enjoyed tremendous growth in new residents after the arrival of the railroad, while the former county seat of Mesilla continued to shrink in population and retreat to its quiet and rural origins.⁵⁵

The town of Las Cruces grew steadily during the last decade of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century due in part to its proximity to rail lines and a rail depot, but growth was also attributed to the establishment of the first land grant college within its city limits. Territorial legislation passed in 1889 created a university in Albuquerque, a school of mines in Socorro, a mental institution in Las Vegas, a jail in Santa Fe, and an agricultural or land grant school in Las Cruces. Just one year prior, the first private Las Cruces College opened in 1888. The land grant university, however, soon replaced local resident and educator Hiram Hadley’s school.⁵⁶ In 1890, the Las Cruces College’s name changed to New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts. The school did not change its name again until 1960, when it became New Mexico State University.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 49–50; Hunner, *Las Cruces*, 8; and Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, 62–63.

⁵⁵ Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 52; Willams, *New Mexico in Maps*, 246; and Hunner, *Las Cruces*, 8.

⁵⁶ Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 86–88; Branigan Cultural Center, *Las Cruces: Crossroads of History Exhibit* (Las Cruces, N.Mex.: City of Las Cruces Museum System, 2009); and Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, 76–77.

⁵⁷ Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 86–88; Branigan Cultural Center, *Las Cruces: Crossroads of History Exhibit* (Las Cruces, N.Mex.: City of Las Cruces Museum System, 2009).

Throughout the continual growth and expansion of Las Cruces, residents could not escape the inclement weather the harsh desert climate offered. Flooding of the Rio Grande and regional drought were regular visitors throughout the centuries of human settlement in the Mesilla Valley, and residents viewed the unpredictability of the life-giving river as a hindrance to real economic progress in the area. The valley had already leapt to the forefront in southern New Mexico as a leading agricultural producer. Residents, however, believed real work needed to be done to protect the town against devastating flooding and stifling droughts. Life along the valley changed dramatically when the U.S. Congress passed the Reclamation Act of 1902 and created the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.⁵⁸

Interest in damming the Rio Grande dated back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Boosters and speculators attempted to cultivate support for building a dam close to El Paso that would protect the city from frequent flooding and also help divide water between the U.S. and Mexico. This ill-fated scheme failed, however, due to its potentially devastating effects on the Mesilla Valley. Had the El Paso boosters been successful, the dam would have inundated the entire agricultural valley north of the Texas city and would have destroyed forty thousand farmed acres and livelihoods along with it. El Paso's dreams of a dam soon wafted northward to Las Cruces resident Dr. Nathan Boyd. Establishing the Rio Grande Dam and Irrigation Company, he believed a dam should be built at Elephant Butte, 125 miles north of El Paso. Boyd secured over a million dollars from European stakeholders to invest in the dam project. With approval

⁵⁸ Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, 80; William E. Warne, *The Bureau of Reclamation* (Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1973; reprint, London: Westview Press, 1985); Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); and Ellis L. Armstrong, ed., "Irrigation," in *History of Public Works in the United States, 1776–1976* (Chicago: American Public Works Association, 1976).

from the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, he set out to complete the dam in five years. Litigation with El Paso boosters, however, halted any progress on the dam and by the time the courts ruled in Boyd's favor in 1903, his five-year construction deadline expired.⁵⁹

Despite Boyd's failure, the U.S. government retained interest in the idea of damming the Rio Grande at Elephant Butte. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation started construction in 1911 and completed the Elephant Butte Dam in 1916. Prices for farmland in the Mesilla Valley skyrocketed as speculators and newcomers to New Mexico bought up property. The types of crops farmed also changed. Self-sustaining farms that had previously grown vegetables, fruits, and alfalfa ploughed up their fields to plant more profitable crops like cotton. Cash crops became a necessity to retain ownership of land that previously sold for twenty to forty dollars an acre and now sold for over one hundred dollars an acre. Cotton obtained the status as a staple in the Mesilla Valley economy as a result of the new dam, and the population of Las Cruces and its satellite communities experienced tremendous growth from newcomers looking to make a living off of the now well-watered land.⁶⁰

New Mexico, inducted into statehood in 1912, experienced tremendous population growth between 1910 and 1970. The state population increased by 211%, from 327,301 in 1910 to 1,017,055 in 1970, twice the national rate during the same period. This extraordinary growth, however, pales in comparison to the increase in population in Doña Ana County, which grew from 12,893 in 1910 to 69,773 in 1970, an increase of 441% in the same six decades. Although dramatic, population growth in the

⁵⁹ Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, 90–92.

⁶⁰ Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 128; and Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, 93–94.

county was initially sporadic through World War I and the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Mesilla Valley experienced the bulk of its growth after the completion of the Elephant Butte Dam, between 1920 and 1930, and after World War II, with the establishment of the White Sands Missile Range and NASA testing facilities, between the late 1940s and early 1960s. Las Cruces's population, between 1920 and 1930, grew from 3,969 to 5,811, and between 1940 and 1960, increased from 8,385 to 12,325 residents.⁶¹

The first atomic bomb was exploded eighty miles to the north of the Mesilla Valley on 16 July 1945. Just one week prior to the detonation, the Army Corps of Engineers established the White Sands Proving Ground, where the U.S. government conducted secret research in the Tularosa Basin. The Proving Ground, later renamed the White Sands Missile Range in 1958, remained in operation after World War II and contributed to the exceptional growth of Las Cruces and its valley neighbors. Subcontractors and the Department of Defense considered Las Cruces “a critical housing area” needed to accommodate the thousands of government and contract employees working at nearby military installations. These new valley residents required new homes, vehicles, and places to buy goods and merchandise. The Las Cruces economy and city limits exploded, straining to contain and accommodate the new urban growth.⁶²

Doña Ana County's population transformed from 70% rural in 1910 to 66% urban in 1970, due to “farm mechanization and consolidation and in the large number of job

⁶¹ Department of Environmental and Social Services, *Background Information Report: For the Planning and Zoning of Las Cruces' Five Mile Extra-territorial Jurisdiction* (Las Cruces: City of Las Cruces, 1975), 25; Willams, *New Mexico in Maps*, 246; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *New Mexico County Totals*, Prepared by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C., <http://bber.unm.edu/demo/ctyshist.htm>.

⁶² Department of Environmental and Social Services, *Background Information Report: For the Planning and Zoning of Las Cruces' Five Mile Extra-territorial Jurisdiction*, 25; Harris, *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, 99–101, 105, 108; and Owen, *Las Cruces, New Mexico 1849–1999*, 182–88.

opportunities that developed in and around urban areas.”⁶³ The county’s and Las Cruces’s primarily urban population of the mid-twentieth century starkly contrasted with the small, rural origins of the Mesilla Valley settlements. The arrival of the railroad, the construction of the Elephant Butte dam upstream, and the establishment of government installations nearby all contributed to Las Cruces’s tremendous expansion. The city developed into the economic center of southern New Mexico. This growth had consequences, however. City planners attempted to control new development that resulted from the increasing population, but they could not stem the checkerboard pattern of settlement where “large areas of vacant land” exist between subdivisions, along the fringe of city limits, and within the city core. Planners’ remedies to counteract the little-controlled growth were sometimes worse than the problem of sprawl itself, and what plans they did have took decades to implement. By the second half of the twentieth century, Las Cruces transformed into a suburban paradise. City officials and planners today remain focused in addressing issues related to Las Cruces’s rapid urban and suburban growth during the mid- and late-twentieth century, and they continue to fight the rising tide of low-density sprawl and decline of their city core.⁶⁴

⁶³ Department of Environmental and Social Services, *Background Information Report: For the Planning and Zoning of Las Cruces’ Five Mile Extra-territorial Jurisdiction*, 3, 25.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Chapter 4

The Beginning of the End

Las Cruces seemed to be at the top of any chart that measured growth and progress by the early 1960s. The once sleepy, agricultural village experienced tremendous expansion in commerce, size, and population throughout the first half of the twentieth century. City officials and residents appeared optimistic that this development, fueled by federal and state expansions at the NASA Testing Facility, White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico State University, and the construction of the Elephant Butte Dam upstream, would continue to feed Las Cruces's growth. Like many Sunbelt cities across the country, Las Cruces reaped the rewards of the major cultural, economic, and institutional changes transpiring on a national level after World War II. The tide of change and influx of investment, however, carried unforeseen consequences. The rapid growth and development around the city pushed the heart of Las Cruces, the central business district, into a steep decline. Many buildings and businesses in downtown, already suffering from a lack of updated city services and renovation from property owners, began to show their age. The surge in new construction outside the city core, infused by newcomers to the area, spelled disaster for the already deteriorating and floundering downtown.

Municipal and state leaders across the country viewed growth as progress, and Las Cruces was no exception. Postwar city progress translated into the expansion of suburbanization. City officials welcomed new suburban development and did little to rein it in, making weak, ineffective attempts to control settlement on city outskirts and to

maintain the vital downtown economy. By the time Main Street business owners and residents realized there was a problem, it was too late. Retail sales and commerce had already shifted to suburban shopping centers and strip malls, and downtown merchants could no longer sustain their local businesses. The national trend toward infatuation with consumerism and with growth at any price cost Las Cruces more than just a central business district. The city lost its heart and character when leaders and residents allowed and encouraged growth outside of the city core while letting the downtown whither away from neglect and misguided revitalization plans.

As the U.S. industrial economy transformed into a personal, financial, and service oriented economy after World War II, Americans used the newly built interstate highways to flee their decaying industrial cities in search of their own brand-new, single-family detached homes and fully enclosed air-conditioned shopping centers. Government installations already in place that once assisted in the war effort and attracted sizeable populations to the sparsely populated West, Southwest, and South, now served as anchors for migrating families, drawing in newcomers while retaining those who had moved during the war.⁶⁵

Las Cruces was one of these Sunbelt cities that transformed from a small farming town into a magnet for government investment. Although a much smaller Sunbelt city compared to Phoenix, Los Angeles, Houston, or even Albuquerque and Amarillo, Las Cruces, like its larger counterparts, “experienced strong job growth” and attracted “households from the declining industrial Northeast.” According to Robert A. Beauregard: “[The] Sunbelt economy had a manufacturing component, particularly in

⁶⁵ Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (1981; repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 17-20; and Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 17–20.

aerospace and semiconductors, [but] it also diversified in agribusiness, oil, real estate, and leisure activities.” Beauregard believes Sunbelt cities “benefited greatly from defense spending and other federal outlays such as highway funds.”⁶⁶ Carl Abbott also states in *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (1987) that national defense, as a growth industry, had a disproportionate impact on Sunbelt cities. New Mexico, in particular, became dependent on the defense budget. Abbott compares the establishment of government installations to nineteenth-century railroad competitions and county seat wars: “Local promotional efforts and political pull influenced decisions to build such facilities.”⁶⁷ The White Sands Missile Range and the NASA Testing Facility, located near the Organ Mountains to the east of town, brought in thousands of employees who otherwise would never have settled in Las Cruces. These government installations complemented the increase in agricultural production the Mesilla Valley experienced after the completion of the Elephant Butte Dam.⁶⁸ Las Cruces benefited greatly from a prosperous postwar economy. This prosperity would come, however, at the cost of losing the city’s once-thriving central business district.

⁶⁶ Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 29.

⁶⁷ Abbott, *The New Urban America*, 18.

⁶⁸ Las Cruces, New Mexico, Planning and Zoning Commission, *Comprehensive Plan: Las Cruces, New Mexico* (St. Louis, Mo.: Prepared by Harland Bartholomew and Associates, Planners, Engineers, Landscape Architects, 1968), 2, 3, 4.



Ill. 4-1. Looking North, Main Street, Las Cruces, New Mexico
(*Photograph courtesy Jon Hunner, Las Cruces [Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia, 2003], p. 47*)



Ill. 4-2. Downtown Main Street, Las Cruces, New Mexico, ca. 1930s
(*Photograph courtesy Jon Hunner, Las Cruces [Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia, 2003], p. 74*)

Prior to the 1960s, Las Cruces's central business district resembled other small-town business cores. The compact center of town, dissected by Main Street, was the heart of Doña Ana County. The two-lane street bisecting the closely spaced buildings offered diagonal on-street parking on either side. There was no long walk through a desolate parking lot. Parking on the street provided quick access to store fronts that abutted the main thoroughfare with small setbacks. Illustrations 1 and 2 demonstrate the strong patronage downtown businesses once experienced prior to and immediately after the Second World War. These early-twentieth-century photographs show the busy thoroughfare, Main Street, filled with vehicles parked along the sidewalks or passing through downtown. Although automobiles dominate the photographs, downtown Las Cruces was a pedestrian-friendly environment that encouraged shoppers to walk along Main Street and peer or venture into the shops. The large store-front windows, wide sidewalks, and awning-covered building entrances, in illustration 2, beckoned residents to park their cars and patronize the local businesses. Unlike the postwar mall or shopping center with their vast, dangerous parking lots, oversized buildings crammed with shops, and wide streets with little or no sidewalks, the early-nineteenth-century Las Cruces downtown was a personable environment that did not overwhelm patrons. The scale of the buildings, walkways, and roads encouraged pedestrian activity, unlike the car-oriented malls.

Well-known urban planner Saco R. DeBoer developed a city plan for Las Cruces in 1955. The plan reiterated the importance of downtown: "The central business district, on the zoning plan called the CB District, is the heart of the city. All arteries of the traffic feed into it and pump out of it over the major traffic streets. The comparison might be

continued because a city is a living entity, something that throbs with life, something that can be fed and encouraged or hurt and discouraged.”⁶⁹ According to DeBoer, the central business district was “historically not only the place for shopping but, also, the place for social meeting.”⁷⁰ Downtown Las Cruces provided the space for and supported local business and industry; and it represented the financial, cultural, and social center of the city.

The city commissioned the DeBoer plan during a time of awakening in the urban-planning movement. Starting in the 1930s and 1940s, city leaders across the United States embraced comprehensive plans as a necessity for maintaining strong urban growth and services. City planning had already become a career for a select few, like famed planner Harland Bartholomew, in the early 1900s, but after World War II, many cities recognized their need for a comprehensive plan that included population distribution and density studies, and guided principles in controlling growth and maintaining city services.⁷¹ Las Cruces, like many rapidly growing towns, blossomed from a tiny village to a bustling city within decades. The accelerated change in urban landscape and population prompted city leaders to attempt controlling and setting standards for land use. Although Las Cruces’s first zoning code passed in 1930, prior land use was often determined by developers who bought up large tracts of land. The private sector decided the value of property and what it would be used for before it became apparent that community members should work together to establish common land-use regulations. The first official attempt at

⁶⁹ S. R. DeBoer and Co., *A City Plan for Las Cruces, New Mexico: Summary and Conclusions, 1955* (Denver, Colo.: City Planning Consultants, 1955), 100.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Saco R. DeBoer, *Shopping Districts* (Washington, D.C.: American Planning and Civic Association, 1937), 4–5; and Eldridge Lovelace, *Harland Bartholomew: His Contributions to American Urban Planning* (Urbana: University of Illinois Office of Printing Services, 1993), 5–10, 33, 43.

controlling development came in 1930 with the passage of the first zoning code, which established five zoning districts: heavy and light industrial, commercial, residential, and unrestricted.⁷² To an urban planner, zoning “was the means for bringing some order to the city.” To private interests, however, the attempt to control growth “was an annoying interference with their freedom to earn a living, or become wealthy.” Despite opposition from investors and some property owners, cities like Las Cruces welcomed zoning and comprehensive plans by the mid-twentieth century “to bring order into the chaos that was the American city building process.”⁷³



Ill. 4-3. Main Street, Las Cruces, New Mexico, ca. 1950s

This image depicts an active downtown, with regular pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and a thriving business district.

(Photograph courtesy Jon Hunner, Las Cruces [Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia, 2003], p. 104)

⁷² Las Cruces, N.M., *City of Las Cruces 1999 Comprehensive Plan*, “Land Use,” (Las Cruces, NM: Department of City Planning, 1999), 1–10.

⁷³ Lovelace, *Harland Bartholomew*, 31–33.

After World War II, the central business district ceased to fulfill the needs of the growing car-oriented, suburban-metropolitan population. Las Cruces experienced an influx of new residents infatuated with automobiles. A booming postwar economy offered Americans unprecedented disposable income, much of which they spent on vehicles that encouraged the decentralization of populations and the expansion of city limits. Beauregard states: “The railroad reinforced the forces of centralization and concentration; the automobile weakened them. . . . Roads and highways are more flexible and ubiquitous in their location. Stores, factories, and homes can be dispersed and still have access to places where jobs and services are abundant.”⁷⁴ The growing number of cars and trucks on the roads in Las Cruces formed a destructive pattern in city development. The cars overcrowded the limited parking and streets in the city core, therefore discouraging patronage of downtown shops. Meanwhile, new settlement along the outlying rim of the city and at unreasonable walking distances to jobs and neighborhood stores left suburban residents with little choice but to purchase and use cars to travel around the city. This automobile dependence was reflected in Main Street merchants’ concerns regarding the future of their businesses. Most of the merchants favored restructuring downtown to increase parking and easing traffic congestion by reconfiguring pairs of two-way streets into one-ways.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 57.

⁷⁵ “What’s Happening to Main Street? Businessmen Comment on Condition of Business Here,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 1 January 1964, pp. 1, 12; “How Come Nobody’s Home in Downtown Las Cruces Lately?” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 1 January 1964, p. 2; “Merchants Who Moved Give Reasons—Results,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 23 January 1964, pp. 1, 7; Mark S. Foster, “The Western Response to Urban Transportation: A Tale of Three Cities, 1900–1945,” in *The Urban West*, ed. Gerald D. Nash (Manhattan, Kan.: Sunflower University Press, 1979), 31–32; Arthur R. Gómez, *Quest for the Golden Circle: The Four Corners and the Metropolitan West, 1945–1970* (repr., Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 33; and Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940–1985* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 96–98.

