

## Downtown Albuquerque – when it was New Town

### Living Downtown When Downtown was Albuquerque pattern.

The following was written by Mo Palmer, curator, Albuquerque Museum, in her own down home style. It contains interesting historical information of downtown Albuquerque, back when it was known as New Town, along with humorous stories and opinions.

Most American towns grew outward from the town square, or plaza, as they were called out here. These squares, commons, or plazas, usually contained the church, courthouse, police station, sometimes the jail, merchants, or some combination thereof. Homes, farms, and villages spread out from these central points.

When the railroad arrived it often created a second “center” and created what John Stilgoe calls “The Metropolitan Corridor.” Sometimes I imagine it was near the center of town but in Albuquerque’s case, it created an entire New Town a mile and ½ East of the original villa. This was to avoid the capricious, frequently flooding Rio Grande, to lay track in straight lines, and to take advantage of cheap land owned by the New Mexico Town Company, formed by three prominent citizens, Franz Huning, Elias Stover, and William Hazeldine.

The terminal and shops would have been in Bernalillo, but landowner and freighter Don Perea of Bernalillo wanted \$450.00 per acre for his land and the railroad people said “NOT.” This is how Albuquerque, in a twist of fate, became our largest city.

They located the shops and terminal at First and Central. In time the railroad complex spread about five miles south to the tie-treating plant. It was a huge operation, one of the, if not the, biggest in the southwest. The railroad, then known as the A&P, but a subsidiary of the AT&SF, got here in April of 1880.

In any event, a new town, actually called “New Town” or “New Albuquerque” sprouted in the middle of the desert. Immediately a business and residential center grew up around the railroad, laid out in a grid street

Downtown Albuquerque – 4th and Central



The first true subdivision was Huning’s Highland, owned by Franz Huning of the New Mexico Town Company. So people started living downtown immediately. The Highland, full of Victorian style cottages and “mansions” lay east of the tracks from Broadway to what eventually expanded to High Street, and north and south of Central, called Railroad Avenue until 1912, from around Lead north to Grande, where it ended at Martineztown, one of the Hispanic plazas.

Some people lived in New Town, some still lived in Old Town, which was not annexed by the city until 1949. They walked back and forth from work or took the street railway, drawn by horses and mules.

People lived downtown because that’s where they worked and they could walk. They lived in Huning’s Highland, but homes also were right downtown. At Fourth and Iron was the Romero house, a real mansion that is now the Good Shepherd mission. As well, modest homes developed just south in the plaza of Barelmas. Many railroad workers occupied these, and also lived in the modest cottages in the Highland.

Many homes were right downtown. The town was divided into four political districts or wards. This is relevant now because the Fourth Ward is still full of houses. First Ward was Railroad (Central) to Grande (MLK), and the tracks to the city limit at High, more or less. Second was South to about Coal, east of the tracks, and south of Railroad (Central). Third Ward was west of tracks, south of Central, and I forget the southern boundary but you get the idea, it included quite a bit of Barelmas. Fourth Ward was the “elite,” the tracks West, Central to probably New York Avenue (Lomas).

Fourth Ward became “Judges Row” because so many doctors, lawyers, and professionals lived there. Some rather huge, grand mansions – almost all gone now.

In the block around Third and Copper were the red light cottages, most notably Lizzie McGrath’s Vine Cottage,



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which is why McGrath's at the Hyatt is so named. There were also some rows of "cribs" or little tiny rooms where the ladies of the evening entertained their guests, also existed.)

Railroads bring passengers and passengers need bed, board, and beauties. Hotels were built for travelers, but local people working downtown also lived in them. The European or Hope Hotel, on the SW corner of Central and First (then called Front Street), was a "perhaps house" brought in prefabricated – perhaps these establishments would stay and perhaps they wouldn't, depending upon whether the frontier town survived or not. It became the Sturges Hotel and was there until it was razed sometime in the 60s. People used to eat in its dining room, and lived in rooms upstairs.

