

Route 66 in past, present and future

Sigrun PrahI

In a beginning urban planning class we worked on the following questions: How did the interstate system around the cities change the main streets of the historic cities and towns? What kind of buildings/uses emerged around the highway? Did that take away from the old center or did it add to it? Was it positive or negative? As a large example we took the towns and cities along Route 66.

Besides the landscape, cities, towns and main streets of Route 66 students also described how certain features changed the main streets of the historic cities and towns and their landscape. The features were:

- Attractions, entertainment
- Roadside architecture and signs
- Gas stations
- Motels
- Food, restaurants, drive-ins
- Music and art

1 History of Route 66

At its inception in 1926, Route 66 was intended to include the main streets of rural America. The paving began in late 1926 in Chicago, Illinois and by 1937 Route 66 had meandered across the United States ending in Santa Monica, California. When it was finally paved from end-to-end one would travel through eight states (Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California) and three time zones.

In the beginning, it was an optimistic road, well traveled, well praised about and full of hope. It introduced an access to the west and was known as “The Mother Road” and “The Main Street of America.” The appeal of Route 66 was first and foremost the experience of being on the open road. One was set free on Route 66 but there were just enough sights, diners, gas stations, and other assorted oddities to make one feel at home on the road. The song *Get Your Kicks on Route 66* popularized by Nat King Cole brought more interest to it.

Route 66 also symbolized the renewed spirit of optimism that went through the country after economic catastrophe and global war. “The Main Street of America” linked remote and under-populated regions, providing small towns with vehicular access to larger cities. An estimated 210,000 people migrated on it to California to escape the despair of the Dust Bowl to whom Route 66 symbolized the road to opportunity. It also grew popular through the trucking industry.

Route 66 was officially decommissioned in 1985 although its uses had long ago been replaced by the interstate system. Now, Route 66 can no longer be traveled solely throughout the long distance. In its span from Illinois to California, route 66 is intertwined by a series of interstates and super highways like US 40, a system that has also in large parts taken over the traffic, the gas, food and lodging

services. Route 66 has become a fragmented road, yet remains complete in memories and paraphernalia preserved in museums and souvenir shops. Its legacy has been continued in pop-culture, television shows, music and iconography. Today towns capitalize on the tourism industry that draws people to see the old sites of the route.



2 Signs and Roadside Architecture

The life manifested on the old route was seen visually along its path. The signs and architecture along the highway attracted the traveler to pull over to the businesses and the owners with their hospitality brought the people inside.

When Route 66 was at its prime it carried a certain feeling of romance along its path. People had used the highway to travel west in search of having a good time or sometimes a better life out west. The spirit possessed by the route was important to many people and showed the freedom and ability of people to just go. Moreover, for the residents along the path, it supported the American Dream of being self-employed and owning your own business, which the majority of motels, shops, and diners inhabiting it were.

Along Route 66 there are still signs and architecture that are as adventurous visually as the road was to travel. Signage was the most important aspect in leading perspective customers off Route 66 and into the trading posts, entertainment, gas, food, and lodging areas. These businesses that were encountered throughout the 'Mother Road' were small, and needed to use unique signs to make

their business seem more desirable than the next. The Route is still infested with signs of various shape, size, and style, whether it is a huge painted board or a small neon sign.



Road signs often not only act as physical markers but also as cultural, political, economic or patriotic statements. They hold value in capturing ideas held by their creators and an understanding of the cultural climate in which they were built.

Main street signage traditionally has simple rectilinear compositions suspended outside a business in a downtown district. The automobile changed this downtown layout. Due to congestion and the lack of parking many businesses were forced to out lying highway strips. This freed business owners from the spatial confines of the main street and allowed for free standing signs not attached to buildings. This type of signage tends to be large in scale, close to the roadside, and angled to be viewed by automotive traffic traveling at high speeds. The sign heralds to travelers from as far down the highway as possible, and signals the driver to slow down.



Buildings or paintings on them can also act as a form of signage. The signs along the Route 66 became an integral part of America's vernacular through their material, form, structure, typography, naming conventions, color, symbolism, and three-dimensional composition in space. The signs featured being on route 66 as a trademark but always tried to be designed individually.

The original roadside architecture along Route 66 also remains the most visual reflection of each region's landscape, weather, and history. Building materials came from the resources of each state. Whether wood or clay or concrete, the buildings were built simply and usefully (a characteristic of the time) by local miners, farmers, and townspeople. These locals slowly emerged as small entrepreneurs taking pride in their small stores, gas stations, cafes, and motels. By maintaining the attitudes, customs, and history of their respective lands, they celebrated their local culture. Thus, Route 66, by winding through the deserts, the mountains, and small metropolises, brought people to the local architecture.

