



Vintage Tucson Neon Art Walk  
Historic Highway Route 80 & 89  
Drachman Street

TUCSON HISTORIC PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

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## Introduction

Nationwide, over the course of the last twenty years, there has been a movement to critically study and preserve mid-century American roadside architecture and neon signage. These mid-century expressions are culturally relevant and foster a unique sense of place. Following the decline of the golden Automotive Age, Tucson, like other places in the country, ignored the deterioration of these historic resources. In the last three years a movement to preserve and enhance these unique cultural expressions has taken root. The Oracle Area Revitalization Plan (OARP), The City of Tucson historic sign code revision process, private business, and preservation advocates are all speaking up for neon sign conservation and retention.



Historic Tucson Route 80 & 89 (Oracle Road) ca. 1955. Photo courtesy of Steve Mathie

The positive momentum of the community-based Oracle Area Reutilization Plan has sparked the formation of a Gateway Business Alliance which actively encourages neon preservation and supports the Auto-Age-specific historic district commercial corridor. These various stakeholders recognize that classic neon signs have an intrinsic ability to create a cohesive streetscape and a dynamic night-time experience.

Until now, the City of Tucson sign code, changes in building use and names of businesses have often resulted in the destruction of these colorful neon icons. Through the anticipation of nostalgia, some of these signs have been salvaged and stored.

The surviving architectural legacies of this area, like those of Route 66 in northern Arizona, are classic early- and mid-twentieth century motels and gas stations, and their glowing neon signs. Although many of these businesses along the original highway have been closed, repurposed or demolished, nowhere in the city do so many signs survive. These artifacts keep the memories of this colorful era in Tucson’s auto travel culture alive.

The Pima Community College Downtown Campus is uniquely positioned as a new and permanent home for these saved, restored historic signs. With its north and east frontages facing historic cross-country Routes 80 & 89, PCC is the perfect location to actively participate in the development of a Neon Sign Corridor that can re-brand this historic area as a safe, culturally significant, and economically viable district. In much the same way that the Main Gate has developed for the U. of A., this area can become the northern anchor for students of the downtown campus as well as the Tucson community.



North Oracle Road, 1958 (signs removed ca. 1970). Photo courtesy of Steve Mathie

**Concept**

The goal of this project is to restore and relocate to the Drachman corridor a series of historic 1940s—1960s neon signs that were originally erected in Tucson, and later taken down and stored. The four proposed signs have been obtained and three are under restoration. Installing these neon signs will immediately begin adding visual strength to the Drachman corridor, and establish a new and optimistic brand for this region of Tucson.



Tucson Historic Route 80 & 89 (Oracle Road) ca. 1955. Photo courtesy of Steve Mathie

From an article “As Subtle As Neon” by Doug Towne of the Society For Commercial Archaeology:

Advertising what are commonly termed "Mom and Pop" motels, these neon signs are among the most spectacular commercial advertisements ever constructed. They could be considered commercial folk art that, whether measured in terms of numbers or flamboyance, reached its zenith in the Southwest. This was due to the year round tourist season and the use of imagery stemming from the region's scenic landscapes, exotic cultures, and colorful history idealized as representing the American Dream. Despite their often gargantuan size, these signs exude a homespun appeal that captures the promise and excitement of the post-World War II age of auto travel in which many of them were created. As the signs were designed to be synonymous with vacations and emit an aura of excitement, they yield a treasure trove of images ranging from generic to unforgettable that the world recognizes as distinctly American in origin. Motels and their signs could be thought of as not only satisfying motorists' lodging needs, but also their requirement for adventure



