Rancho Cucamonga, California: The Forgotten Past

By: Anne Dodge
In 1986, the city of Rancho Cucamonga, in San Bernardino County, CA, ratified the Foothill Boulevard Specific Plan – an economic development and transportation plan that would bring order to the chaos of strip mall development that threatened to clog the young suburb’s main artery. Foothill Boulevard had once been the last rural stretch of Route 66 for travelers on their way to Los Angeles. But by the time the city began planning for this corridor in 1986, Foothill Boulevard had lost most traces of its agricultural heritage and had been developed in patches with strip centers to serve the area’s growing population. This development had happened without much consistency, regulation, or thought to traffic management; old Route 66 had no median strip or turn lanes, and developers were placing strip-center entrances and exits at such frequent intervals along the road that traffic was hurting local businesses. City officials also worried that commercial development was outpacing residential development and that the city had failed to regulate development appropriately. Nancy Fong, a 20-year veteran of Rancho Cucamonga’s Planning Department, remembers the impetus for the 1986 plan: “We were concerned that there was a mismatch of development, that [projects] were not coordinated and not integrated, and that they did not represent the image of Rancho Cucamonga, which is a city with a plan, with a vision.”

The 1986 Foothill Boulevard Specific Plan addressed these economic development concerns as well as the city’s concerns with the aesthetic and functional aspects of new commercial development along the road. Through design guidelines, the plan shaped the construction of medians and strip-center entrances so that shoppers would continue to flock to Foothill as the city’s primary commercial corridor. Between 1986 and 2000, Rancho Cucamonga implemented this plan in increments as the suburb continued to grow. Bob Klekner, the lead consultant for the city’s 2002 Visual Improvement Plan, recalls that the widening of Foothill Boulevard led to the loss of many of the city’s historic homes, most of which were Craftsman-style bungalows that had been converted to commercial or office use. Although most of these buildings had been demolished, in the late 1990s the city began to realize that Foothill Boulevard’s Route 66 history represented an underutilized economic development tool. By then, the road had been widened to its current size (two lanes heading each direction, with a median and turn lane in the middle), and city government’s concerns about auto congestion were being eclipsed by the desire to attract new businesses and improve the city’s tax base.

Nancy Fong along with other Rancho Cucamonga city employees began discussing the possibility of using Route 66 as a “branding” tool for Rancho Cucamonga. Nancy recalls that the annual “Route 66 Rendezvous,” a vintage car rally in nearby San Bernardino, prompted the initial proposal for renaming Foothill Boulevard “Route 66 Boulevard,” since that neighboring city had a history of successfully associating itself with the Rally and other profitable Route 66 events. “So we said, well why not us?” she remembers. “Why can’t we capture that Route 66 theme? We may not have the same type of activity as San Bernardino, but we can have something different, something that is representative of Rancho Cucamonga.” This conviction eventually resulted in the creation of the Foothill Boulevard/Historic Route 66 Visual Improvement Plan, a docu-

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1  Nancy Fong interview, Diamond Bar City Hall, January 18, 2006.
2  Nancy Fong interview.
ment completed for the city of Rancho Cucamonga in 2002 by Urban Design Studio, a division of RBF Consulting.

