

# Historic preservation and the imagined west



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Historic Preservation and the Imagined West  
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The historic districts of Denver, Seattle, and Albuquerque may not be what they seem. Is it truly the history you come to see or is there a different purpose here? All three cities have grand historic districts. Those consist of Pioneer Square in Seattle, Larimer Square in Denver and Old town in Albuquerque. In the book *Historic Preservation and the Imagined West*, written by Judy Morley, it is indicated that there may have been another reason for the development of these districts. We will explore that possibility in this paper.

Let us start our exploration in the South. Albuquerque today is one of the fastest growing cities in the west. It sits in the valley between two rivers and much of their history is related to "sitting between two rivers". It is high desert and is always warm and dry. It is in New Mexico and its original inhabitants were Mexican. There still is a large population of Hispanic people in the Albuquerque area and most of the culture of the city is affected by the Hispanic culture. There is also a large pueblo Indian culture in the Albuquerque area including Southern Ute, Navajo and Apache (McCullah, 2007, pg 30). These cultures have affected the past culture of the city and continue to affect the present culture. As you enter Old Town, you will notice all of these influences immediately.

Old Town in Albuquerque sits at Central and 4th Streets in the city. It took \$8 million to make it old enough for a tourist historic district. It was, in fact, the area in which old Hispanic culture began. In fact, back when the city was small, it was very close to the center of town. There are iron fences and gardens just like you would imagine. You can stroll around the area in the shade of the verandas from the buildings. Shopping is readily available and  
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you better bring your wallet because they are very expensive and exclusive in nature. This culture was created from another, older culture. The Hispanics were driven from the area when the renovations began. They were evicted from their homes. The Navajo used to sell all original jewelry off blankets on the streets and the local life was vibrant yet poor. It is a little ironic that the very culture of the people were driven away in order to represent that culture as historic. This writer believes that is what Morley was trying to tell us in her book (Morley, 2006).

Today Old Town is a beautiful place to visit and certainly there are many things to do and much to buy. It is definitely a tourist attraction. The advertisements on the internet are very enticing and make you want to go right away, especially with winter approaching the rest of us. However, it is never mentioned that a few blocks away live the very families that were evicted from these neighborhoods and most live in abject poverty. There are drugs and gangs to deal with. Albuquerque has one of the largest percent of drive by shootings in the United States. We, like so many times, have taken advantage of a poor culture to build our own riches.

A little North of Albuquerque lays Denver Colorado. This city like Albuquerque is growing and is considered part of the Wild West. Their important historic district is Larimer Square. Larimer Square lies on 1st street in the city. At one time this was a dry goods store, the first bank in the west, a bookstore, and the 1st western post office. Today it is shopping, dining, and entertainment. It is lively in the day or night but especially at night. There are 16 renovated 19th century commercial building that are now shops, nightclubs, courtyards and open spaces. Not to long ago, this area was where the homeless went, prostitutes walked, panhandlers worked and

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alcoholics spent time. All of those people were driven out of the area when the new historic district was built. Again, it was somewhat ironic to have the Wild West driven away so we could build the Wild West.

When we think of the Wild West, we think of saloons and prostitutes, drunks and guns. These things are shown to us everyday in the movies we watch. Of course, everyone is always clean and nice and has just had a bath. Well in the real world that is not the way it is. These people are dirty and homeless and drunk and disorderly and drinking establishments are not pleasant places to go. That is unless it is on Larimer Square in Denver. The restaurants and saloons are lovely and clean and fun. There is one problem though. At night you should not veer to far away from 1st street and you should be on your toes and not wonder around alone (Gendzel, 2008).

Seattle has its Pioneer Square. You can ride downtown by horse and cart on the cobblestone streets of yesteryear. View the historic buildings of the past and the beauty of the area. It is magnificent and while you are there shop in the biggest book store in the country, some of the best shops around and view museums about Seattle's history. Seattle's historic district is now known as one of the most cherished historic districts in the states.

Seattle knew by the time that they attempted their transformation of this district that it would make a huge difference in the income for the city. It was well planned prior to setting out to do the work. Their goal was to plan an old American downtown while changing the culture and assumptions about the district. At the time there was a definite nationwide shift in taking a declining real estate market (downtown) and converting it into a tourist attraction.

Many people and small business were evicted from the area in order to provide the space for renovation.

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In conclusion, yes, there are some truly beautiful historic districts in the United States and three of the most beautiful lie in Albuquerque, Denver, and Seattle. We have a romantic way of looking at the Old West, even though it was in reality a violent and often poor period of our history. Were the historic districts of these towns built on true history? Certainly, that is the question that Morley would ask in her book. Much of the history is still there in all three cases, though it is different than that of the original history. Would we visit and spend our money in the old towns of the past, without the renovations that have been done? Probably not. We, as Americans, do not want to see the squallier of being poor or the true way a saloon or brothel looks. We visit Old Town, whether it is in Albuquerque, Denver, or Seattle, we visit our dreams of what the Wild West was like and that is the way we like it.

## References

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