On the contrary, the interstate is very impersonal, it seems to be a lonesome road that sets up non-descript stations where you can stop when you are hungry, tired, or need to re-fuel. There is no special attraction drawn to these stops. The signs along the interstate system are generic. They want to be recognized as parts of a chain and unlike the various and expressive ones that had once been so common on route 66 they are identical in all states. In addition, along

interstates the buildings are set back from the road, making the driver leave the road totally to get there, therefore making the road and the building seem separated from each other. However, on Route 66 the businesses were located along side the road in parts, letting the road and the architecture be used together to create a common space and a personal feeling.

3 Gas

Another important factor of Route 66 was that the first simply constructed automobiles needed gasoline. On a road that stretched for a couple of thousand miles, gas stations became a necessity. New drivers first purchased gasoline at liveryes, repair shops, or general stores. They arduously poured the gas in buckets and then funneled it into their gas tanks. This primitive method would soon become obsolete. By the 1920's with the growth of the automobile and the construction of roads, the now thriving oil industries began developing more consumer-friendly distribution systems. This move inevitably led to the modern "gas station."

The gas station buildings originally told a lot about a region's climate and available materials. Where houses were mainly brick or wood, the gas stations of Illinois had a wooden or brick structure covered by clapboard or shingles. In Missouri, the material was sandstone. In the more Western regions of Route 66, the arid desert and sub humid plains catered to the large canopy design to protect customers from the sun. These canopies also had to be tall enough to let in light and allow for larger trucks.



By the 1930's, Pure Oil, Phillip's Petroleum, and Texaco were all standardizing their gas station and designed a basic "Streamline Moderne" building. This design could be used all over the country with any materials available - porcelain-enameled steel, brick, concrete block, or frame and stucco. Moreover, Texaco's universal simplistic design (a white building with 3 green stripes) became a recognizable icon for gasoline.

Today, the filling stations that accentuated Route 66 are long gone. Their tanks below ground are rusted out and pumps are outdated, if not looking skeleton like. The interstate provides gas stations with easy on and off access to it, making the traveler's journey faster and more efficient. Participants of the travel way no longer purchase gasoline from liveries or general stores, but from big business oil companies who run a monopoly with stations set up along the freeway. By strategically setting up stations along a certain length, corporate companies took over the function of general stores and liveries.

4 Food

Along the historic route 66 a wide variety of restaurants, cafes, diners, bars still tend to maintain their original look and their old style signs in front of their place from old days. Every state has its own top spots where people can enjoy the food and drink while traveling across the route 66 and taste the original old recipes from the time when the Route 66 was

the main road. They once served the people who traveled the long way from the state of Illinois to the state of California, and today they serve tourists that want to taste the old ways when route 66 was celebrated as the main road and not as the historical path as it is today.

Moreover fast-food restaurants evolved from the eateries spawned by the car culture. Drive-Ins with food delivered to waiting cars, “Walk-Ups” where customers queued in multiple lines to speed food purchase and ultimately the Drive-Through where food was handed to motorists in waiting cars were introduced. Reflecting on the industrial age assembly lines, food preparation, and delivery were engineered to fully rationalize time and motion. With the widespread adoption of the automobile for personal transportation Americans took on automobile-convenient food as a logical extension of their mania for the on the go lifestyle. This also changed the use of public and private space. The boundary between inside and outside of a restaurant is not crossed when ordering from the car. Today this type is mainly represented by generic hamburger chains along the interstate.



5 Lodging

Route 66 and traveling by car has diminished the role of the hotel. Hotels are often located in the urban core of a city or town. They are directly adjacent to the street, and they have no or limited parking because they were originally geared towards visitors arriving by train. They are usually designed as a destination, not a passage, that means to accommodate multi-night stays, and their guests are usually there for the purpose of business or vacation in the local area. They often

include additional amenities like function rooms, dining facilities, and a welcoming entry lobby. The motel, on the other hand, is well suited for one-night stays. The building is separated from the street to accommodate the cars. Easy parking drops guests off in front of their room, built with only one or two floors, room access is direct on the outside of the building, that is arranged around a parking lot or an open air swimming pool. The accessibility makes the motel the ideal system for transient travelers.



Many of the motels were built in the early 20th century and carried a local character. In Kellyville, OK, for example, the motel appears like an old farming village made of stone. This style of motel is unique to Oklahoma, and could not be seen anywhere else. In Flagstaff, Arizona, a great neon sign shows the Flamingo Motor Hotel, with its slate roofs to sustain the desert heat. This type of roof differs greatly from roofs elsewhere, and would stick out in a person's memory of their travel along Route 66. The Wigwam Motel in Rialto, California is also different in that the rooms are actually a series of tepees resembling a Native American tribe settling alongside the road. All of these motels can be seen right along the side of the street, and are not advertised on monotonous green, red or blue signs of a motel chain.