By January 2006, the Route 66 Visual Improvement Plan was in the midst of implementation; about half of Foothill Boulevard has been streetscaped using the plan’s palette of Route 66-themed iconography. This part of Foothill, on the eastern end of town, is also the most recently developed part of the road; a new, open-air, pedestrian-oriented mall, the “Victoria Gardens Lifestyle Center”, was completed here at the intersection of Foothill and Interstate 15 in 2004. Because this is the first part of Foothill to experience large-scale redevelopment since the adoption of the Visual Improvement Plan, it is also the first section to see a full-scale implementation of the plan’s design guidelines (financed by a mandatory cash outlay from the mall developer). But in an interesting confluence of marketing and design trends, the look of the new mall is fairly consistent with the iconographic, nostalgic feel of the city-mandated streetscaping. “Streetwalls” within Victoria Gardens are decorated with faux painted advertising murals, and old neon signs for non-existent shoe repair and malt shops have been salvaged and mounted along corridor walls to create the feel of a 1950’s main street, complete with streetlamps, benches, and even street signs for the pedestrian corridors (see picture). So, for the developer of Victoria Gardens and the city of Rancho Cucamonga, the required Route-66 streetscaping along Foothill presented an opportunity to reinforce the project’s design and marketing theme, and the developer implemented the Foothill streetscaping to the fullest extent possible. As a result, citizens of Rancho Cucamonga and the rest of the Inland Empire approaching Victoria Gardens by car from Foothill Boulevard can now experience an integrated simulacrum of American urbanism in both the private and the public realm.
Unlike other Route 66 towns that are now proudly claiming this heritage, Rancho Cucamonga has very few structures and signs, and little original roadbed left from the heyday of Route 66. The area was mostly undeveloped until the 1960s, but like the rest of southern California, it has a unique agricultural heritage that has almost completely disappeared over the last few decades. It is this history that Michael Taylor, the coordinator of the National Park Service’s Route 66 Corridor Program, would like to see celebrated. During the dustbowl years of the 1920s and 30s, when Route 66 was first recognized as a trans-American highway, “Okies” and other impoverished westerners dreamed of California as a promised land where they could secure a regular job in the citrus groves and earn a steady income in a beautiful, temperate, and affordable community. This was a fiction for most poor farmers, who were turned away at the California border after what was often months of arduous travel; this story is memorialized in *The Grapes of Wrath*, which chronicles one family’s experience along Route 66 during this era in American history.

The area’s agricultural history began when California was still under Mexican occupation. In the 1830s, 13,000 acres of the land that is now Rancho Cucamonga was owned by one man, Tubercio Tapio, who ran a successful vineyard and winery in the area. Remnants of this winery are part of the present-day Thomas Winery building, an adaptive-reuse property that serves as a shopping center and is listed on the California Historical Landmarks list. Tapio’s vineyard land was eventually sold to John Rains and his wife and renamed Rancho Cucamonga, after the Cucamongan Native Americans who originally settled the area. Throughout the 19th century, Rancho Cucamonga was colonized by a variety of populations, including the Americans, who invaded California in 1846 and declared it a state in 1850. Like the settlers before them, the colonists who arrived after statehood struggled with the challenge of irrigating the arid chaparral land, but agriculture remained the area’s primary industry until late in the 20th century. Until the automobile came to prominence, settlers, adventurers, and prospectors found their way to Rancho and the rest of the “Inland Empire” via a slew of famous railroad lines and trails including the Santa Fe Trail, the Camino Real, the Butterfield Stagecoach route, The Union Pacific Railroad, and the Pacific Electric Railway. The first of these, the Santa Fe Trail, was later paved to become the city’s Route 66 alignment.

Unlike Albuquerque and many other Route 66 cities, Rancho Cucamonga remained a small, agricultural town until the 1960s when suburban growth from the Los Angeles Metro Area began to spill over into San Bernardino County, which lies 40 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. Since the 1970s, Rancho has experienced steady population growth as a residential community on the former site of the area’s first successful vineyard. But as late as 1980, Rancho was known among Route 66 travelers mainly as a stretch of agricultural road connecting San Bernardino to Los Angeles. “It was a real country place when I first started; that three-bay gas station was the only thing in town,” recalls Quinta Scott of her first photographic trip to Rancho Cucamonga in 1979. The

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city of Rancho Cucamonga was not incorporated until 1977, at which time the population was 44,600. At that time, San Bernardino County’s total population was only 746,200, 41% of whom lived in unincorporated areas. Today, the county population is nearly 2 million, 15% of whom live in unincorporated areas; 137,000, or about 6%, live in the city of Rancho Cucamonga. As a result of its sudden suburban growth and the recentness of its agricultural past, Rancho has far fewer artifacts from the Route 66 heyday than other cities that have chosen to reclaim and feature this heritage.

