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CONSTRUCTION AROUND ARIZONA

PROJECTS - PEOPLE - PRACTICES



Image courtesy of Author

CRUISING CENTRAL — THEN & NOW

JASON MORRIS

If you grew up in Phoenix, you're likely familiar with the cultural activity of cruising Central Avenue. For decades before the advent of social media, teen entertainment in the Valley often turned to motoring along Central. It was a way to meet other teenagers and find out where the parties were. It was a place to see and be seen and show off your wheels, even if it required spending the night driving up and down the same road. The iconic Park Central Mall, Phoenix's first shopping mall, was a focal point on the strip given its large parking lot, which offered ample opportunity for hanging out.

Central Avenue's significance goes back to how Phoenix was laid out initially,

when the first city planners designed the north/south access. They wanted both a grand promenade and a central business district. "In my opinion, Central Avenue historically has always been Phoenix's main street," Derek D. Horn, local historian, says. "It was considered the central spine of the city. Everything radiated off of Central. It

was where city growth started and originally, it was a location that attracted money and power in Phoenix for a long time."

One of the first transitions for Central was when the city council in the 1950s decided to allow skyscrapers outside the downtown core. This decision allowed for the slow, steady construction of high-rise



Image courtesy of Arizona Contractor & Community

Top: Artist's rendering of the redeveloped Park Central Mall.

Right: Park Central Mall under construction, 1956.



buildings north on Central, stretching the business district for miles.

Many thought this decision detracted from downtown's ability to remain viable. It would take decades of stops and starts before the central business district realized the type of volume to create the downtown we see thriving today. For many years, the focus was on mid-town as the center of commerce. Now, it appears, we are finally seeing both downtown and midtown come in to their own with separate character, tenants, amenities, and attractions.

Central Avenue's Renaissance

My firm, Withey Morris, has had more than 20 projects along Central over the last several years. Most recently, we have been fortunate to work on both the redevelopment of Park Central Mall as well as the creation of The Central Park adjacent to Steele Indian School Park.

The Central Park is an iconic and massive \$1 billion project comprised of a mixed-use development that pays homage to Steele Indian School Park's history and

culture and, will ultimately be a prominent gateway to uptown Phoenix. The planned development will feature six high-rise towers that include apartments, condominiums, office space, a retirement community and retail space.

Park Central Mall is transforming into a work/live/play and arts destination that includes Creighton University, a nine-story apartment project and a 10-story parking garage that will hold 2,001 vehicles. Even the recreated/updated iconic Park Central entry sign is installed and operating, serving as a beacon for the revitalization of the long-neglected site.


With the advent of light rail, we're seeing billions of dollars of redevelopment along Central, rising home prices and a much more pronounced developable area – from the warehouse district all the way to Camelback Road. Not only has a business address at Central Avenue become desirable, but it's turning into a desirable residential address. It has all the components you need for prolonged success – great



educational institutions, healthcare, and transportation.

Balancing Old and New

Redevelopment of Central is about balance between old and new. An equal amount of planning and effort goes into preserving older structures and points of pride, such as museums, as there is in creating new focal points. Instead of stand-alone uses such as retail, office or housing, we are now seeing the rise of "Mixed-Use" projects which allows the public to live, work, and play in the same well-designed block. Today, we are truly seeing the best of the old and new.

If local residents of yesteryear cruised Central today, I think there would be general amazement about its progress, and at the same time, there'd likely be enough familiarity. Hopefully, they'd think it was done well and it was done right. It kept the best of what was there and continues to preserve some amazing structures while at the same time permitting a whole new transportation network and amazing redevelopment opportunities. Central Avenue really is a good example of how Phoenix develops best. 

Jason Morris is a founding partner of Withey Morris PLC. Experienced and effective, his dynamic presentations at public hearings on behalf of his clients prove that an attorney can be both personable and tenacious. Throughout his career, he's practiced exclusively in land use, government relations, zoning, and administrative law.



Top left: Rush-hour traffic facing south along Central Ave., late 1960s.
Top right: Park Central Mall neon marquee along Central Ave., 1957.
Left: Artist's rendering of the redeveloped Park Central Mall.