Merchants in downtown Las Cruces realized that the adoption of one to two automobiles per family spelled trouble for their businesses. The number of cars in Doña Ana County boomed during the early 1960s. The county population of over sixty-thousand inhabitants retained twenty-two thousand vehicles by 1964. The *Las Cruces Citizen* reported the influx of automobiles: “Doña Ana County ranks high in automobile ownership. The buying wave of the past few years has carried the local population to a new record.” In 1964 there were 133 cars in the county for every 100 families. This statistic surpassed New Mexico’s average of 121 automobiles per 100 households, and the U.S. average of 120 vehicles per 100 families. Not only did Las Cruces and county residents purchase more cars, the vehicles they purchased were bigger and more luxurious than the average automobile before the war. Cars and trucks in operation in Doña Ana County increased from twenty-one thousand in 1960 to twenty-two thousand in 1964, a 4.4% gain. To put car ownership in perspective, the total population in the county grew from 59,948 residents in 1960 to 69,773 in 1970; and Las Cruces with 29,367 inhabitants in 1960, expanded to 38,500 in 1966. The large number of vehicles on the road quickly overwhelmed the central business district and provided little incentive for suburbanites, already inclined to shop at strip malls and shopping centers, to purchase goods downtown.⁷⁶

Las Cruces, like many other cities throughout the Sunbelt region of the United States, fell victim to its own success. The prosperity of local and regional economies, fed by suburbanization, came with the price of urban decentralization. By the end of the

⁷⁶ “Large Car Population in County: 22,000 Cars Are Registered,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 17 December 1964; Williams, *New Mexico in Maps*, 246; and Richard L. Forstall, ed., *Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900–1990* (Washington, D.C.: Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995), <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/nm190090.txt>; and Las Cruces, New Mexico, Planning and Zoning Commission, *Comprehensive Plan: Las Cruces, New Mexico* (1968), 5.

1940s, commentators noticed a major national trend of people moving away from large, industrial cities and central city cores, and into new suburban developments.⁷⁷ In Las Cruces, officials welcomed the postwar growth. The trend toward settlement on the outskirts of town may have started in the 1940s, but city leaders and businessmen only took notice and began to question the effects of this outward growth in the early 1960s. Downtown merchants felt the sting of progress first. Harland Bartholomew, whom the city of Las Cruces commissioned to generate a comprehensive plan in 1968, warned: “The whole financial structure of cities, as well as the investments of countless individuals and business firms is in jeopardy because of what is called ‘decentralization.’” Bartholomew, like many city leaders, realized by the late 1940s and 1950s that suburbanization and decentralization was draining city cores, and therefore city treasuries, of revenue essential to city services and to the quality of life officials once boasted of.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 4–5, 10.

⁷⁸ Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 13, 16; and Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 30–31.



Ill. 4-4. View of Las Cruces and the Organ Mountains, 1930

This photograph reflects the agricultural landscape around Las Cruces before suburban growth stretched as far as the mountains in the background.

(Photograph courtesy Branigan Memorial Library Collection, collection #ms0001, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico, photograph #A76-157/28)

The *Las Cruces Citizen* laid to rest any doubt as to what was happening to the town's once-thriving Main Street. In January 1964, the newspaper published back-to-back articles titled "What's Happening to Main Street?" and "How Come Nobody's Home in Downtown Las Cruces Lately?" In these articles local merchants contended that the run-down and outdated buildings, lack of adequate parking, and traffic congestion in the central business district could not compete with the new, spacious shopping centers and massive parking lots sprouting up on the outskirts of the city and along major intersections. The businessmen interviewed in the article appeared worried about the decline of downtown Las Cruces. But they believed that this downturn was temporary if only they could renovate commercial buildings, ease traffic problems, and create more

parking.⁷⁹ Urban renewal emerged as a plausible solution for these businessmen in addressing these development and economic issues.

The underlying optimism of merchants in the recovery of Main Street belied the real problems occurring not just in Las Cruces but in cities across the country. Not even the prosperity engulfing the Sunbelt could hide the lack of investment and renovation that had stricken central-city cores and the devastating effect of decentralization. The decline of central business districts occurred prior to post-1945 suburbanization.⁸⁰ The lack of upkeep and investment in downtown properties was echoed in the *Las Cruces Citizen's* interviews with merchants frustrated with penurious landlords and outdated infrastructure.⁸¹ Landlords charged the store owners rents that were probably justified when business was up, but, by the early 1960s, merchants were feeling the financial pinch. Not only were rents high, but the buildings were deteriorating and tenants perceived the property owners as resistant to refurbishing the aging structures.⁸²

For many store owners, building on undeveloped property outside of the city core to regain much of their lost business was cheaper than renting space downtown where sales were declining and rents were rising. One local businessman, Mannie Blumkin of Mannie's TV and Radio shop, explained: "Parking was very important and then I had to decide whether to renew a lease or to build on my own. For just a little more than the lease cost, I found that I could build, own, and have something with which I could look to

⁷⁹ "What's Happening to Main Street? Businessmen Comment on Condition of Business Here," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 1 January 1964, pp. 1, 12; and "How Come Nobody's Home in Downtown Las Cruces Lately?" *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 1 January 1964, p. 2.

⁸⁰ Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 35, 58; and Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 29–35.

⁸¹ "Merchants Who Moved Give Reasons—Results," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 23 January 1964, pp. 1, 7.

⁸² "What's Happening to Main Street? Businessmen Comment on Condition of Business Here," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 1 January 1964, pp. 1, 12; and "Merchants Who Moved Give Reasons—Results," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 23 January 1964, pp. 1, 7.

the future with.” He went on to say, “As for business, I am doing three times as much business as I was down there.”⁸³ Struggling to maintain their shops under the burden of high rent and declining business, merchants followed the migration of economic prosperity from the downtown to the suburbs of Las Cruces, just as others had across the country.

During the 1960s, Las Cruces was a conflicted city. Although businesses started to leave downtown, many merchants seemed hopeful and confident the drop in sales was a temporary setback. Shop owners and the city welcomed any new improvements to Main Street as the remedy to what was ailing the central business district. The *Las Cruces Citizen* reported on the reconfiguring of roads around the city core into one-way streets but revealed a growing lack of confidence among merchants and residents that downtown business would return: “‘This is an outgrowth of the desire of downtown merchants’ wish to stop the flight of business to outlying areas, or out of town completely,’ as Mayor [T. J.] Graham said. ‘It will create 70 new parking spaces, and will speed up traffic flow so that people can accomplish their business with less waste of time.’”⁸⁴ Mayor Graham and the City of Las Cruces held meetings with residents to address downtown merchants’ concerns. City leaders met with representatives of the Housing and Home Finance Administration and supported the application for federal aid. These municipal efforts, however, were only stop-gap measures that did little to rid Main Street of the decay eating away at its patronage and revenue.⁸⁵

⁸³ “Merchants Who Moved Give Reasons—Results,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 23 January 1964, p. 1.

⁸⁴ “Streets to Be One-Way In About Two Months,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 10 September 1964, pp. 1, 8; and “Main Street’s New Changes to Match Other Areas,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 25 June 1964, p. 1.

⁸⁵ “Downtown Improvement Meet Held,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 29 April 1965, p. 10.

Despite Graham's assurance that realigning the roads would stop the hemorrhage of private and city revenue from downtown Las Cruces, city leaders appeared to be either ambivalent toward or struggling with what to do about Main Street. They seemed to be unsure or hesitant about whether to redirect resources needed for the ever-increasing outward growth of the city or whether to commit money to renovate utilities and roads in the city core, which fewer and fewer residents utilized. At the same time the city proposed plans to address the concerns of downtown merchants, the Zoning Commission continued to approve subdivision proposals and negotiate with developers on the extension of costly utilities and infrastructure to outlying areas.⁸⁶ The commission considered two subdivision plans in July 1965. One plan, part of an extension of Telshor Hills, would add forty-one new acres to forty-three lots already platted. The second proposal, also an extension of an existing subdivision, called for adding Las Alturas Estates, one hundred acres and thirty-one large building tracts, to the existing Las Alturas Subdivision. Both subdivisions and their proposed additions were located east of Las Cruces's city core, and across the relatively new Interstate 25.⁸⁷

Mayor Graham and city leaders' uncertainty or ambivalence toward the plight of the central business district did a disservice to merchants already unsure of their future on Main Street. At the same meeting during which the Zoning Commission considered proposals for new subdivisions in outlying areas, the mayor and the City of Las Cruces asked the New Mexico State Highway Department and Bureau of Public Roads to consider adding more overpasses and frontage roadway in the Interstate 25 link that was

⁸⁶ "Zone Board to Study Subdivision Proposals," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 29 July 1965, p. 10; and "Subdivison Zoning Proposal Given Final Approval," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 19 August 1965, p. 1.

⁸⁷ "Zone Board to Study Subdivision Proposals," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 29 July 1965, p. 10; and "Subdivison Zoning Proposal Given Final Approval," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 19 August 1965, p. 1.

“soon to be built to accommodate traffic in and out of such areas as these now proposed.” Graham also notified the Highway Commission that Las Cruces would “continue to grow Eastward and . . . city development would be choked if width, extent, and length of frontage roads were insufficient to take care of developing needs.”⁸⁸ City officials were probably well aware that investment in new suburban outgrowth was not only cheaper for developers and residents, but also less risky for the city. The municipality was sure to reap the rewards of new tax revenue from the development of the suburbanization of outlying areas. On the other hand, investment in the city core was costly, and not guaranteed to work. The potential risk and loss would be too much for Las Cruces to bear on its own. Cities like Las Cruces maintained a “bias for low-density, developer-driven urbanization, and new initiatives for older cities were scarce.”⁸⁹ Only with the federal government bearing most of the burden, would the city finally turn toward downtown and try to stop and reverse its decline.

Although the city supported suburban outgrowth, many residents vocalized their frustrations with the lack of planning and infrastructure needed to support new subdivisions. Las Cruces suffered from devastating flooding during the 1960s and many attributed the growing problem of flood control to poorly-planned suburban growth that funneled rain water into town: “Today flood control is a real problem that grows more difficult each day. Each new subdivision and construction project compounds the problem further. Neighbor is flooding neighbor. Sanitation is a grave problem with some 50,000 people in greater Las Cruces living so close to one another. . . . We have only moved the water to other areas and increased the speed with which it runs off by forcing

⁸⁸ “Zone Board to Study Subdivision Proposals,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Citizen*, 29 July 1965, p. 10.

⁸⁹ Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 59–60; and Editorial, “It Ain’t Gonna Rain No More,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 25 August 1967.

it downhill on paved streets in concentrated streams confined by curbs.” One citizen accused the city of shortsightedness and she demanded a halt to any further development until the flood control problem was addressed. The mayor and city commissioners defended their pro-subdivision approach by claiming growth was progress and with expansion comes “growing pains.” Mayor Graham responded to these concerns by claiming it would be difficult to tell the people of Las Cruces that “we can no longer grow until we can control floods.” The municipal response was typical in an era in city planning that favored expansion without confronting the consequences of uninhibited development.⁹⁰

For Las Cruces, and many western cities, the choice to encourage decentralization and suburbanization was a logical one. Sunbelt cities tended to spread outwards, unlike the large northeastern and midwestern Rustbelt metropolitan regions that grew upwards. According to historian Mark S. Foster, city leaders consciously made an effort to promote decentralized, low-density development in order to avoid “the density, squalor, and ugliness of many older Eastern cities.”⁹¹ In 1955, urban planner DeBoer endorsed the view that crowding was not economical or efficient and “horizontal development had beneficial side-effects” such as a decrease in traffic congestion downtown.⁹² Annexation was a tool commonly utilized by many Sunbelt cities who wished to expand horizontally and to hold on to suburban populations, bringing them into their population rolls and

⁹⁰ “City Will Make Application for \$125,000 Flood Grant,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 22 August 1967.

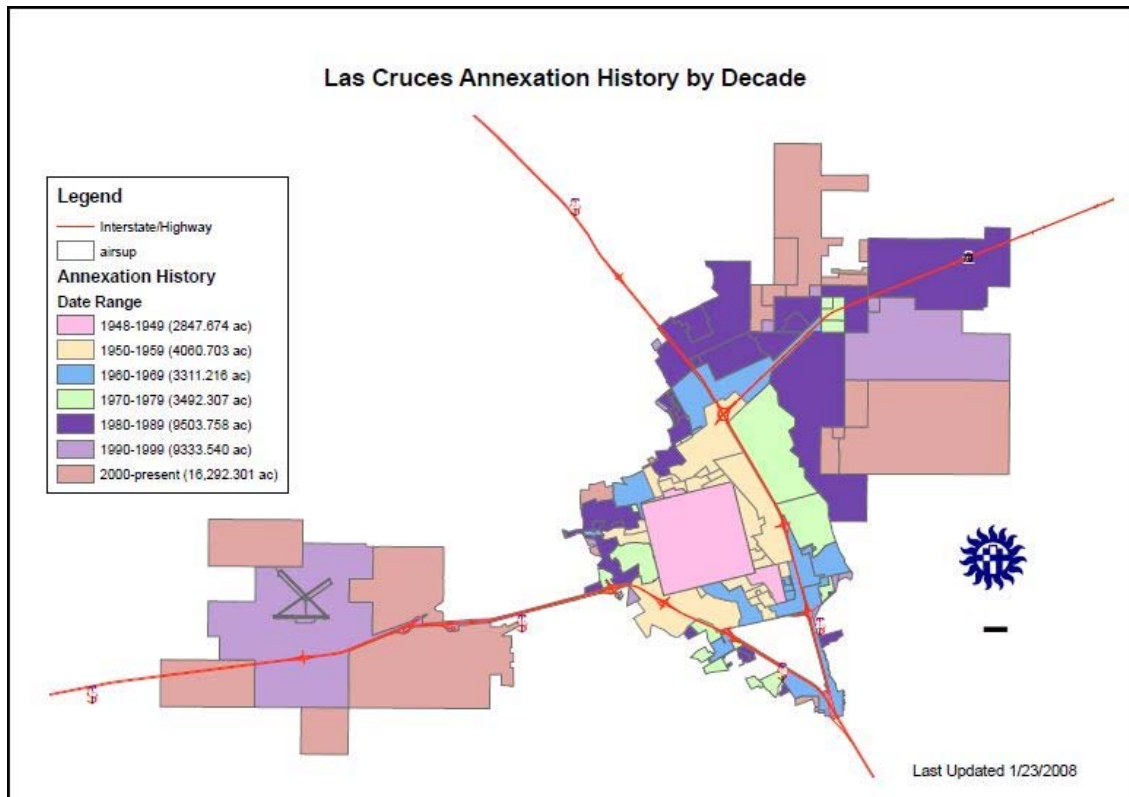
⁹¹ Foster, “The Western Response to Urban Transportation,” 32.

⁹² Foster, “The Western Response to Urban Transportation,” 32; and DeBoer and Co., *A City Plan for Las Cruces, New Mexico: Summary and Conclusions, 1955*.

increasing their tax base.⁹³ Similar to Tucson and Albuquerque, Las Cruces's city limits began to creep outward in the 1940s and 1950s.

Below is a diagram chronicling Las Cruces's annexation of land from 1948 to 2008. A jump in annexation began in 1948, when city leaders acquired close to three thousand acres of land just in one year alone. From 1950 to 1959, Las Cruces grew by another four thousand acres, and during the following two decades the city's land holdings increased by nearly eight thousand acres. Most of the annexations through the 1970s occurred in the eastern part of the city. Although this expansion pales in comparison to the annexations in the 1980s and 1990s, which tripled that of any decade before, Las Cruces officials used the extension of city limits to exert some control over a growing suburban population that resided outside the purview of city services and taxes. Despite the toll on the downtown core, city leaders focused their energy and resources on grappling with growth in the outskirts of town and encouraging low-density development, even with the need to extend costly municipal utilities and services.

⁹³ Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America*, 171.



Ill. 4-5. History of Annexation in Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1948-2008
(Illustration courtesy City of Las Cruces Community Development-Planning Department, Las Cruces, New Mexico, 2008)

Although DeBoer, like other planners, encouraged low-density development, he also believed that a strong urban core provided the lifeblood for cities. That conflict was apparent in the city plan he created for Las Cruces. DeBoer warned city leaders of the looming competition that suburban development would pose for the downtown. In his plan, he encouraged the city to make room for more parking and expansion of businesses, by restricting land use in the central business district; create off-street parking spaces; slow traffic; and widen sidewalks: “The Central Business District today must, however, provide off-street parking space if it is to survive.” DeBoer’s plan did not just allude to the potential for a decline in downtown in 1955 but made very clear to city leaders that

survival was impossible if Las Cruces's Main Street did not change and become more suburban friendly.⁹⁴

That conflict was common among city leaders and even urban planners in the postwar urban landscape and was indicative of the complacency towards suburbanization and its effects on established city cores. According to Beauregard, this dilemma was the result of cultural attitudes and institutional tendencies that played important roles in the dynamics of suburban growth and urban decline.⁹⁵ He uses the term “parasitic urbanization” to describe the progress suburbs experienced at the cost of disinvestment and decline in urban regions. Beauregard attributes this parasitic urbanization to American and city leaders' ambivalence toward cities and romantic embrace of semirural living. He also states there was a “reluctance of state and federal governments to regulate suburbanization and redirect development to faltering cities.” Also fueling the problem was a lack of interest of investors and developers in the city “compared to their infatuation with the suburban frontier;” building outward was cheaper.⁹⁶ These institutional factors explain city leaders' disingenuous commitment to developing solid and effective plans for the revitalization of downtown Las Cruces, despite ample warnings from DeBoer in his city plan in 1955.

Main Street Las Cruces stood little chance of surviving the new suburban form of settlement, without the aid of city, state, or federal government. The United States' love of suburbs and the automobile, and the lack of regard for traditional, pedestrian-oriented business districts encouraged the abandonment of city cores, including Las Cruces's ailing urban center. Private investors failed to see the potential and property owners could

⁹⁴ DeBoer and Co., *A City Plan for Las Cruces, New Mexico*, 100–3.

