

# Cultural Preservation in the Era of Cultural Globalization

## A Case Study: Redeveloping the B. Ruppe Drugstore

In a slowly reviving commercial district, are there ways to reawaken empty storefronts — in this case a former herbalist's shop in one of Albuquerque's oldest neighborhoods — without simply leasing it to yet another Walgreen's. This is the challenge we face as we redevelop the [B. Ruppe Drugstore](#), a place with a long and fascinating history briefly documented in my previous [Shelterforce article](#). When I wrote the piece six months ago we had recently lost our tenant and were considering a non-traditional approach to redeveloping and leasing the building. The following shares the work we've done since then, and our focus on cultural preservation as we have re-opened the space for a period of free community use.

### Cultural Preservation, a Critical Component of Sustainable Development



*B Ruppe Drugstore Photo Credit: Homewise*

Over the last 50 years we've gotten much better at preserving historic buildings but don't think as much about preserving the *intangible heritage* of communities—things like oral traditions, performing arts, and rituals.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, we acknowledge that a sustainable future must include green design, but we don't talk about how honoring the history and cultural relevance of certain places is also critical for sustaining communities. It's time for developers and preservationists to do more than preserve buildings; we must also work to maintain the cultural identity of the places we are redeveloping.

Sustainable development, by one definition, is development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the abilities of future generations to meet their own needs.<sup>2</sup>

*"A broader concept of sustainable development includes not only environmental, but also economic, social and cultural aspects. It is generally recognized that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be a century of globalization. Notwithstanding all the benefits of economic globalization, it causes the substantive threat of cultural globalization. Therefore, it is fundamental for every community to identify and maintain its own characteristic features that reflect diversity and identity of the place."<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.iisd.org/topic/sustainable-development>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228466259\\_Cultural\\_Heritage\\_in\\_the\\_Context\\_of\\_Sustainable\\_Development](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228466259_Cultural_Heritage_in_the_Context_of_Sustainable_Development)

New Mexico is a poor state rich in “identity of place”. The cultural globalization associated with gentrification has come late to Albuquerque (the state’s largest city) but one can sense its impending arrival as orange scooters and microbreweries sprout up downtown. Barelas, a village formed in the 1600’s at the point where travelers on the Camino Real crossed the Rio Grande, is now a small neighborhood absorbed into the center of Albuquerque’s sprawling 197 square mile footprint. Adjacent to the shuttered railyards—a redevelopment priority for the current mayor—Barelas is in the crosshairs of a changing landscape.



*E Scooters in Downtown Albuquerque Photo Credit: KRQE*

In many ways, this is good news. For decades Barelas lost residents due to economic downturn and increasing safety concerns. In a 2015 UNM study, over 25% of buildings were determined to be vacant.<sup>4</sup> Vacancy rates exacerbated depressed home values and inhibited the success of local businesses. (As described in this Lincoln Land Institute report long-term vacancy contributes not only to economic decline but negatively affects quality of life and sense of well-being.)<sup>5</sup> On Fourth Street, the neighborhood’s once-thriving business corridor, many local businesses—such as the B. Ruppe Drugstore—closed up shop. The Ruppe began in 1883 and by the time it closed in 2011 had been transformed from a typical pharmacy into a *yerberia* (or medicinal herbal store) by co-owner Maclovía Zamora.

Maclovía’s portrait adorns the north side of the Ruppe building. [Painted in 2014 by artist Nanibah Chacon](#) to honor Maclovía and her contributions, the mural symbolizes the cultural significance of the business. [Homewise](#) (the CDFI and non-profit developer that I work for) purchased the building in 2017 to ensure that this cultural asset’s long and interesting history did not get erased by insensitive redevelopment. What we didn’t know was exactly how we would approach redeveloping it.



