

## RIO NUEVO: City Planning Project - Video documentation

*Heidemarie SEBLATNIG*

Heidemarie Seblatnig, The University of Arizona, Tucson, School of Architecture, CAPLA, USA, PO Box 210075, Tucson, AZ 85721-0075  
Vienna: IEMAR, Vienna University of Technology, A-1040 Vienna, Treitlstrasse 3, Austria/Europe;  
e-mail: seblatnig@seblatnig.com

The University of Arizona is collaborating with development groups to finance the program for single and two person family housing. The University of Arizona understands the importance of available, affordable, quality housing to its students and other members of the campus community. The University also recognizes the ways in which living in campus or campus-affiliated housing can enhance the experience of students, including graduate and professional students. Finally, the University supports the development of supportive, diverse, and safe communities.

The facilities developed through this project are intended to provide housing for non-traditional undergraduate, graduate, and first professional students of the University of Arizona as well as visiting scholars, visiting faculty, and other special guests of the University. International students will be an important resident sub-population.

The students of this program were asked to do a series of analyses on 12 different sites selected by city officials, planning consultants and the faculty as having the greatest potential for housing in the downtown area. The students identified approximately 6 of these sites on which their subsequent design ideas would be developed being the most suitable. Tucson is located in Pima County at the Santa Cruz River. The name Tucson comes from the Piman "Sluyk-son", meaning a dark or brown spring.

Pater Eusebio Francisco Kino, S.J. a Jesuit missionary from Tyrol in Austria, who founded nearly 30 mission stations in Sonora, recorded a settlement on his map which he called TUCSON in 1692. From 1776 it was a Spanish settlement. Tucson was doubtless the second settlement by Europeans in the United States with Santa Fe at the first by a few years. El Presidio de Tucson was established in 1776 and by 1800 it had a population of 300. These Spanish Colonists lived in fairly crude adobe structures tightly grouped around the presidio. During this time Tucson and its low, flat-roofed, adobe Sonoran buildings continued to look much the same. Tucson was occupied by U.S. troops in 1856. The Sonoran/Transitional buildings date from 1879 to 1920.

The progression from Sonoran, to Transnational, to Anglo-American Territorial, is one of utilizing the currently available technology and trade goods in an adobe house. In 1880 Southern Pacific Railroad brought settlers from California and the east coast. Also eastern styles such as Italianate, Stick Style, Queen Anne (1894-1922) and the Bungalow (1901-1945) came from California. In 1912 about the time Arizona became, the Academic Revivals and the Southwestern Revivals became popular. In 1872, Tucson was the largest town between San Antonio and Los Angeles. With the establishment of the University of Arizona in 1887, Tucson began to grow substantially. Availability of rental housing has always been an important factor in the neighborhood.

After this view on Tucson's historical architectural styles and the fact, that they are copied in family-housing in the present, it is easy to understand how difficult the situation is for modern city planning. Critics believe that the Tucson area is in danger of losing its historical character by superficially aping it, which is expressed in the headline "Houses of stultifying sameness mock Tucson's history" in Tucson's newspaper. For example, not all the bland "chicken-wire-and stucco" housing developments being assembled and mass-produced in Oro Valley and other suburban Tucson areas. These chicken-wire-and stucco developments are regulated in detail as paint colors, plant species, fences, gates remodelings and the heights of trees. The result is street upon street of houses with an appearance of stultifying sameness.

The need for aged buildings to make a city worth living cannot be filled with copies of ancient architectural styles. By old buildings there are not only meant museum-piece old buildings, also a lot of plain, ordinary, low-value buildings. The question is, what will Tucson look like in 20 or 30 years? Will it be another Phoenix – sprawling, polluted and ugly? The similarity of the high rise architecture with Phoenix cannot be denied. The city of Tucson is in any case, according to Kwinter's and Fabricius's descriptions a specific and unique combination of historical modalities in a dynamic composition. Infrastructures, as the engines of change, turned out as one of the great problems of the RIO NUEVO project.

This systemic expression of the city with its wide range of topics shows us the problems, especially in the dominance of freeways, broad streets, crossings, paths and underpasses, which are layed like an inflexible corset over the city. Cutting downtown into parts, which cannot be connected easily.

Special attention has to be payed to the planning of parking garages and the parking system when planning residential facilities for University of Arizona students and other members of the University of Arizona community in the RIO NUEVO project. "Action" is a characteristic of the American style and the planning of the parking garage captures more interest, then the construction of the residential facilities for University of Arizona students. Many critical issues were raised in the process of this city planning project.

The question was how do we bring a city to life, when the rich "middle" culture in social and economic transactions has been eliminated. When anyone or any institution, that added either value, cost, or dimension to a transaction has been removed. This disintermediation does not simply produce a gain in "efficiency" it changes the very channels and pathways through which capitalism operates (see Kwinter/Fabricius).