⁹⁵ Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 71.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

not be persuaded to refurbish their aging downtown buildings. Both the city and private land developers preferred the lower risk and higher profitability of expansion in outlying regions of the city. By the early 1960s, Main Street merchants grew alarmed at the sobering loss of revenue and began calling for municipal action. City leaders, however, offered only stop-gap measures to combat the decline. Federal aid and a newly established Urban Renewal Agency in Las Cruces would become the key to undertaking the massive project of revitalizing the downtown in the second half of the decade.

Chapter 5

Be Careful What You Wish For

Urban renewal is a means of revitalizing and modernizing our city and eliminating blight and deterioration through the redevelopment or rehabilitation of declining areas. The Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency has officially designated the section where you are located as the DOWNTOWN URBAN RENEWAL PROJECT N. MEX. R-4, an urban renewal area to be redeveloped and rehabilitated with financial assistance from the United States Government. Generally the area is bounded by Lohman Avenue to the South; Campo Street to the East; Picacho Avenue to the North and Water Street to the West. . . . If your building is among those that will have to be vacated, it will be necessary for you to consider a move to another location. However, every occupant will be given as much advance notice as possible to the time the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency expects to require possession of the property, and no one lawfully occupying property within the project area will be required to surrender possession without at least 90 days written notice from the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency of the date on which possession will be required. . . . Please be assured that we will try to help you find other facilities suitable to your needs and requirements and that we will provide other aids and services to ease problems of relocation that you may encounter.

—Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency

During the summer of 1968, the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency sent out notices like the one above to business and property owners who lived and worked within a ninety-four-acre area that encompassed thirty-three full blocks and ten partial blocks in

the Las Cruces town core. The city, at the behest of its residents, formed the agency to address local distress over the deteriorating business center and to revitalize the downtown area. The Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency (LCURA), formed by 1960, and the City Advisory Committee to Urban Studies (CACTUS), formed in 1966, took note of citizens' fears of potential losses in their businesses and homes through decline and condemnation. The city and LCURA emphasized and capitalized on these worries to push through its renewal plan, all while officials continued to annex land and encourage low-density suburban growth on the outskirts of municipal boundaries. City leaders also used the threat of crime, disease, and lower property values in blighted areas to help move the urban renewal project forward. If land owners did not subscribe to this fear, the city tried to encourage the sale of private property and relocation by pointing out the benefits of living and working in newer neighborhoods around town. Condemnation and eminent domain remained the last option for residents who refused the city's offers to purchase parcels. As the project progressed, many property owners in the urban renewal district, faced with few options, grew more frustrated and disillusioned with government involvement in the revitalization of their downtown. Despite the a local upwelling of opposition to urban renewal and the city's involvement, Las Cruces officials continued with the plans, and everyone hoped for a quick close to the project.

Through each step of plan development, and property appraisal, condemnation, acquisition, and demolition, the agency used stern letters and notices, such as the one quoted above, and threats of condemnation and court proceedings to quiet residents' and property owners' concerns with the renewal project. To provide some assurance to Las Cruces, the renewal agency stated at the end of a notice to business owners: "We would

like to repeat that we want to help you move to a new location better than the one you have. Studies have shown that many business concerns have bettered themselves and increased their business by moving to a well-selected new location. In addition, moving may give you a chance to acquire or build improved facilities. We want to cooperate with you, so don't hesitate to call upon us."⁹⁷ Many central business district (CBD) inhabitants and merchants feared what would happen if no action was taken to address the dilapidated state of their downtown. However, they soon began to fear the true cost of city and federal government intervention.

Government involvement, whether local, state, or federal, in the acquisition of private property was and remains today a taboo subject, usually treated with unease by both the public agency and citizens. Under the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Urban Renewal umbrella, the city of Las Cruces and the LCURA stretched the long arm of government into the personal lives of many residents. The economic class, age, and, to some extent, racial composition of those living and working within the project area made the long process of redevelopment of the central business district all the more complicated. The LCURA and the Relocation Department within the agency encountered not only substandard buildings and housing, but also elderly and poor residents on fixed incomes, who inevitably would be dramatically impacted by a government takeover of and the forced removal from their properties. Many merchants, barely holding on already, chose to close their doors for good instead of relocating. Still

⁹⁷ Ibid., 7; and "Villa Mora Urban Renewal Project," *Doña Ana County (N.Mex.) Record*, 21 July 1960. The epigraph in this chapter is drawn from Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency, "Informational Statement for Business Concerns and Nonprofit Organizations and Other Nonresidential Establishments," July 1968, p.1, box 24, Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library, Las Cruces, New Mexico [hereafter LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library].

others moved their businesses outside downtown, never to return to the city core even after completion of the revitalization program. Those living within the ninety-four-acre project area, with their homes demolished, could not return. Urban renewal left an empty space and a tinge of bitterness in the hearts of Las Cruces, symbolized by the vast, barren parking lots that replaced hundreds of businesses and homes.

Toward the mid-1960s citizens, property owners, merchants, and municipal leaders in Las Cruces believed their small city was facing a crisis. Suburbanization endangered the sustainability of the central business district. Like other municipalities across the country, the residents and city officials shared their fear of decentralization, and the siphoning of business and revenue to the suburbs. Prior to and after World War II, U.S. planners saw sprawl and disinvestment in city cores as a disease that had to be treated before the effects became permanent.⁹⁸ While there remained a strong infatuation with suburbia and the pastoral and scenic life it represented, municipalities formed a new awareness of the detrimental effects sprawl had on central cities. Planners and municipal leaders nationwide recognized the devastating impact of metropolitan growth beyond the urban core on city coffers. Distinguished land-use planner Harland Bartholomew warned, “The whole financial structure of cities, as well as the investments of countless individuals and business firms is in jeopardy because of what is called ‘decentralization.’”⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (1981; repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 170.

⁹⁹ Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940–1985* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 13 (quotation), 16; Abbott, *The New Urban America*, 171; and Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 35–40.

The federal government took note of the vicious circle in which cities found themselves. The middle-class flight from city cores, with the tax base and businesses following, left behind urban blight and deteriorating infrastructure and created a gap in urban tax revenue, which further hampered the ability of municipalities to address degrading public services in the central business district. The federal government attempted to aid distressed cities with the passage of the Wagner-Ellender-Taft Housing Act of 1949. The law mandated that although urban redevelopment was a municipal responsibility, federal assistance was now available to “local agencies for the assembly, clearance, site preparation, and sale or lease of land for ‘predominantly residential uses’ to private developers or housing authorities.”¹⁰⁰ The act laid the foundation for the establishment of urban renewal programs across the country as it expanded over the next two decades to encompass residential, commercial, and civic sites.

Under the initial law, the federal government would cover two-thirds of the cost to purchase and clear blighted properties, with the municipalities paying for the remaining costs associated with the projects. Cities also had access to grants to aid slum clearance.¹⁰¹ The initial impact of this new program was minimal until the late 1950s, when new provisions expanded its funding and uses. By 1959, federal capital-grant funds up to twenty percent could be applied to nonresidential projects, and funding flowed more freely through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) into urban renewal programs. From 1958 to 1963, city planners developed optimistic,

¹⁰⁰ Abbott, *The New Urban America*, 149; Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 107; and Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 80–81.

¹⁰¹ Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 107.

large-scale projects to revitalize downtowns, for federal urban renewal funds, which initially trickled, now poured out of Washington, D.C.¹⁰²

The small city of Las Cruces had felt little impact from the Housing Act of 1949 prior to the early 1960s. Municipal officials, however, took advantage of one tool in their arsenal that many believed could counteract the effects of decentralization. Like many civic leaders, Las Cruces administrators looked to annexation as a method of recuperating tax revenue and maintaining a modicum of control over sprawling suburbs, while private land developers favored this legal approach to access city utilities like water, sanitation, police, and fire services.¹⁰³ New Mexico lawmakers eased the annexation process with bills passed in 1947 and 1964. The law passed in 1947 established arbitration procedures that cities and citizens would follow, should a dispute arise. The state legislature established a new process for municipal land expansion in 1964. This act allowed for any incorporated municipality to “take in by simple resolution any unincorporated area which had been completely encircled by the municipality for five years.”¹⁰⁴ This new process of annexing contiguous tracts of land, along with the newly devised “shoestring” method, allowed cities like Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Las Cruces to expand their boundaries with ease.

¹⁰² Abbott, *The New Urban America*, 149–50; and Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 107–8, 145. Congress created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) in 1934 to “insure low interest, long-term mortgages, thereby encouraging lenders to extend more generous terms to prospective buyers.” Blighted areas, however, were considered a higher risk to private lenders and the FHA. According to historian Jon C. Teaford, planner Harland Bartholomew believed the FHA’s practices not only failed to address the flight from city centers, but it also encouraged decentralization and “undermined city-core property values,” accelerating outward migration. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 17–18; and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “The Federal Housing Administration (FHA),” 16 January 2011, Homes and Communities, <http://www.hud.gov/offices/hsg/fhahistory.cfm>.

¹⁰³ Las Cruces Department of Planning and Environmental Concerns, *Las Cruces Tomorrow: A Planning Workbook, Problems, Needs and Prospects* (Las Cruces, N.Mex.: City of Las Cruces, 1977), 24.

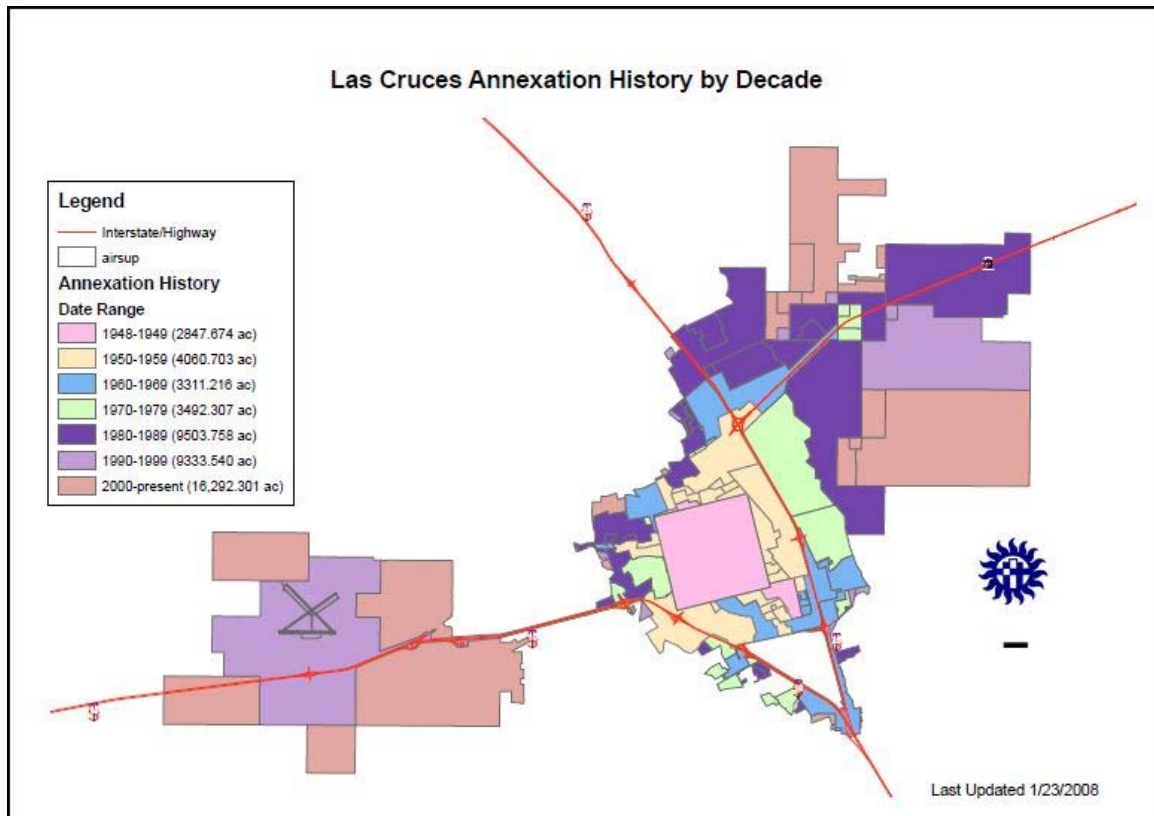
¹⁰⁴ Michael F. Logan, *Fighting Sprawl and City Hall: Resistance to Urban Growth in the Southwest* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), 112–13, 125.

In order to take full advantage of the acquisition-by-simple-resolution process, city governments, and the developers who petitioned them, employed the “shoestring” method. In this process, “the city would make the tract ‘contiguous’ by annexing a sliver of land, referred to as a ‘shoestring,’ often along county roads and easements.”¹⁰⁵ This type of annexation can be seen in Las Cruces’s land acquisitions in the diagram below (see ill. 5-1). Acreage procured between 1960 and 1969, during the 1980s, and since the year 2000, appears to have been obtained via the “shoestring” method. By the late 1970s, planners recognized the consequences of this form of boundary expansion. The Las Cruces Department of Planning and Environmental Concerns stated in a report published in 1977: “[The city had an] alligator-like shape due to annexations stretching along highways in the northeast, south, and west. . . .”¹⁰⁶ The same report considered this type of growth to be inefficient and uneconomical as the odd size of the city made the extension of city services and facilities difficult and costly.¹⁰⁷ Annexation, however carried out, failed to have the effect planners and leaders expected in the 1960s. The Las Cruces central business district continued to suffer as the outlying areas of the city flourished.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Las Cruces Department of Planning and Environmental Concerns, *Las Cruces Tomorrow*, 24.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.



Ill. 5-1. History of Annexation in Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1948–2008
(Illustration courtesy City of Las Cruces Community Development-Planning Department, Las Cruces, New Mexico, 2008)

In 1966, Las Cruces community members and merchants gathered in public meetings to discuss what recourse the city had to counter their decentralization problem. In October residents set meetings to activate a citizens' organization that would promote downtown revitalization. Mesilla Valley Chamber of Commerce president E. Frank Adams, in favor of developing a citizen's action committee, urged locals concerned with the condition of the central business district to attend these meetings. The local newspaper, the *Las Cruces Sun-News*, printed numerous articles beseeching property owners to get involved, come to meetings, and help start and finish an urban renewal

project for the downtown area.¹⁰⁸ As a result, the City Advisory Committee to Urban Studies (CACTUS) was formed at the end of October.

Immediately the group appointed an architectural-design committee to come up with plans for the CBD, discuss traffic flow and parking, styles for new and renovated buildings, as well as beautification projects. CACTUS chairman Tom Clark remarked, “We [CACTUS] are soliciting ideas from all individuals and groups. We are not politically affiliated or ‘married’ to any group or interest. This group is for something, not against something and our only interest is to make Las Cruces a better place to live.”¹⁰⁹ The action committee also worked closely with the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency. LCURA executive director J. Earl Whelply presented the city’s preliminary plans for shopping centers in the downtown area at this November 1966 meeting.¹¹⁰ Renewal plans began to develop and evolve at CACTUS meetings fairly quickly. Local New Mexico State University (NMSU) students proposed a downtown mall in the month following the formation of the group. Lt. R. C. Rhome, a U.S. Army engineer and NMSU student, headed the Rhome plan that called for a mall with canopies covering store fronts and one-way traffic through Main Street. CBD merchants shied away from the idea of a shared canopy along all the store fronts. They appeared, however, to be comfortable with individual canopies and a one-way or limited two-way thoroughfare dissecting the central

¹⁰⁸ “Local Citizens Set Meet to Aid Urban Renewal,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 October 1966; “Chamber of Commerce President Urges Residents to Attend Meet,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 19 October 1966; and “Important to Future,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 2 November 1966, p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ “CACTUS Group Formed to Aid Urban Renewal,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 27 October 1966; and “Property Owners Urged to Attend Session,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 2 November 1966.

¹¹⁰ “Property Owners Urged to Attend Session,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 2 November 1966. J. Earl Whelply took over as Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency (LCURA) executive director in July 1966. He had previously resided in Port Arthur, Texas, where he headed the urban renewal program in that city. “J. Earl Whelply Takes over as Director,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 5 July 1966.

business district. Their main concerns, though, always reverted back to parking and the need to compete with the ample parking of suburban shopping centers.¹¹¹

The favorable reception of Rhome's plan was the first sign of the city and residents' departure in revitalization plans from the traditional layout of downtowns, which had a multi-use, heavy concentration of larger buildings and heavy pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Instead, the new plan steered the downtown toward some type of pedestrian mall.¹¹² Las Cruces officials and residents' infatuation with this type of planning is not surprising at a time when suburban shopping centers enjoyed tremendous novelty and popularity. The mid-twentieth century was the era of downtown malls. They were built to build business, improve the environment of the CBD by reducing fumes, improve safety by separating cars and people, provide a focus to the area, and "improve the amenity of downtown, making it a more pleasant place." Perhaps most importantly, however, malls aimed to establish a shopping center atmosphere that would allow city cores to compete with "new, outlying centers."¹¹³

Planners had created different variations of the central-city mall. The type initially favored by Las Cruces officials and residents was the semi-mall, which intended to reduce traffic and parking while it expanded pedestrian areas and increased landscaping and public amenities. This option was the least invasive. A more involved alternative was the transit mall, which expanded pedestrian walkways, landscaping, and public areas,

¹¹¹ "Plan Proposed by NMSU Students to Create Downtown Mall: Rhome Plan for Covered Walking Presented to CACTUS," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 3 November 1966; and "Downtown Business Reluctant at First, Few Years Prior, But in 1966, Favored Renewal," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 10 November 1966.

¹¹² Raymond E. Murphy, *The Central Business District: A Study in Urban Geography* (Chicago, Ill.: Aldine-Atherton, 1972), 1–2.

