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Published by: Western Historical Quarterly, Utah State University on behalf of the The Western History Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25443010

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Novel Tourism: Nature, Industry, and Literature on Monterey’s Cannery Row

Connie Y. Chiang

This article examines the evolution of tourism on Monterey’s Cannery Row from the 1950s to the early 1970s. To revitalize this former sardine processing center, city officials, developers, and planners utilized the beauty of the coastline, the deteriorating built environment of the industrial era, and John Steinbeck’s Cannery Row.

John Steinbeck’s 1954 novel, Sweet Thursday, opens with a dismal account of the sardine industry’s precipitous postwar decline in Monterey, California: “When the war came to Monterey and to Cannery Row everybody fought it more or less, in one way or another. . . . The canneries themselves fought the war by getting the limit taken off fish and catching them all. It was done for patriotic reasons, but that didn’t bring the fish back. As with the oysters in Alice, ‘They’d eaten every one.”’1 Once a thriving street lined with over twenty sardine processing plants, Cannery Row was no longer a place swirling with activity. As Monterey resident Ed Larsh recalled, “In 1949, most of the sardines had been netted, and the entire industry was gasping like a fish out of water.”2 The future of Cannery Row appeared altogether bleak.

When it became clear that the fishery was not going to rebound quickly, Monterey city planners and developers turned their attention back to tourism. Monterey had attracted tourists since the late-nineteenth century, when well-heeled visitors flocked to the Hotel Del Monte, one of the grand railroad hotels of the American West. Tourism never disappeared from the city’s shores in subsequent years, but it did become less

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1 John Steinbeck, Sweet Thursday (New York, 1954), 1 and John Steinbeck, Cannery Row (1945; reprint, New York, 1994).


important during the sardine's heyday. The return to tourism, therefore, was not an entirely new development for Monterey, nor was it unusual for a western community on the tail end of a boom-and-bust economy. Many other places once dependent on extractive industries also directed their energies to tourism when natural resources became scarce or investors moved elsewhere.3

Monterey's postwar tourism program both paralleled and diverged from those of other towns whose past fortunes had evaporated. Tourism boosters throughout the region emphasized the natural beauty and recreational opportunities of their locales. They often celebrated their industrial heritage by restoring old buildings and opening historical museums. And Monterey followed many of these patterns. The same spaces where purse seine boats had unloaded sardines became splendid ocean vistas. Owners renovated canneries and warehouses, creating restaurants, t-shirt shops, and art galleries.4 But Monterey's connection to John Steinbeck's novels, especially Cannery Row, also made its promotional efforts distinct. City planners and developers tried to preserve and recreate Cannery Row's industrial ambiance, in large part, as a way to generate nostalgia for his fiction.5 Few western tourist attractions have had a literary figure of Steinbeck's stature so closely tied to its history and its environs.

While Steinbeck's impact on Cannery Row has been detailed in scholarly and popular accounts, discussions of nature's role in the street's transformation have focused largely on the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which opened in 1984 in a former cannery.6 This article analyzes an earlier period, from the 1950s to the early 1970s, well before one could point to the aquarium to explain the ties between nature, industry, and tourism. In the wake of the sardine industry's collapse, Montereys watched their once glorious fish plants fall apart. City officials and developers eyed the stretch of valuable oceanfront property and imagined a way to reconcile industrial decay and natural beauty. They eventually decided that industry, represented by abandoned

3 See, for instance, Hal K. Rothman, Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West (Lawrence, 1998), 1–9, 187–201, 205–29 and Bonnie Christensen, Red Lodge and the Mythic West: Coal Miners to Cowboys (Lawrence, 2002).


6 Martha Norkunas argues that the aquarium "recaptured nature and reasserted its dominance," while John Walton claims that the aquarium "promoted Monterey's growing reputation as a center of environmental protection and education." See Norkunas, Politics of Public Memory, 68 and Walton, Storied Land, 253. See also Tom Mangelsdorf, A History of Steinbeck's Cannery Row (Santa Cruz, CA, 1986), 203–5.
machinery and crumbling canneries, could both punctuate the Monterey seascape and speak to Steinbeck’s novel. In an ironic sense, the deteriorating built environment enhanced Monterey’s nature even as it stood for its over-exploitation. Promotional efforts, then, attempted to reconcile a past impulse to turn sardines into commodities with an enduring desire to sell the beauty of the coastline. This approach illustrated that literary notoriety alone was not the only path toward tourism.