The Visual Improvement Plan

Nancy Fong (and the City of Rancho Cucamonga) recognized that Foothill Boulevard’s Route 66 history was a dormant asset several years after local Mother Road aficionados attempted to put Rancho on the map for Route 66 travelers. In 1991, local roadies founded the “Route 66 Visitors’ Center and Museum” in a storefront along Foothill Boulevard. The Visitors’ Center also sold “Highway 66” neon signs to businesses along Foothill that wanted to advertise their allegiance to the Mother Road and distributed maps of Foothill showing local, Route 66-related businesses. The founding of the visitors’ center reflected a swell of interest in Route 66 in the whole of the Inland Empire. This interest culminated in the “Route 66 Rendezvous,” an annual hot rod gathering first organized by the San Bernardino Convention and Visitor’s Bureau in 1990. Although the Rancho Cucamonga Route 66 Visitors’ Center closed in 1997, San Bernardino’s “Route 66 Rendezvous” continued to grow as an annual celebration, and the City of Rancho Cucamonga took notice. At the same time, Rancho was looking for a way to sharpen the appearance of its main street in the hopes of attracting new businesses. “We wanted to unify the corridor by the streetscape, hardscape, the median islands,” recalls Nancy Fong. “So with that in mind, also with our city redevelopment agency [participating], this was one of the ways to foster economic development...this was just a small part of that economic strategy, looking at Route 66, to brand the city.”

Rancho Cucamonga hired Urban Design Studio (UDS) to present a preliminary proposal for the new streetscaping, which would be implemented partly with city funds and partly through contributions from developers as they redeveloped parcels along Foothill. Bob Klekner, the lead on the UDS Project, was impressed with the city’s wholehearted embrace of its new image; “We’ve worked with other communities along Foothill Boulevard in the San Gabriel Valley, where the Boulevard is the old Route 66 as well, but no “city” [sic] has embraced the historic value quite as much as Rancho did.”

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6 “The Rendezvous” has become Route 66’s most prominent festival; it attracts 500,000 visitors to San Bernardino every September for a weekend-long celebration of “custom and classic vehicles and enough food and automotive vendors to satisfy even the most demanding tastes.” See http://www.route-66.org/about_us.htm.
7 Nancy Fong interview.
8 Bob Klekner, written communication, March 16, 2006.
asked UDS to create a palette of Route 66 icons, as well as an array of street furniture, signage, and wayfinding choices, to present at a public workshop in July of 2000.\footnote{Conversation with Bob Klekner and http://www.ci.rancho-cucamonga.ca.us/govt/plng_whatsnew.htm.}

"We didn't have enough images of classic Route 66 communities or historic icons to put in there, so if you look at it, it's kind of a hodge podge, but we were trying to just get a feel from people about what they liked and didn't like. That was one of the first things we did, so we could just get people involved," recalls Bob Klekner of this first community meeting. UDS presented these design options to Rancho Cucamonga's Chamber of Commerce in September, 2000, and later to the broader public through an online survey on the city's website. The survey presented the viewer with a variety of options for benches, trash receptacles, streetlights, banners, and paving, and asked the viewer to rate the options from 1 to 5. The survey then attempted to gauge the public's interest in Route 66's more eccentric built fabric, in a section of the survey called "Public Amenities"; here, viewers could rate from 1 to 5 images ranging from more traditional public fountains and clocks to life-size plaster dinosaurs, wigwams, and 12-foot high twin arrows jutting out of the desert (a reference to Route 66's iconic "Twin Arrows," two giant arrows along Route 66 outside of Flagstaff in the abandoned town of Twin Arrows, AZ).
Lastly, the survey pitched a series of “ideas” for the thematic interpretation of Route 66, which Rancho Cucamonga could then incorporate throughout its stretch of Foothill Boulevard. Ideas included transforming Foothill into a symbolic version of the Route 66 corridor, in which each new intersection would represent one of the route’s eight states, or interpreting Foothill as an “homage to the automobile age,” highlighted by the burial of eight to ten cars headfirst along the roadside in reference to Route 66’s famous Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, TX. While UDS indicated on the survey that a re-creation of the Cadillac Ranch was improbable, the firm also suggested another idea that was even less likely to be implemented – the installation of neon signs along Foothill marking the boundaries of different districts within Rancho Cucamonga. At the time, new neon signage was against city ordinances, despite the fact that the Route 66 Visitors’ Center and Museum had been charming out neon signs for Foothill businesses throughout the 1990s. “There were ordinances in that city that didn’t allow certain signs, including bright new neon,” remembers Bob Klekner. “And our point was, that’s part of Route 66 – and now they have allowed neon signs, I hope in part because of our plan.”

