CAN YOU GET THERE ON VAN BUREN?

URBAN FLASHES: PHOENIX, ARIZONA

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One of the curious features of the street layout of the original urban center of Phoenix—now the fifth largest metropolitan area of the United States—is not just the way in which the primary cluster of east-west streets are named after the U.S. presidents, from Washington to Theodore Roosevelt. This would have been too easy. Rather, taking Washington as the east-west ground zero (Central Avenue is the north-south ground zero, with numbered avenues to the west and numbered streets to the east, staggered so that the important streets to the east are even numbers and the important avenues to the west are uneven ones), the chronological inventory of the presidents leapfrogs over Washington. Thus, Jefferson is to the south of Washington, while Adams is to the north; Madison is to the south, while Monroe is to the north, and so on for about a mile-wide block of streets.

One of the most important presidents of the early national period of the U.S. was Van Buren, and the street that bears his name is one of the most traversed—and one of the most colorful—of contemporary Phoenix. At times a favorite runway of streetwalkers, both women and transgendered men, Van Buren is most prominent for having been a major thoroughfare, before the creation of the I-10, between the U.S. to the east of Phoenix and California to the west (get on the I-10, which parallels Van Buren about three-quarters of a mile to the north, and you will essentially end up, going west, at the Santa Monica Pier on the Pacific Ocean, as great of a terminus ad quod an internal American migrant could hope for). Long before the cold-war interstate system, when all the country had were the post-depression U.S. highways, Van Buren was a spur of the legendary US Route 66, which ran from Chicago to Los Angeles, carrying the migrants who would create modern Southern California and the goods that brought the country out of the Great Depression. US66 was relatively dismantled by the interstate system (there is not a nostalgia-driven project to reconstruct it). Yet spurs like Van Buren remain, part of the vital interurban transportation network by which metropolises survive: freeways are convenient, but there are times in which an urban thoroughfare is preferable, and Van Buren (along with Washington, Jefferson, McDowell, Thomas, Indian School, and Camelback) fulfills that role.

One might, to use such a metaphor, identify five geological layers with respect to Van Buren.

The original U.S. highway system basically served to link cities with each other across the country. This was in contrast with the three-decades-
later interstate highway system, which was designed to connect the country as well, but in doing so it bypasses urban centers or utilizes business loops that connected the cities to them. In contrast, the U.S. highway system typically went through towns of all sizes, linking them together as part of the construction of modern America. When cities could not be connected in as straight a line as the lay of the land allowed, secondary highways were developed, with the goal of providing the maximum degree of urban connectivity. Since Phoenix—which in the 1930s had not yet begun to emerge as a major population center: this would begin after World War II—did not lay on the straight line of Route 66, it was, as a consequence, connected via a secondary route that linked it to the east with Albuquerque, New Mexico and Amarillo, Texas and to the west with Los Angeles (the Pacific terminus of route 66) and San Diego. Van Buren Street was the path that that secondary route took through Phoenix, Route 60. Along the several miles that passed through Phoenix their sprung up the typical infrastructure of such routes, which were important, first, as part of the migration of the great depression, the movement of the war period, and, then the postwar prosperity when American took to the road in growing numbers. This infrastructure included gas stations and garages: the latter necessary because automobiles were still mechanically unreliable over the long haul, particularly through the unrelenting desert. It included coffee shops and convenience stores, as well as curio shops that sold kitschy mementos of the changes in the geosocial landscape along the trajectory of travel. And, most singular of all, the infrastructure meant the overnight motor lodge, which would develop into the great American institution of the motel, complete with kitchenette, coin-operated radio, and even the coin-operated vibrating bed to ease away the tensions of the road.

With the development of the interstate system, it no longer became necessary to drive through cities, and motel rows like Van Buren Street began to decline. By the 1970s, this strip, bounded on the north by modest residential areas and on the south by industrial parks had begun to see its overnight lodges turn into low-cost housing. Since Phoenix only minimally engaged in urban renewal during this period, much of the downtown began to be abandoned, a phenomenon from which it still has a lot of recovery to

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1 The principal segments of Route 60 today are Interstate Highways 10 and 17 as the run through central Phoenix and the Superstition Highway that separates from the I-10 and bisects the East Valley communities of the Greater Phoenix area.
experience. Little low-cost housing was specifically built to handle the poor among the population influx of the period, and the motels along Van Buren were—and continue to be—one alternative.

