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ON THE WEB



Darrell Miho for The New York Times

The sign for Roy's Motel and Cafe in Amboy, Calif., along the old Route 66, as seen through a hole in the cafe window.

## New Kicks on Route 66 for Commercial Builders

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN  
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ALONG Route 66, which connected Chicago to Los Angeles from 1926 to 1985, roadside motels and their signature neon signs have been celebrated in books, songs and movies, as motoring west became an expression of American independence and freedom.

Since Route 66 was decommissioned as a federal highway, however, many motels have been lost to the wrecking ball, while others have stood vacant, ready to be revitalized by a movement to create a heritage corridor along the historical highway.

Route 66 aficionados hope that the restoration of one of the most famous stops for travelers along the highway, Roy's Motel and Cafe in Amboy, Calif., will anchor a revival of motel culture and Route 66 tourism. Roy's, about three hours east of Los Angeles, was bought by a San Bernardino restaurateur, Albert Okura, who acquired not just the motel and cafe but also the entire town. He promised the previous owner, Bessie Burris, that he would preserve and restore the town, which was in decline for decades and shut down completely in 2005.

As a collector of Route 66 memorabilia, Mr. Okura jumped at the chance to buy Amboy for \$425,000 in 2005, betting that revived interest in Route 66 will make Amboy commercially viable again — and he may be onto something. The World Monuments Fund, a New York-based organization devoted to saving architecture and cultural sites around the world, recently put Route 66 on its 2008 list of most endangered sites.

“There is a whole revival happening around Route 66,” said Mr. Okura, who owns the Juan Pollo restaurant chain. “I’m the baby boomer generation, and we want to be young and live in the past. But you need somewhere to go, so they follow Route 66. But progress is disjointed. The more I looked into Amboy, the more I realized, there’s no other place like this.”

In addition to a gasoline station, post office, garage, church, cemetery, four houses and an airport runway, Amboy is most known for its atomic-age sign for Roy’s. The original lodging in Amboy consisted of six bungalows built in the 1920s. A single-story motel with 20 units and a lobby were added in the 1950s, when Route 66 tourism was at its peak.

Despite slow progress in getting things back up and running, word has spread throughout the Route 66 subculture. And before Mr. Okura has even been able to make the gas station functional, tourists are arriving to monitor Amboy’s progress.

“Fifty tourists from London had their cars shipped to America to drive Route 66,” said Joanne Fuentes, who is helping to oversee the refurbishment for Mr. Okura. “It was an awesome sight. They parked right underneath the Roy’s sign. We just had a group of about 20 people from Germany that had their motorcycles shipped over, so they can ride along the route. So there’s a lot of people around the world that are waiting for this to happen.”

Mr. Okura expects to open the gas station soon, followed by the motel and cafe. He has hired a preservation architect, Taylor Loudon, who is based in Culver City, Calif., to guide the restoration, particularly of the bungalows, which have been picked clean by vandals over the years. “It’s a classic ghost town that isn’t quite dead yet,” Mr. Loudon said. “The context is, you see these buildings for miles because there’s nothing else around. In the background is this barren lunarlike landscape. It’s significant that the place still exists at all.”

The same might be said for many motels along Route 66 that have gone out of business and crumbled since Interstate 40 was built in the 1970s, bypassing most cities along the southwestern portion of the route. Independent groups including the New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance, run by Gary Wolff, a preservationist from Santa Fe, have sprung up to raise awareness of the motels’ historical significance.

According to Mr. Wolff, Albuquerque once had 100 motels, but that number is down to 25. He estimates that there were more than 300 motels along Route 66 in New Mexico, but that only 60 or so are left.



Rick Seibelli Jr. for The New York Times

In Albuquerque, officials blocked plans to tear down another Route 66 motel, the El Vado Motor Court.

“A lot of these places are not kept up or are abandoned and become a nuisance,” Mr. Wolff said. “We’re encouraging communities to consider tax credits and grants to restore motels and wrap the motels into heritage tours.”

Many of the motels are not remarkable architecturally. But three significant ones in Albuquerque that were listed on the National Register of Historic Places have been torn down.

But the city has drawn the line with the El Vado Motor Court, a Pueblo-style building that functioned as a motel until two years ago, when it was bought by a developer who intended to tear it down and build condominiums. The city blocked those plans in February.

“If we can’t come to a resolution with the developer, we’ll condemn it and take it,” said Martin J. Chavez, the mayor of Albuquerque, who would like to see the El Vado and others like it turned into boutique motels catering to Route 66 tourists. “Route 66 is very much a state of mind,” he said. “It’s part of who we are. It would be like New York without the Statue of Liberty.”

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has advocated saving the El Vado, which was built in 1937. “The El Vado is special,” said Daniel Carey, director of the group’s Southwest office. “It’s completely intact — the rooms and office, the signage, traffic-

flow pattern. And it's in a prominent location, in the bend of Route 66. It definitely could survive as a motel.”

Another group that has taken an interest in preserving and reviving roadside motels along Route 66 is the Society for Commercial Archeology, a national organization devoted to preserving the 20th-century commercial landscape. “You need a combination of location and an owner who is really jazzed about putting money into it,” said Douglas C. Towne, a board member and a Route 66 enthusiast. Mr. Towne said that fewer people these days traveled with a sense of adventure and spontaneity, and that this change had led to a decline in the motel culture. But, he said, “there's a small but growing segment of travelers that appreciates this architecture.”

Credit for some of this revival can be attributed to the National Parks Service, which has run the Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program, created by Congress in 1999 to help property owners, nonprofit organizations and cities preserve the heritage of Route 66.

“Motels are going through an awkward period,” said Kaisa Barthuli, deputy program manager of the Route 66 program, which is based in Santa Fe. “They're becoming significant, but people don't fully see them as historic yet. We see around the country there is more interest to travelers who want that vintage motel experience. But we have to make sure they don't get torn down in the meantime. So we're trying to raise awareness of motels in our transportation history and our identity as adventure seekers.”

Ms. Barthuli takes comfort in a handful of motels that have not only survived but have also thrived as tourist attractions, such as the Blue Swallow in Tucumcari, N.M.; the Munger Moss in Lebanon, Mo.; and Wigwam motels in Arizona and California with their individual teepee-style rooms. She also points to Flagstaff, Ariz., as a city that is being proactive by offering tax credits and other financial incentives to help motel owners improve the buildings' facades and restore neon signs.

“It's a matter of timing and history,” she said. “It's just percolating up now.”