Urban Design Studio’s final plan forsakes grander thematic interventions for simple streetscaping combined with familiar Route 66 iconography, like the black-and-white “Highway 66” signs mounted on bus kiosks and replicas of 1930s gas pumps grouped in intervals along the sidewalk as barriers to automobile traffic. Both of these interventions integrate thematic designs with functional streetscaping elements; along with benches, trash receptacles, and streetlights, they seem less dramatic than many of the ideas proposed in UDS’s original survey, perhaps because they serve a useful purpose and likely would have found their way onto Foothill Boulevard with or without the presence of Route 66. However, the plan’s most ambitious intervention, and the least functional from a pedestrian point of view, is the proposal of two entry gateways that will span the width of Foothill Boulevard at the eastern and western ends of the city. The plan states that the gateways “should announce not only the entrance into the City, but also acquaint the motorist with the fact that they are on Historic Route 66 and celebrate its heritage.”

The proposed gateway is made of metal and stone, in conservative beige, gray and green.

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10 Route 66/Foothill Boulevard Historic Route 66 Visual Improvement Plan Survey.
colors, but still, the arch is an unmissable intervention that attempts to both define and brand the city. Once built, these gateways will announce that drivers are not only traveling along Route 66, but that they have entered a municipality that has chosen to recognize and invest in this heritage.

Ironically, motorists driving into Rancho Cucamonga are not “entering” Route 66; the Route’s historic path includes all of Foothill Boulevard, a road that runs the width of San Bernardino County. Drivers are only entering a zone in which this history is actively addressed; this is true in each Route 66 city that chooses to highlight its heritage through large-scale interventions like gateways. However, in Rancho Cucamonga heritage is highlighted exclusively through the re-creation of a remembered past, not through preservation or conservation of anything that once characterized this portion of Route 66 during its period of significance. Rancho’s Foothill Boulevard Plan honors nostalgia, not history, and perhaps this is a byproduct of the city’s desire to employ its history as a branding device and economic generator, rather than as a tribute to the region’s past. The plan itself makes this almost explicit in its introduction, in which it describes Foothill Boulevard as “an invaluable piece of Americana known as Route 66”. The plan’s labeling of Route 66 as “Americana” instead of “America” or even “American history” reveals an unbridgeable distance between the town’s conception of this historic road and the reality of the history that happened along it. The value that the plan recognizes is that of a well-known national and international label, not the value inherent in the thoughtful interpretation and exposition of human history. On the other hand, in Rancho Cucamonga, the true history of Route 66 is a difficult one to interpret—a history of agricultural labor and settlement, when migrant workers fled the oppressive poverty of the dustbowl states for the promised land of California.