A third stratum, after the first two of a U.S. highway route and low-cost housing, of Van Buren demographics, however, involved prostitution. Although other strips may serve the purposes of prostitution, Van Buren became notoriously associated with street solicitation, although it mostly meant soliciting customers in passing vehicle traffic. Street presence of this prostitution did not survive the late 1990s, and its last hurrah was during the Super Bowl game held in Phoenix in 1996. Van Buren served as an excellent venue for pickups, with its proximity to the Sky Harbor International Airport and downtown Phoenix; the proximity of Van Buren to Arizona State University (it is one major alternative route to the freeway for traffic from downtown Phoenix to Tempe) was an added factor in the last boom of prostitution it hosted in the late 1990s.

Today, a good number of the residents in the motels that have been turned into low-cost housing are so-called illegal immigrants. The ongoing Latin Americanization of Phoenix (it is now 33% Hispanic) has involved not only the arrival from across the border of individuals seeking low-cost housing, but also the migration north from so-called South Phoenix, where racial discrimination had confined the (mostly) Mexican population throughout the city’s urban history. The South Phoenix border is flexible, but it usually has meant south of the Salt River, which lies approximately two miles south of Van Buren. However, numerous other factors have contributed to the northward migration of Hispanics, as well as the eastward migration necessitated by the destruction, through residential creep, of agricultural communities where Hispanics formerly constituted the majority
of the workforce, toward massive sectors of the western Valley of the Sun, where Phoenix is situated.

Today, there is an insistent interest in the revitalization of the downtown Phoenix, and this includes major streets around it. Since Van Buren flows into the downtown area form both east and west (and this essay has given little attention to West Van Buren, although some of the geological layers mentioned are to be found there as well), it is inevitably going to be part of urban redevelopment. In particular, East Van Buren (the focus of this essay) is privileged because of its proximity to Sky Harbor International Airport, the displacement of the industrial parks around it by gleaming office buildings and their infrastructure, such as new business hotels), and the emerging importance of Arizona State University as the paradigm of the new urban university. Indeed, this segment of Van Buren will play a privileged role in linking the original Tempe-based campus (Van Buren ends at the Mill Avenue Bridge, which takes one into the university village across the Salt River from Phoenix) with the downtown campus that will be developed blocks north of it along the Central Avenue Corridor. The gentrification of Van Buren, which has already begun with the aforementioned office buildings and business hotels, in addition to new condominiums catering to young urban professionals and their particular infrastructure, means that the layered historical references of Van Buren will inevitably lost forever: this is the fifth geological layer. Whatever continuity there is, through existing sites and structures, among the first four geological layers I have described, will be permanently displaced. Perhaps a name or two will remain, but that will be all.

Thus, these photographs capture a Phoenix past that will soon be long gone. Given the rundown and often dangerous nature of Van Buren, there is little reason for nostalgia. But there is every reason for a sensitivity to the historical record, and that is the context in which these photographs are being presented.²

Part of the westward migration that came about as integral to the Great Depression, World War II, and postwar prosperity and its transformations of the demographic landscape of America, as the belief always that such migration would bring with it a better life: movement

² These photographs are presented in the order in which they were taken moving westward from approximately East 32nd Street, along that part of Van Buren that was part of US Highway 60.
meant the possibility of acceding to the American dream, the promised land of economic security and the good life. The Dreamland Mobile Home Park trades on the notion of movement as a way of changing one’s life through changing one’s residence as a means of attaining the good life. If the invention of the mobile home meant the possibility of taking one’s home on the road, the mobile home park afforded an instant installation upon arrival in the place of one’s dreams. Phoenix, in its initial growth after the Second World War, certainly marketed itself as a dreamland, for the winter visitor, who could plug in a residence for months at a time in any one of dozens of home parks across the Valley or become even a permanent residence. The mature trees in the second image of this park are an index of how long it has been around. Many parks like Dreamland remain dotted around the Valley, although most have been replaced by urban renewal or the rapidly expanding
residential subdivisions on the east and west ends of the metropolitan area.

