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It Really Is Main Street

Redeveloped, revitalized, and historically preserved, Albuquerque's Nob Hill still manages to speak to now





Historic shopping districts throughout New Mexico and the nation felt the pinch of retail megacenters long before they started seeing diminishing returns from the faltering economy. Where shopping was once a daylong affair of visiting several favorite stores, many American Main Streets have been sacrificed to the gods of convenience, relegated to preserving a glimpse of what life used to be, with rows of antique and junk shops and businesses that are either failing or abandoned altogether.

But not all downtowns have succumbed. In Albuquerque's Nob Hill district, life springs from once decrepit old hotels, and locals and tourists feel at home as the street

scene erupts with hope and opportunity. The neighborhood unfurls like a grandmother's quilt of rich colors and textures, with decoration and ornamentation, people old and young, and the breath of potential emanating from its facades.

For those with a historical interest in all things architectural, Nob Hill's sometimes controversial pedigree is sure to entice. In 1937 Central Avenue became part of Route 66, the historic corridor connecting Chicago and Los Angeles. At the time, Nob Hill was a young suburb on the outskirts of the city, complete with a movie theater, restaurants, hotels, and a pharmacy. It was the lovely Nob Hill Shopping Center that marked the beginning of the mile-long commercial

district, which also fed the neighborhood, literally: A mom-and-pop grocery and a bakery were the main attractions.

The shopping center is an art deco structure designed by Louis Hesselden, who also designed the old Albuquerque High School classrooms, gymnasium, and library. It has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1987, and is considered the foremost example of an automobile-inspired shopping center in the state, if not the nation. Its deco towers and neon signage are still intact.

The tradition of Route 66 drive-in hotels and creative decoration found a home in the district as well. Roadside architecture was its own justification in those days of mobile

Above: Kellys Brew Pub offers both inside and outside dining at a converted service station. Opposite, left to right, top to bottom: Old and new come together at the clothing stores Sparky's Trading Company and Elsa Ross; art deco towers at the now abandoned blues bar at Carlisle and Central; a satellite bursts through the facade at Satellite Coffee; decorative iron detailing and bold Día de los Muertos murals mark one of the neighborhood's import stores; Sachs Body Modification stays open well into the evening; a goddess mural at 110 Dartmouth; nouveau deco at the lofts at 110 Richmond; Imbibe and the Skybar merge adobe style and modern lines; a vintage entrance reflects a view on the Place in Nob Hill, new luxury lofts.

competition. Each establishment tried to outdo the last in its sheer determination to win the attention of passersby. In Nob Hill, the contenders included a café shaped like an iceberg at the site of the present Lobo Theater, hotels modeled after tepees and pueblos, and a Mexican restaurant inside a giant sombrero. Further enhancing the Route 66 corridor through Nob Hill and Albuquerque were the state fairgrounds just two miles away and the late-1930s Monte Vista Fire Station, which was constructed as part of the Depression relief efforts of the Works Progress Administration and designed by architect Ernst Blumenthal.

After the meteoric rise of the Route—which spawned great wealth as well as thematic songs and movies—and its subsequent decline with the construction of I-40 in the 1960s, Nob Hill was subject to the traditional sentencing of all old commercial centers: It decayed into a home for porn shops and other seedy establishments, its beautiful, abandoned buildings used by squatters and drug traders.

In the early 1980s, a contentious and forward-thinking developer, Jack Pickel, came in and did the unthinkable. He kicked everyone (including the mom-and-pop store and the bakery) out of the Nob Hill Shopping Center, which by then was the only remaining heartbeat in the commercial district. Whether through cunning or lucky timing, the La Montañita Co-op, a local food store established in 1976, leased space in Nob Hill after outgrowing its radical roots, and a marriage between the shopping center and the co-op guaranteed success for both.

By then, co-op shoppers were no longer just old hippies with high ideals. They were young professionals, families stationed at