## Historic Route 80, 89 and the Oracle Area Revitalization Plan

Beginning in the nineteenth century, Tucson courted an emerging tourist market while serving the country's transcontinental travelers. Tourism became a major component of the local economy during the early part of the twentieth century. Tucson was one of the first cities in the nation to launch a formal advertising campaign to attract visitors. Beginning in the 1920s, the northern edge of the city expanded, maintaining the city-wide grid-iron street pattern. Casa Grande Highway (Miracle Mile), Oracle Road, and Drachman Street were formally aligned, developed, and paved, becoming the northern gateway to the city. These roads were ultimately designated as part of U.S. Highway Routes 80 and 89 and Arizona State Highway 84. Route 80 connected Tucson to Florence, merging with north-south 89 and 84 at the intersection of Oracle Road and Miracle Mile. The combined Routes snaked through Tucson's urban core, leaving the southern edge of the City outwards to Benson and Nogales Highway.

Dozens of businesses throughout the Oracle Area, including motor courts, motels, restaurants and service stations, catered to the truckers and tourists who traveled these Routes over the next 50 years. By the mid 1950s, over 100 motels were operating along this highway corridor.

The completion of Interstate 10 through Tucson in 1961, bypassing the historic routes to the west, was the first of numerous events that caused a decrease in traffic and the related deterioration of the Oracle Area and the surrounding vicinity, including the portion of U.S. Route 80 along Benson Highway. Numerous businesses were closed, and many motels were demolished. The first iteration of Interstate 10 through Tucson lacked major exits at Grant Road, Speedway Boulevard, and Saint Mary's Road; therefore, unlike other local highways throughout the region and country, Miracle Mile remained relevant as the primary northern entrance to the city for many years. By 1973, major alternative access points had been constructed, inexpensive air travel had been introduced, and automobile vacation travel had been brought to a halt by the 1973 oil crisis.

From 1973 onward the Oracle corridor and surrounding area declined. Nevertheless, changes in business operations and adaptive reuses enabled many properties to survive. Today, dozens of buildings built prior to 1973 along the highway corridor retain historic integrity. Interest in preserving and restoring these resources is increasing with a renewed emphasis on Tucson's mid-century architectural and historic heritage.

### Oracle Area Revitalization Plan (OARP)

In 2007 the OARP began development. The Oracle area between Speedway and Miracle Mile has been the focus of attention for several years by neighbors and business owners. A once-thriving State route, the area was seriously affected by the construction of Interstate 10 and has been struggling to regain its position as a key gateway corridor to Tucson's downtown core. Today, the area contains both residential and commercial sites in need of revitalization.

The primary purpose of the OARP is to establish policies and procedures to encourage the development of employment options, more services to meet surrounding residential needs, social and recreational opportunities, a variety of housing options, sensitivity to the area's historic character, and overall improvement of the built environment.

This project is an initiative of the Ward III Council Office, neighborhoods, businesses and institutions in the area, and is being managed by the City of Tucson Housing & Community Development Department.

A team of Housing & Community Development planners, working in tandem with the Ward III Office, comprise the Project's Core Team. This team will manage the development of the Oracle Area Revitalization Plan with the assistance of two committees – the Citizens Steering Committee and the Technical Advisory Team.

The Citizens Steering Committee is made up of individuals representing a range of interests and locations in the Oracle area, including the Pima Community College. The CSC meets monthly to discuss various aspects of the Oracle project and will ultimately help to establish the goals and objectives for the future of the project area.

The Technical Advisory Team has 18 members, each of whom is a technical representative from service and infrastructure departments of:

- City of Tucson
- Pascua Yaqui Tribe
- The University of Arizona
- Pima Community College
- Amphitheater School District
- Tucson Unified School District

The proposed Tucson Vintage Neon Art Walk is an ideal extension to the goals of the OARP.

## Neon Signs

Four neon signs obtained are: Medina Sporting Good, Tropicana Motor Hotel, Canyon State Motor Lodge/Arizonan Motel, and the Magic Carpet Golf Sign. Attached are historic and vintage photos in their original locations and context.