Part of the service infrastructure of Van Buren as a main traveled road in and out of central Arizona is the curio shop, two of which still stand along Van Buren in different states. No longer open to the walk-in public, whose attention was lured by the yard ornament of the sleeping Mexican or the ashtray in the form of the latter’s broad sombrero, one at least seems to be a wholesale outlet: such curios are now to be most routinely found in the gift shops of hotels or in the hallways of airports. When such establishments functioned along strips of busy streets like Van Buren, they would serve the customer who would walk over from the hotel next door or drop by after eating at the café down the street. Selling a kitschy memento of Arizona and its (poorly understood and even more poorly represented) Hispanic past, the curio shop trafficked in icons of the dreamland that just might lure someone else from back home out to see it firsthand.

The anchors of Van Buren remain, without a doubt, the motels. These include what are now noticeably rundown installations, along with some that have been condemned as structurally unsafe and unsanitary because of
deteriorated plumbing and pest infestation. Several demonstrate the theme orientation by which establishments, built often one after the other along a major road, sought to distinguish themselves from one another. This is particularly true in the log-cabin or California cottage motifs, both of which are represented on Van Buren (the former is still maintained in almost mint condition). Others are larger installations, and some have been kept up and remodeled (like the one on the cover), which indicates that Van Buren still attracts the traffic of travelers needing a place to spend the night.

Many of the motels cater to more or less permanent residences, often illegal immigrants, drug dealers, and prostitutes (who, as of this writing, are, however, less frequently engaged in public solicitation outside the motels); one motel touts its offer of “quick rent apartments,” which one could suspect is a euphemism for rental by the hour. Some motels trumpet the fact that they are “American owned and operated,” a claim that indicates rival establishments are in the hands of so-called ethnics, typically Indians or Pakistanis. These circumstances underscore how the historical layers of Van Buren, in addition to being chronologically distributed, also intersect: the low-income resident, the prostitute, the foreign arrival—all of which contribute to a distinctly diverse demographics along this urban site.

One example of something like an gentrification of the motels is the Salvation Army retirement village that makes use of one of the more modern hotels along this strip.

I do not know if the markedly present automobile establishments—used car lots and some garages—along Van Buren were part of the original history of the street as a route through town, or if they came afterward as part of the continuing commercial/industrial recycling of property until the
land becomes part of the upcoming gentrification. Certainly, it makes sense for both sales lots and repair shops to have accompanied the original drive-through traffic. Prior to the 1960s, vehicles were not particularly well adapted for long-distance driving, and even less so in the case of the trek across the desert, on both sides of Phoenix, with nothing of the travel amenities (rest stops, water barrels, and emergency phones) that facilitate the trip today. One thinks of the rattletrap of a truck the Dustbowl Oakies used to make the trip out to California in *The Grapes of Wrath*, a story (John Steinbeck’s 1938 novel; John Ford’s 1940 film) that is contemporary to the early days of cross-country driving that would have included Van Buren Street. If cars did not die completely from the trip, they often required repair, and many new arrivals in town would also have wanted a cheap vehicle to start their new lives in Phoenix. Undoubtedly, these automotive establishments continue to cater to those individuals who inhabit the many motels and several motor parks of the area.

It is not unexpected to encounter along Van Buren Street bars and liquor stores: they are undeniably part of the overall creatural needs of both the transient as well as the fixed population of the street. Sundays, however, bring out the sign board of the Love Tabernacle, whose founder is Jesus Christ. I thought at first this must be a euphemism for prostitution; I now see that it is a minimalist attempt to counter the area’s reputation for raw sin.
Without a question, there are established-denomination churches located within reasonable distance from this segment of Van Buren; there are, however, none actually along it.