Cannery Row, therefore, blended older forms of western promotion—scenery, nostalgia, and industry—to create a post-industrial collage. By emphasizing the splendor of the coastline and nostalgic connections to Steinbeck, Monterey developers and planners drew on previous tourism ventures, from the national parks to dude ranches and rodeos, that highlighted scenic grandeur and romantic tales of the western past. They also built on earlier efforts to advertise the West’s rich natural resources in order to draw settlers to sparsely populated areas. While postwar Montereyans, unlike nineteenth- and early twentieth-century boosters, no longer had a lucrative natural resource-based economy to publicize, they enveloped the sardine industry’s history and physical remains in nostalgic depictions of a Steinbeck-inspired past and a celebratory narrative of industrial accomplishments. The result was a tourism program that neglected the causes and consequences of the sardine collapse.

In this way, postwar Cannery Row represented a transitional moment in the history of western tourism. While ecological principles were spreading throughout the nation and influencing public policy at this time, they had not yet carried over to the tourist desires of many middle- and upper-class Americans. The focus on industrial remnants and the beauty of the shoreline suggested that utilitarian and aesthetic ideals of nature, not a concern for coastal and marine protection, shaped tourism programs on Cannery Row. Steinbeck’s fiction served as another selling point, but it was not the only attraction that local developers and planners tried to promote. Despite the inherent contradictions of their approach, they believed that nature, industry, and literature could be brought together in a way that would renew Cannery Row and transform it from a desolate harbor to a center of activity once again.

The Southern Pacific Railroad established the roots of Cannery Row tourism. In 1880, the Pacific Improvement Company, the railroad’s construction arm, acquired over seven thousand acres of prime Monterey Peninsula land and began to build the Hotel Del Monte as an outlet for a new branch-line connecting Castroville and Monterey. The hotel featured luxurious amenities, including well-appointed guest rooms, polo fields,

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7 Robert G. Atthearn, The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America (Lawrence, 1986); Earl S. Pomeroy, In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America (1957; reprint, Lincoln, 1990); Rothman’s Devil’s Bargains; Marguerite Shaffer, See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940 (Washington, DC, 2001); David M. Wrobel, Promised Land: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West (Lawrence, 2002).

8 Norkunas, Politics of Public Memory, 50–1, 59. While Norkunas makes similar points, her analysis focuses more on the exclusion of Cannery Row’s working class and ethnic history than on its environmental history.
manicured gardens, and a bathhouse. In selling the hotel, promoters also emphasized the mild climate and picturesque setting, embracing the Carmel River Valley, Monterey Bay, and vast groves of live oaks and Monterey pine. One brochure declared that “there is literally neither winter nor summer,” and guests may “sit indolently inhaling the pure air fresh from the ocean.” The hotel soon became a popular destination among elite easterners and westerners alike and dignitaries, such as President Benjamin Harrison and steel baron Andrew Carnegie, paid visits as well.9

The Hotel Del Monte remained an important Monterey establishment in the early twentieth century, but the sardine industry soon came to dominate the city’s shores. Although San Franciscan H. R. Robbins opened Monterey’s first cannery in 1901, it was Frank E. Booth of the Sacramento River Packers Association who made the canning business profitable. He opened his factory near Fisherman’s Wharf in 1902 and developed new techniques to process salmon and sardines. Other entrepreneurs followed Booth’s lead and built canneries on Ocean View Avenue, the street that became known as Cannery Row. In particular, the outbreak of World War I, which increased demand for canned sardines, prompted a spurt of construction.10

Monterey recovered from a post-World War I slump to develop into one of California’s most successful sardine ports. Although the plants continued to churn out tons of sardines, they enjoyed the greatest profits from reducing sardines and sardine offal into fish oil and meal to supply California’s agricultural markets. The California Fish and Game Commission facilitated the expansion of the reduction industry by issuing liberal permits that allowed canners to reduce increasing amounts of fish. Monterey was able to escape the worst hardships of the Great Depression as a result, but Fish and Game scientists warned that the rapid, unchecked growth of California’s sardine industry might lead to the fishery’s collapse.11

Owners of hotels and visitor-related establishments balked at the industrialization of the waterfront during the interwar years, but tourism also began to expand beyond