¹¹³ Laurence A. Alexander, "Malls for Downtown Renewal: An Evaluation," in Laurence A. Alexander, ed., *Downtown Malls: An Annual Review*, vol. 1 (New York: Downtown Research and Development Center, 1975), 4.

while removing private vehicular traffic, except public transit, through the main thoroughfare. The third choice, the full mall or full pedestrian mall, proved to be the path Las Cruces would eventually follow. This alternative would close off Main Street completely and replace the road with landscaping, lighting, paving, and perhaps sculptural pieces.¹¹⁴

The majority of pedestrian malls in the United States, nevertheless, did not live up to their much-ballyhooed expectations. Although they were built to fulfill multiple purposes, such as increasing retail sales, strengthening property values, competing with suburban shopping centers, and creating a new image for a city, and generating pride of residents, they rarely achieved these goals. By the early 1980s, downtown malls came under attack and many were removed altogether, while others still remain vacant reminders of lost planning fads. Only a few of these malls could be considered successful.¹¹⁵

Although it received the most attention, the pedestrian mall was not the only option proposed by locals. In a letter to the editor published soon after CACTUS revealed the Rhome Plan, a concerned citizen introduced the idea of saving what was left of Las Cruces's historical value in its buildings and exploit the western-cowboy tradition of the American Southwest. This anonymous resident challenged the city to turn downtown Las Cruces into a heritage tourism site similar to Albuquerque's Old Town, Lincoln, New Mexico, and Santa Fe's plaza. The author of the editorial believed a downtown mall with shopping centers would not attract tourists in the way that a "cow town" Main Street

¹¹⁴ Harvey M. Rubenstein, *Central City Malls* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), 3–4.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23; and Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 270.

would.¹¹⁶ The city and the LCURA, however, carried on with planning a pedestrian semi-mall and modernizing buildings that escaped demolition. Indeed, the fate of downtown could have followed a dramatically different path if the city had turned its planning in the direction of heritage or cultural tourism.

Historic preservationists across the United States were beginning to advocate the revitalization of decaying downtowns abandoned for suburbia, not through demolition and clearance, but through careful rehabilitation of existing buildings and through an emphasis on accentuating the multi-functionality of central business districts. Downtowns traditionally served multiple purposes from housing an urban population to serving as the prime location for local businesses and recreation: “Downtowns traditionally provided a focus for local communities, giving a sense of identity to their residents. Downtown, they could associate a place with the concept of community, and this did much to create a common sense of purpose.”¹¹⁷ Preserving the historic character of city cores and retaining local businesses in those buildings often created a destination point for residents and visitors. Similar to Santa Fe, which offered a reprieve for tourists escaping their eastern industrial cities, Las Cruces had an opportunity to embrace its history represented in its many historic structures and utilize its cultural heritage to breathe life back into its downtown. Historic or cultural tourism, or “the marketing of the historic scenic, and mythic past,” immersed visitors in a romantic era, long since past, and provided them with a sense of being part of a moment in history. Like most tourist attractions, heritage

¹¹⁶ “Editorial in Support of Heritage Tourism,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 6 December 1966. Other residents also voiced support for a heritage tourism approach. See “Old West Master Plan,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 31 July 1967.

¹¹⁷ Norman Tyler, *Historic Preservation: An Introduction to Its History, Principles, and Practice* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 200), 169–70.

sites offered an escape from a modern reality.¹¹⁸ Las Cruces's small neighbor to the south, Mesilla, maintained a thriving plaza and community with the help of the historic Catholic Church and local restaurants, art galleries, and shops housed in nineteenth-century buildings that catered to tourists and the local residents. Although certain drawbacks exist with the exploitation of a town's cultural and historic heritage, it can be argued that this option provides a more successful and less invasive and traumatic outcome to that of urban renewal. Mesilla's historic plaza serves as a stark contrast and reminder to the potential Las Cruces's Main Street held.¹¹⁹

The Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency and CACTUS quickly moved into the scale-model phase for the downtown mall project. By mid-November 1966, the Architectural and Design Committee and its chairman, Jim Shook, presented a scale model at a public meeting. The consensus at this gathering was also to encourage contemporary Spanish or Territorial designs that were modern but retained some traditional characteristics. A more finalized model was revealed at a following CACTUS meeting. The Houston, Texas, planning firm Bernard Johnson Engineers, Inc., hired to develop and complete plans for the urban renewal project in early 1967, utilized the public input and preliminary planning from these meetings. Once the Texas firm completed the first phase of the process, the city would then send the plans to the Fort Worth, Texas, Urban Renewal Regional Office and to Washington, D.C., for the final go

¹¹⁸ Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Topeka: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 90–91.

¹¹⁹ Chris Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition* (Albuquerque: University of Albuquerque Press, 1997), 322–24; Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 23–25, 84–86, 89–93; Tyler, *Historic Preservation*, 171–73; and Town of Mesilla Government, "History of Mesilla: A Lively Social Center," Mesilla, New Mexico, http://www.oldmesilla.org/html/mesilla__a_lively_social_cente.html.

ahead.¹²⁰ Protests from local architects who questioned the authority of CACTUS in choosing the design and landscaping followed the unveiling of the model. Although these protests were quickly passed over and made little impact on the trajectory of the project, they opened a door to future challenges to the urban renewal process.¹²¹

Plans for the future downtown grew more concrete in January 1967 with a general consensus in favor of a suburban-type pedestrian mall with plentiful parking and little traffic. The project included canopies that would cover the sidewalks along Main Street and limited traffic and angled parking. Remaining protests or concerns died down when city leaders reminded merchants and residents of the consequences of doing nothing. The possibility of further decline and possible condemnation of buildings that did not meet current building codes was enough to silence any apprehension at least for a little while.¹²²

Also in January, the LCURA began to release additional specifics about the project such as the costs, expected contributions from Las Cruces and from HUD, size of the area impacted, and the city's process of land acquisition needed to carry out the plans. Initially, city leaders expected downtown revitalization to run around \$1.5 million. As the plans evolved and became more elaborate, however, the cost increased. By early 1967, the amount for the program ballooned to an estimated \$4 to \$7 million. As promised by HUD, two-thirds and up to 75 percent of this cost would be covered by the federal

¹²⁰ "Scale Model Viewed," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 15 November 1966; "New Main Street Model revealed at CACTUS Meeting," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 7 December 1966; "Business Redevelopment Goal of Las Cruces Project," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 9 January 1967; "Las Cruces Urban Renewal Plan Finalizing and about to Be Sent to Fort Worth Regional Office for Approval," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 16 March 1967; and "Cruces to Stop 'Slum Subsidy'," *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal*, 4 June 1967.

¹²¹ "Protests to Urban Renewal by Local Architects," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, n.d. [November 1966].

¹²² "Proposed Outline for Future of Downtown is Drafted," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 8 January 1967.

government. The remaining third was the responsibility of the city, even as the price tag for this ever-expanding project continued to rise.¹²³ Most of the cost lay with land acquisition. LCURA estimated the cost of purchasing properties in the ninety-four-acre plan site to add up to \$5 million. Thirty-three full blocks and nine partial blocks made up the urban renewal area, and officials expected at least half of the buildings on over nine of the blocks to be demolished to make room for some three thousand parking spaces.¹²⁴

A public entity acquiring private land was a sensitive issue. Many Las Cruces shared a sense of unease with the idea of such government possession through a purchase agreement, condemnation, or eminent domain, any of which would be an inevitability under the urban renewal program. An article in the *Las Cruces Sun-News* described the process as “neither entirely voluntary nor an overnight one.”¹²⁵ In an attempt to ease the distress of citizens when they confronted the idea of a “government takeover” of private property, city and community leaders constantly sold the downtown renewal plan at public meetings and exaggerated the fear of a rotting city core. As an example, Director Whelply told residents that the purchase of property from land owners often enabled “the family to buy better property than was possible while funds were tied up in sub-standard structures for which there was no market.”¹²⁶ Whelply believed most cities, including Las Cruces, subsidized “slums.” He vowed in local and regional newspapers that he would

¹²³ “Business Redevelopment Goal of Las Cruces Project,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 9 January 1967; “How Is Urban Renewal Financed,” *El Paso (Texas) Herald-Post*, 1 March 1967; and “Urban Renewal Series,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 10 January 1967.

¹²⁴ “Proposed Outline for Future of Downtown Is Drafted,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 8 January 1967; “How Is Urban Renewal Financed,” *El Paso (Texas) Herald-Post*, 1 March 1967; “Urban Renewal Series,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 10 January 1967; “Cruces to Stop ‘Slum Subsidy’,” *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal*, 4 June 1967; and “Protests Aired on Renewal Project,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 9 and 10 March 1967.

¹²⁵ “Business Redevelopment Goal of Las Cruces Project,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 9 January 1967.

¹²⁶ “Property Acquisition under Urban Renewal to Be Started,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 January 1967; and “Renewal Program Construction Carefully Planned,” *El Paso (Texas) Herald-Post*, 2 March 1967.

not allow the city to continue pouring taxpayer money into maintaining slums: “In slum areas the average is for every \$1 collected in taxes, the taxpayers are spending \$7. If they [Las Cruces] don’t face the problem, they’re subsidizing slums.”¹²⁷

The director’s words proved powerful and helped gain support among downtown merchants and residents. While the LCURA tried to quell any concerns over the project, the agency continued to take a strong stance by proclaiming that “land purchases may be arranged by simple negotiations or, if no agreement can be reached, through condemnation proceedings and the courts.”¹²⁸ Whether exaggerating the threat of inner-city slums or embracing the role as a powerful entity that would seize property if necessary, the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency managed to pre-empt any major criticism, albeit temporarily.

With urban renewal also came code enforcement. The city of Las Cruces, with the aid of a federal grant from HUD, commissioned the planning firm Harland Bartholomew and Associates to draft a new comprehensive plan that would be presented to the Planning and Zoning Commission in 1968.¹²⁹ This report was a blueprint for the administration of regulatory and zoning ordinances, land-use planning activities, and capital improvement projects.¹³⁰ It fell to the city to adopt and enforce the recommendations. Municipal officials looked to creating and enhancing new building and housing codes that would help bring aging residential and commercial structures throughout the city into compliance. Many of these buildings were located near the

¹²⁷ “Cruces to Stop ‘Slum Subsidy’,” *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal*, 4 June 1967.

¹²⁸ “Business Redevelopment Goal of Las Cruces Project,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 9 January 1967.

¹²⁹ Las Cruces Planning and Zoning Commission, *Comprehensive Plan: Las Cruces, New Mexico*, New Mexico Project P-31 (St. Louis, Mo.: Harland Bartholomew and Associates, 1968), cover.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7, 73–74.

downtown area, which contained some of the oldest neighborhoods in town. Planners and the city commission initiated a crack-down on code compliance as the urban renewal project started, and they used similar tactics in their approaches to assuage the residents' fears of government intrusion.¹³¹

In the fall of 1967, Las Cruces initiated a "neighborhood-by-neighborhood analysis" to study the causes and extent of decay within its municipal boundaries. The report, part of the city's "Workable Program for Community Improvement," was a component of a "long-range project planned to eliminate blighted areas in the city and bring neighborhoods into compliance with building and housing codes."¹³² Public leaders used the imagery of disease infested-blighted slums to garner support and temper resistance to this study and the eventual enforcement of stricter regulations. Alfred Rucks, minority housing subcommittee chairman to the Citizens' Advisory Committee, pointed out at a public meeting that "national studies have shown 60% of all TB cases, 50% of all other diseases, 35% of all fires, 45% of all major crimes, 55% of all juvenile delinquency and 50% of all arrests come from within areas left to decay."¹³³ He also pointed out that Las Cruces saw the most cases of TB and dysentery in New Mexico and called for federal aid to help with code compliance and purging the city of substandard buildings.¹³⁴ Whether or not Rucks exaggerated the threat of disease and crime, these

¹³¹ "Housing Condition Survey Starts; Fund Allocation Depends on Report," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 5 September 1967; "Code Section Tagged Rights Violator," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 16 November 1967; and "Tough Code Enforcement Is Proposed," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 29 November 1967.

¹³² "Housing Condition Survey Starts; Fund Allocation Depends on Report," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 5 September 1967. The city code enforcement officer, Dan Antes, hailed this study as "the first essential step in planning a program of neighborhood improvement through strict code enforcement, rehabilitation and clearance." *Ibid.*

¹³³ "Tough Code Enforcement Is Proposed," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 29 November 1967.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*; and "City Codes Controversial," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 24 November 1967.

strong warnings from municipal and community leaders helped to quiet concerns over government encroachment.

Urban renewal planning continued unabated throughout 1967. The city incorporated CACTUS into the city advisory board and broadened its duties to include programs relating to housing rehabilitation and code enforcement.¹³⁵ The Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency invited bids for the first stage in demolition, bringing down the old City Hall and constructing a new building in the downtown area. Whelply set a timeline to finish the overall project in five years, and by June 1967, the estimated price tag had reached \$11 million. The revitalization plans had not changed dramatically and still consisted of creating several thousand off-street parking spaces and rerouting heavier traffic to one-way streets around downtown, but leaving Main Street with two lanes for limited vehicular use, establishing buffer lanes to protect pedestrians, building canopies over store fronts, and providing a large enough piece of property to accommodate a large retail department store and a bank.

The LCURA director knew the importance of public approval for the project. He stated the actual plan was not of “prime importance—the acceptance of urban renewal [was].”¹³⁶ When, in July 1967, a rumor spread like wildfire through the community that homeowners would be faced with imminent displacement from their properties, the agency refuted the story in a local newspaper article and pleaded with citizens to contact their office for correct information.¹³⁷ Despite this concern for local opinion, Whelply

¹³⁵ “Need for Housing Code Is Stressed,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 4 May 1967.

¹³⁶ “Cruces to Stop ‘Slum Subsidy’,” *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal*, 4 June 1967; Al Duitman, “Urban Renewal Project Is Hoped to Return ‘Beat’ to Heart of Las Cruces,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 16 July 1967; “LCURA Invites Bids for Demolition of Buildings,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 27 April 1967; and “Urban Renewal Now Estimated at \$11 Million,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 15 June 1967.

¹³⁷ “Imminent Displacement Rumor Untrue,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 21 July 1967.

consistently advocated, much to the dismay of many protesting residents, placing an anchor store that he believed would attract shoppers to smaller merchants in the CBD. After touring other urban renewal projects in Little Rock, Arkansas; Atchison, Kansas; and Grand Junction, Colorado, Whelply came to the conclusion that downtown Las Cruces needed a “magnet.” Although he actively sought and contacted national retailers in an attempt to sell a lot in the city core, interest to build in the CBD proved tepid at best and was contingent on a completed revitalization project. Eventually, resistance from local residents to his initial plan, which placed a “large shopping center type operation” on the 200 block of Main Street, was strong enough that Whelply moved the future site farther north, away from downtown retailers. He still refused, however, to give up on the belief in the desirability of a magnet store.¹³⁸

The director put much faith in the idea that the city should clear a large swath of land, which in turn would attract a major department store and, later, customers to the central business district. This theory, however, had already proved unsuccessful at the time Whelply actively sought to place a national chain in the city core. A large retail establishment had opened on Main Street in March 1966, just a couple of blocks south of downtown Las Cruces. President of the First National Bank, Frank O. Papen, owned the Loretto Shopping Center. The sprawling complex, with its plentiful off-street parking, contained twenty-six stores that included J. C. Penny, Dunlap’s Department Store, a pet shop, and a jewelry store. Touted as modern and built at the cost of \$5 million, the shops

¹³⁸ “Cruces to Stop ‘Slum Subsidy’,” *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal*, 4 June 1967; “Protests Aired on Renewal Project,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 9 and 10 March 1967; “Albuquerque Struggling with Downtown Deterioration, Sears Closes Downtown Store,” *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal*, 6 April 1967; “Setback Requirements for Urban Plan Outfitted,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 12 April 1967; Al Duitman, “With Price of Services, Las Cruces Proves the Cost of Urban Renewal Goes Up,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 17 July 1967; and Duitman, “Urban Renewal Project Is Hoped to Return ‘Beat’ to Heart of Las Cruces.”

opened into a heated and air-conditioned covered mall. Although Loretto appeared successful in its own right, it had little effect on smaller CBD merchants, despite the eighty thousand–square-foot J. C. Penny anchor store. In fact, this vast shopping center, with its boundless parking lots and capacious retail space, symbolized the lack of city planning and foresight that encouraged a suburban lifestyle to the detriment of its own downtown.¹³⁹

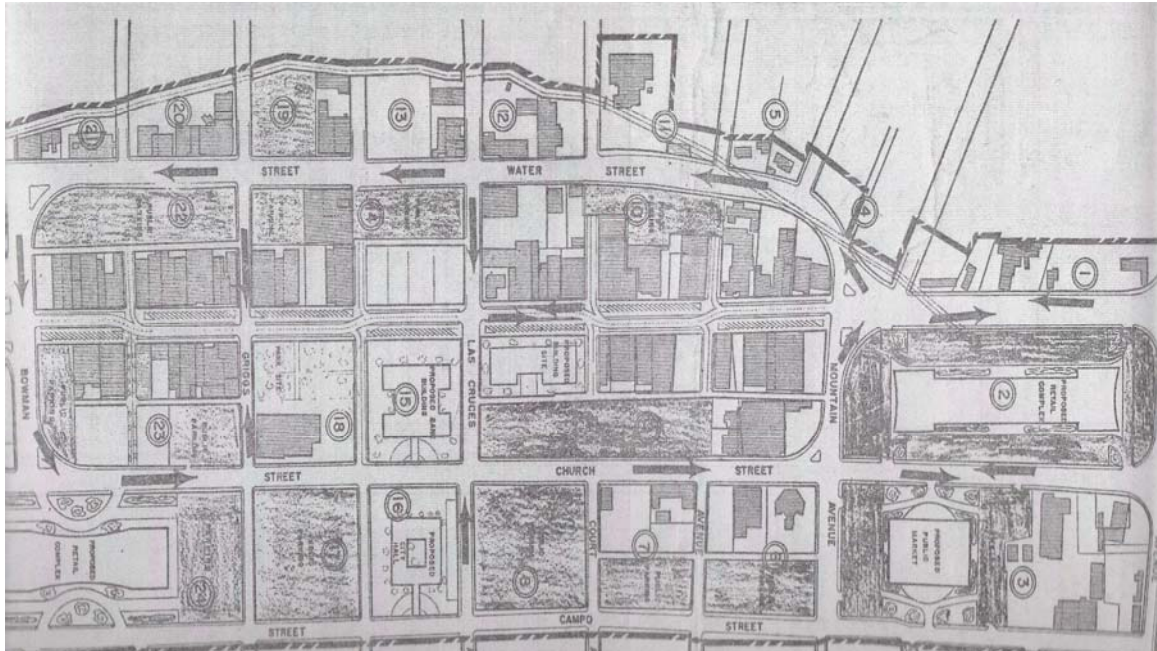


Ill. 5-2. The Loretto Shopping Center Today
(Illustration courtesy G. O’Graffer)

Downtown revitalization plans received preliminary approval and awaited federal funds by July 1967. The city expected the funding process would take three to six months. The LCURA also finalized costs for the now over \$11 million project, with the federal government covering a little over \$6.5 million and the city paying close to \$5

¹³⁹ “Las Cruces Population Goes Up; 74,000 People Reside in Moon Glow; New Buildings, Homes are Rising Fast,” *El Paso (Texas) Herald-Post*, 27 March 1967.

million, out of which \$2 million would return to the city from reselling land. Out of fear that the city could go into debt in order to cover the costs of urban renewal, the agency declared that all construction within the project area would be on a “tear-down, build-up basis . . . [and would] develop the program in a checkerboard fashion, with the first group of buildings ready for occupancy before displacing businesses from present sites.”¹⁴⁰



Ill. 5-3. The Proposed Revitalization Plans for Downtown Las Cruces, 7 May 1967
 This image shows Main Street running horizontally, south (left) to north (right), in the middle of the diagram, with Church Street to the west, Water Street to the east, and both parallel to Main Street. Both Church and Water Streets are designated one-way in this plan, while Main Street maintains limited two-way traffic. The caption for this plan published in the *Las Cruces Sun-News* read: “Plots marked on the map with vertical lines represent present buildings, many of which will be rehabilitated. Shaded areas indicate public parking facilities. Blank spaces within the blocks delineate lots that currently are vacant or those from which substandard or non-conforming structures will be cleared for redevelopment. Also indicated are parking spaces on Main Street and automobile traffic flow through the district.”