*Mural of Maclovía Zamora Photo Credit: Homewise*

### Ruppe Drugstore: A Case Study in Cultural Preservation

<sup>4</sup> <https://bber.unm.edu/media/files/Barelas%20MainStreet%20Community%20Economic%20Assessment%20.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.lincolnlust.edu/sites/default/files/pubfiles/empty-house-next-door-full.pdf>



*Medicinal Herbs Photo Credit: Homewise*

The first time I walked into the building was the summer of 2018, and it looked as though it had closed yesterday. There were herbs hung to dry on the wall in the back room, tinctures Maclovia had made to treat various ailments on the shelves behind the pharmacy counter, and a plethora of oils, candles and Catholic religious objects throughout. As I dug into the building's contents, the cultural and historical significance of what had been left behind became clearer. Nearly 40 years of correspondence, handwritten recipes for medicinal herbal tinctures and index cards of prayers

and meditations—the records of Maclovia Zamora's evolution into a medicinal herbalist and healer—at risk of being thrown out.



*Herbal Tinctures made by Maclovia  
Photo Credit: Homewise*

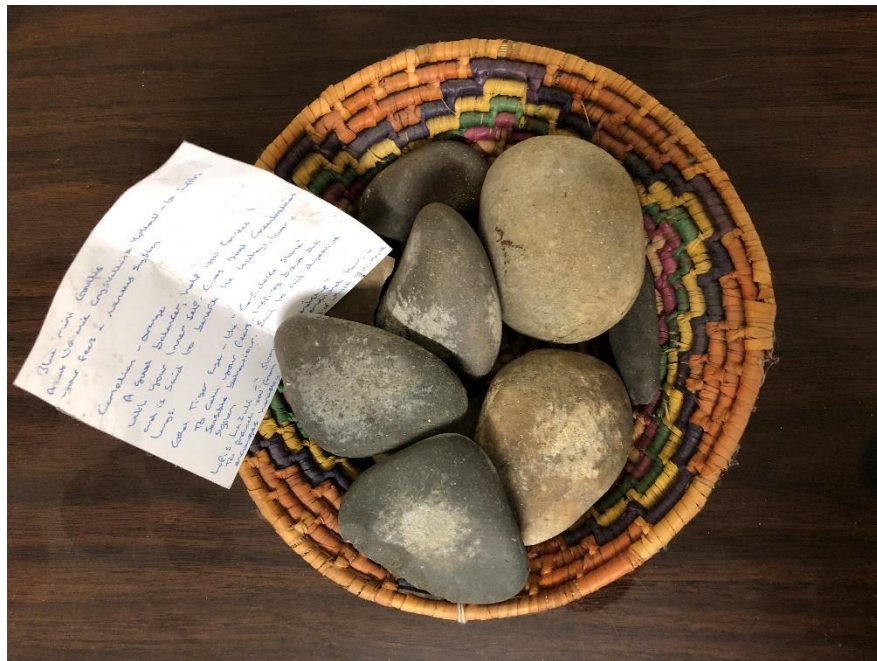


*Customers at Ruppe Drugstore shopping for Medicinal Herbs  
Photo Credit: Albuquerque Journal*

By the time it closed, Ruppe had become a significant informal cultural institution related to the field of curanderismo and herbalism. Maclovia had established relationships with healers in northern New Mexico and in Mexico, and she would often host a curandera from Mexico City to provide treatments and education. The tenuous connection to traditional and indigenous medicine is stronger in New Mexico than many other parts of the country, but the transfer of knowledge remains fragile. The wealth of information held within Ruppe's walls at the time of Maclovia's passing represented an important part of the renewal of this knowledge.