10 Mangelsdorf, Steinbeck’s Cannery Row, 7–9, 19–26 and Michael Kenneth Hemp, Cannery Row: The History of John Steinbeck’s Old Ocean View Avenue (Carmel, CA, 2002), 34–42.

the coastline by promoting landmarks from Monterey's Spanish past. Established in 1931 by local elites, the Monterey History and Art Association recognized the appeal of Monterey's romantic "old capital" days. It preserved historic buildings from the pre-American era and encouraged tourists to visit these sites on a walking tour of the downtown area. The Hotel Del Monte, on the other hand, led the protests against the industrial pollution that purportedly scared away tourists and undercut profits. In particular, they grumbled when fish entrails washed up on the beach and unpleasant sardine odors filled the air. Because the fisheries surged to the forefront of the local economy, however, most Montereyans accepted the odors as a price of good business.12

The tug-of-war between tourism and fisheries ended with the United States's entrance into World War II. With a pressing need to feed the troops abroad and stock grocery store shelves at home, the federal government took over California sardine production and demanded that the factories package increasing amounts of canned fish. Monterey fishermen and canneries answered the call to duty, landing no less than 145,000 tons of sardines and as many as 250,000 tons per season during the war. But while Cannery Row bustled with activity, the Hotel Del Monte languished. Hotel owners eventually leased its grounds and buildings to the Navy for use as a pre-flight training school in 1943, marking the end of its days as a genteel resort.13

The fishery's wartime expansion, however, could not be maintained. Beginning in 1946, sardine catches dropped precipitously. While many canners and fishermen were hopeful that the sardine would rebound, state scientists were not optimistic. The causes of the collapse remain open to debate, with possible culprits including climatic changes, overharvesting, and pollution, but the consequences were undeniable.14 Several consecutive years of poor catches suggested that the sardine's return was not imminent, and many canneries began to shut their doors. In March 1952, the Aeneas Sardine Products Company became the first cannery put on the auction block. By 1958, there were only five canneries left in operation. Cannery Row took a major hit when the California Packing Corporation, one of the oldest and largest canneries, closed in April 1962 and sold its machinery to a Puerto Rican tuna cannery. As manager D. T. Saxby explained, "You can't run a sardine cannery indefinitely without sardines."15


Some Monterey canners tried to keep their operations going, but their efforts proved futile. During the 1950s, they packed tuna, and during the early 1960s, they campaigned to replace sardines with anchovies in their reduction operations. Tuna never became a large part of production, and only the Hovden Food Products Corporation remained on Cannery Row once the state issued anchovy reduction permits in 1965. Even when the sardine fishery showed some signs of recovery in 1958, Monterey canners could not sell their products. Their pack was too expensive to compete with Japanese and South African canned sardines in the export market, and the domestic market could not absorb all of the catch.  

Although Knut Hovden, the owner and founder of the Hovden plant, had retired in 1953 and passed away in March 1961, his employees were not ready to shut down. Manager W. O. Lunde noted, “You don’t buy a coffin for a man just because he’s sick.” As he lobbied for anchovy permits, he also noted that the fishing industry was part of what made Monterey:

What would Monterey be like without a fishing industry? Every day cars pass the cannery. You know what they’re looking at? Cannery Row—the famous Cannery Row that’s known all over the world. What kind of a cannery [row] would you have without a cannery? What kind of harbor would there be without a fishing fleet? Believe me, we’re not dead yet—we’ve got a lot of fight left.

Lunde tied Monterey’s identity to a prosperous industrial waterfront, yet he also suggested that Cannery Row was becoming a place for tourism. He did not justify the continuance of the canneries because of their direct contributions to the local economy, which were minimal. Instead, he implied that the canneries needed to stay open because visitors wanted to see a working waterfront with real, functioning canneries and a harbor filled with actual fishing boats.