(Illustration courtesy Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News)

¹⁴⁰ Al Duitman, “Population Growth, Business Flight Woke Cruces to Urban Renewal,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 18 July 1967.



Ill. 5-4. A View of the Downtown District before Urban Renewal, 4 June 1967
This aerial view of the central business district, looking north, shows a high density of buildings along Main Street through the center of the image, with most of the blocks filled with structures. An editorial in the *Las Cruces Sun-News* claimed the purpose of the Urban Renewal project would be “to rehabilitate the core area of the downtown section, in which buildings have deteriorated and been vacated. It is hoped that once the project is completed, beautiful new stores, along with rehabilitated buildings that will be retained, will provide the finest shopping areas in the entire Southwest.” Editorial, *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 15 November 1967.
(Illustration courtesy Las Cruces Sun-News)

Nearly a year after the city submitted urban renewal plans to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the project received funds to begin the next phase,

which entailed purchasing and clearing property.¹⁴¹ Federal law mandated that the LCURA, when using HUD loan and grant funds, pay a fair-market price for any land purchases. In a notice sent out to business owners and residents within the renewal area, the city reiterated, “Every owner of property to be acquired for the project will be afforded a full opportunity to sell his property directly to the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency without litigation. When purchasing properties, it is the policy of the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency to pay fair prices and to treat all owners fairly and impartially.”¹⁴² The notice continued to inform those affected that any offer from the city would be based on two independent appraisals. If these two assessments of a property’s value were too far apart, the urban renewal officials would order a third appraisal and seek an average between the three. The agency also made clear that condemnation could be an option if the city deemed that its agents had exhausted all efforts in negotiations.¹⁴³

Once LCURA completed the purchase of a lot, the agency gave the owner of the commercial or residential property at least ninety-days written notice to vacate the premises. Using HUD funds, the agency offered displaced citizens a relocation payment to help with moving expenses or property loss. The city, in accordance with the Housing Act of 1949, was required to offer assistance in “securing a place that not only suits [the

¹⁴¹ “Renewal Loan Ok Awaited,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 8 February 1968; “Urban Project Ok’d: \$1.4 Million Fund Grant Is Reserved,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 20 March 1968; “Urban Renewal Funds Okayed: \$6.6 Million To Be Given Immediately,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 24 June 1968; and “Urban Renewal Loan and Grant Expected within Seven Weeks,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 28 June 1968.

¹⁴² Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency, “Informational Statement for Business Concerns and Nonprofit Organizations and Other Nonresidential Establishments,” July 1968, p. 6, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*; “Urban Renewal Loan and Grant Expected within Seven Weeks,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 28 June 1968; and “\$2,066,700 to Buy Tracts Okayed by Urban Renewal,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 12 September 1968.

individual displaced], but one which will be decent, safe, and sanitary.”¹⁴⁴ Under the Urban Renewal Relocation Program, which provided assistance to displacees in securing new housing, however, many Las Cruces who sold their property found they could not qualify for or purchase new housing that met the standards stipulated by the program.¹⁴⁵ Also, many residents, especially those retired and living on fixed-incomes, believed that the agency’s appraisals of their properties did not come close to a fair-market price, and the offers they received left them with little choice but to move into public housing. A number of business owners shared this sentiment, either choosing to move to another part of the city permanently or just to go out of business altogether. Las Cruces officials began to face growing resistance as the urban renewal project advanced.

Problems arose immediately when the city began to acquire parcels of land. In September 1968 the LCURA rejected appraisals on forty-six properties, on which the two assessments of value were too far apart to make a fair offer. The agency ordered a reevaluation of the bids and if they could not bring the two closer together, a third appraisal would be ordered. Ninety other properties, however, were approved, using the two independent firms that separately inspected the home or business and “submitted separate appraisal figures for each parcel to the agency.” Within the LCURA, real estate officers analyzed each assessment and recommended an offer.¹⁴⁶ The city and its project started off precariously, for the process of land acquisition proved to be a rough road

¹⁴⁴ Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency, “Informational Statement: To Families and Individuals Living in the Municipal Center Urban Renewal Project Area Whose Property Has Been Acquired by the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency,” n.d., p. 1, box 24, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library.

¹⁴⁵ Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency, “Informational Statement to Families and Individuals in the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Project Area,” June 1969, pp. 1, 4–6, box 24, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library.

¹⁴⁶ “\$2,066,700 to Buy Tracts Okayed by Urban Renewal,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 12 September 1968.

when locals came face-to-face with the reality of forfeiting their property and relocating to new properties. Moving to public housing, as some low-income individuals and families had to do, made the transition even more difficult. Director Whelply, however, remained adamant throughout this important phase in the project that the agency did a “tremendous job of relocating businesses and families,” in spite of the drone of protests and discontent welling up from Main Street.¹⁴⁷

The agency approached relocation of locals affected by the project with seeming ease. LCURA cavalierly broached the topic of moving low-income families and individuals in its general relocation plan: “It is our opinion that we have the resources to take care of any special problems related to low-income families, large families, [and] handicapped or elderly site occupants.”¹⁴⁸ The agency estimated thirteen families and six individuals, many elderly, that lived within the project area, subsisted on incomes of two hundred dollars a month or less. Many of these low-income inhabitants earned less than one thousand dollars a year. To put that in perspective, the median income for families in Doña Ana County in 1960 was \$4,948, yet over a quarter of the population lived on \$3,000 or less a year. The city premised much of its urban renewal plans on slum and blight clearance, and now city officials had to confront the face of poverty-stricken neighborhoods like the nineteen households living within the project area. Agents believed seven of those families had enough equity to purchase a new home, while the rest could utilize welfare assistance or Social Security to afford new lodgings or public housing. The LCURA also pointed out, “We have a good relationship with the Local Public Housing Authority. . . .” There seemed to be little concern in the agency for how

¹⁴⁷ “Urban Renewal Called Tool to Aid City,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 3 October 1968.

¹⁴⁸ Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency, “H-6122 Narrative,” General Relocation Plan, p. 3, box 24, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library.

these low-income residents would react to the idea of relocation to public housing or to the possibility of not being able to afford a new home.¹⁴⁹

By October 1968, discontent with the operation of the urban renewal project reached a breaking point and concerned Las Cruces residents attended a meeting to discuss their options. Residents formed the Committee for Citizens Affected by Urban Renewal headed by President Joe Anaya. The group voiced its main concern to Whelply, who attended the initial meeting. “Urban renewal is not relocating people living within the urban renewal boundaries into comparable homes,” Anaya said. In response, the director told the committee that the agency offered fair-market prices to homeowners who could relocate into housing that met building codes. Anaya then pointed out that the agency had not submitted fair offers to property owners, to which Whelply explained that “those who do not think they are being paid fair prices may go to court to establish prices.” This abrupt response to the committee’s concerns left little option for low-income residents to challenge the city’s offers on their homes. Legal representation required funds that many locals on fixed-incomes could not access. At the meeting, Anaya left open the option to hire an attorney to represent the committee and locals, as many business and homeowners felt the financial strain of living with the effects of urban renewal.¹⁵⁰

Problems continually arose, however, with land appraisals. The Board of Commissioners of the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency issued the final approval on these purchases, and commissioners had to recommend a third evaluation for many of the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 3–7; and Census of the Population, 1960, New Mexico, “Summary of Economic Characteristics, By Counties: 1960,” General Social and Economic Characteristics: New Mexico, Characteristics of the Population, table 36, vol. 1, part 33, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵⁰ “Citizens Form Urban Plan Impact Group,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 14 October 1968; “Citizens Plan Appraisal Protests,” *El Paso (Texas) Times*, 17 October 1968; and Brad Bane, “Las Cruces Urban Renewal Hurts!” *New Mexico State University Round-up*, 25 October 1968.

properties within the urban renewal district. Some homeowners continued to face issues after having their properties appraised three times. For example, the board discussed possible condemnation of a parcel owned by Adelina R. Gonzales, who claimed through her attorney that the plot had been “appraised three times, but the figures were not within 20% of each other.” Gonzales’s attorney went on to claim that “urban renewal would acquire the [property][but] would not pay for the building, only for the land, [and] he could not get a building permit to repair it.”¹⁵¹ Gonzales was just one of the many property owners faced with wildly varying appraisals and with little recourse to challenge the city’s offers. Ultimately, if the titleholder of the land objected, the agency could move to condemnation or eminent domain proceedings to force the owners to accept an offer and forfeit ownership. These issues with property acquisition continued throughout the urban renewal process.¹⁵²

The urban renewal project in Las Cruces touched on several issues sensitive to inhabitants. As the municipality focused on the CBD, officials continued to allow and encourage, through annexation and permits for subdivisions and shopping centers, suburban sprawl to spread toward the city’s outskirts. The city did not address this contradiction, however, and, instead, chose to abandon the downtown’s historic and cultural heritage, and to transform the urban core into another suburban shopping complex.

The community initially welcomed help from the local and federal government with revitalizing their downtown. However, the general goodwill shared by merchants

¹⁵¹ “Gonzales Property Discussed,” *El Paso (Texas) Times*, 1968.

¹⁵² “Widmer Charges Some Property Owners Not Getting Fair Price,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 20 May 1969; and Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Resolutions-1970, *A Resolution Authorizing Appeal of Court Award in Eminent Domain Proceedings*, Resolution No. UR-165, 14 January 1970, box 2, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library.

and residents during the planning phase quickly transformed into disillusionment and frustration as urban renewal pressed forward. The city and its urban renewal agency had to deal with property rights and the much-dreaded process of condemnation and eminent domain. In order to keep the project on track, city and agency officials attempted to move quickly through the land acquisition phase. They created a message of both fear and hope to push property owners toward selling and relocating. The city used imagery of blight, disease, and crime to influence residents, while promoting the idea of relocating to recently-constructed homes and commercial buildings. Officials also maintained a strong stance against anyone who challenged urban renewal plans. Property owners had few choices if they refused to sell to the city. The threat of condemnation and eminent domain alienated many residents affected by the project, and the growing resentment and disenchantment toward the city and urban renewal would linger past the completion of the project.

The “germ of bitterness,” as one local newspaper article phrased it, had been sown. The LCURA and the city proceeded with the years-long project of acquiring property within the project area. Boggled down by extended negotiations and suits against the city, revitalization plans dragged on from one year into the next. Merchants and residents, frustrated at the slow pace but also unsatisfied with the city’s methods of acquiring properties, grew even more suspicious and discontent at the seeming lack of progress. The agency, however, trudged ahead with the plans, faithful that once locals saw the results, Las Cruces would reap the rewards of a modern downtown mall.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ “Urban Renewal: Germ of Bitterness,” *New Mexico State University Round-up*, 25 October 1968.

Chapter 6

The Final Chapter for the Las Cruces Downtown Mall

As Las Cruces's economy and population continued to grow throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, downtown urban renewal efforts carried on with the hope that it would revitalize the city core. The project, started with rough planning in 1965 and 1966, consisted of overlapping phases of parcel acquisition, building demolition, and development of a pedestrian mall and of ample parking. Residents and city leaders expected a modern Main Street with the look and feel of a suburban shopping center at the close of the program. The almost ten-year journey through urban renewal, however, was wrought with problems and conflict that included plan alterations, lawsuits, delays, and a Grand Jury investigation. Influences from the federal and state levels further impacted this sometimes contentious and often frustrating process. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), subjected to the whims of different administrations, dealt with oscillating funding for programs and policy changes. Dependent on national, state, and local policies, the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency (LCURA) and the city finally completed the project by fall 1974. The relocation of property owners, the Grand Jury investigation into city and agency misconduct, the lack of a resolution requiring an architectural theme, the naming of the downtown mall, and the fight over who would provide parking slowed, but did not stop, the urban renewal project. Although these issues were eventually resolved and revitalization efforts continued, the process had already negatively impacted many members of the community, and this sentiment would carry past completion of the plan.

Between 1960 and 1970, Las Cruces's population growth outmatched fellow Sunbelt cities like Tucson, Albuquerque, and El Paso. Growing at an average annual rate of approximately 2.6 percent, the population of Las Cruces increased 30 percent during that decade alone and maintained nearly 3 percent annual growth between 1970 and 1975. By comparison, Tucson's population expanded by almost 24 percent, and Albuquerque, by 21 percent during the 1960s.¹ The forces behind this primarily suburban and urban growth in Las Cruces and Doña Ana County shifted, however, from an influx of federal and defense jobs to "light manufacturing, trade, and private services, government services, and retirees."² Employment at the White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) and the Apollo Program at the NASA Testing Facility declined dramatically from their peak in the early- to mid-1960s to the first half of the following decade. At its height, WSMR employed 9,765 people in 1962, but by 1974 that number fell to 7,784. NASA scheduled a phasing out of the Apollo site by 1971, which had 1,600 personnel at its height just four years prior. NASA reported that it would whittle down the remaining 600 employees still working at the installation to a skeleton maintenance crew of 30. Offsetting these devastating losses, however, was the anticipation of adding the shuttle program to the White Sands Missile Range.³ Nevertheless, federal defense and scientific

¹ Department of Environmental and Social Services, *Background Information Report: For the Planning and Zoning of Las Cruces' Five Mile Extra-Territorial Jurisdiction* (Las Cruces, N.Mex.: City of Las Cruces, 1975), 26–27; "Population of Places: 1970 and 1960," p. 33-11, *Characteristics of the Population*, vol. 1, pt. 33, Census of Population 1970, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C.; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *New Mexico County Totals*, Prepared by the U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C., <http://bber.unm.edu/demo/ctyshist.htm>.

² Department of Environmental and Social Services, *Background Information Report*, 28-29.

³ *Ibid.*, 29; Jose Amaro, "Savings Expressed If Range Site Plan Accepted," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 11 November 1970; "Space Projects—Pushes, Losses—Top News," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 31 December 1970; and Alice Grover, "Cruces Loses Apollo, But May Add Shuttle Program," *El Paso (Texas) Times*, 20 January 1971.

installations would no longer reach the employment levels achieved during the two decades that followed World War II.

Growth in Las Cruces starting in the 1970s came from a variety of sources. New Mexico State University thrived and expanded with consistent increases in student enrollment, and retirees flocked to the perpetually sunny region of the Mesilla Valley. Light manufacturing, such as the new Hanes Corporation Hosiery Plant, and retail trade picked up the slack in declining agricultural and federal government jobs.⁴

The city reaped the benefits of this economic and population growth. Although development did not match the frenzied pace of the two decades following World War II, the late 1960s and early 1970s still enjoyed a high rate of construction. Building permits consistently rose, with increases in commercial and single-family home construction. Between 1950 and 1965, the valuation of structures to be built or altered was over one million dollars annually. In fact, the years 1964 and 1965 each saw building requests valued at over ten million dollars. By 1970, Las Cruces saw a decline in permits compared to a few years prior, but the city maintained a healthy rate of construction. By mid-1970, total volume reached over two million dollars in construction just for the first half of the year.⁵ This success symbolized progress and reassured municipal leaders and residents that the urban renewal project was a part of this momentum and would help the CBD catch up to the rest of Las Cruces's prosperity.⁶

⁴ Department of Environmental and Social Services, *Background Information Report*, 30–31.

⁵ Statistical Information, Las Cruces, New Mexico, Appraisal Report for Urban Renewal Agency, 1966, box 2, Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library, Las Cruces, New Mexico [hereafter LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library]; “Month’s Total of \$580,066 Doubles 1969’s,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 7 May 1970; “City Building Permit Total Reaches \$2,654,729 Figure,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 7 June 1970; and “Banks Say Assets Up \$8 Million,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 22 January 1970.