    In addition to the Love Tabernacle, a Spanish-language congregation is located a few blocks away in a former strip mall. The arrival of organized religion in the vicinity may not exactly be a manifestation of gentrification, but it is most assuredly a response to the bad reputation of Van Buren that is pointed to with reference to the taverns and prostitution.

    The Liberty Apartments, “cooled by refrigeration,” is one of the larger hostelries along Van Buren, but this large piece of property, with various types of units within its confines, is now firmly enclosed by a chain link fence. This fence may be rented, but it has been up so many years that it might as well be a permanent part of the property. Moreover, this is a piece of property so close to the downtown financial area of Phoenix that the fence will probably never come down until the property is sold for some sort of development that would fall under the heading of gentrification. This is true of other properties that have been condemned or abandoned in this way, and it is also true of the occasional vacant lot. There are not income-producing properties at the moment, and likely generate modest tax revenues. However, their owners hold onto them—one rarely sees a for sale sign—
because they know full well that the proximity to downtown Phoenix and to Sky Harbor International Airport, not to mention Arizona State University, will, in the not too distant future, make these properties valuable for all sorts of new uses.

One such new use has been the development, north across the street from the Liberty Apartments of St. Luke’s Hospital, set back from Van Buren on the edge of a lovely park. St. Luke’s, when seen in this image without the buildings to the south, east, or west, looks like it sits in a prosperous middle-class area of town (as does its sister Catholic Hospital, St. Joseph’s, two miles to the north in Phoenix’s comfortable Willow District).
St. Luke’s is accompanied nearby by the Wilson Elementary School, which cannot be more than a dozen years old. Although not built to serve the children who live in the Van Buren motels (rather, it serve the residential area to the immediate north, northwest, and northeast), it is the public school of the for the Van Buren area, and is also a sign of a significant renewal of property along this street.

The chain-link motif along Van Buren street extends to some, but not all, of the vacant lots. In the case of one large piece of property, it is possible to look westward along the line of the fence to a vanishing point that is second financial center that extends along East Camelback Street four miles

Figueroa Street is to that city’s Wilshire Boulevard: the second term in both cases is a more recent development that the historic central core). This axis extends northward for about two miles along Central Avenue (the east-west ground zero in the numbering system of the blocks, streets to the east, avenues to the west), beginning at Washington Street (the ground zero of the numbering system of the blocks, which all bear names).

It is at the intersection of Van Buren and Central where one can find what is currently the tallest skyscraper in Phoenix (and, consequently, in Arizona), originally the Valley National Bank Building, but subsequently,
first, the Bank One Building and soon, I understand, the Chase-Manhattan Bank Building. Thus, there is a spatial juxtaposition in this photograph—unintended when it was taken (I was only interested in the geometry of the fence)—in which the chain-link fence, an icon of the fallow property, meets with a prominent icon of the city’s financial empire. To travel westward along Van Buren is to leave behind the rundown and vacant spaces of the historical portion of the street to pass by the beginnings of gentrification in the form of a new hotel and a large cluster of condominiums. St. Mary’s Basilica backs on Van Buren, with its newly built administration center and gardens, which replaced St. Mary’s grade school after much controversy. One half-mile to the south, along Washington Street there is a medical clinic, a historical but well maintained Inmaculado Corazón Catholic church that serves the Hispanic community, and another new condominium development, large cluster of new condominiums. Both Van Buren and Washington lead into the financial core of the city, and Washington ends as

![Photograph of a fence with buildings and empty lot]

When one “sees through” the fence, it is apparent that this is a large piece of property that extends all the way back to Washington Street and the back of buildings along its north side. But in the process of contemplating this vacant lot being held against future economic growth, one can contemplate three symbols of the economic prosperity of Phoenix: the sun
(here refracted through some thin winter clouds), yet another jet plane landing at Sky Harbor International (only about a mile away), and the south mountains, which are part of the string of mountains that envelop the so-called Valley of the Sun and provide it with one detail of natural landscaping and a manifestation of its desert splendor.

