



**THE LONE  
DIAGONAL IN  
A GRID TOWN  
WHAT'S GRAND  
ABOUT  
GRAND AVENUE  
BY DOUGLAS TOWNE**

We've all heard about the alleged power of the pyramid, but does the hypotenuse leg of a triangle also contain a little magic? The throngs of people that flock every First Friday of the month to tour the art spaces along Grand Avenue—the lone diagonal in a grid town—would undoubtedly agree there's a distinctive vibe on this directionally-challenged street that can't be found elsewhere in Phoenix, Arizona.

"I sure do feel that there's something special about Grand Avenue," says Jason Nosaj, co-owner of The Trunk Space, one of the art venues along the street. "Artists like things with unique angles," says the SCA member. "If you go to a big metropolitan area like New York City, there are 'wedge' shaped buildings everywhere, but Grand Avenue has the monopoly on that here."<sup>1</sup>

Few souls exploring the edgy galleries and funky nightspots, however, realize Grand Avenue throbbed with life long before its present reincarnation as an arts district.

**GRAND AVENUE'S GENESIS**

Originating at the intersection of 7th Avenue and Van Buren Street in downtown Phoenix, Grand Avenue bisects the right angle formed by these roads, racing off over 50 miles to the northwest to the town of Wickenburg. In a metropolitan area laid out in a rigid grid pattern oriented along the four cardinal points, with major east-west arteries uniformly one mile apart, Grand Avenue stands out on maps as a road that knows where it starts, where it wants to go, and isn't afraid to cut against the grain to get there.

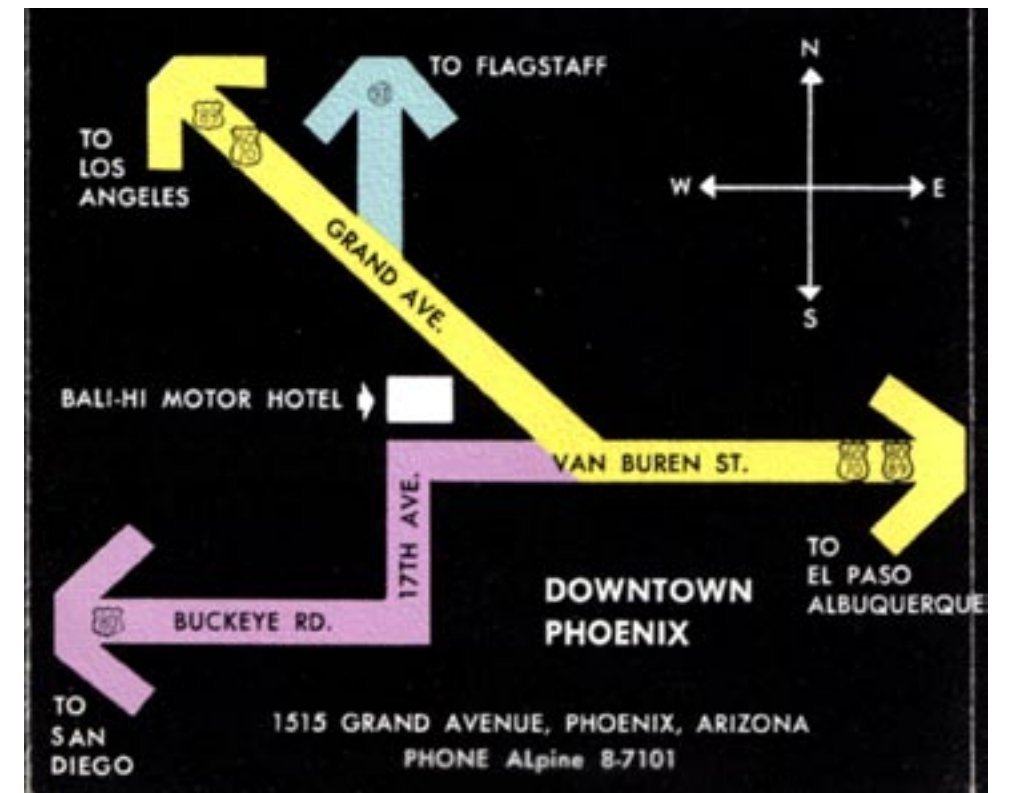
The highway's route developed out of a need to ship food and supplies the 50-odd miles between Phoenix, then a small farming community, and Wickenburg, a town benefiting from the wealth produced from the nearby Vulture Mine, the richest gold strike in Arizona. Grand Avenue's distinctive diagonal route, like so many angled streets across the country, is the result of the roadway paralleling the tracks of the Santa Fe, Prescott, and Phoenix Railroad that connected the two communities with regular passenger service from 1895 to 1969.