⁶ “Face of Las Cruces Is Changing,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 28 October 1968.

As the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency pushed forward with the redevelopment process of ninety-four acres in downtown, problems began to arise. Before long, the agency and the city became entangled in various lawsuits and disagreements with local merchants, residents, and even the regional HUD office. Almost immediately the issue of relocating families and individuals quickly bubbled to the surface when the agency started to purchase properties from private owners. Municipal and LCURA officials promised that the process of land acquisition and relocation would be fairly painless, for there was plenty of housing, public and private, to accommodate those who needed to move. In particular, a number of low-income and elderly families and individuals faced limited options in searching for new homes they could afford. The city and the agency believed that if these residents could not afford to purchase accommodations elsewhere in the city, they still had the option of public housing. Either way, according to government officials, the welfare of these citizens was guaranteed. A LCURA document stated: “Since we have a comparatively small number of people to displace and it will be spread over the next three to four years, we feel it is obvious that we will have adequate resources to take care of all who are displaced by our project. . . . It is our opinion that we have the resources to take care of any special problems related to low-income families, large families, handicapped or elderly site occupants.”⁷ Despite the city’s assurances that all residents dislocated by urban renewal would be able to find a new place to live, homeowners faced great difficulty in using LCURA money offered for their properties to find comparable and adequate accommodations. These citizens and businesses alike faced the dilemma of accepting a “fair-market price” for their properties

⁷ Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency, “H-6122 Narrative,” General Relocation Plan, p. 3, box 24, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library.

and then not being able to afford to purchase a new location. The best the city could offer was the promise of a new grant under the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968, which awarded up to five thousand dollars to help individuals and families “span the gap” between what they received for their properties and the price of a new place in which to live or do business.⁸

The reality of relocating displaced inhabitants also proved to be more difficult when the city overestimated the availability of housing. In early 1970, the Citizens’ Advisory Committee attempted to call attention to the desperate shortage of public housing in Las Cruces and to the “disparity between the need for and availability of public housing for low-income families and elderly persons.”⁹ Citing a housing census, the group claimed 1,766 housing units in the city were considered substandard in 1960, and only 100 low-income homes had been built. The committee recommended to the city commission that 500 more units be built within two years in order to accommodate a growing population of families and individuals in need of shelter. According to a *Las Cruces Sun-News* article published on the committee’s request, the local Housing Authority received 301 applicants for low-income housing, but only 37 families were admitted: “Only 1 in 8 families who applied were granted housing, and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the

⁸ “Renewal Agency Has No Solution for Homeowners,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, September 1970; and *Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968*, HR 17989, 90th Cong., 2d sess., *House Report* no. 1585. The Housing and Urban Development Act specifically states: “In general, replacement housing payments made under the above Acts are for the purpose of aiding individuals and families displaced from their homes, businesses or farms by Federal or federally assisted programs in acquiring decent, safe and sanitary dwellings of modest standards sufficient in size to accommodate the displaced owners, reasonably accessible to public services and places of employment, and available on the open market. As a condition to receiving the payment, a displaced owner must (a) under the 1968 Act, purchase and occupy a replacement dwelling within one year from the date he is required to move; (b) under the 1970 Act, purchase and occupy a replacement dwelling within one year from the date on which he receives from the Federal agency final payment of all costs of the acquired dwelling, or on the date on which he moves from the acquired dwelling, whichever is later. This payment is in addition to any acquisition payment, and cannot exceed \$5,000 under the 1968 Act and \$15,000 under the 1970 Act.” *Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968*, http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-tege/rr74_205.pdf.

⁹ “Public Housing Increase Asked,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 15 February 1970.

applicants [met the] requirements for public housing.”¹⁰ City Codes Administrator Dan Antes agreed that many families found themselves in desperate straits due to the lack of housing. According to Antes, the city had inspected over nine thousand homes for conformance to city regulations and found that 1,573 of them did not meet the required standards, and 800 of these fifteen hundred could be considered dilapidated under municipal criteria. Antes, like the Citizens’ Advisory Committee, brought his findings before the city commission to highlight the dire need for housing.¹¹ Despite the problems that the city and the LCURA encountered in relocating displaced families and individuals living in the urban renewal area, the project carried on resolutely. The struggle to locate adequate and up-to-code housing for Las Cruces most in need remained an issue beyond the revitalization of the city core.¹²

Land acquisition continued, slowly, but unabated, even as J. Earl Whelply, head of the Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency, resigned to take a job in Texas in June 1969. His former assistant, Rudy Armstrong, took over as executive director of the agency. The change in leadership seemed to represent a new beginning within the urban renewal project. The city, downtown merchants, and residents noted a decline in public approval of the process and a lack of communication between all the key players.¹³ Although Whelply left voluntarily to pursue a different job, the change in personnel, which included a new chairman for the Board of Commissioners of the LCURA, appeared to be part of a broader call for more open communication with local government entities and

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Growth Problems Mark City Commission Meet,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 August 1970.

¹² Richard de Uriarte, “Flaws Found in Community Development Statement, But at Least Las Cruces Doesn’t Think Small,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 25 May 1973.

¹³ “Whelply Announces Resignation as Urban Renewal Director Here,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 10 June 1969; Editorial, “Urban Renewal,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 23 June 1969; “Urban Renewal Board Okays Prices; Armstrong Acting Chief,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 10 July 1969; and “Armstrong Heads Cruces Renewal Project,” *El Paso (Texas) Times*, 10 July 1969.

hope that the city and agency could quickly complete the project.¹⁴ By early 1970, the LCURA attempted to move as quickly as it could and foresaw a June deadline when all the property along the seven-block mall district on Main Street would be purchased, allowing “redevelopers time to complete new buildings before construction of the canopy.”¹⁵

At the same time that different leadership came into the LCURA, a new plan emerged for the downtown mall. Originally, the plan was to develop a semi-mall that still allowed limited two-way traffic on Main Street with angled on-street parking, but the project now developed into a full-scale pedestrian mall closed to all traffic, except emergency vehicles. This altered proposal called for raising canopies and laying a walkway to cover seven blocks of Main Street, providing ample space for civic and public events, and allowing pedestrians, unobstructed by vehicles, to wander from store to store. Local architect Jerome G. Hartger, who designed the mall canopies, believed that closing off the main thoroughfare was the best method for “putting a heart into downtown Las Cruces and providing a center for civic beauty.”¹⁶ City officials and residents reacted favorably to a full pedestrian mall. The chairman of the Las Cruces Parks and Recreation Commission, Dr. Raymond Paz, thought this new plan could help “rejuvenate” a “community spirit” and “help bring about a united community. He said it

¹⁴ “Bryan Named Urban Renewal Board Chief,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 23 July 1969; and Editorial, “Renewed Thoughts on Urban Renewal,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 3 July 1969.

¹⁵ “Urban Renewal Foresees June End to Purchases,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 12 February 1970; LCURA Exec. Dir. J. Earl Whelply to Mrs. Consuelo Lerma, Purchase Option, 29 April 1969, “Quick Taking Procedure Correspondence,” box 28, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library; and Real Estate Dir. A. S. Dikowski to Attorney John M. Lenko, Authorization of “Quick Taking” Condemnation, 23 July 1969, box 28, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library.

¹⁶ “Pedestrian Mall Plan Outlining Slated Tuesday,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 21 September 1969; and “Mall Reaction Favorable,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 24 September 1969.

would lend itself to the human, spiritual, cultural, and social values as well to improvement of business in the area.”¹⁷

Paz’s optimism was shared by LCURA commissioners, who passed a resolution to establish the mall and sent the plans to the Planning and Zoning Commission, City Commission, and HUD officials in Fort Worth, Texas, for approval. The alteration met no resistance or protests from locals either. By all accounts, everyone favored the change in the project, despite Hartger notifying the city, albeit less enthusiastically, that results of constructing pedestrian malls in downtowns elsewhere had proven to be mediocre and inconclusive at best. He warned the city and the LCURA that “after the first surge of enthusiasm, activity tapered,” but he believed that this pattern would not substantially affect the downtown. More than a decade would pass before many cities that invested in downtown malls, especially full pedestrian malls, realized that this suburban cityscape did not transfer easily to function smoothly in a dense, urban environment.¹⁸

The architectural sketches were printed in the *Las Cruces Sun-News* and reflect a modern approach to the design of the downtown pedestrian mall (see ills. 6-1 and 6-2). Although Las Cruces and the LCURA wanted new construction in the urban renewal project to mirror the traditional Hispanic or southwestern culture of the region, modernity seemed to take precedence. The suburban, shopping-center appearance of the plans

¹⁷ “Pedestrian Mall Plan Outlining Slated Tuesday,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 21 September 1969; “Mall Reaction Favorable,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 24 September 1969; “Lack of Protests Pave Way for New Mall Area,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 30 October 1969; and “Urban Renewal Commission Approves Mall,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 31 October 1969.

¹⁸ “Pedestrian Mall Plan Outlining Slated Tuesday,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 21 September 1969; “Mall Reaction Favorable,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 24 September 1969; “Lack of Protests Pave Way for New Mall Area,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 30 October 1969; “Urban Renewal Commission Approves Mall,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 31 October 1969; Laurence A. Alexander, “Malls for Downtown Renewal: An Evaluation,” in *Downtown Malls: An Annual Review*, ed. Laurence A. Alexander (New York: Downtown Research and Development Center, 1975); and Herbert S. Levinson, “The Myth and Reality of Downtown Malls: An Overview,” in *Downtown Malls: An Annual Review*.

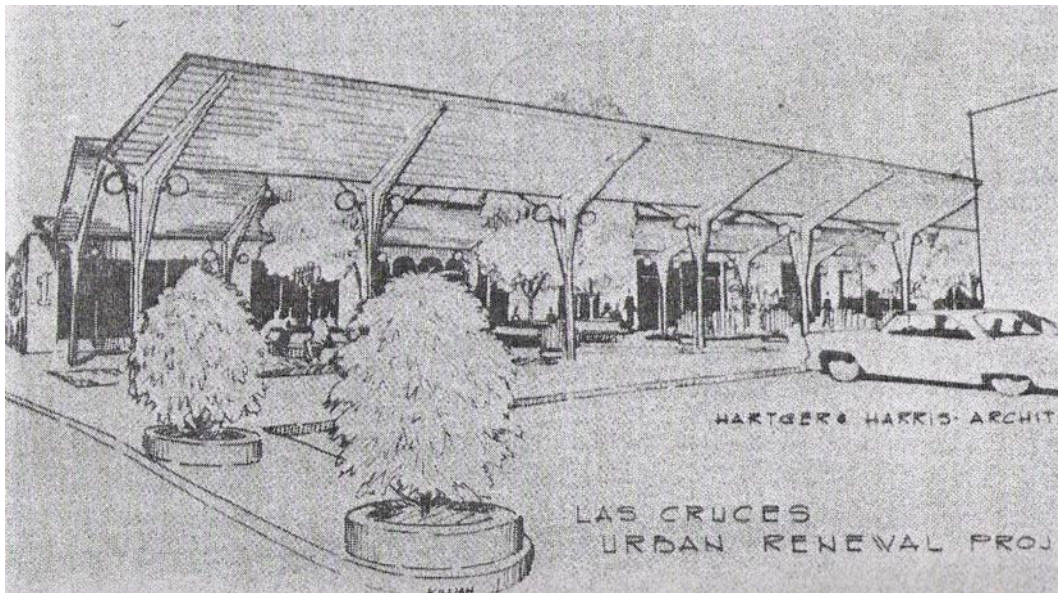
superseded traditional cultural styling. The grand entrance, as shown in illustrations one and two, was designed to usher customers and visitors, who could park in large parking lots surrounding the mall, into a canopied Main Street. Within the mall, they could stroll along a yellow-bricked pathway through seven landscaped and lighted blocks without any vehicular traffic. Architect Hartger explained that the mall would contain “grassed areas, seats, potted plants, telephone booths, drinking fountains, and pools,” all at the cost of nearly half a million dollars.¹⁹ Now Las Cruces could visit local merchants in the central business district (CBD) and still experience a taste of suburbia.

Although the city and community agreed that southwestern, territorial, or Spanish architecture should be the unifying image of Las Cruces’s downtown, the LCURA and its board of commissioners refused to pass a formal regulation establishing a particular style or form. Such a resolution came before the LCURA board in August 1970 but was quickly tabled. Eventually, at a regular meeting on 9 September 1970, commissioner and vice chairman Jack G. Stroman moved that the *Resolution Establishing Southwestern (Territorial) Architecture as a Requirement for New Construction within the Area of the Mall within the Downtown Urban Renewal Project* “be brought back to the table for the purpose of discussion.”²⁰ This maneuver was not, however, a genuine effort to pass any type of ordinance that would impose a specific style on new construction. When the issue came up for discussion during the LCURA commissioner meeting, most members were already reluctant to demand architectural conformity in the downtown district,

¹⁹ “Most Beautiful Main Street,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 26 June 1970; “Mall Reaction Favorable,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 24 September 1969.

²⁰ Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Board of Commissioners, *Resolution Establishing Southwestern (Territorial) Architecture as a Requirement for New Construction within the Area of the Mall within the Downtown Urban Renewal Project N. Mex. R-4*, 9 September 1970, p.2, Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Minutes, 1970, box 2, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library.

“Commissioner Stroman stated that we should encourage but not demand that this particular theme be carried out.”²¹ The board, with the exception of Commissioner Joe Anaya, concluded that there should be no resolution. For developers purchasing parcels within the urban renewal area were already encouraged to construct in a style that would “be in conformity with the surrounding buildings.”²² Only Anaya voted not to pass the resolution. The board instead allowed property owners to use their own building designs, as long as it loosely conformed to the general guidelines of HUD and the LCURA.²³

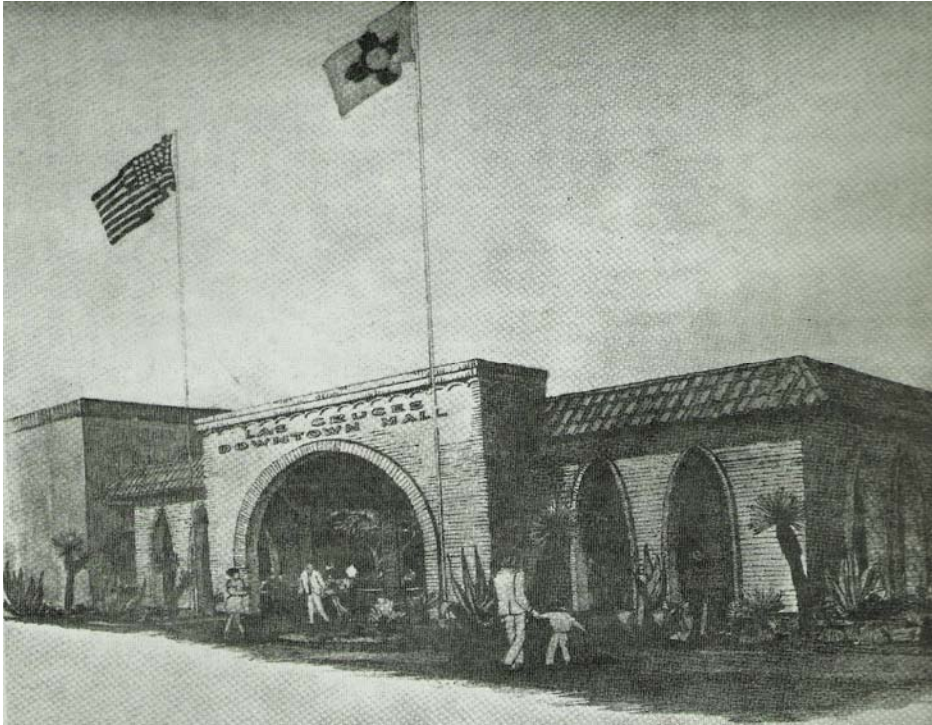


Ill. 6-1. The New Proposed Pedestrian Mall with Traffic Closed to a Portion of Main Street, 23 September 1969
(Illustration courtesy Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News)

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 3.

²³ Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Board of Commissioners, *Resolution Establishing Southwestern (Territorial) Architecture as a Requirement for New Construction within the Area of the Mall within the Downtown Urban Renewal Project*, 3; and Russ Perron, “Architect Theme Tabled by Agency,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 10 September 1970.



Ill. 6-2. An Architect's Sketch, 11 November 1970

This sketch depicts the proposed entrance to the downtown pedestrian mall. Considered to reflect a traditional yet modern southwestern style, the entrance was intended to give visitors and customers the suburban feeling of entering a shopping center. (Illustration courtesy Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News)

Many Las Cruceans were unhappy with the retreat of the LCURA Board of Commissioners from any type of architectural code that would require development in the CBD to conform to a southwestern or regional theme. One resident complained to the *Las Cruces Sun-News* over the lack of architectural meaning downtown. The author described how the city tore down “attractive old buildings and old landmarks” and predicted the lack of interest the city core would suffer if new or modern development replaced the original, culturally and visually interesting structures: “We have destroyed a part of the old charm of Las Cruces for a possible new ugliness!”²⁴ Another concerned citizen echoing these sentiments, urged the LCURA to request that all new construction

²⁴ E. M. Kirkman, “Private Opinion,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 16 September 1970.

incorporate “traditional Spanish-Indian motifs” similar to those required in Santa Fe, New Mexico: “With most of the nation caught up in the tinny-neon race to make every city an aluminum-plated replica of the next one, we could preserve the rich heritage of this region and could build a truly beautiful city that would be unique and quite lovely.”²⁵ The architectural fate of Las Cruces’s central core brought strong emotions to the surface. Residents and merchants alike favored some type of standard that would secure a uniform theme. Even the Tourism Committee of the Chamber of Commerce supported a LCURA resolution requiring that new development follow a southwestern or regional architectural guideline. However, the agency resisted these efforts from the community, maintaining that a formal ordinance would unduly penalize new development. The fear of impeding potential private investment in the renewal district kept commission members from formalizing a style requirement, despite strong support from residents.²⁶

The urban renewal project, nevertheless, moved forward with no written architectural or thematic requirement for rebuilding downtown, and by November 1970, Director Armstrong announced that the agency’s land acquisition and clearance plans were now nearly complete. The LCURA purchased a total of 204 parcels, which contained 243 residential and commercial properties scheduled for demolition, at a cost of \$5,571,827. Of this number, the city had already leveled 173 with 70 still to go.²⁷ The land clearance represented the initial phase in the project, and now, with a new rough deadline of July 1974, the agency would turn to selling off parcels to private developers

²⁵ Tom Erbard, “Private Opinion,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 September 1970.

