"Where Eternal Mountains Kneel at Sunset’s Gate"

Kevin S. Blake

For centuries mountains have been among the most symbolic landscapes in the American Southwest, imbued with a montage of meanings to all of the peoples of the region. American Indians have viewed high places as enchanted or sacred, integral to their spiritual beliefs. Spaniards, Mexicans, and Anglo have seen mountains as transportation barriers or prospects of mineral wealth, while at the same time also celebrating the sublime and beautiful nature of rugged peaks.

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Several Southwestern cities have gained distinct identities in part through a close association with neighboring peaks; Albuquerque’s Sandia Crest and Tucson’s Mount Lemmon come to mind as familiar examples. Phoenix, easily the largest city in the Southwest and the place labeled by Peirce Lewis as “perhaps America’s Most Super-American City,” is less rooted in popular imagery as a mountain town. Even so, the lower and drier ranges of central Arizona inspired the

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CALL FOR PACIFICA SUBMISSIONS

The Editor
In addition to our regular announcements and reports, Pacifica depends on submissions from the APCG membership. I intend to publish at least one essay and one map in each Fall and Spring issue. If you would like to see your essay in these pages, please submit your manuscript of no more than 1500 words for consideration before the deadline for each issue (March 1 for Spring and October 1 for Fall). If you have an original map that you would like to see published in the newsletter please send it along for consideration (same deadlines apply).

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line of lyrics in Arizona State University’s alma mater that serves as the title for this essay.

The meanings associated with urban symbolic landscapes are particularly intriguing because, as Donald Meinig observed in his enduring monograph on the Southwest, cities are “the points of injection and centers for diffusion of the people, objects, and ideas” of a culture. Increasingly, the urbanite’s vision of what a landscape should look like controls the human impacts on mountains. A look at the contribution of mountains to the identity of cities and how these rocky spaces become meaningful places reveals three archetypes that form the bedrock of mountain symbolism in metropolitan Phoenix. These representations are mountains as wilderness, playground, and home.

Set in the nearly flat basin of the Salt River at an elevation of about 1,100 feet, Phoenix is punctuated with buttes and ringed with peaks that rise from a few hundred to over 6,000 feet above the valley floor. Many of the local ranges are northwest-southeast trending fault-block mountains with scant arborescent Sonoran Desert vegetation on their steep slopes. Dry air, long-range visibility, and bold back-lighting can play tricks with the appearance of these mountains. With just a bit of imagination, the serrated ridges seem to have been stamped out with a cardboard cookie cutter and propped up on the horizon. Nevertheless, the beckoning vista of what appears to be wide-open country, but that is actually a heavily contested landscape, is a key amenity in attracting the thousands of new residents, tourists, and winter visitors that flock annually to the Valley of the Sun.

SACRED AND PRESERVED WILDERNESS

Mountains have always been closely associated with wilderness, even as the connotation of wild places has evolved from one of folklore, fear and mystery to one of designated protected areas. Like a flotilla buffering nature from urban growth run amok, the boundaries of two dozen

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wilderness area on public lands lie within seventy-five miles of downtown Phoenix. Wilderness area names like Superstition, Eagle Tail Mountains, Heisegate, and Hummingbird Springs highlight the mystique that these landscapes present to urbanites. Every one of these wilderness areas is in mountainous terrain, in part due to private ownership of level arable land, but it also is a legacy of the belief that rugged high terrain is the aesthetically-favored landscape that best represents the national and regional character.

Long before mountains were proclaimed as special places worthy of a unique status by our government, American Indians showed their respect of the peaks through their legends. Pima stories relate that the Superstition Wilderness was a place of refuge during a flood sent by the creator to punish those who were evil. Another legend tells of how the nameake of the Four Peaks Wilderness would epitomize the Yaquispat tribe in symbolic battles with the Maricopa people, who would be represented by the jagged Sierra Estrella. The mountains would battle with blowing sand, falling rock, and thunder, and the winning range would foretell the results of human conflicts. The foundation of these American Indian representations of mountains as sacred places is that mountains own the people—quite a contrast to the battles fought today over the ownership and protected status of high terrain.

In the last two decades residents of the City of Phoenix have continuously reaffirmed their perception of mountains as protective wilderness by funding the purchase of a sprawling mountain preserve system. Advocates of the protected ranges say that "mountains are to Phoenix what oceans, lakes, and rivers are to other communities — a natural resource to be preserved and enjoyed by present and future generations." But the efforts to preserve the heights become increasingly difficult with rapid urban sprawl.