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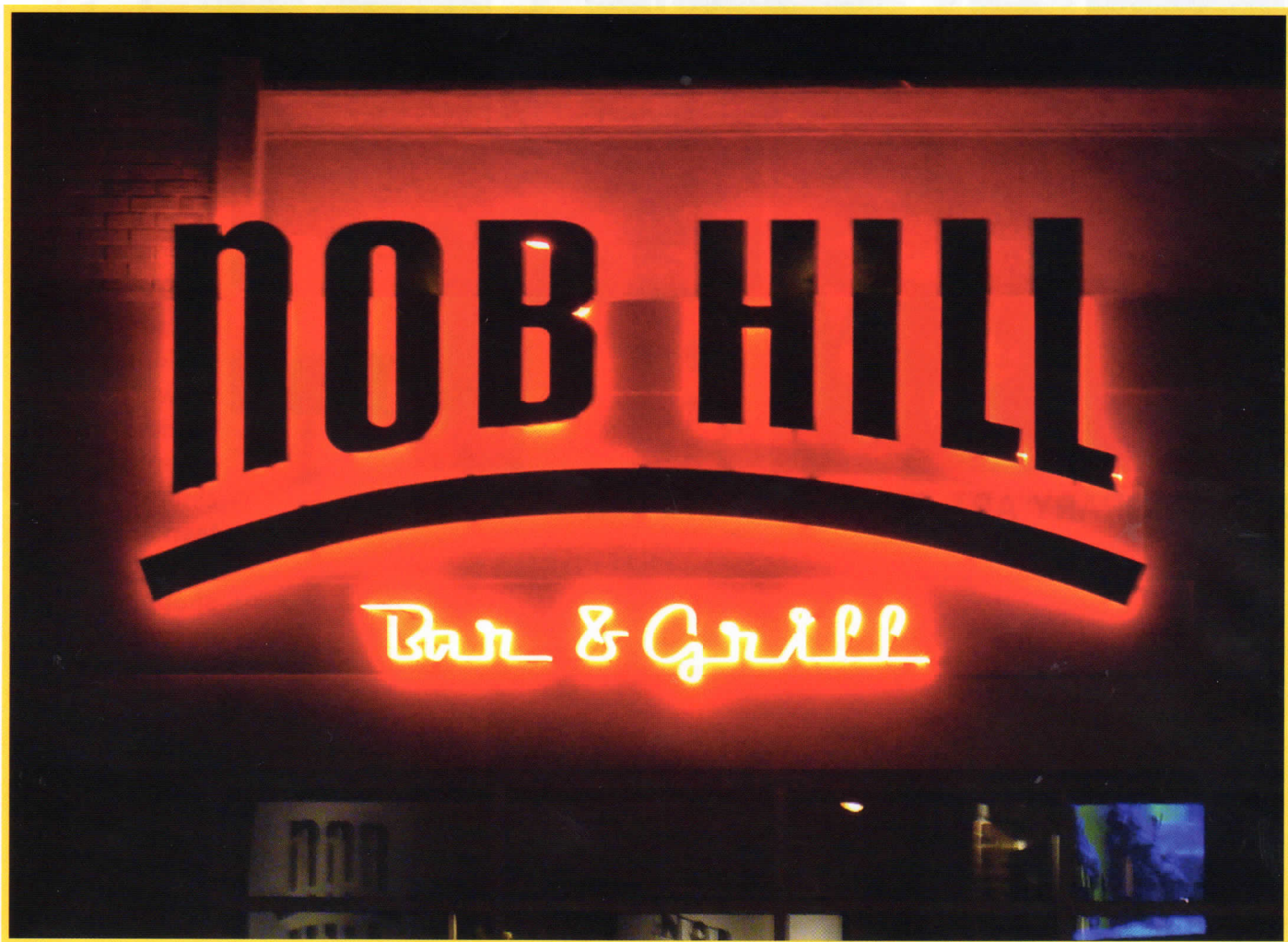
Flying Star's vintage sign marks the way in for pastries and coffee.

the air base, professors from the university, and students who started coming for the organic and local groceries. Meanwhile, the people who had been running things in Nob Hill were mired in their old, territorial ways. They didn't think they could embrace or implement changes that were taking hold in California and apply them to advantage in Albuquerque. What they didn't realize was that the people of Albuquerque had established some degree of wealth, there were more of them in town, and they were vacationing in California!

Pickel heard vacationers' stories and realized what people were beginning to look for. It was a classic case of "If you build it, they will come," only now it was "If you preserve it (and make it relevant), they will come." He hired preservation professional Mary Rose Szoka, who championed the idea of Nob Hill as a Main Street community and set into motion a plan: Turn the commercial district into an area where locals could do all the shopping they needed to do in one place, and restore the neighborhood along the way.

The award-winning Scalo restaurant sealed the deal on the other end of the Nob Hill commercial district in 1986, offering the expanding upper class a taste of great Italian food in a chic setting. In 2007, *Wine Spectator* bestowed upon the restaurant its coveted Award of Excellence, verifying that Scalo is just as relevant now. Nob Hill was officially recognized as a New Mexico Main Street Community after some 20 years of work by neighborhood advocates on May 14, 2009, at Scalo. Today Nob Hill is a unique and inspiring place to spend time, whether shopping at the co-op or visiting any of the other cool shops that call the district home. Whatever your needs—shoe repair, dog grooming, a rare contraption for your ancient SLR camera, fresh flowers, or a wonderful meal—it's all here.

Even more inspiring: The Nob Hill of today does not bow solely to the preservationists. The neighborhood could easily have been a mundane suburban Main Street dotted with the most complete example of Route 66 roadside architecture in the state, if the preservation gods had been allowed to rule. But this Nob Hill is home base for the avant-garde as well as countless professionals, professors, families, and tourists. It embraces the colorful traditions of its past,



Calling itself an “upscale joint,” Nob Hill Bar & Grill has become a favorite hip hangout.

creating a new brand of 21st-century roadside architecture, with spaceships bursting through facades, classical art deco refitted with neon to make it at once new and old, once abandoned classic auto-court hotels that have been turned into bright and shiny business incubators, and old gas stations that have become restaurants and florist shops. Sachs Body Modification, across from the popular Greek restaurant Yanni's, is a boisterous merger between 1950s architectural detailing and bold neon signage. Within its storefront windows rests a titillating, vintage-inspired, anatomically correct nude female mannequin that illustrates how beautiful what you never thought could be tattooed or pierced can be.

There are countless murals, mosaics, and decorative pieces throughout the commercial district, and a simple stroll can take hours for someone who loves to look beyond the entry door. The rich cultural heritage of Albuquerque is represented in ornamental elements sprinkled throughout the neighborhood and includes Native American, Hispanic, American Southwest, Celtic, Greek, moderne, and roadside America influences, as well as modern political statements and even comic-book characters. Of course, in the rich tradition of Route 66, neon abounds. Architecture styles include neo- and pseudo-puebloan, Spanish, territorial revival, art deco, and classical revival with bursts of Southern

charm, as well as modern infill projects interspersed throughout.

Whether it was moxie or just plain vision that possessed Pickel and Szoka to save Nob Hill Shopping Center and thereby advocate the cause of historic preservation for the entire district, their efforts and those of countless individuals who bought into the idea transformed the commercial district back into a vital neighborhood. The result is a beautiful testament to the community of Albuquerque: the value placed on a sense of neighborhood, a celebration of Route 66 heritage and 20th-century architecture, stunning views, gorgeous buildings, fun and unique shopping, excellent food, and gardenscapes to tempt the senses. ✱