The Hovden cannery was in the minority; most canners cut their losses and sold their factories. The Cannery Row Properties Company, established in 1953 by Salinas Valley businessman Wesley Dodge, former cannery manager George Leutzinger, and a handful of other stockholders, began to buy much of this property. By 1957, it had acquired twelve former canneries and reduction plants, the Ocean View Hotel, an apartment building, and holding interest in the laboratory of Edward Ricketts, a close


friend of John Steinbeck. After buying the former plants, the company rented them out and sold the cannery machinery to the highest bidders. Fish meal driers made their way to a sand processor and dried-apple plants. A machine that had removed fish heads now cut off carrot tops. Other equipment and personnel left the country for canneries in South America and South Africa. Sal Ferrante, former manager and operator of the Oxnard Cannery, moved south to manage a cannery in Peru, where liberal regulations allowed for non-stop, year-round reduction of anchovies.18

Unlike Ferrante, most residents who had worked in the fishing industry did not have the expertise, resources, or desire to relocate overseas. Some fishermen migrated to Southern California, where fishing was still active in the 1950s, or pursued the tuna industry in Mexico. Others simply tried to eke by. As one old-timer explained in 1959, "It's what we do. We make a living. If we don't make any more than that—well, it's still a living." Les Caveny, business agent of the cannery union, added, "Once you get into the business, you're like an old firehorse. You just can't stay away."19 Still, many former cannery workers and fishermen found themselves out of work. In June 1955, female employees of the fish-canning industry comprised the largest surplus of workers in Monterey County. Approximately five hundred fishermen were also unemployed. A local employment study concluded, "Fishermen must convert to other means of earning a living or move elsewhere."20

The growth of the local military establishment began to fill the void left by the fishing industry. During World War II, the Presidio of Monterey became an enlistment center, while Fort Ord, roughly ten miles north of Monterey, became a major site for basic training and debarkation. After the war, Fort Ord turned into a permanent military installation. While it is unclear if any former fishermen and cannery workers obtained military employment, the military became a major regional employer. By the late 1960s, Fort Ord, the Defense Language Institute, the Naval Postgraduate School, the Coast Guard Navonal Reserve Station, and the Naval Auxiliary Landing Field had roughly 4,500 civilians on their payrolls.21 However, unlike other urban areas in the


20 Monterey County Industrial Development, Inc., Information about Monterey County (Salinas, CA, 1950–1959) and Harold Kermit Parker, “Population, Employment, and Post High School Education in the Monterey Peninsula” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1952), 95.

American West, Monterey was small and lacked the political influence to attract more national funds and establish large defense-related manufacturing or supply industries, such as munitions or aircraft plants. The military’s importance to the local economy was undeniable, but one economic analysis estimated that roughly half of the federal outlays for military installations, including a significant portion of the military payroll, was spent outside the region.22

To diversify the economy and ensure a stable base for future growth, Monterey focused more energy on building the tourism industry. The emphasis on tourism was part of larger national and regional trends in the postwar period. As the population of California surged and the national economy prospered, more Californians had the leisure time and income to go on vacation. They also purchased automobiles and took their trips on the road, where they navigated the expanding interstate highway system. Indeed, a Monterey Peninsula regional plan from 1963 explained that tourism and recreation had become the fastest growing economic activity in the nation during the preceding decade.23 Only a day’s drive from Los Angeles and two hours from San Francisco, Monterey was poised to take advantage of California’s increasing number of auto tourists. Now Montereyans needed to construct a tourist identity that would give potential visitors the incentive to make the trip.

John Steinbeck’s 1945 novel, Cannery Row, provided part of the inspiration for postwar tourism in Monterey. In the opening chapter, he superbly depicts the Cannery Row ambiance. He writes, “Cannery Row is the gathered and scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps, sardine canneries of corrugated iron, honky tons, restaurants and whore houses, and little crowded groceries, and laboratories and flophouses.” Steinbeck goes on to describe the daily ritual of Cannery Row, a scene that was familiar to any Montereyan during the wartime boom. “In the morning when the sardine fleet has made a catch, the purse-seiners waddle heavily into the bay blowing their whistles. . . . Then cannery whistles scream and all over the town men and women scramble into their clothes and come running down to the Row to go to work.” After the day is over, the last fish cleaned, cooked, and canned, workers “straggle out and droop their ways up the hill into the town and Cannery Row becomes itself again—quiet and magical. Its normal life returns.”24

After this evocative opening, the Cannery Row of sardines, fishermen, and cannery workers fades away, and Steinbeck turns his attention to a collection of eccentric

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24 Steinbeck, Cannery Row, 5–6.
characters who live on Cannery Row. Mack and the boys hang out under the black cypress tree and set up house in a fish meal storage warehouse, which they call the Palace Flophouse and Grill. Dora Flood, the street's madam, runs the Bear Flag Restaurant, while Lee Chong provides groceries, alcohol, and other goods from his overflowing general store. And then there is the owner of the Western Biological Laboratory, Doc, a man of generosity and erudition who is at the center of all the action. The novel's plot revolves around Mack and the boys' attempts to throw Doc a well-deserved party for his many kindnesses to the local community.