The suburb of Scottsdale now laps at the base of the McDowell Mountains, which are mostly privately owned and slated for elite developments. Scottsdale’s dreams of total public ownership of thirty-one acres in the McDowells ended when the $100 million price tag was revealed. To preserve what they call the signature feature of the northeast valley, city leaders have given their support to a land trust that will try to purchase or arrange the donation of the most visible ridges. Preserve supporters formed a key voting bloc by swinging a recent city council election in favor of a candidate who supports earmarking city funds for the trust. Deciding the future of the existing and proposed mountain preserves pits people of mostly the same mid- to upper-class Anglo culture against each other. Within this culture the contrasting land ethics of development versus preserved wilderness are embodied in different groups, resulting in alternative visions of the best use of the heights.

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Square Peak is a centerpiece of the Phoenix Mountains Preserve, and its steep trails are a haven for fitness enthusiasts. (Continued on page 8)
Sunset’s Gate

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Scottsdale is also the scene of a cross-cultural conflict between city officials and the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community over the ownership of Saddleback Mountain. In an ironic departure from traditional cultural values, the Pima-Maricopa community is considering building a gambling center near what they have called a sacred peak; an action spurred by the success of several nearby reservation casinos. Scottsdale, which already permitted the construction of homes near the base of the mountain and a four-lane boulevard across its flank, now wants to preserve the peak as open space, an endeavor that is enabled by wealth and prompted by the rampant development elsewhere in town. Cultural interactions, economic conditions, and changing cultural beliefs all contribute to the ideologies that affect the symbolism of mountains as wilderness.

Resort and Park Playgrounds

In metropolitan Phoenix, the preferred place for a playground is a mountain. All of the county regional parks are located in foothill zones, usually taking on the names of nearby mountains even if none of the peaks are inside the park. Some mountainous areas in unpatrolled parks or on local national forest land are havens for drunken shooting sprees, a use that redefines desert pavement to be a smooth, wind-blown surface of shell casings and broken beer bottles. On weekends, the easily accessible parks of local wilderness areas are reminiscent of a testilot, with cars rather than cows crammed together in a dusty parking lot and people obligingly trailing in lock step toward the scenic viewpoint trough.

Camelback Mountain’s colorful eroded form contributes to its simultaneous designation as a park, preserve, and point of pride.

Some of the mountain preserves and wilderness areas in the Phoenix area are at risk of being transformed by overuse and recreation development into parks with playground characteristics. Within the Phoenix Mountains Preserve System, numerous areas of dense development are designated as parks, including the nearly 17,000 acres of South Mountain that is touted as the world’s largest municipal park. Hordes of joggers on the summit trail of Squaw Peak inspired one observer to call the route “step-aerobics for the sure-footed.” Mountain bike trails, hiking paths, and roads snake across the slopes, water towers are gouged into the flanks, and transmission towers bristle from the summits. These scars are testament to the pragmatic needs for points of high elevation in a flat basin and to the concept that wilderness can be loved to death.

The country club lifestyle of exclusive resorts and golf courses relies heavily on the enhancements of a location nestled around peaks with distinctive shapes, such as Camelback Mountain or Pinnacle Peak, and on names that conjure thoughts of alluring heights, such as Mountain Shadows or Desert Highlands. The Buttes hotel, built into the side of a small butte adjacent to an interstate highway, markets itself as “a mountaintop resort.” One of the design finalists for a proposed major league baseball stadium

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even featured a monstrous glass atrium along the outndale to provide a striking view of Camelback Mountain. The consistent message is that the fun places are in the hills. Playground users come from all walks of life, and even though they obviously value mountains, the perceived benefit lies in the use and development of the peaks for any activity that pleases people.

**IDYLIC MOUNTAIN HOMES**

Mountains symbolize a feeling of home when they are represented as ideal sites for housing. The percentage of metropolitan Phoenix subdivisions names with a height theme has more than tripled during the last twenty years. Developers use mountain imagery to appeal to all economic classes, but this marketing theme is most common and elaborate for upper-class neighborhoods. Elite subdivisions often have ostentatious entranceway monuments that seek to connect the development with nearby peaks.