The Armijo House, SW corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> and Railroad, was the first luxury hotel. It had a boardwalk from the depot so the ladies wouldn't drag their skirts in the ever present mud, partially caused by the marshy area and partially caused by the fact that the acequia ran right through the middle of town for years and was a big source of irritation to city fathers because folks threw their garbage and sewage into it.

The second big hotel was the San Felipe on the SW corner of Fifth and Gold. It was singularly unpopular because it had a reading room instead of a bar. To the east of the tracks was the Highland Hotel, which also burned but was remodeled and is now the Hudson, still standing. I'm sure people lived there.

As the town grew, a pattern developed. Businesses operated downstairs, and most buildings had upstairs, where proprietors and their families lived, and rented rooms to boarders. As late as the sixties I remember walking downtown and seeing the stairs to the "second floor walkups" with doors that opened from the street.

Hotel living was a perfectly respectable way to live, for single men and women as well as for families. Folks lived at the Combs Hotel, just west of First on the North side of Central. We have photos of one of their rooms. It had a lobby with a piano and loads of chairs so you could hang out and read the paper. Little hotels were everywhere. All you had to do was look up to see them. City directories began to list peoples' residences as "Rooms, the Combs Hotel," or "Elms Hotel" and so forth. Off the top of my head there was the Elgin (still there over the building on SW corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Central, not a hotel now). In the 600 Block of W Central, North

Side, over what is a just closed pawn shop, was a hotel –. I got to go look at it. They walked down a hall to a shared bath. The rooms were wee, I do not know how people lived in them. They had a built in bookcase, a closet, and that's about it. There's a LOT more space up above those buildings than you think, because they were built long and narrow, to maximize space on the lots (a style picked up by malls, where smaller stores tend to be long and narrow).

Over time there was the Vera Hotel, the Sun Hotel, the Grand Central, and apartments developed on the upper floors as well. So families lived there. A couple of prominent Italian families lived in the Savoy, that building you asked me about yesterday, and had businesses downstairs. I know a lady whose family owned and lived above the San Diego Hotel on South First. People even lived in the Alvarado, there was a dormitory for workers, like the Harvey Girls, etc., and I've seen at least one male clerk listed as living at the Alvarado Hotel.

The Commercial Club was a building at 4<sup>th</sup> and Central, and bachelors kept rooms there. I have a photo of the interior of one room. My grandmother lived in a hotel downtown.

You went down to the dining room or to one of the many cafes and restaurants for your meals. Even the YMCA, NE corner of Central and First, which was an architectural sister to the Alvarado, had rooms upstairs. Many retired railroad men eventually lived there. On the NW corner of First and Central was the Metropolitan Hotel.

Above the Korber Building on N Second at Tijeras, where the Convention Center East is, was the Angelus Hotel where folks lived.

Some of these facilities did have kitchens, I talked to a guy who lived in the Angelus. So they were essentially apartments.

So downtown living hotels were pretty ubiquitous and not at all unusual.

Then there were boarding houses all over the place, particularly run by widows who turned the family home into a boarding house after the old man shuffled off. The house at 616 Coal SW, currently being remodeled, was a single family dwelling and a very large one at that, with the owner's planing mill directly behind.



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Researching city directories I discovered that after he died, she started running a boarding house there. All kinds of people lived in it – railroad workers, clerks, etc. There were many boarding houses downtown and again it was normal for singles to live there and take their meals there.

These were south on First and second as well as north. The Lindell Hotel and Boarding House was south of the Alvarado near Lead. Most boarding houses were “mrs so and so’s”

We also had a YWCA on Fourth Street where young women could live, no doubt in a virtuous atmosphere. There is a house at 415 Coal SW I just had a call on, it apparently was a single family dwelling converted to rooms.

Downtown was very dense with buildings, not at all spread out with empty spaces as it is now. (over 150 buildings were destroyed in the 1960's as part of urban renewal).

There were also apartment buildings and apartment hotels, which means they included cleaning and linen services rather than leaving that up to you. There was one, The Lincoln Apartments, around Fifth and Silver that was still there in the 40s.