There is no opportunity to buy the simplest things for daily life in the neighborhood and consequently no social contact with the neighbors. Shopping is only available in the huge shopping malls, located around the city. You never will meet your neighbors, neither in the morning, nor in the evening, when they drive their car into the garage, close the door and will never be seen again.

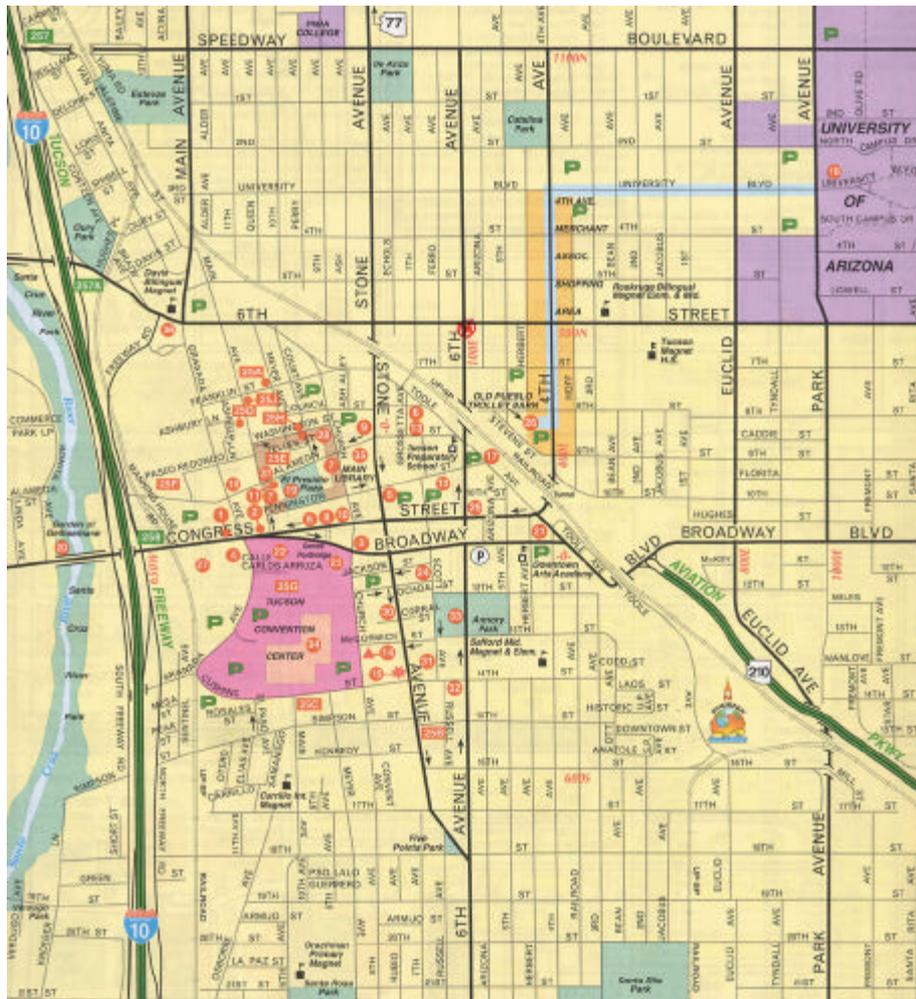
In America the automobile did break the morphological barrier of the traditional capitalist city after the Second World War. It induced a new type of urbanization. "The American city began to explode spatially, but only as a quilted interlock of increasingly confined and abstract synthetic environments." (Kwinter/Fabricius)

After World War II, Tucson, like many western American cities, was dominated by expanding suburbs fueled by the increased mobility of its residents and the abandonment of downtown as a residential, commercial and cultural center. Federal programs to “renew” American downtown-areas in the 1960s and 70s, actually did more damage than renewal through the wholesale demolition of entire neighborhoods - including those of Tucson’s ethnic minorities - and replacing them with civic and governmental mega-projects that ultimately did little to return life to downtown Tucson.

In 1999 the citizens of Tucson voted on a proposal to revisit downtown revitalization in the master planning project called RIO NUEVO. They understood, that public institutions and practices whose role was once to coordinate the needs of the population, are the only able institution to develop the master plan of mixed use clusters of commercial, retail, civic, cultural, educational, housing and parking functions that will provide 24 hour activity in downtown Tucson. Institutions, they are now commonly demonized as agents of external “regulations”. Not everything can be seen under the viewpoint on real, but cold efficiencies.

The School of Architecture at the University of Arizona has been engaged with the City of Tucson to develop many of the RIO NUEVO master planning concepts into more detail. In fall 2001 this studio has been assigned to address issues of housing in downtown Tucson as an integral component of the revitalization efforts by bringing people back to downtown.

It seems, that this successful model for how municipal entities can be partner with academic institutions to enhance each other’s goals will be an important instruments to preserve the legacy of today’s generations of the citizens of Tucson.



Picture 1: Downtown Tucson Map



Picture 2: Tucson Skyline

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Jacobs Jane: The death and life of great American cities, New York, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1989  
 Koolhaas Rem, Mutations, Barcelona 2000