Some home advertisements use generic ridges to frame the view of the house, communicating that mountains complete the package of a perfect home. In other cases mountains are the dominant theme of an ad, usually in an aesthetic sense with text that refers to mountain views: “in the mountains, in Scottsdale, incomparable,” or “where else can you live in the shadows of majestic mountains,” or “a little elevation can do a lot to improve your view.” The hyperbole reaches greater heights with advertisements that brag “between heaven and Scottsdale lies your home at Desert Mountain,” and “the views will last forever for those who get here first.” Then there is the name of a local enterprise, Mountain View Cemetery, that represents mountains as an eternal home, where the mountains views really will last forever. Clearly, the local peaks are valued by developers and home buyers, but the peaks are symbolized as a commodity to be bought and sold. The underlying ideology is that mountains are worthy because they enhance the value and character of a home and its setting.

**PEAKS OF IDENTITY**

Whether symbolized as wilderness, playground, or home, mountain landscapes are also perceived as distinctive features unique to part or all of the Phoenix area, and as such they are icons of identity. The contribution of mountains to hometown identity is illustrated by the designation of Camelback Mountain, Squaw Peak, and the Papago Buttes as points of pride, and by the frequent naming of freeways for nearby peaks.

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peaks. Furthermore, one-half of the planning
villages features peaks to capture the character
of the district.

The commonplace naming of businesses with
mountain terminology or the use of peak icons in
business signage reflects a belief that customers will associate the high places with high quality and with something desirable or familiar about their hometown. The frequent use of mountain icons on the official signs and seals of local cities and American Indian reservations also communicates an identity that is based partially on steep terrain.

The bonding of people with their local landscape is also indicated by architectural designs that seek to make a connection between the built environment and a local landform, such as the large new utility building with a color that intentionally matches the shade of the nearby Papago Buttes. The new law library on the Arizona State University campus features an unusual landscaping item that the local paper described as "a large mountain of gravel that looks like it needs to be spread out." The design architects named this mound Magic Mountain because it symbolizes the mystique that local peaks hold for the Indians. The architects also say that constructing this steep hill, complete with its large boulders and saguaros, was a purposeful attempt to bring some of the rugged local topography onto the flat campus.

Another way mountains contribute to the character of a community are as familiar landmarks. Hillside letters spelling out "PHOENIX," including the directional arrow, use the Usery Mountains near suburban Mesa as a prop. First placed during the 1920s as a sign directing naive pilots toward Phoenix's airport, these white rocks have become an icon of the area, according to rangers working at the adjacent mountain park. A proposal to remove the rocks a few years ago backfired as the ensuing public outcry resulted in the renovation of the letters. As

James Parsons observed, hillside letters fortify the sense of place and form a durable part of community identity.

In general, the representations of natural landscapes in metropolitan Phoenix follow this pattern: peaks with a distinctive shape or color and those at the leading edge of urban development are the most likely to become contested and symbolic landscapes. While the flat desert is bulldozed into submission without a whimper, the fate of most rolling upland desert and hillside parcels is vigorously debated. Most of Phoenix's high places have some symbolism at the neighborhood level, and some of the more rugged and beautiful mountain crests have multiple meanings for the entire city.

Mountain symbolism thrives for all economic classes, but the power to determine the land use in high places rests primarily with wealthy individuals and the taxation and legislative authority of local governments. In affluent Paradise Valley the desire and power to preserve the scenic quality of Mummy Mountain has risen to the point of debating whether to disguise a thirty-foot summit radio tower as a saguaro, if it is allowed at all. Other local governments have passed ordinances setting design standards to ensure unimpeded mountain views.

I feel that Phoenix's urban culture is on the make for idealized landscapes of rugged topography, grabbing scenic mountain properties before they are snatched up by someone with a different land ethic. Without well-funded and well-organized interventions by civic groups and local governments the fate of many Phoenix summits will be determined by the development ethic, and the dominant representation of mountains will be as a scenic amenity for elite houses and resorts. A promising opposing force to this trend could be the efforts of local communities to develop and define their image. In their efforts to shape the urban identity, they will find a mountain of symbolism imprinted throughout the cultural landscape that represents the local ridges as peaks of pride.

Kevin S. Blake is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Geography at Arizona State University. His lifelong interest in hiking and studying western mountain landscapes has led to a dissertation topic of mountain symbolism in the Southwest.