Old Elks also lived in the Elks Club, remodeled from the ruins of the burned San Felipe Hotel (Fifth and Gold). It was there into the Fifties or later. The Elks were proud of providing a home for their elderly members.

People even lived above those little buildings still standing on the South side of Gold in the 200 Block. There were also buildings that housed offices and rooms.

My boss, Jim Moore, and his dad even had rooms above the Sunshine Theater. He could hear all the movies playing. This would suggest you could rent rooms in almost all these buildings.

But what inevitably happened was suburbs. People think the car led to suburbanization, but it was really the electric streetcar, so the outlying areas were called “streetcar suburbs.” Then people no longer had to walk to work and could live in the hinterlands.

I should mention that between Old and New Town,

along West Central, a lot of big houses were built. Some smaller ones around Robinson Park were called “Honeymoon Row” since they were sort of “starter” houses for young couples.

Many of the bigger mansions were converted to apartments.

Apartment buildings were built as well, the Washington Apartments at 10<sup>th</sup> and Central and the Castle Apartments at around 14<sup>th</sup> and Central, for example. Ask Michael about those, he lived in the Castle for a while. Down around Tijeras and Marquette and 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, etc. are still some courtyard apartments, one is the El Portal.

Ok so then after the freeway came 1961- ish, and the suburbs grew, and the malls came in 1961 and 1964, nobody lived downtown anymore. The rooms all became 50 cent or a dollar a night flophouses, and deteriorated. Lots of drunks and fellow travelers. Old



This article is promoting the development and investment into the NE heights (out of downtown) - 1960's

railroad men continued to live in the YMCA, as far as I know, until it was torn down in the 70s. Of course by then it was no longer respectable to live downtown. Boarding houses and apartment

hotels gave way to the modern self-contained apartment complex. Although – some people, in Huning's Highland, do still rent out rooms.

We have photos of folks hanging out of their second and third story windows watching parades go by. You can always tell it's a residence because they always have curtains.

---Mo Palmer, Curator Albuquerque Museum



## Purpose of Study

### **Purpose: Develop a Plug-n-Play Market Study for Downtown Housing**

The purpose of the study is to determine the type of housing that will have the greatest potential for market success in the downtown area. The study will provide development models and recommendations that will allow potential developers to benchmark their proposed product against what potential residents of downtown would prefer. It will also serve as a guide of the type of property to be developed.

### **Market Boundaries: Downtown and the surrounding areas are defined:**

For the purposes of the study, the boundaries will be contained using the typically defined boundary - within a one mile radius of the Downtown Core as identified in the downtown 2010 plan, (walking distance to downtown).

For the purposes of data collection, the boundary will be expanded to include: Menaul/ Indian School to the north, I-25 to the east, Bridge/Avenida Cesar Chavez to the South, and the Rio Grande River to the west. Said boundaries will include any parcels that front on these boundaries as well. This area consists of 5 1/2 square miles or approximately 3,550 acres.

### **The boundaries incorporated in the study roughly match the following census tracts:**

350010015001, 350010015002, 350010015003, 350010015004, 350010027001, 350010027002, 350010027003, 350010027004, 350010027005, 350010026001, 350010026002, 350010014002, 350010014003, 350010014004, 350010014005, 350010014006, 350010025001, 350010025002, 350010025003, 350010025004, 350010025005, 350010022001, 350010022002, 350010022003, 350010022004, 350010030022, 350010021002, 350010021003, 350010021004, 350010029002, 350010029004, 350010029005, 350010028001, 350010028002, 350010028003, 350010030013.

### **Product: To be included in the Study**

The following Housing Types will be included in the market study: Ownership, Loft's, Townhouses, Live/Work Spaces, Rental,

Apartments, Condo's, Single Residency Occupant (SRO) units.

### **The Final Product**

The market study will evaluate the demand for new housing downtown, analyzing the most likely demand for new product, the unit mix, price points, absorption, and make recommendations for housing developments downtown.

### **Focus Group**

performed by Bill Moye of the STAR Group and building on previous research and studies, the study will hold three focus groups: "downtown residents", "downtown employees", and "potential downtown renters".

