

**BILL
HART**

THE
PHOENIX
GAZETTE



What the heck is that arch on McDowell?

A colleague remarks:
*Hey — I exit the Squaw Peak
and I'm heading west on McDowell
and all of a sudden I'm driving under this
humongous arch that runs over the whole
street! It kinda looks Chinese, but I'm,
like, perplexed. I ask myself, WHATUP?*

Or words to that effect.

So, as your intrepid urban explorer, I launched an investigation into the stark white arch that rises up out of nowhere in a sleepy section of McDowell Road east of 16th Street.

The moral of my tale? How soon we forget.

How soon we forget a \$47,500 piece of public art erected just four years ago.

How soon we forget the "Miracle Mile," as East McDowell Road was grandly known in the 1950s when it was the first major business district outside downtown.

How soon we forget that the arch is not — repeat *not* — Chinese.

So what is it?

It is an 85-foot steel sculpture running roughly between Lionetti Hair Clipper Service and Yerberia Guadalupana.

It is the "McDowell Gateway," marking McDowell's historic role as gateway to downtown, according to businessman Shelby Austin, member of the East McDowell Civic Association, which planned the arch with the Phoenix Arts Commission.

"If I sound enthusiastic — I am," he said. "McDowell Road is just so full of history! And I'm also a believer in public art. Without (it), we miss the essence of life itself."

The arch is "the creation of a landmark," said Scottsdale sculptor Michelle Stuhl, who designed the span and supervised its installation in 1991.

It's also an attempt at recapturing a bit of a bygone era.

"The community felt that connecting both sides would refer back to the intimate street setting they lost when McDowell was widened," Stuhl said.

And it was an effort to revive the spirits — and fortunes — of the Miracle Mile. At its dedication, the arch was said to "symbolize reliving the miracle."

Today, the symbolism is less cheery.

A closer look reveals that the arch actually connects two of the numerous blank storefronts that eye each other glumly across McDowell.

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The sculpture looms up suddenly, strangely, without an obvious connection to its surroundings. Stark, white, featureless — it almost looks unfinished. Or abandoned.

"This area's been up and down," said Doug Moore of Lionetti's, noting a nearby adult bookstore and adult club.

"It's not the best place to be after sundown."

Asked if the arch had helped the area, Oscar O'Neill of Yerberia Guadalupana shrugged. "To be honest, no."

But it is a landmark; merchants said it's great for giving customers directions. And it's spurred unflagging speculation as to a possible Asian orientation — with its series of vertical slats seen as Chinese writing.

"About 90 percent of the people who come in ask, 'What does that Chinese writing say?'" Moore said.

O'Neill said: "Sometimes we kid people that it says 'yerberia' in Chinese."

Ofelia Martinez, who recently opened a bridal shop nearby, said: "I hear that it's something for the Chinese people, but I don't see many Chinese around here.

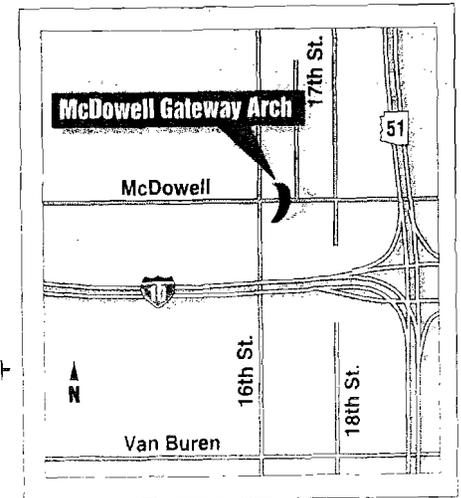
"Mostly, I see Mexicans."

For the record, the cross-pieces is an abstract picket fence, Stuhl said. "It's not meant to be literal, but to be a visual cue that people can see in different ways.

"I like the idea that it has some mystery to it," she said. "People ask, 'What is it?' I say, 'Well, what is it?'"

So there. Uh... now you know.

WHATUP is an occasional service in response to inquiries. Curious about someplace or somebody in the Valley? Bill Hart can be reached at 271-8694; P.O. Box 2245, Phoenix 85002; HartB on America Online; or HartB@aol.com.



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