

Desert Cities

Arizona Historical Society Museum, Tempe, AZ, Branch. Curators: Mary Melcher and Jean Reynolds

April 12, 2003-April 2008

Desert Cities seeks to enhance the viewer's understanding of the post-World War II growth of Phoenix and other desert cities in the Valley of the Sun. Public history, television news footage, historic photographs, sound recordings, videos, corporate brands and icons, and replicas of living spaces combine to tell the story of change and growth in the valley from 1945 to 2000. The co-curators state that *Desert Cities* is the story of how the valley landscape has been shaped and how people live, work, and play in the valley today.

In 1950, Phoenix was the 99th largest city in the nation; by 2000 it was the 6th. Today, the valley absorbs, on average, 110,000 new residents per year. Where are the people coming from? What is their impact on longtime residents and families? How are neighborhoods being transformed? What are the pluses and minuses of rapid growth and development? These are some of the questions posed by the exhibit. Through interpretation, oral histories, and material and popular culture, the exhibit invites viewers to formulate their own answers.

Entering the exhibit, visitors hear the voices of people who relocated to the valley. Some speak of the long and arduous journey to Phoenix. Some remark on the beauty of cotton fields and orange groves that seemed to extend for miles. The largest populations migrated from California and the Great Lakes region. All speak of the intense summer heat.

Since ancient times and especially since World War II, life and industry in the valley have been sustained by surface water. Rivers and their tributaries were diverted and canals and dams were built. The exhibit discusses the impacts of modern engineer-

ing feats, such as swamp coolers and refrigeration, on Arizona's landscape. *Desert Cities* uses home interiors to compare family living spaces of economically disadvantaged residents to those of affluent homes in planned communities. Habitats of desert tortoise, rabbits, hares, fowl, reptiles, and even cockroaches are examined. Conspicuously absent from the exhibit is any discussion of American Indian peoples and their aboriginal rights to lands and resources. The taking of ancestral lands and resources left American Indian farmers dependent on government subsidies and food rations. Recent legislation seeks to reverse some of the inequity.

That being said, the exhibit's most powerful presentation is on race relations. A Mexican American World War II veteran provides moving testimony that after honorably serving his country, he could not secure a home loan. An African American realtor relates how she had to ask a Greek American friend to purchase a home for her in a predominantly Anglo-American neighborhood. Other testimonies and discussions of social movements, like the national Civil Rights Movement, show how race relations and inequalities in Arizona have been and continue to be addressed.

A large section includes the brands and icons of restaurant chains, banks, planned communities, and department stores. Professional sports franchises have proved to be an effective form of branding for cities. In today's world, branding may be replacing history and historic places as markers for developing a sense of place in American society.

Desert Cities raises questions for preservationists: Can corporate branding and preserving a sense of place coexist? How will changes to the fate of the brand affect the community's sense of place? The desert cities have arrived, but how long will we be able to water the playing field?

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