The focus group participants were asked to identify key elements of what appeals to the about downtown, what downtown still needs to offer, and why they choose to live where they do.





## Executive Overview

### Downtown Housing Study 2001 Executive Summary

By Todd Clarke CCIM

Albuquerque's downtown is undergoing its second revival. The boom in downtown development from the location of the railroad in the 1880's lasted through the 1950's, slowly phasing out as the burgeoning population moved east and north into the NE Heights.

Recent endeavors by the public and private sector have pushed the downtown revival to the forefront, which has created the demand for over \$427M in investments, with the possibility of an additional \$100M in the near future. This doesn't include the \$233M invested in the renovation of the big "I" project.

What makes a successful downtown and does Albuquerque have what it takes? Public commitment, private investment, know how, hard work and planning are all key steps. As part of the study, six major metropolitan statistical areas that are nationally recognized for successful downtowns were profiled against Albuquerque, including San Antonio, San Diego, Portland, Chattanooga, Austin and Denver.

With the exception of the number of cars parked downtown, in the following questions, Albuquerque was in the middle of the pack, and in some instances, led it. Questions included:

- Compared to the rest of the MSA how much denser is the downtown housing? (Albuquerque was 1<sup>st</sup>)
- As it relates to the size of the overall MSA, what percentage of the land is allocated to the downtown core? (Albuquerque was 6<sup>th</sup>)
- What percentage of the MSA's jobs are located downtown? (Albuquerque was 3<sup>rd</sup>)
- How do Downtown's Albuquerque's grocery store sales compare against other Downtowns? (Albuquerque was 1<sup>st</sup>)
- As it relates to the 2000 census's- what percentage of the population lives Downtown, Did it increase from 1990 and is forecasted to increase by 2005? (Albuquerque was 1<sup>st</sup>)
- What percentage of the MSA's automobiles are located downtown? (Albuquerque was 1<sup>st</sup>)

HUD developed a report in January of 2001 "Strategies for Success - Reinvesting Cities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century" highlighting the common factors amongst 114 cities

across the nation. Downtown development was top on the list.

#### Demographics

As it relates to demographics, Downtown Albuquerque (the housing core defined by Rio Grande, I-25, I-40, and Avenida Cesar Chavez), shrank from 25,557 to 25,533 residents, a trend that will only change if more housing is created downtown.

Downtown Albuquerque has 3,175 persons per square mile versus the City of Albuquerque average of 115. Income levels downtown are lower than the city average, and the age distribution is normalized across all ages. 37% of all downtown residents are single, while 33% of households have more than two residents. Residents most likely to be attracted to downtown include young urban professionals, empty nesters, upper echelon transitional lifestyle residents, university students, residents who commute by airplane, and families.

From a business employment standpoint, 33% of all transportation/communication/public utilities, 29% of all public administration, and 22% of all wholesale trade employees are located downtown. Downtown businesses employ four times as many employees as the typical Albuquerque business.

#### Housing Demand

Based on current economic conditions, demand for downtown housing will most likely include the need for 600 new houses including, 200 single family residential and 400 multifamily, per year for the next five years. Demand for multi-family housing across the City will reach 1,076 units per year. Based on a ratio between number of jobs to number of households, and compared to the rest of the City, Downtown Albuquerque is under-supplied in housing units, with 14% of surveyed downtown employees indicating a strong interest in relocating downtown.

#### Housing Supply

For the first time in 20 years, several downtown housing projects are in the works, 2<sup>nd</sup> in the market only to the Westside. Demand is expected to outpace supply with the market emerging with a higher overall occupancy than currently exists today.

Density studies indicate that the most feasible type of



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multi-family development will be garden, courtyard, and podium style housing, and while the interest exists there for high rise housing, rents are not currently at a level to afford current construction costs.

Although the typical demand ratio for housing is 65% single family (ownership), and 35% multifamily (renter), the first wave of downtown housing will most likely have success at 66% multi-family (rental), and 33% single family/condo/townhouse (ownership). This barometer will need to be checked annually for possible changing indicators, that might bring this back into line with national/regional/local averages.

