

The Impact of Resort Landscapes: A Historic Study of a Small Arizona Town

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Throughout the 1900s in the United States of America, many new towns and settlements in Florida and the Southwest used tourism to attract wealthy visitors, causing conflict between the needs of local residents and the resort economy. This paper looks at the role of the elite San Marcos Hotel in the small farming town of Chandler, 25 miles south of Phoenix, Arizona, during the first three decades of the town's life. The study traces evolving responses among the town's white farming community, noting a shift over 30 years from an enthusiastic identification with the hotel and associated luxuries, to a simpler farm ethic. The study contributes to growing research about resort architecture and themed environments, both in the context of US history and as a growing concern in today's world of accelerating global tourism.

Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s in the United States, many new towns in Florida and the Southwest used tourism to attract wealthy visitors for investment and potential settlement. Common resort elements included ambitiously designed luxurious hotels, themes of luxurious living, and a focus on wealthy clients, often creating sharp contrasts with ordinary residents (Moehring, 1989; Dodrill, 1993; Nicolaidis, 1998).

THIS PAPER LOOKS AT THE ROLE OF THE SAN MARCOS HOTEL in the small farming town of Chandler, 25 miles south of Phoenix, Arizona, during the decades following the town's founding in 1912. While wealthy visitors flocked to Chandler throughout the winter months, earning the town the reputation of "Pasadena of the Salt River Valley", Chandler as a whole remained modest, with an overall population of some 1,500 white farmers until the 1960s, and a sizeable population of migrant workers living in shacks on the outskirts of the town. The paper asks: how did the hotel affect the self-image and social vitality of the local community?

Resorts are receiving attention in the literature of planning and design, both for their architectural merit and for their impact on local communities. How can local people find their identity in a resort milieu, and what might be the impact of tourism on the high immigrant populations common to many resort areas? The paper relates these concerns to the historic context of early town making in the United States, responding to growing interests in landscape architects such as Warren Manning, Earle Draper and John Nolen, examining their creative energy in light of underlying capitalist motivations (Crawford, 1995; Sagarena, 2002). This study raises broader questions about the impact of high-style architecture in local communities worldwide, an increasingly pressing concern with the globalisation of tourism (Moehring, 1989; Nicolaidis, 1998).

The study is based on a survey of regularly selected front pages, May 1912 to October 1929, from the *Chandler Arizonan*, a local weekly newsletter covering

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white residents' business, growth and social events, plus some world news. The paper was run by local editors, and regularly included letters from residents. Miscellaneous archival materials, oral histories and local histories broaden the 'Anglo' perspective. Chandler, like many Arizona towns of the early 1900s, is a useful city for research into early town making, because the State's early prosperity encouraged mainstream planning and design at the time, yet the area's remoteness from the east and west coasts discouraged large-scale settlement until the arrival of service and high-tech industries in the 1970s. As a result, many Arizona towns from the Progressive Era survived intact for decades, unlike their Florida and Californian counterparts (Dumke, 1974).

CHANDLER: THE EARLY YEARS

Alexander Chandler (a veterinary surgeon from Montreal turned land speculator) sold two assets for his town: the bountiful and healthy farm life guaranteed by the Salt River Valley's fertile soil, and the nearby Roosevelt Dam, and a world-class resort made possible through the tourist hotel San Marcos. This resort enterprise exploited a nationwide interest in southwestern landscapes, and the growing popularity of Phoenix as a cure for pulmonary diseases (Luckingham, 1989).

The 76-roomed San Marcos easily rivalled fashionable California and Florida hotels of the time, displaying Colonial-style luxuries such as shaded arcades and airy pergolas leading to secluded courtyards and gardens, a golf course, tennis courts, polo stables, plus a motoring garage. A mission-style, arcaded town square extended the southwestern motif throughout the town, while deed restrictions bound downtown business owners and nearby homeowners to the square's architectural uniformity. Beyond the square, however, farmers lived in tent houses and small ranch homes, while a substantial labour force (largely Hispanic) lived in camps and adobe shacks along the river banks.

CONFLICTING IMAGES

During the first five years of the town's life, the San Marcos is mentioned in every issue of the *Chandler Arizonan*, making 8 percent of total front page coverage.¹ Mentions reveal fascination with the hotel as making Chandler a "world class" city that, like Pasadena, had used a resort focus to help acquire a mature municipal, economic and transportation structure within 30 years, and a reputation for lavish gardens and homes, budding colleges, and a climate of cultural sophistication (Dumke, 1974). Chandler residents relished the hotel's luxuries and elegance, from the "emerald green lawns and tropical shrubbery" to the 60-foot dining room and bronze menu covers; they applauded the "Mission-style square designed by a Pasadena landscape architect", and apparently tidied their town and organised clean-up campaigns, following recommendations by San Marcos managers (and even guests) to "emerge from the backwoods and desert", look more "progressive" (March, 1914; February, 1916). There were many comments about the hotel's up-to-date building technology, with mentions of the modern water-piping system, the hotel's weatherproof asbestos roofs and hollow concrete walls; residents noted,

furthermore, that Chandler had been “properly deeded and platted” and “designed with forethought”, and was “a city that started out right” (12 June 1915). For Chandler’s white residents, the resort focus brought instant culture. It also brought much-needed assurance in the struggle against outsiders’ perception of Arizona as “wild, woolly and inhabited by bad men and Indians ... a country of wild and reckless cowboys and miners” (9 September 1917). For the town’s 30 percent Mexican community, however, oral histories have so far yielded little evidence of identification of a resort culture, as distinct from the predominantly ‘Anglo’ culture of white farmers and other townspeople.²

It was also noted during the early years that the hotel brought substantial economic benefits. Hotel construction encouraged the local building industry, which in turn gave credibility to the town, encouraged railroad connections and further settlement. By 1917, the town’s solid appearance had attracted the Ohio-based company Town of Goodyear 15 miles to the south, and the smaller agricultural settlements of Chandler Heights and Valencia.

However, by the 1920s, mentions of tourism fell to below 5 percent of total coverage, and by 1922 to 1 percent, marking the hotel’s opening and closure, plus random curiosities throughout the season. At the same time, a new ethic developed with the growth of the cotton, citrus and dairy industries. Along with notices of new farmer’s unions and associations (for poultry, horse breeders and stock raising), of involvement with the local agricultural extension service, and of cotton day celebrations, came articles about the wholesomeness of farm life. “The true homes of America are found in the agricultural communities and on the farms ... where a family may be raised amid natural surroundings supplied by Mother Nature” (22 December 1927). Not only was farm life preferable to city life under “smelting chimneys and the roar of the smokestacks” (18 November 1923), above all, it was morally beneficial. An announcement from the Chandler Pig Club promises that boys and girls can develop “thrift, self reliance and purpose in life through hog raising” (2 July 1922), while another claims the farm ethic keeps the youth at home, and provides an antidote for Bolshevism (7 November 1922).

The early blossoming of the San Marcos Hotel brought much needed credibility and business to the new town, and positioned the town nationally during its early years. Since the town’s white residents relied heavily on economic growth and cultural assurance at the time, they eagerly embraced the hotel’s image of luxury and class. However, within 10 years of the town’s life a growing farming economy encouraged the town’s white residents to identify with a rural ethic of thrift and wholesomeness, basically co-existing along with the hotel, yet independent. Throughout this time, however, the town’s Mexican community was used a lot for heavy labour, yet marginalised from downtown activities.

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NOTES

- ¹ *Chandler Arizonan*, 12 December 1913.
- ² Oral histories by Tillie Montenegro (1989), Manuel Estrella (1994), Joe Romero (1998).