Steinbeck's fictional recreation of Cannery Row had local roots. His intimate familiarity with Monterey began during his childhood in Salinas, about fifteen miles to the east. To escape the dry heat of the Salinas Valley, Steinbeck's family spent many summers at their cottage in Pacific Grove, Monterey's neighbor to the northwest, and Steinbeck frequently made his way back to the Monterey Peninsula in subsequent years. Between 1930 and 1936, the early years of his literary career, he spent a considerable amount of time writing in Pacific Grove and soon met Edward Ricketts, the inspiration for Doc and a self-taught marine biologist who ran a biological supply house, the Pacific Biological Laboratory. Steinbeck and Ricketts forged a deep friendship, and Ricketts's lab, wedged between the fish processing plants on Cannery Row, became a refuge for Steinbeck and a gathering spot for their mutual friends.25

As Steinbeck's fame increased, his ties to Monterey became tenuous. After his marriage to Carol Steinbeck ended, he remarried and, in 1941, moved to New York with his new wife, Gwyndolyn Conger. Following a stint as a war correspondent in Europe during World War II, he wrote the manuscript for Cannery Row in the New York office of Viking Press in July 1944. "I just finished a crazy kind of book about Cannery Row and the lab etc. All fiction of course but born out of homesickness. And there are some true incidents in it. And some of it is a little funny I think," he explained to his Monterey friends Tal and Ritchie Lovejoy. Steinbeck moved back to Monterey before the book hit the shelves, but his homecoming was bittersweet. He felt awkward around his old friends and uncomfortable with his growing fame. Disillusioned, Steinbeck, Gwyn, and their baby son, Thom, returned to New York.26

In the meantime, the release of Cannery Row put Monterey on the map. The national reviews were mediocre—Orville Prescott of the New York Times claimed that the novel had "no real characters, no 'story,' no purpose." But this did not affect local sales. Monterey bookstore owners noted that the novel generated the first real profits


they had experienced in some time. In fact, some Montereyans began to consider poor reviews as “in some way, a slur on the town itself.” Other residents waited to express their opinions “until they were able to discover what the majority thought.” According to biographer Roy Simmonds, “Steinbeck found it all immensely amusing.”

The popularity of Cannery Row soon began to draw curious literary fans to Monterey. As local columnist Margaret Hensel noted, visitors drove down Cannery Row “. . . looking to right and to left for Lee Chong’s Grocery, for Doc’s Western Biological Laboratory, for Dora Flood and the girls of the Bear Flag Restaurant. . . .” Steinbeck’s characters were “so warm and meaningful” that “they live on for the readers,” she concluded. Even though Cannery Row was a work of fiction and only partially based on reality, fans hoped to find the novel’s characters and landmarks exactly as Steinbeck described them. According to scholar Martha Norkunas, Steinbeck’s “literary landscape” had come to replace the historical one.

It was illogical for tourists to expect the “real” Cannery Row to duplicate the novel or vice versa: the characters, places, and stories, though based on existing people and landmarks and some actual events, were still fictional creations. However, Wing Chong’s Market, the prototype for Lee Chong’s grocery, was one place that satisfied some tourists’ cravings for Steinbeck’s Cannery Row. In the novel, Steinbeck describes Lee Chong’s as “a miracle of supply.” When tourists entered Wing Chong’s, writer Peggy Rink explained, they could not help but feel “a pleasant thrill of recognition” because of the “incongruous variety of merchandise that delighted Steinbeck.” According to Frances Yee, sister-in-law of Won Yee, the store’s original proprietor, visitors came from “all over the country.” But apparently they came to look rather than buy. By December 1953, Yock Yee, Won Yee’s son, and his partner C. M. Sam liquidated the store, no longer able to make a profit.