Affordable housing analysis indicates the City's current plan for including affordability components in most housing is having success.

### Research and Polling and Focus Groups

According to a 1998 survey by Research and Polling and three different focus groups performed by the Star Group in 2001:

- Potential Downtown residents indicate that safe neighborhoods, price, location, schools, size, and proximity to work are important in their decision to select a residence.
- Low on the list (less than 3%) included: privacy, interest rates, amenities in home, quiet area, property taxes, views, road conditions, accept animals, and traffic.
- 33% of the prospective residents would prefer a condominium, while 57% prefer a larger lot and a lower grade of finish.
- 64% of the prospective residents prefer a rental unit within walking distance to restaurants, shopping, and work.
- 49% of the prospective residents consider the quality of public school education important to select an area to live in.
- 40%+ of the prospective renters prefer to pay \$500 to \$599 in rent
- 40%+ of the prospective buyers prefer to pay \$100,000 to \$149,999 for a residence.
- The majority of the prospective residents indicated that it was important to be close to public transportation, and the same majority indicated that parking is important as well.
- Close proximity to shopping was also rated as important.

Informal interviews conducted with downtown residents, downtown employees, downtown employers, real estate professionals, and others indicated the following desires:

- To replace surface parking lots with quality mixed use developments.
- Density is ok, as long as it fits in with the character of the neighborhood.
- To make downtown a quality place to live
- To correct sometimes incorrect perceptions about downtown
- To preserve the few remaining historic buildings

### Overall Housing Recommendations:

- Like most areas of the city, job growth fuels population growth, which fuels demand for housing.
- Focus on pre-college education is very important to the residents of housing.
- The demand for housing downtown is strong, very strong.
- Initially the strongest demand will come for smaller units with comparable prices to the existing marketplace (\$.98/sf)
- Alternative housing will be in strong demand (live/work & lofts)
- Future demand will come for more expensive rental and ownership
- Timed with the development of new parking structures, develop a plan to replace a majority of surface parking lots with higher density multi-family communities
- Study and change public transportation corridors to come within 300 feet of the majority of downtown residents (possibly a Lead/Coal and Mountain shuttle?)
- Until such time that downtown land prices become more reasonable or rents rise significantly, a negative GAP may exist between the construction cost for a development and its market value. In the short term, this GAP can be closed with financial incentives and tools offered by various government programs.
- To encourage pedestrian traffic between Old Town and downtown, redevelop key parcels and older buildings in a New Mexico version of Miami's south beach, with sidewalk cafes, ground floor retail, and art deco (or other appropriate New Mexico themes) multi-story, residential/ hotel properties
- Work to facilitate the continual creation of an inventory of available land and buildings for the conversion to housing.
- The Downtown Action Team and City of



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Albuquerque should work together to create a live/work and loft housing code that is conducive to non-traditional housing types.

- Redevelopment of downtown would not be possible without the financial support and focus of the public sector.

- Although the current downtown communities will most likely enjoy financial success, significant future gains in the downtown housing market will come from individuals looking for a certain quality of living. These people can individually assume the risk of a \$200,000-\$250,000 (or upto \$200/sf) custom built loft (or live/work) housing, whereas, larger builders will have a difficult time surpassing the current \$100/sf ceiling for new construction (i.e., individual risk is less risky than collective risk). To encourage this development, the public and private sector should work together to assemble a subdivision of 25' wide lots that would be lotteried or sold to custom home builders/owners for development as loft housing and/or live work spaces (subject to creating the appropriate zoning, and building codes to support it).

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- Downtown neighborhoods should be encouraged to raise the bar of services, focusing on changing their neighborhoods to communities that rally around common ideals, traditions, and ceremonies.

*(Neighborhoods - A district or area with distinctive characteristics: a neighborhood of fine homes; an ethnic neighborhood. The people who live near one another or in a particular district or area—  
Community - A group of people having common interests)*

- Although there is strong demand for all types of downtown housing, special focus and incentives should be offered to promote the recreation of the single resident occupancy (SRO) housing type.