Long before light-rail became the Phoenix public transportation buzz word, there was a Grand Avenue trolley car, albeit one pulled by a mule, transporting passengers from downtown to the then city limits at McDowell Road. The mule trolley, which began in 1890 and was upgraded to an electric system in 1909, flourished before losing popularity to the automobile. The trolley remained busy each fall transporting passengers to the Arizona State Fair, but business was so poor at other times that during the 1930s, a conductor reportedly accepted a goat as a passenger

**DOUGLAS TOWNE's** art installation, "The Lone Diagonal in a Grid Town: What's Grand About Grand Avenue," was featured at Phoenix's Stop n' Look Gallery in 2003. The exhibit drew mixed critical reviews but was a favorite among Grand Avenue's "street" people who briefly made him the toast of the Bikini Lounge.

**OPPOSITE:** California AAA map showing Grand Avenue between Wickenburg and Phoenix, and a pedestrian push button on the avenue.

**BELOW:** Artist's map from Bali Hi Motor Hotel brochure. — All photos and ephemera courtesy of the author.





since its owner was willing to pay full fare. Although other routes of the Phoenix trolley system hung on until 1947, the unprofitable Grand Avenue trolley made its final run in 1934.<sup>2</sup>

As trolley service faded, Grand Avenue had already transitioned into a major conduit for cross-country auto travelers motoring along one of its many numerical designations: U.S. Highway 60, 70, and 89, and Arizona State Route 93. Starting with the Model T and running through the muscle cars of the 1970s, Grand Avenue was called the “Western Gateway to Phoenix” and pulsated with 24-hour traffic as the only highway between Phoenix and Los Angeles.

### GRAND AVENUE’S ROADSIDE ARCHITECTURE

Gas, food and lodging businesses were built along Grand Avenue, with an especially swank tourist strip located near downtown Phoenix. The motels had exotic themes where one could slumber, nosh, and celebrate in establishments masquerading as outposts of the Middle East, the South Pacific, or the Wild West. Checking in, motorists were instantly transported to distant worlds without the need for passports or vaccination shots. The motor hotels also featured cocktail and dining facilities complementing their exotic themes, allowing for spiritual and culinary immersion in the chosen setting. Travelers—and city residents alike—reveled in their faux ambiance.

The Egyptian Motor Hotel hyped its Arab mystique as “A Mirage on the Desert...Come True.” Amidst towering palm trees, it boasted of being “The Most Convenient and

Modern Hotel in Phoenix” adding, in an inadvertent double-entendre that Alfred Hitchcock would surely appreciate, that this hotel could be enjoyed “For the Rest of Your Life.”<sup>3</sup>

A few blocks down Grand Avenue, or depending on your perspective—across the Indian Ocean in the South Seas—was the Bali Hi Motor Hotel, an “Island of Western Hospitality.” The Bali Hi featured “A

South Pacific lagoon captured in gleaming tile—just steps from your door” where you could retreat to the Tabu Room for a cocktail experience “snug and quiet, nestled in the beauty and harmony of a Balinese atmosphere,” and dine at their restaurant that “delights in offering you every culinary pleasure to be experienced in good food [prepared] by Chef Max Penton in a tropical atmosphere.”<sup>4</sup>

Nearby at the Western Village Motor Hotel, Jim Daley was your Corral Boss at the Trails End Bar and Café. This enterprise billed itself as “The West’s Most Western Hotel,” adding “This beautiful resort hotel authentically captures the Western atmosphere and offers guests luxurious moderately priced accommodations.”<sup>5</sup>

Many visitors who came to the Valley of the Sun for its much vaunted warm weather were attracted to another Grand Avenue mini-resort, the Hotel Desert Sun, a place all about luxurious recreation. If you felt a tad guilty about relaxing poolside and being indulged with drink and food delivered to your chaise lounge, there were “strenuous” work-out options nearby, along with opportunities to socialize with other guests. Literature from the Hotel Desert Sun touts, “Two large shuffleboards are convenient if you want exercise with your sun fun. You’ll meet congenial people that you would be proud to invite into your own home.”<sup>6</sup>

A bit north of downtown was the Rock Center Motel and Western States Garden Stone Supply, probably the only one-stop shop ever for lodging and landscape rock. This unique business combination came about in the late 1950s when an owner of a rock supply business in California moved to Phoenix, purchasing the lot that contained the motel. Planning to raze the roadside lodge, he instead converted two of the cottages into an office and showroom and kept operating the rest as overnight accommodations. Eventually, the entire motel was turned into a stone showroom of sorts, with each motel unit covered with different rock faces, all linked by a stone sidewalk that was a work of lapidary art.<sup>7</sup>

### GRAND AVENUE’S DECLINE AND REBIRTH

Alas, the idyllic Grand Avenue resort strip would not last forever. When Interstate 10 connected Phoenix with Los Angeles in the 1978, the majority of Grand Avenue’s cross-country traffic was lured away by the new superhighway.<sup>8</sup> Urban blight enveloped this artery, causing the decay and eventual demise of many of its most unique places. As tourist-oriented businesses began closing because of non-existent travelers, Grand Avenue became a road of abandoned motels and shuttered gas stations.