²⁶ “Positive Action Urged on Theme for New Mall,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 September 1970; Valley Garden Club of Las Cruces, “Private Opinion,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 24 September 1970; and Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Board of Commissioners, *Resolution Establishing Southwestern (Territorial) Architecture as a Requirement for New Construction within the Area of the Mall within the Downtown Urban Renewal Project*, 2.

²⁷ Lu Marion Day, “Urban Renewal Program ‘Two-thirds Way Home’,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 15 November 1970.

and focus on constructing the downtown pedestrian mall, widening streets, and moving utilities underground. City and LCURA officials, however, soon ran into a Grand Jury investigation that threatened to end careers and to derail the urban renewal project.²⁸

City Commissioner Ben Alexander circulated a petition for a Grand Jury investigation of the city manager A. J. Vasilakis and LCURA Director Armstrong, into irregularities in the urban renewal program, and into the administration of municipal operations. With mounting complaints from property owners and residents, Alexander filed his petition in district court and alleged “the possibility of ‘theft and sale of municipal property by employees of the city’” and that property within the urban renewal district had “been sold and the money not placed in the city treasury.” As the Grand Jury convened, Vasilakis, who was accused of misuse of public money, defended his actions as a misunderstanding. According to Alexander’s petition, the city manager used public money to purchase advertising that urged Las Cruces to pass a bond issue, in apparent violation of state statutes.²⁹ Not long after, the Grand Jury indicted Armstrong on “thirteen counts of violation of the state purchasing act,” by awarding demolition projects to the Burn Construction Company without advertising the bids.³⁰

Chairman Henry E. Berroteran, of the LCURA board, responded with a public statement supporting Armstrong and the city administration. The regional HUD office in Texas seconded his declaration. Despite Alexander’s accusations of misconduct, the Grand Jury investigation eventually fizzled when District Judge Norman Hodge

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Grand Jury Asked,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 15 June 1971; “Cruces City Official Seeks Probe of Alleged Fund Irregularities,” *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal*, 17 June 1971; “Sanders to Call Grand Jury Here,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 17 June 1971; “Articles on Grand Jury Set,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 4 July 1971; “Grand Jury Indicts Manager, Businessman,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 27 August 1971; and “Alexander Hits Council Action,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 1 September 1971.

³⁰ “Urban Renewal Director Indicted,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 7 November 1971; and “Urban Renewal Occupies Jury,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Bulletin*, 16 September 1971.

dismissed the case due to insufficient evidence and declared the case could not be re-filed. The case against Vasilakis and Armstrong, although garnering a lot of media attention, failed to establish any wrongdoing by city officials. The judge and state attorney general considered the entire investigation frivolous. The Grand Jury investigation had the potential to become a major setback for Las Cruces leaders and the urban renewal project, but for perhaps slightly eroding public confidence in municipal officials, the investigation did little to slow revitalization plans. The city and community, instead, looked to the future and focused on the next phase in rehabilitating the central business district.³¹

Although revitalization plans overcame complicated obstacles in the initial land acquisition phase, the project, city, and LCURA encountered more troubled waters as planners approached the issue of parking and updating utility lines. In February 1971, City Manager Vasilakis stated in a *Sun-News* article that the project would need an estimated \$587,000 to provide adequate parking to downtown businesses. This cost would include the clearance and paving of lots designated as future parking lots and the construction of a multistory structure. Vasilakis said, “We now have parking units but when the mall is fully built, we’ll need approximately 1,770 more.”³² He added that shoppers would no longer have to worry about finding a place to park because there would be enough spaces to accommodate the needs of downtown shops. He also mentioned that merchants within the project area were responsible for the cost of parking,

³¹ Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Board of Commissioners, “Minutes of Regular Meeting,” 10 November 1971, pp. 1-2, Las Cruces Urban Renewal Minutes, 1971, box 2, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library; “Cruces Urban Renewal Chief Issues a Public Statement,” *El Paso (Texas) Times*, 11 November 1971; “HUD Officials Laud Local Urban Renewal,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 12 November 1971; “Cruces Official Case Dismissed,” *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal*, 23 February 1972; and “Vasilakis Charges Dropped,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 February 1972.

³² Jose Amaro, “City Officials Hear Basic Need to Provide New Mall Parking,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 17 February 1970.

but the city had not yet determined how business owners would pay to finance the development.³³ Vasilakis reiterated the need for additional parking spaces at a LCURA Board of Commissioners meeting, where he presented a study of the parking situation downtown. The study averaged a demand ratio of 2 ½ spaces per 1,000 square feet of floor space, but general parking codes called for 3 units per thousand square feet, and 1 space “per 400, 300, or 200 square feet thereafter.”³⁴ Vasilakis called for the city to pass an ordinance requiring commercial properties to maintain enough spaces for vehicles, and he promoted the construction of lots and a parking structure to allow for these ratios. The initial plans he outlined raised the construction costs of \$81 per parking unit, for just surface spaces, to \$167 for both the lots and the parking structure. The city manager and the agency, however, still needed to iron out the details of who would pay for this part of the project.³⁵

Agency and city officials had to deal with the thorny issue of how to finance this phase of planning, and it would take over three years to resolve. Initially, the LCURA assumed merchants who needed downtown parking would pay the cost of constructing the lots through a one-time assessment that business owners had agreed to pay. The city, however, still had to research the costs and payment details for this project and began to lean toward a leasing system that would also generate revenue.³⁶ Even without a solid financing plan, municipal and LCURA leaders moved ahead with the parking project, which, if not dealt with soon, could threaten to derail the whole urban renewal process. If

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Board of Commissioners, “Minutes of Special Meeting,” 2 February 1971, p. 2, Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Minutes, 19701, box 2, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library.

³⁵ Ibid.; and “Urban Renewal Board Urges Parking Solution,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 13 April 1972.

³⁶ Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Board of Commissioners, “Minutes of Special Meeting,” 2 February 1971, p. 3.

the city did not make enough progress toward completion, HUD retained the power to withdraw renewal funds, possibly halting any further work downtown. Vasilakis moved quickly and met with LCURA director Armstrong in July 1972 to push planning through and begin construction as soon as possible, with no firm idea of how to finance the job.³⁷ The city manager and LCURA officials worked on drafting a zoning ordinance that would require merchants provide a certain number of parking spaces per square footage of floor space. If these business owners could not provide “the adequate number of spaces of private parking . . . the ordinance call[ed] for the merchant[s] to lease public spaces from the city.” After reviewing the measure, City Attorney Roger Ralph agreed with Vasilakis that this measure could be a permanent one that would benefit the city.³⁸

Las Cruces officials abandoned the assessment idea for the leasing method, however, when it became apparent that the city would need some public funds to “develop the facilities,” even with an assessment on commercial property. Planners came up with the idea of creating a revenue-making system in which the city would finance the paving of the lots, parking structure, and maintenance. The municipality would lease the spaces to merchants who did not meet the required parking to floor space ratio. As initially developed, this plan would be a permanent measure that would lease parking units indefinitely to downtown business owners and would generate enough revenue to pay for the construction of the lots as well as for future maintenance.³⁹ After announcing

³⁷ “City Defaults on Urban Renewal Payment,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 15 August 1972; “HUD Issues Warning,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 August 1972; and “Talks Slated on Parking,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 13 July 1972.

³⁸ “Talks Slated on Parking,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 13 July 1972; and Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Board of Commissioners, “Minutes of Special Meeting,” 2 February 1971, pp. 4–5.

³⁹ Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency Board of Commissioners, “Minutes of Special Meeting,” 2 February 1971, pp. 4-5; and City Manager A. J. Vasilakis to Las Cruces City Commission, 25 October 1972, “Central Business District–Urban Renewal: Free Public Parking Facilities, a Self-Liquidating Project of the

this new system, the City Commission set up several public hearings to gather input from resident and commercial-property owners. Downtown merchants, who had recently formed the Downtown Merchants Association to address urban renewal issues, retained a lawyer to challenge the new ordinance and voice its preference for an assessment: “According to the merchants, they have been led to believe that the parking lots behind the Main Street stores would be financed through a one-time assessment of the property owners. Thus would be a procedure similar to a paving district.”⁴⁰ The city and the LCURA quickly realized that Las Cruces did not look favorably on the new ordinance and money-making venture.

The City Commission tabled the parking-zoning ordinance until a future meeting after it encountered this public dissatisfaction. Despite protests from the community, Las Cruces officials continued to push for the measure, even as HUD threatened to cancel its contract with the city for the urban renewal project if the city could not resolve the parking issue and other delays. In order to get HUD’s attention, city leaders voted to default on their payments to the federal urban renewal agency, which in turn would prompt a stern warning and a visit from agency officials: “City officials indicated at the time that they withheld the payment in hopes that representatives from HUD would come to Las Cruces so that the problems between the city and the agency could be resolved.”⁴¹ After a visit from HUD representatives, the City Commission made its payment to the federal government and Mayor T. J. Graham was convinced the three-hour meeting

City of Las Cruces, New Mexico, Part I,” Parking, box 3, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library.

⁴⁰ “Merchants to Engage Lawyer for Hearing,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 27 July 1972; “Merchants Form Downtown Group,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 20 January 1972; and “Parking Hearing Planned Tonight,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 4 August 1972.

⁴¹ “HUD Issues Warning,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 August 1972; “City Defaults on Urban Renewal Payment,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 15 August 1972; and “Parking Issue Awaits Action,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 6 August 1972.

between local and urban renewal officials helped put the leasing plan for parking and the urban renewal project back on track. Downtown merchants, however, felt differently.⁴²

Only a few months later, in October 1972, HUD approved Las Cruces's enabling ordinance and its plan to lease parking spaces to downtown merchants. On 26 October 1972, the City Commission passed Ordinance No. 42, which decreed that the parking project was in the public's best interest because it would relieve traffic congestion and hazards. Sections two through five of the municipal legislation outlined the "self-liquidating" aspect of the project: "Each commercial use in the district defined in Section 4 is hereby determined to benefit from the Urban Renewal Project and including the construction, operation and maintenance of the City of Las Cruces Off Street 'Free Public Parking' Project and may lease non-exclusive space in a municipal parking lot or structure within 400 feet of such commercial use."⁴³ At a later meeting, Vasilakis worked out the price to complete the program and presented the figures to the City Commission. He estimated the total cost at \$838,203 for the land and construction of eleven lots and one multi-story parking structure that would produce 1,219 spaces at an average of \$687.62 per parking unit. The plan called for charging business owners on a sliding scale that decreased if the merchant leased more spaces. The cost to rent each unit from the city

⁴² "City Defaults on Urban Renewal Payment," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 15 August 1972; and "Cruces Agrees on Urban Renewal Pay," *El Paso (Texas) Times*, 24 August 1972.

⁴³ Las Cruces City Commission, Ordinance No. 42, Commission Bill No. 73-46, *An Ordinance Creating a Revenue Producing Project: i.e., the City of Las Cruces "Free Public Parking Project: Providing for the Lease of Space Therein; for the Construction and Management Thereof; for the Issuance of Bonds Payable from the Net Income Thereof* (26 October 1972), pp. 1-2, "Central Business District-Urban Renewal: Free Public Parking Facilities, a Self-Liquidating Project of the City of Las Cruces, New Mexico, Part I," Parking, box 3, LCURA Records, 1966-1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library; "HUD Okays Las Cruces Parking," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 26 September 1972; and "Parking Lot Ordinance Passes City Commission," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 27 October 1972.

averaged eight dollars per year.⁴⁴ Immediately after the commission passed the ordinance, Vasilakis opened the project to bids for construction and the city seemed to have found a solution to their parking and revenue problems.⁴⁵

Las Cruces officials moved quickly to start the parking project, but the Downtown Merchants Association was not far behind. After retaining a lawyer to represent merchants' interests in the urban renewal program, the group filed a lawsuit against the city once commissioners approved the zoning and leasing system. The challenge declared that the ordinance and "a compulsory parking rental system" violated property owners' rights and would damage their businesses. The suit also claimed Las Cruces leaders violated the constitutional rights of the plaintiffs when the city unlawfully assigned authority to the city manager without "any standards and such constitutes an unlawful delegation of legislative duties of the governing body of said municipality."⁴⁶ With the case working through the court system, Vasilakis and municipal officials, who viewed the suit as premature and denied any wrongdoing, decided to cancel any bids for the project and to hold a public meeting to address the concerns of the Downtown Merchants Association.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ City Manager A. J. Vasilakis to Las Cruces City Commission, 20 November 1972, Summary Recommendations, "Central Business District—Urban Renewal: Free Public Parking Facilities, a Self-Liquidating Project of the City of Las Cruces, New Mexico, Part IV," Parking, box 3, LCURA Records, 1966–1974, RG 96-113, ASC, NMSU Library; and "Cruces Sets Hearing on Urban Renewal for Downtown Mall Parking Facilities," *El Paso (Texas) Times*, 12 November 1972.

⁴⁵ "City Seeks Bids for Parking," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 16 November 1972.

⁴⁶ *Rex Ross, et al. v. The City of Las Cruces, a municipal corporation*, N.Mex. 3d Judicial District, No. 26585 (21 November 1972), Summons, 1, 3–4; "Suit Challenges Parking Ordinance Validity," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 22 November 1972; and "State and Locally," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 13 December 1972.

⁴⁷ "State and Locally," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 13 December 1972; and "Parking Hearing Called Off," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 10 December 1972; "Parking Suit Termed 'Premature' by City," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 19 December 1972; "Parking Issue Viewed," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 January 1973; and *Rex Ross, et al. v. The City of Las Cruces, a municipal corporation*, N.Mex. 3d Judicial District, No. 26585 (21 November 1972), Answer, 1–3.

Several months passed before a judgment on the case finally arrived. After motions, hearings, and the withdrawal of a judge from the case, District Judge George Zimmerman of Alamogordo, New Mexico, ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and against the city. Citing eight points that invalidated the parking ordinance, Zimmerman ruled that the zoning denied downtown merchants' "due process of the law and equal protection of the law." He also stated in his judgment that the city's actions "transcended limits set forth by New Mexico statutes and amounted to mandatory leasing, an improper delegation of power to Vasilakis, and a violation of 'vested property rights.'"⁴⁸ Municipal leaders disagreed with the ruling and filed an appeal. At the same time, however, they still felt pressure to finish the urban renewal project. HUD urged officials to move past the court case and to seek another way to construct enough parking spaces downtown and complete the program.⁴⁹

Clyde Emmons, regional HUD manager, warned the LCURA and city commissioners that if Las Cruces could not finish the urban renewal project, they would once again face reimbursing the federal government for funds HUD sent to pay for the program. Agreeing with Zimmerman's ruling, HUD declared that the city could neither establish a compulsory leasing system nor force property owners to pay a parking assessment. Any contribution from citizens had to be voluntary. And as it turned out, the revitalization plans ran under budget so an assessment on parking spaces downtown could work on a voluntary basis. So city officials abandoned the legal appeal and focused

⁴⁸ "City's Downtown Parking Ordinance Found Invalid by Judge," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 4 April 1973, pp. 1-2; "Motion Hearing Slated on Parking Zone Issue," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 30 January 1973; "Parking Hearing Nixed; Local Judge Withdraws," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 2 February 1973; "Parking Hearing Slated," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 13 March 1973; "Notice," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 21 March 1973; "Notice," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 22 March 1973; and "Notice," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 30 March 1973.

⁴⁹ "City Appeals Decision on Downtown Parking," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 19 April 1973; and "Financial Breakthrough to Ease Parking Hassle," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 25 May 1973.

on developing another way to address parking that would help close out urban renewal work in the central business district. In August 1972, the City Commission met to discuss a new parking plan that was stripped down to just surface lots, with no multi-story structure or extensive landscaping. At a cost of \$385,000, this new proposal was a stark contrast to the original \$800,000 plan. There was a still a minimum requirement imposed on downtown merchants, who needed to provide a square foot of parking space for every square foot of retail space they owned. If property owners could not meet this requirement, they could pay an assessment to the city on a voluntary basis over five, ten, or fifteen years. The Downtown Merchants Association and other residents impacted by the urban renewal project agreed to this new plan, and construction on the surface lots started almost immediately. As the city resolved the parking issue and neared completion of the parking lots, the Las Cruces government and community prepared for the approaching end to the project.⁵⁰

When construction in the urban renewal area neared completion, the downtown project struck up another controversy, albeit minor, over who would get to name the mall and what would that name be. The City Commission held several public meetings to address the future name of the pedestrian mall. This issue garnered community-wide attention. Some residents believed a group should be appointed to collect names submitted by Las Cruces and then choose the best one. The business owners in the Downtown Merchants Association maintained that their group should be allowed to

⁵⁰ “Financial Breakthrough to Ease Parking Hassle,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 25 May 1973; “New Parking Plan Revealed by City Fathers,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 2 August 1973; “Commissioner Approves Mall Parking Contract,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 September 1973; “Private Opinion,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 1 October 1973; “Parking Contracts to Be Completed,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 14 November 1973; and “Close-Out Set for Las Cruces Urban Renewal Project,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 24 August 1973.

choose the name. They favored calling the pedestrian mall the “Las Cruces Downtown Mall.” Commercial property owners, however, met resistance from a number of locals who believed this matter should be decided by all taxpayers, not just those living in the urban renewal district.⁵¹ The Planning and Zoning Commission finally met to resolve the contest and choose a name, “Main Street Plaza,” that took into account suggestions from the community. The planning commissioners sent their recommendation to the City Commission, which would make the final decision, and in early September 1972, members of the City Commission came down on the side of downtown merchants, who had suggested “Las Cruces Downtown Mall” as the new name. City leaders, residents, and business owners all appeared satisfied with this compromise as the end of the project neared and the community prepared for the opening of the mall that year.⁵²

Considering the extraordinary energy, time, and money pouring into the downtown urban renewal project, Las Cruces planners and leaders surprisingly failed to address a major contributing cause to the initial decline of the CBD. Throughout the almost ten-year journey of revitalization efforts, the city still promoted outward growth and the establishment of major shopping centers that would eventually compete with city-core merchants. In February 1970, Montgomery Ward officials announced their purchase of nearly twenty-eight acres of land on the eastern side of Interstate 25 and the construction start of a 73,000-square-foot outlet store. Named the Lohman Plaza

⁵¹ “Mall Issue Faces City,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 18 June 1972; “Mall Naming Sent to Planning Group,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 20 June 1972; “The Downtown Mall,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 20 June 1972; “The Naming of the Mall: A Tempest,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Bulletin*, 22 June 1972; “Debate Arises Over Naming of Mall,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 12 July 1972; and “Commission Selects ‘Main Street Plaza’,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 16 August 1972.