Tropicana Motor Hotel ca. 1970



Canyon State Motor Lodge/The Arizonan Motel

MAGIC CARPET NEON SIGN.  
c. 1968



view looking East                      view looking west  
Magic Carpet Golf



Medina Sporting Goods



Artist Concept Illustrations



Drachman Street looking southwest

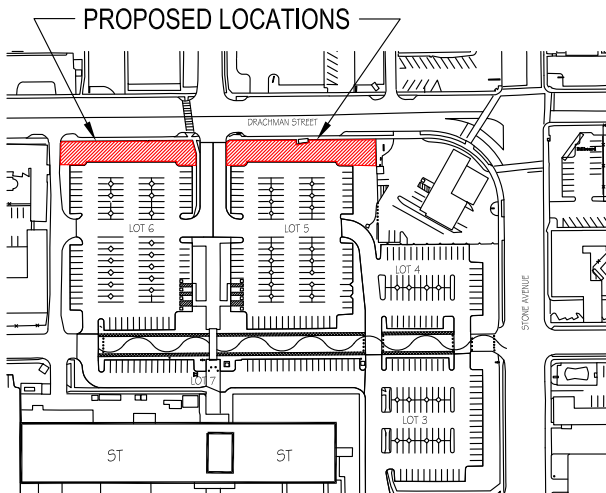


Drachman Street looking southwest



Drachman Street looking southeast

## Technical Illustrations



LOOKING WEST



LOOKING EAST



PROPOSED PROJECT SITE IS LOCATED AT THE NORTHERN BOUNDARY OF THE DOWNTOWN CAMPUS. TO THE EAST AND WEST OF THE DRACHMAN CAMPUS ENTRANCE.

THIS SHEET IS FOR PROPOSED LOCATION REFERENCES ONLY.







## Contact

Demion Clinco  
President  
Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation  
P.O. Box 40008  
Tucson Arizona 85717

demionc@yahoo.com  
520 247 8969

## Letters of Support

Community advocates, leaders, and organizations supporting this concept:

Karin Ulich, City of Tucson Council Member, Ward III  
Roberto Bedoya, Executive Director, Tucson Pima Arts Council  
Julie Sasse, Chief Curator and Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Tucson Museum of Art  
Stephen Grede, Landscape Architect, Faculty Member, PCC (Downtown Campus)  
Carlos Lozano, Founder, Vanishing Tucson  
Dirk Arnold, Endangered Architecture  
Rebecca Ruopp, Principal Planner and Project Manager, City of Tucson



## Appendix: Tucson Neon Preservation and History

Monument signs of glass tubes filled with electrically excited neon gas, although ubiquitous icons of the American commercial landscape, were invented in Europe, a product of the electrical revolution of the late 1800s. Scientists and visionaries, including Francis Hawksbee, Johann Winkler, Heinrich Geissler, and Nikola Tesla, invented new technologies that allowed the bombardment of gases with high-voltage alternating current to make them glow, a process immediately joined to glassblowing. Mixtures of gasses produced a wide spectrum of available colors. Rudi Stern, in his book “Let There Be Neon,” credits the electrical infrastructure developed by Thomas Edison with making the neon revolution possible.

The outdoor electric spectacular, which would transform city centers all over the world into nighttime wonderlands of kinetic excitement, was born in the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. Thomas Alva Edison had made possible through his invention in 1879 of the first commercially practical incandescent lamp. By the early 1880s he had developed all of the equipment and techniques for a complete electrical distribution system leading to the first electric-light power plant in the world, on Pearl Street in New York City. By 1900, electricity was flowing into nearly 1,500 incandescent lamps arrayed on the narrow front of the Flatiron Building to form America’s first electrically lighted outdoor advertising sign.<sup>1</sup>

As the generation of electricity developed multi-purpose power into a commercial commodity, French entrepreneur George Claude patented the neon sign and marketed this invention on a mass scale, holding a virtual monopoly on the industrial development and manufacturing of such signs. Claude exhibited the first neon sign at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1910. Two years later, the first neon sign was installed in Paris. In 1923, the first American electric advertising sign shone over Earl Anthony’s Packard dealership in Los Angeles, California, stopping traffic and ushering in the American Neon Age.