The relatively recent “Latinoamericanization” of Van Buren and the area north of the multiple boundaries (Salt River, Washington Street, the Union Pacific railroad tracks) that held the Mexican population, so to speak, in check and out of sight of the white urban core is evident in a network of commercial sites relating to the needs of Hispanics. In the early years of the twentieth century, white and Hispanics were pretty evenly divided within the city, but beginning with the post-World War I boom and continuing with the World War II boom, the Hispanic presence fell to around ten-percent of the metropolitan population. But the influx of Hispanics in the last decade—casually denoted in a virtually racist manner as “illegal immigration”—has brought the Hispanic population up to around a third of the city and meant that (in addition to a civil rights consciousness) Hispanics could no longer be confined (along with African Americans and Asians) out of sight to the south. Moreover, the southern rim of the Valley, up against the skirt of the southern mountains, is seeing an explosive growth in middle-class and upscale residential areas that may well come to destroy the ethnic neighborhoods of what has always been called South Phoenix.

Because of the use of the Spanish language to one degree or another by most Hispanics, their presence along Van Buren is immediately apparent in the names of business and in the goods and services announced as being offered. Indeed, in some cases these business have meant the take over of
establishments that were formerly, and long, known as Anglo businesses.

Note that the Auto Credit car lot is situated even closer than the aforementioned chain-link fence to the Bank One building (dead center of the photograph), while one can see to the left the Collier Building, which is the most recent addition to the downtown skyline and the seat of a major financial corporation.

In addition to an open-air flea market, albeit of modest proportions, this segment of Van Buren could boast of one of the first enterprises to provide direct bus service from downtown Phoenix to Mexico. Although the company soon outgrew this space and has moved to a location closer to the Sky Harbor airport, its sleek modern busses were, in their arrival and departure, another sign of the intersection of a possible new prosperity for Van Buren Street (precisely because they did so well at this location they had to move into larger quarters) and the sizeable Hispanic presence in the area.

Several taquerías along Van Buren mark the Hispanic presence. What is notable about these businesses (which complement traditional Mexican restaurants) is the way in which they include outdoor eating, either in the form of a seating area attached to a permanent building, or in the form of a mobile cart with picnic tables next to it. The nature of these business as specifically Latino, which also include a dance hall now several decades old, the El Capri Dancing, and a bar, El Presidente (which seems now to function more as a special events venue), is marked, of course by the Hispanic flavor.
of their names. Thus the Capri complements the more Anglo Blue Moon Lounge; Tacos Campos the now disappeared--displaced ethnically?—Carrow’s eatery. The Hispanic nature of these establishments, moreover, is often reinforced by the typically Mexican flare of color and exuberant announcement of menu options.

This world of Van Buren Street will soon disappear. I do not know if it will happened within ten years or if it will take longer. Nor do I know if the incursion of Latinos, both new arrivals in the state or those who are being displaced from the old rural areas to the south and west, will slow the gentrification along Van Buren, since they would have to be displaced to somewhere else in the city. Of course, the regrettably slow but inevitable affirmation of a Latino middle-class in Phoenix has already meant that both old and new residential areas include fully integrated Latino neighbors. Yet it is also true that traditional middle- and upper-class neighborhoods like the downtown Palmcroft-Encanto area remains resolutely Anglo. Nevertheless, this is a consequence of economic rather than the racial/ethnic discrimination of the not-too-distant past.

The pressures for the reutilization of land for high-income—and highly taxed—use are enormous, especially in a downtown area like that of Phoenix’s that is undergoing revitalization. For many anxious to see urban blight replaced by more indexical signs of the area’s much vaunted Sunbelt
prosperity the process is painfully slow. But the signs of its presence are undeniably evident. Thus, to walk or drive along the stretch of Van Buren Avenue Bridge that takes one into the university town of Tempe is to see a that runs from Central Avenue downtown east to where it ends at the Mill fairly dense reflex of one significant portion of Phoenix history.

Photographing that stretch in the late 1990s and first few years of the 21st century is to create a record of that history that will, in the very immediately future, no longer be there: the Dreamland Hotel will have been replaced by a luxury condominium, the Templo de Alabanza by an upscale food market, the Liberty Apartments by a school. Will anyone lament their passing?