⁵² “Commission Selects ‘Main Street Plaza’,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 16 August 1972; “Mall Name on Agenda for City,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 4 September 1972; “It’s ‘Las Cruces Downtown Mall’,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Bulletin*, 7 September 1972; “Area Called ‘Downtown Mall’,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 6 September 1972; and “Wizard of Oz Characters Come Alive on New LC Mall,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 17 October 1972.

Shopping Center, this massive enterprise would directly compete with any local downtown merchants and draw customers out of the city core and toward its outskirts. Another large mall received the city's approval just a year later. The three-million-dollar multistory, to be built on the corner of Idaho Avenue and El Paseo Road, would include a 90,000-square-foot Woolco discount department store, as well as other smaller shops. Total retail space would cover over 200,000 square feet. Despite the city's well-meaning intentions, the CBD had little chance to survive competition from these new shopping centers that catered to suburban trends of vast, air-conditioned stores buttressed by ample parking.⁵³

As the Grand Jury investigation and the parking issue faded away, Las Cruces could finally see an end to the downtown revitalization efforts in February 1974. The city had already opened the pedestrian mall two years prior, but the LCURA still had to address the remaining issues such as parking, utilities, landscaping, and selling the last of the land the municipality acquired. With the parking situation cleared up, Regional Director Manuel Sanchez, of HUD, notified Mayor Graham that the federal government would request a final audit and begin closing out the project given that it was "all but finished."⁵⁴ By May 1974, after a visit from HUD officials, the city no longer needed to maintain a full-time office for the LCURA. With an anticipated closing date of 30 May 1974, the agency became a part-time operation to oversee the sale of five parcels that

⁵³ "Ward Buys Land for Shop Center," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 5 February 1970; and "City to Get New Shopping Mall," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 28 March 1971.

⁵⁴ "Urban Renewal Closes Out: Downtown Las Cruces Gets a Great New Start in Life," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, January 1974; and "Mayor Receives Letter on Urban Renewal Status," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 12 February 1974.

remained in the hands of the city and to close out remaining court cases that still awaited decisions.⁵⁵

The impact of the urban renewal project on the downtown's built environment was dramatic and far-reaching. Vast parking lots now surrounded the seven-block-long canopy over Main Street (see ills. 6-3 and 6-4). One-way streets, known locally as the race track, looped around the now sparse and sterile urban renewal district. This new downtown contrasted sharply with the surrounding neighborhoods in the central city. Just three or four blocks away, historic homes and buildings that evolved over time surrounded the alien and barren urban core. As the renewal project came to an end, officials and residents believed their downtown would embark on a new beginning filled with the vibrant life of the community. Despite the long, drawn-out process of urban renewal, Las Cruces held onto the hope that Main Street's redevelopment would breathe life back into the heart of their city. Continual population and economic growth combined with revitalization and modernization efforts in Las Cruces's CBD, however, did not translate into a thriving downtown. The city's embrace of contemporary trends like the shopping center, annexation, sprawl, and subdivisions overshadowed the needs of its historic downtown. Community and municipal leaders, hoping to capitalize on the trends of suburbia, guided the twelve-million-dollar project away from preserving Main Street's century-old character and supported a modern solution, the fully enclosed shopping mall. The decisions made during this process became embedded in the memories of residents and left a sense of bitterness over the loss of countless structures that had represented a tangible connection to Mesilla Valley's heritage and culture. The failure of the project seemed to tear deeper at the wound already left from the demolition and clearance of Las

⁵⁵ "Part-Time Operation Slated for Urban Renewal Office," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 10 May 1974.

Cruces's historic Main Street. Over the next thirty years, municipal leaders and planners continued to struggle with the question of how to inject life back into the city core.



Ill. 6-3. Aerial View of Downtown Las Cruces after Urban Renewal
(*Illustration courtesy Las Cruces Blog: News, Photos, History,*
<http://lascrucesblog.com/category/history/page/2/>)



Ill. 6-4. Downtown Las Cruces after Several Blocks Were Levelled during Urban Renewal, 1974

(Illustration courtesy Branigan Cultural Center, Collection of the City of Las Cruces Museum System)



Ill. 6-5. Underneath the Canopy, on the Yellow-Bricked Pathway That Was Formerly Main Street

(Illustration courtesy Las Cruces Blog: News, Photos, History, <http://lascrucesblog.com/category/history/page/2/>)

Chapter 7

Conclusion

It is a warm spring morning. The sky is clear; the air is crisp and infused with the subdued scent of alfalfa and grass emanating from New Mexico State University–owned fields located a few miles away in the middle of town. Rachel steps out of her historic adobe home in the Alameda-Depot Historic District with her daughter Isabella. They stroll a few blocks away from their home in search of fresh local produce and shopping along Main Street. The farmers’ market is crowded with shoppers, but Rachel and Isabella manage to navigate the throng of Las Cruces residents and move on to walking around downtown, where they peruse art galleries and locally owned shops. After a few hours of window shopping, Isabella grows weary and hungry, and she and Rachel decide to head home with their bag of groceries. They pass by Pioneer Park on their way home through the historic district; they are content with their purchases of locally produced goods that support regional industries and businesses in the prosperous Mesilla Valley.

A pedestrian-friendly, reinvigorated downtown like this one is the goal of new comprehensive plans developed by Las Cruces city planners. Planners consulted with university staff and students, neighborhood associations, business owners, developers and city residents regarding what the ultimate goal should be for the struggling central business district (CBD). Officials finally settled on a plan in 2004 to revitalize the once-thriving downtown through a multi-faceted approach. Main Street would be transformed into “A Pedestrian-Oriented Mixed-Use Regional Activity Center” that would contain institutional, government, and private office space, as well as a cultural, arts and

entertainment center. Retail and small businesses would be within walking distance of and dispersed within residential neighborhoods in accordance with the approach of New Urbanism. The Congress for the New Urbanism supports developing neighborhoods into compact, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use areas. These working and living nodes should be within walking distance for most daily activities, and the streets are designed to encourage pedestrian use.⁵⁶ If successful, Las Cruces's plan will dramatically transform the languishing city core. However, it will not be the first attempt to shape development along Las Cruces's Main Street and throughout the city. The ill-fated urban renewal efforts of the 1960s and 1970s spelled disaster for the downtown, and now planners are attempting a new renewal project for the city core and hope to recapture the historic character and integrity of the central business district.

After the city opened the pedestrian mall in 1972 and completed the urban renewal project in 1974, local officials and residents had anticipated a revitalization of business along Main Street. The goal of the project was to "transform a decaying core into a viable retail and office area, having a relaxed atmosphere created by pleasing public spaces and attractive private structures," and "to emulate one of the real estate industry's most creative achievements since the Second World War: shopping centers, whose success has been based upon the provision of a high degree of comfort, attractiveness and accessibility."⁵⁷ Main Street, now a seven-block-long pedestrian mall,

⁵⁶ "The Congress for the New Urbanism views disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge. We stand for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy." Congress for the New Urbanism, "Charter for New Urbanism," <http://www.cnu.org/charter>.

⁵⁷ City of Las Cruces, *Las Cruces Tomorrow: A Planning Workbook; Problems, Needs and Prospects* (Las Cruces, N.Mex.: Department of Planning and Environmental Concerns, 1977), 120.

provided patrons with a shaded, yellow-bricked walkway underneath metal canopies and landscaping. Separated from traffic, visitors could now walk beside and observe the lighted fountains, planters with shrubbery, flowers, and trees, and the kiosks that line the pathway. The city provided ample free public parking to further entice shoppers to visit the recently-finished project: “The Mall represents an attempt to draw out the essence of what a downtown should be—a place where the natural diversity of people, goods, and services makes it a center for exchange and a focus for civic events.”⁵⁸

Three years after the completion of urban renewal in Las Cruces, the city and locals still awaited the revival. With over ten vacant lots and twenty-one buildings along the mall unoccupied, a Las Cruces Planning Department study, published in 1977, maintained that the full potential of the revamped Main Street had not been met and that consumers and merchants still lacked confidence in the viability of the downtown mall. The report blamed this disappointing realization, in part, on the lack of improvement to the rear façades of buildings in the downtown district that were not torn down. The city called on property owners to rehabilitate these remaining structures: “These façades serve to repel consumer interest in doing business along the Mall and stimulate a negative public image of the area.”⁵⁹ This study also noted a lack of sufficient lighting in and around the mall at night and noted the “ghost town” image of Main Street. Both problems contributed to a disincentive to patronize and invest in the CBD. A single land use dominated the downtown, for office space serving the financial and government center of the city proliferated, while entertainment and retail businesses and restaurants remained outside the municipal core. Within several years of the project completion, planners

⁵⁸ Ibid., 121.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

recognized the need for the mixed use of land that would entice people to visit the mall throughout the day and into the night.⁶⁰ Although only a few years passed before city officials and residents realized that the multi-million-dollar project had failed to fulfill its promise to lure businesses, customers, and visitors to Las Cruces's downtown, municipal planners and leaders, through this report, maintained that the mall would work as long as citizens and merchants created "positive attitudes about the area" and encouraged new investment.⁶¹

Starting in 1973, the downtown mall experienced a brief, weekly reprieve from the disappointing lack of visitor patronage and business investment. The Las Cruces Farmers' Market, established in May 1973, revitalized Main Street for a short period of time during the week and has grown into a year-round growers' and crafts' market that citizens from throughout the city and three neighboring counties can visit twice a week. Initially endorsed by the City Commission, Doña Ana County Resource Conservation and Development Council, the League of Women Voters, and the Home, Education, and Livelihood Program, the market "would serve to generate added income to the economy of the local farmers . . . and provide an outlet for local consumers to purchase fresh vegetables and specialty crops."⁶² Among the many sites recommended, the League of Women Voters recommended the downtown mall as the location for the weekly market, and the canopied walkway provided ample shelter for vendors. The mall was able to accommodate the growing and successful farmers' market, hiding, however briefly, the vacant "ghost town" image that settled along Main Street during the rest of the week.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 122.

⁶¹ City of Las Cruces, *Las Cruces Tomorrow*, 122–23.

⁶² Ibid., 122; and "Farmers' Market Approved," *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 8 May 1973.

Ten years after the completion of the urban renewal project, the lack of patronage and investment in the downtown mall became even more apparent. The city still struggled with how to address the failing central business district but remained determined to address the problem: “In the years since the project’s completion, only modest retail activity has been achieved. Construction of the Mesilla Valley Mall, opened in 1981, has diverted most of the existing and potential regional retail trade from downtown for the foreseeable future.”⁶³ By 1985 Las Cruces planners endorsed a new approach toward town planning and attempted to incorporate a mixed land-use pattern into the city’s comprehensive planning. Although this approach is the hallmark of New Urbanism, which emerged in the early 1990s, Las Cruces officials embraced, to a certain degree, the new concept of promoting more pedestrian-friendly commercial districts that included a mix of office, retail, restaurant, and residential space. The city’s comprehensive plan of 1985, although still promoting low-density growth and annexation as a method of accommodating suburban development, recognized the need for a change in the direction of planning in the downtown district and mall.⁶⁴ The city’s planning efforts to encourage mixed-use development along Main Street, however, had a limited effect. Planners simultaneously promoted the use of the CBD as a financial and administrative center, while also trying to encourage visitors and shoppers to patronize the few retail businesses still operating along the mall. In the end, despite the city’s intentions to revitalize the core once again, the “ghost town” image of downtown remained intact, with office spaces proliferating in the core and inhabitants abandoning the mall at the end of the workday and business week.

⁶³ City of Las Cruces, *City of Las Cruces Comprehensive Plan: Goals and Objectives* (Las Cruces, N.Mex.: Planning and Zoning Commission, Department of Planning, 1985), 24.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 13–15, 26.

During the post–World War II period Las Cruces and other American cities witnessed a transformation in residential settlement patterns, as commerce and the use of the automobile evolved. Decentralization, suburban development, shopping-mall trends, and the popularity of vehicles had profoundly impacted Las Cruces’s downtown, which already had started to suffer from a lack of investment and attention in the 1950s. Concern over the fate of the CBD, however, fell behind the needs of new construction in the outer rims of the city. Municipal officials, commissioners, the mayor, and private developers pursued a comprehensive plan that welcomed outward, low-density growth, even if it came at the expense of a beloved downtown already teetering on the cliff of obsolescence.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Las Cruces embarked on a long journey of urban renewal like thousands of other municipalities throughout the United States. From the beginning, this southern New Mexican city’s revitalization efforts sparked controversy and discontent from residents and at times from city officials. The citizen despair over the destruction of St. Genevieve Church, the cherished historic landmark, served as an omen of what was to come when the project commenced in 1966. The Catholic diocese sold the building to the Farmers and Merchants Bank, which planned to replace the demolished church with a new bank building. Only a few years later in 1972, bank officials, no longer looking to build on the site, offered city leaders the chance to purchase the property. The Las Cruces Urban Renewal Agency (LCURA) unanimously approved a resolution to purchase the parcel of land and developed plans to turn it into a city park. Despite tepid approval from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), whose officials expressed a concern over using this property for a park instead of parking

and street widening, the City of Las Cruces pushed forward with the idea of a city park.⁶⁵ The community strongly favored this vision, and many residents believed the development of the land into a park would help to address the sense of loss locals felt over the church demolition and property sale: “The agency’s recent move has heartened many former parishioners of the St. Genevieve Catholic Church and has healed many wounds which were opened when the property was sold for commercial development.”⁶⁶ Much to the dismay of municipal and community members, the city could not move the park plans past HUD officials, who ultimately rejected the project, and the property was destined to become a parking lot.⁶⁷ Municipal leaders ultimately underestimated the connection between this sacred building and parishioners, and an effort to mitigate the loss associated with this property failed when HUD officials stepped in and stopped park construction plans that might have assuaged the community’s bitterness.

This sense of loss and resentment toward government intervention continued well past the demolition of St. Genevieve Church. The urban renewal project obliterated Las Cruces’s historic downtown urban environment. Blinded by suburban novelties like the enclosed shopping center, an infatuation with automobiles, and the idea that “progress equals expansion,” city officials and planners bypassed any attachment to the historic landscape of Main Street. They favored, instead, a complete reconstruction of the central business district, clearing any structures that impeded the new plans, which modeled the new commercial center after a shopping mall.

⁶⁵ “Mall to Have City Park,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 22 June 1972.

⁶⁶ “Park Placement Pleases Parishioners,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 25 June 1972.

⁶⁷ “Mall Park Not Reality Yet,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Sun-News*, 5 July 1972; and “City UR Work 99% Complete,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Bulletin*, 14 September 1972.

Many residents, who initially favored this radical plan to rehabilitate their ailing city core and who pleaded for federal and local aid, encountered a new modern reality, government intervention. As the city pressed forward with acquiring the land needed to create a pedestrian mall and ample parking, officials resorted to numerous condemnation and eminent domain proceedings to keep the process going and to remove people from the renewal district. The reality of forced relocation or eviction left many property owners disillusioned and discontent with the city's involvement. The exasperatingly slow pace of the project further fueled public dissatisfaction, which culminated in a Grand Jury investigation into allegations of wrongdoing within the LCURA Board of Commissioners and within the city government. And the discontent festering over the methods municipal officials' utilized to carry out their plans found a voice in lawsuits filed against the city.

Throughout the process of urban renewal, Las Cruces planners and officials also failed to address factors that contributed to the decline of the downtown. Although the many reports commissioned by the city repeatedly highlighted the causes of the downturn on Main Street, municipal leaders continued to favor and support the decentralization and expansion of the city. Officials and private land developers encouraged the establishment of subdivisions, shopping centers, and commercial strip construction along highway corridors. Even after the completion of the renewal project and despite its detrimental effects on the CBD, planning reports still advocated this form of growth. Las Cruces's growing population, boosted by incoming residents working for the federal installations in the area, lacked a strong attachment to the city's cultural and historical urban heart. Downtowns, long associated with blight, urban decay, and stagnation, fell out of favor with a growing suburban population, which valued a modern urban landscape over the

traditional, high-density core. Las Cruces's residents followed development to the outskirts of the city, and municipal officials, reluctant to discourage this outward expansion, allowed sprawling development to take precedence over the needs of Main Street.

At first celebrated for its modern, southwestern style and suburban atmosphere, the downtown mall failed to live up to its expectations. It neither revitalized the central business district, nor did it become a community-gathering place except on designated occasions. Instead, Las Cruces's core grew more barren, with desolate expanses of parking lots and a canopied pedestrian mall lined with vacant buildings. The municipal government continued to view outward expansion as progress, despite its detrimental effects on the downtown, and urban renewal, failing to attract a suburban population, proved to be catastrophic for the struggling city center.

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