What to do with this treasure trove of knowledge and history? It was hard to find precedents to our approach to redevelopment. The field of development does not look back much, except in historic preservation circles which often fetishize the aesthetic of old places rather than work to maintain cultural identity in redevelopment. I knew that Maclovia had worked very hard to rediscover the knowledge she gained about medicinal herbs and other healing practices. In academic language, this lifetime of accumulated information is called *knowledge capital*, and



it is understood to be a critical resource for the well-being of future generations dependent on what we leave behind.<sup>6</sup>

*Objects used in Traditional Healing Ceremonies at the Ruppe Drugstore*  
Photo Credit: Homewise

One of the many assets located in Barelas is the [National Hispanic Cultural Center](#) (NHCC), an institution dedicated to the preservation, promotion, and advancement of Hispanic culture, arts, and humanities. As the deadline to clear out the building approached I reached out to a very talented, thoughtful staff member at the NHCC, Valerie Martinez. I brought Valerie to the building to see what remained. We determined that the NHCC could establish a digital archive of Maclovia's life and work from the many photos, letters, recipes, and other items left inside, thus protecting and preserving the knowledge capital for future generations.

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/2013/SD\\_framework\\_and\\_indicators\\_final.pdf](https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/2013/SD_framework_and_indicators_final.pdf)



*Photos on an Altar Made by Artists for the ALTAR Art Exhibition for Day of the Dead Photo Credit: Homewise*

Using cultural preservation as a sustainable development strategy can increase social cohesion in the midst of changing neighborhoods and communities. When I first began working at Homewise, I met with community leaders throughout the neighborhood, often receiving an icy reception initially. People were understandably wary to trust a developer and were fearful that the change coming to Ruppe would eradicate their history. Cristina Rogers, Barelas resident and Mainstreet Director, described it this way: “Lots of development and redevelopment has

happened in Barelas that hasn’t benefited the neighborhood. When Homewise first moved into the area and started buying buildings to renovate people were asking, ‘Is this going to be the Homewise neighborhood?’ There was definitely a fear of a large organization moving in combined with people not understanding what a community development finance institution (CDFI) is and how that’s different from a regular bank.”

After a few failed attempts at finding a permanent tenant for the building, we instead decided to do a simple renovation and open the space up for a period of free community use. We felt this would be an important signaler to the neighborhood that they were welcome in this new version of the Ruppe and that, while the building was changing, its legacy as an informal community institution lived on.

The response to our community space activation period has been overwhelming. In the first month of community use, we’ve hosted events 27 out of 31 days. These have included Ballet Folklorico classes taught by Cesar—a neighbor from Mexico passionate about sharing his favorite art form, a pop up art opening called ALTAR that featured Dia de los Muertos altars made by local artists, yoga classes, a poetry night dedicated to increasing mental health through self-expression, a weekly teen arts project led by an arts-based community engagement organizational called Artful Life, a live podcast recording, a jewelry making workshop, a conference session for creative entrepreneurs, a writing workshop and a community photo exhibit made up of family photos sourced from the neighborhood.



*Day of the Dead Altar created for an art event called ALTAR Photo Credit: Jessica*



*Ballet Folklórico Classes that take place weekly at the Ruppe Drugstore Photo Credit: Homewise*

### Preserving Cultural Traditions that Foster Social Cohesion

Culture is never static. The etymology of the word is the Latin *cultura*, meaning to grow, to cultivate. To be able to “maintain the characteristic features that reflect diversity and identity of a place” development must not only preserve cultural history but also support culture-bearers, artists, and every day residents to carry on their traditions. “If Ruppe, such a beloved place in the community, had sat empty or become a random business with no connection to the past, I think it really would have depressed people,” says Cristina Rogers. “They would have felt like, ‘It’s over. We will get gentrified.’ Instead it’s a community space. People are thinking about using it, thinking about different

ways to use it—an important first step to help people become more entrepreneurial. Here is a space for you to use, how will you use it?”

It is important to acknowledge that not all culture should be memorialized. Ideas of racial supremacy and memorials to the history of colonization, for example, are cultural traditions. As Louis Menand eloquently articulated [in this great New Yorker article](#) recently, “We think that to call something a part of a group’s culture is to excuse it from judgement.” We advocate cultural preservation as a sustainable development strategy not to place cultural traditions beyond the realm of critique. Rather, we believe that developers play a role either furthering a cultural eradication or helping to cultivate and preserve traditions. We think any cultural activity that builds social cohesion and reminds us where we came from is a positive counter to the changes coming in this century of cultural globalization.