



Historic District of the Mind

We'll preserve our past—just as soon as we start caring about it **BY GREG BLAKE MILLER**

City leaders spent their winter discussing whether Downtown's John S. Park neighborhood should be designated our first historic district. This would allow Las Vegas to join such towns as New York, Boston and Yuma, Arizona, as places that officially recognize that they have histories.

If you're keeping score at home, that would give us one historic district for 100 years of history. If this is the rate at which we preserve our past, there won't be much left to preserve for the big bicentennial. And it's a hopeful preservationist indeed who would predict the rate will get much better.

The problem is not one of government fecklessness, but of our own almost intense apathy toward the city's past. All around the country, neighborhoods have been simultaneously preserved and reborn, not through government pronouncements but through the recognition by private citizens that there's something worthwhile to save.

Las Vegas is not old enough, not "historical" enough, for us to expect to sustain a sense of our past through a New York-style Byzantine tangle of preservation regulations. In other words, we'll have to achieve at least some of the goals of protection simply by giving a damn.

Historic preservation will come of age in Las Vegas only when residents begin to feel a personal connection to the city's history. That personal, emo-

tional connection—the nostalgia—not only will aid in future grassroots efforts to create historical districts, but more importantly will foster a climate in which individuals and communities work of their own accord to make sure the character of their neighborhoods is maintained. Collective nostalgia will be particularly helpful as residents become more determined to confront city and county governing bodies and private developers to slow the ad-hoc granting of zoning changes that has left so many urban and ranch neighborhoods surrounded by strip malls, strip clubs and cookie-cutter housing developments.

This is not to say the Valley's process of gradual organic change should stop; on the contrary, as raw land for development at the city's margins fills up, the Valley will need to grow through in-fill redevelopment. Battered blocks of the old will be brought down to create space for something new and better. But when there is something worthwhile to preserve—a fondly remembered place with a fondly envisioned future—an engaged public will speak up.

The Valley's extraordinary population growth in the past 20 years has brought hundreds of thousands of new residents with no nostalgic connections to their new communities. But in that period, children have grown up and played in front of houses and eaten at restaurants and ridden bikes past ranch homes behind shady stands of cottonwood, and surely they've grown attached to some of it. And the things kids have a fondness for today will, in 20 years, be part of their personal—and therefore our civic—history: Childhood brings attachments to obscure everyday places, places that patently don't *matter*, and yet, in our individual life stories, they do.

That's what makes the John S. Park neighborhood so compelling. It's not the Sands hotel. It's not Bugsy's bungalow. It's a place where people lived and loved and learned and built a way of life. There are hundreds more places like this in our city, born in different eras. There are more being born even today. And they shouldn't need the name "Historic District" for us to recognize their value. **III**