But from this seemingly sad tale of the proverbial boulevard of broken dreams emerges a stunning success story. Grand Avenue has a newly emerging identity—at least the first mile and half section—until it hits McDowell Road and is escorted out of town by Burlington Northern-Santa Fe freight trains. Blight is being transformed into renewal—and not the dull-as-dishwater variety that typically emerges from bureaucratic planning commissions. This revitalization consists of the decidedly more organic and intriguing form

of a grassroots arts district—a big idea inadvertently created by countless small entrepreneurs and artists pursuing their individual visions.

Grand Avenue’s abandoned storefronts are being transformed into youth-oriented—or young-at-heart—congregational spaces for those seeking options beyond reality TV, spectator sports, and franchised mediocrity. Art of every hue, form, sound and talent-level thrive there nightly. Moreover, on the first and third Friday of each month, Grand Avenue becomes one of the city’s preeminent social gatherings when its sidewalks brim with people drawn to the open houses and festivities offered by many art spaces. Urban hipsters and curious suburbanites are drawn to the street’s energy—created by its distinctive geometry, architecture, art and activities.

“Grand Avenue itself is an attraction since some of the nicest, most unique architecture in the city can be found on the street,” says Nosaj. An example of this is the art venue he shares with Stephanie Carrico at what he calls, “the ‘Grandavelt’ Corner (the funky intersection of Grand Avenue, Roosevelt and 15th Avenue). “Our space originally held an ‘Indian Motorcycle’ dealer and was built largely by the original owners—you can tell by things like the original tin ceiling, and strange additions,” says Nosaj.<sup>9</sup>

Long-time denizens of this diagonal artery are benefiting from its rebirth. Two doors down from Nosaj and Carrico’s Trunk Space is the Bikini Lounge, a classic Tiki establishment that’s undergone a metamorphosis from dive bar to hipster hangout. The lounge opened in 1948—the brainchild of a serviceman returning from the South Pacific. “[It’s] one of the oldest bars in the state, thanks largely to the number that have been bulldozed in the past five years,” says Nosaj.<sup>10</sup> Standing-room-only crowds pack this faux Polynesian palace for First Friday events.



OPPOSITE: Matchbook cover from Egyptian Motor Hotel. THIS PAGE: Brochures from Hotel Desert Sun and Bali Hi Motor Hotel.





Other architectural gems have survived but with dramatically changed functions. The Googie-inspired, 1960s-era Fletcher Jones Chevrolet building, easily recognized by bold lines and glass walls that suggest space travel and the atomic age, became the Paper Heart Gallery in 2004. Another noteworthy street-survivor is Bragg's Pie Factory, a streamlined Moderne building built in the late-1940s. Longtime downtown artists and preservationists, Beatrice Moore and Tony Zahn, recently purchased the building and plan to fill the 15,000 square-foot structure with small businesses.

Sadly, the motels along Grand Avenue have not fared as well: the Western Village Motor Hotel burned (early 1990s), the Rock Center Motel was demolished for road improvements (late 1990s), and the Hotel Desert Sun stands vacant after a recent fire. However, the Egyptian Motel struggles on as the Palms Motel and Bali Hi Motor Hotel is now the Oasis Motel, with renovation underway to become housing and work spaces for artists.<sup>11</sup>

Building on its past for a distinctive future, Grand Avenue is now definitely the place to be. Whether you're into people watching, gallery gazing, offbeat entertainment, vintage roadside architecture or just looking for something outside the sea of strip mall sameness, Grand Avenue—the lone diagonal in a grid town—is the route to take. ●

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with Jason Nosaj, December 12, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> "It Never Was Grand," *Phoenix New Times*, November 10-16, 1982, pp. 8 & 31.

<sup>3</sup> Egyptian Motor Hotel matchbook cover.

<sup>4</sup> Bali Hi Motor Hotel brochure.

<sup>5</sup> Western Village Motor Hotel matchbook cover.

<sup>6</sup> Hotel Desert Sun

brochure.

<sup>7</sup> "Beat the Crush: Need a place to stay and a load of gravel? Try this Grand Avenue Motel," *Phoenix New Times*, November 14-20, 1990, pp. 22-23 & 38.

<sup>8</sup> Bragg's Pie Factory brochure.

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication with Jason Nosaj, December 12, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



**ABOVE:** The vacant Western Village Motor Hotel burned in 1990, leaving only remnants like this matchbook cover. **BELOW:** A matchbook cover from Fletcher Jones Chevrolet.



Chuck's Corner Featuring photos from the collection of artist and photographer Chuck Biddle.



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