Although Urban Design Studio’s plan does not engage with this history, the city’s new Foothill Boulevard Mural Program may lead to a more thoughtful interpretation of the area’s Route 66 history. The program encourages local citizens, organizations,
Three finished versions of UDS’s streetscaping plan near Victoria Gardens Center. Source: Author.
and businesses to engage in the city’s streetscaping process by soliciting mural designs and reimbursing up to 50% or $7,500 of the total mural cost. The program’s brochure suggests that mural proposals “reflect the growth and development of the city of Rancho Cucamonga” and forbids the use of either advertising or political sentiments.14 Other than the city’s online survey about streetscaping initiatives, this program is Rancho Cucamonga’s sole attempt at engaging the community in the Route 66 corridor development process. However, given the city’s dearth of historic Route 66 fabric, this is a sensible program that will help broaden the city’s interpretation of the corridor.

The rural landscape of the past could not be further from the landscape of the present, given the city’s current incarnation as the “Inland Empire’s Premier City”15 the home of the region’s most successful, new, open-air “Lifestyle Center”. In this light, it is no wonder that Rancho has chosen to celebrate its good fortune in having a river of “Americana” flowing through its main commercial artery, instead of struggling to make sense of an agricultural history long displaced by suburban development. And it may be true, as roadie and activist Jim Conkle argues, that any attention for Route 66 is good attention; what Nancy Fong sees as a “branding” opportunity can also serve as a reminder of what most San Bernardinians have forgotten, or have never known in the first place – that what is now an ordinary road was once one of America’s most well-traveled and revered cross-country thoroughfares.

Rancho Cucamonga Conclusions

In Rancho Cucamonga, the lack of a critical mass of built fabric led to a top-down Route 66 planning approach that emphasized branding over preservation. This was perhaps the only way that the Route 66 corridor would receive any attention; the city’s agricultural landscape has been long replaced by commercial and residential development, and all that is left of agricultural Route 66 are a few scattered properties and the narratives of the city’s past. However, agriculture and the promise of steady work in California’s groves and orchards played an integral part in Route 66 history. These narratives – The Grapes of Wrath, the songs of Woody Guthrie, and other cultural products – chronicle the hardships of traveling Route 66 during the Great Depression, and Rancho Cucamonga was one of many towns that symbolized freedom from poverty for thousands of Dust Bowl refugees. In the absence of built fabric, this is the history that Rancho Cucamonga should be fighting to preserve. It is a difficult history and a challenging one, but it is rich with meaning and interpretive possibility. Rancho has implemented only one program that opens the door for a wider and more meaningful interpretation of its Route 66 corridor – the mural program along Foothill Boulevard. The program is new and has yet to result in any new murals, but with any luck, this outreach will result in thoughtful and historically relevant interpretations that will deepen the city’s representation of Route 66 to both travelers and citizens.

15 Rancho Cucamonga City Hall website. See http://www.ci.rancho-cucamonga.ca.us/.
Because of the city’s lack of historic Route 66 fabric, programs facilitating public art and interpretive projects, like the mural program, are the best way for Rancho Cucamonga to develop its corridor in a meaningful way, beyond the market-based notion of “branding.” Because Rancho Cucamonga is striving to present itself as a forward-thinking “city with a vision,” the city could take advantage of this interpretive opportunity by supporting Route 66-related public art with a technological edge. For example, I have proposed to several roadies a project for Route 66 that involves the “podcasting” of location-based oral histories. This project integrates narrative with an easily-accessed, web-based library, so that visitors could listen to stories as they drive or walk along portions of Route 66. Similar projects have been proposed for Tulsa and Albuquerque, but for Rancho Cucamonga, a project like this would have even more resonance since the visible signs of its agricultural history have been lost to development. A project like this need not restrict itself to oral history and other forms of audio, since so many of Route 66’s cultural products are visual. When I mentioned this project to Professor Manuel Castells, he suggested creating a hyperlinked corridor, where users could access a thread of images, stories, music, and video with an historic connection to the location. This type of project would lend itself well to Rancho Cucamonga, since so many cultural products address California’s agricultural and Route 66’s role as the highway to this promised land.

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16 Nancy Fong interview.