Therefore many motels along the road were attractions as well, and some old and historical motels still stand and are visited along the main road today. Often the signs of the

motels are visually more attractive and more important than the building itself. The characteristic style of large size, bright colors, and flashy lights of the motel signs along Route 66 respond directly to the moving automobile and nomadic lifestyle.

Today the motels along the interstates are much different from the old motels on Route 66. The only way you know when to stop for a motel would be to look for a generic sign to tell you. When you do find a hotel, you notice that it looks the same as the one you have seen in the previous state. Motels have become a chain, and have lost their originality and specific qualities.

6 Roadside Attractions, Art and Music

The explorers of Route 66 originally followed a dream, their wheels brought them to new lands. Their path rolled, rose and fell, it pitched and heaved around every hairpin turn, what would they find around the next bend? Would it be something intriguing or scary? Would it be a giant boy carrying a hamburger, a big blue whale, a stretch of painted Cadillacs buried in the ground, a giant dinosaur in front of a cavern, a giant rabbit wearing a saddle, a spaceman carrying a rocket, a big neon pig dancing on a sign, or would it just be a stretch of Camelback Road, empty enough to travel along quickly and give one the sense of a roller coaster ride?



The Cadillac Ranch, for example, located on the outskirts of Amarillo, consists of ten Cadillac automobiles from 1949 to 1963 that are partially submerged head first in a wheat field. The art installation, created by installation artists and architects collectively known as Ant Farm, was a combination of commemorating the glory of Route 66 with the freedom it engendered allowing for the flow and movement of Americans westward. Though the actual vehicles are placed at the exact angle of the Pyramids of Giza, the designers want to commemorate a concept closer to the American people – that of the fascination with a sense of place, the concept of roadside attractions and the mobility and freedom of the automobile.

Other attractions were trading posts, racing on the road, natural wonders, and drive-in movie theaters. The purpose for the man made attractions were to welcome, accommodate, and entertain travelers. Food, gas, and lodging were the most important, but by adding attractions, it made the adventure of the route not only feasible but also interesting and exciting. The tourist trade increased and a unique way of marketing one's product developed. Whatever was built or electrified was always large and often strange. Phrases such as, world's largest, longest, tallest, and others may still be seen along Route 66 today.

Bobby Troup's "(Get your Kicks On) Route 66" is, without question, the most recognized, and the most covered, ode to old 66. Written in 1946, it characterizes the legendary highway as the only way to truly travel west:

"If you ever plan to motor west:

Travel my way, the highway that's the best.

Get your kicks on Route 66!

It winds from Chicago to LA,

More than 2000 miles all the way,

Get your kicks on Route 66!

Now you go through St. Louis...Joplin, Missouri!

And Oklahoma City looks mighty pretty.
You'll see Amarillo...Gallup, New Mexico.
Flagstaff, Arizona: don't forget Winona,
Kingman, Barstow, San Bernadino.
Won't you...get hip to this timely tip:
When you...make that California trip.
Get your kicks on Route 66!"

There is no wonder over 76 artists, including The Cramps, Anita Bryant, Louis Jordan, The Rolling Stones, Sammy Davis Jr., the Replacements, Chuck Wagon and the Wheels, Nat King Cole, and Depeche Mode, have remade the tune. They all knew the real Route 66, and they had one message: "Get your kicks on Route 66!"

7 Interstate versus Route 66

When the interstate system came along and neighbored Route 66, travelers mainly used this instead. The interstate was a faster and a more efficient way of traveling if someone just needed to get from a to b. Along this path there aren't usually any exciting visual aspects incorporated, just a long, paved, and boring highway. The interstate took a lot of the life out of the old route and caused many businesses to shut down. In many respects, the physical remains of Route 66 mirror the evolution of highway development in the United States from primitive country roads to a federally subsidized complex of uniform interstate expressways.



Route 66 now has become more like a theme park or an attraction rather than a common traveling experience. It seems like the days of enjoying traveling across the country in the car are almost over, or they are a luxury, and getting to the destination as quickly as possible now becomes more essential.



On the other hand one thing that makes Route 66 so unique is the way the road in itself has become a destination. This is almost ironic in that traveling a highway has become a vacation destination for some people rather than having a place as a final location with the journey being the destination.

Shops and antique stores are popular on Route 66 today. Most restaurants, motels, and other places along the way have memorabilia of Route 66. The cafes are old fashioned, the restaurants still serve the greasy hamburgers that

travelers loved in the old days, and the attitudes are still friendly and inviting.



Therefore although it is rundown in some parts, Route 66 still retains that down home feel. So if you want a taste of a slower pace, get off the interstate, take the byway and see the country and its people. Find your own kicks on any route, but, just even for day, try a piece of Route 66!



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