In 1924, Claude’s neon sign franchise opened its first U.S. office in New York City, followed by Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco.

Neon, which was to play a very important part in urban nocturnal spectacles, was introduced to the United States in 1923. By virtue of its flexible luminosity, neon could produce effects beyond the capacity of earlier light sources. It could create startling silhouettes, whether of figures or letters, in a range of color combinations that seemed infinite. In an advertising brochure of Claude Neon, the French firm of George Claude that held a virtual monopoly on neon tube manufacture in its early years, neon tubes were described as “the latest and most artistic forms of electric advertising and illumination. The light given is continuous, very distinctive, and peculiarly attractive. It has been described as a ‘living flame.’” A European hybrid of art and technology, neon’s elegance and refinement came from France, then the undisputed international arbiter of taste. However, neon soon became symbolic of American energy and inventiveness, its Continental roots giving rise to a spectacular flowering of American showmanship in the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

The use of neon signs exploded throughout the middle twentieth century. Tucson’s commercial strips, downtown district, and highways were all lined with large neon monument signs, yet

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<sup>1</sup> Stern, Rudi. *Let There Be Neon*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. New York. 1979. pg. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Stern, Rudi. *Let There Be Neon*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. New York. 1979. pg. 16.

From the beginning there were problems with infringements. As the popularity of neon spread, small one-man shops proliferated. Owing to the tubes' fragility they did not ship well, so even small towns began to have a need for neon shops.<sup>3</sup>

The first Tucson sign company explicitly listed for the production of electric signs appeared in the Tucson City Directory in 1929: the "National Sheet Metal Mfg. Co." at 353 Toole Avenue. In 1930, under the city directory heading "Neon Sign," only one company was listed: "Arizona Sheet Metal Co."

By the end of the 1930s,

[...] motorists drove faster cars, and motels used everything at their disposal to stop them. Neon signs became much more specialized and most motel operations featured distinct names [...] Building became part of the sign itself [...] The motel sign was recognized as a regional interpretation of the vacation fantasies expected by the motorist.<sup>4</sup>

Between 1939 and 1940, six Tucson companies created "Neon-Electric" signs. Many other sign production companies were active during this two-year period but there is no evidence of their involvement in neon.

Neon signs manufacturers in Tucson included those listed below. The year indicates the company's first appearance in the Tucson City Directory):

1930	Arizona Sheet Metal Co.	135	South 4 <sup>th</sup> Avenue
1933	Tubular Neon Co.	821	North 9 <sup>th</sup> Avenue
1934	Isadore Posner	17	South 6 <sup>th</sup> Avenue
1936	Acme Neon Co.	210	North 4 <sup>th</sup> Avenue
1938	Modern Sign Shop	161	East Broadway
		1/2	
1940	Hearn Signs and Neon Products Co.	545	North 4 <sup>th</sup> Avenue

By 1950, over 17 neon sign production companies were active in Tucson. Over the next decade, colored plastic and fluorescent displays begin replacing neon, and this specialized industry as a whole began to fade away. Today, neon sculpture (as well as repair and refurbishment) is still practiced by sign makers and artists as an obscure, "retro" technological endeavor. Some of these companies are still active in Tucson. Although new signs continue to be designed and fabricated, the majority of neon work today is repair and restoration.

Little is known about the individual craftsman and artists who produced these glowing Tucson nighttime monuments. Few records from that period have surfaced; the primary source material is limited to visual documentation in old postcards and photographs from this era. Yet the work of these craftsmen was fundamental in shaping the visual character of Tucson's nocturnal environment. Their design cues came from architecture, "Western" sensibilities, and nostalgic marketing trends.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Jakle, John A., Sculle, Keith A. and Rogers, Jefferson S. *The Motel in America*. John Hopkins University Press, 1996. pg.155.