Otherwise, tourists did not find many remnants of Steinbeck’s Cannery Row. The hustle and bustle that he described in his opening vignette had gone the way of the sardine. After several years of poor catches, Cannery Row, like so many other western towns once dependent on extractive industries, was like a ghost town. As Rink explained, “If the tourist came during the busy years when the now-vanished sardine thronged the Bay he may have peered into the faces of booted and bandanned [sic] cannery workers. . . . Any tourist inspecting Cannery Row in the years since the


29 Steinbeck, Cannery Row, 9; Peggy Rink, “Pilgrimage to Wing Chong’s,” What’s Doing on the Monterey Peninsula 6 (9 May 1953): 32–3; Mangelsdorf, Steinbeck’s Cannery Row, 185.
mass evacuation of the sardine has had trouble finding any faces at all to look into." Cannery Row of the 1950s was quiet and deserted, not charged with excitement and activity, as Steinbeck had suggested.

As Montereyans mulled over Cannery Row's future, they looked to Steinbeck for guidance and advice. In 1957, the Monterey Peninsula Herald published his four proposals for Cannery Row, each described with his sardonic flair. The "old-old" would entail rebuilding shacks and Chinese gambling dens with scrap wood and tin. The "new-old" would recreate the look and smell of the sardine industry. Existing canneries would be sprayed with plastic to prevent rust build-up, while rocks and beaches would be stocked with artificial fish guts and wind machines would restore the odor of rotting fish. The "pseudo-old" would reconstruct Monterey's Spanish past by erecting "adobe" houses made of concrete and stainless steel.

Steinbeck acknowledged the allure of Monterey's past, but he ultimately advocated that developers start over and create "something new" out of Cannery Row:

Young and fearless and creative architects are evolving in America. . . . I suggest that these creators be allowed to look at the lovely coastline, and to design something new in the world, but something that will add to the exciting beauty rather than cancel it out. Modern materials do not limit design as mud and tile once did. Then tourists would not come to see a celebration of a history that never happened, an imitation of limitations, but rather a speculation on the future. We never had a Notre Dame or a Chartres. But who knows what future beauty we may create? The foundation is there; sea rocks and beach, deep blue water, and on some days the magic hills of Santa Cruz. It would be interesting to see what could be added to this background. I don't think any such thing will be done, but so far dreams are not illegal—or are they?  

Steinbeck was undoubtedly aware of his impact on Cannery Row, but he implored the city to embrace the beauty of the coastline and start with a clean slate.

Creating "something new" did not take hold, as city officials seemed eager to capitalize on Steinbeck's novel and romantic visions of the industrial heyday. This process began with changing the name of the street from Ocean View Avenue to Cannery Row in 1957. While Montereyans had referred informally to the street as "Cannery Row" for years, the formal name change meant that visitors seeking Cannery Row could now look on a map and find their destination. Even though the name change was, in part, a tribute to Steinbeck and a testament to his popularity, he was entirely amused by the city's action. When his sister Beth, who was still living in Monterey, passed along the news, he remarked, "This strikes me as a triumph of city planning

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30 Rink, "Pilgrimage to Wing Chong's," 32.
logic. Ocean View Avenue was named at a time when you coul[d]n't see the ocean from it and now they change it to Cannery Row when there are no canneries there. Steinbeck's sarcasm aside, the renaming was significant. As geographer Paul Carter has argued, names gave space "... a character, something that could be referred to." In this case, the name Cannery Row signified a public identity inspired by a fictional account of Monterey's past.

Through the late 1950s and early 1960s, Cannery Row continued to shift from a fish processing center to an arts, shopping, and entertainment hub. While some plants were boarded up and others became warehouses, Cannery Row's low rent and ample space attracted a furniture dealer, several art galleries and studios, a handful of bars and restaurants, a dance studio, and a butterfly dealer. Monterey's 1959 General Plan affirmed these developments, particularly as tourism became "one of the most important elements in the economy of Monterey." Although the plan recommended that the remaining canneries stay open, it also wanted cannery buildings to be used for "more active land uses, such as restaurants, art galleries, and craft studios suitable to this location in Monterey."

When Steinbeck visited Monterey in 1960 after a cross-country road trip, described in his book Travels with Charley, he noticed the changes in Monterey and particularly along Cannery Row. The beaches were no longer "festered with fish guts and flies." And, "the canneries which once put up a sickening stench are gone, their places filled with restaurants, antique shops, and the like. They fish for tourists now, not pilchards, and that species they are not likely to wipe out." But Steinbeck also seemed troubled by Monterey's transformation. "You can't go home again because home has ceased to exist except in the mothballs of memory," he concluded. Curiously, the same person who had advocated "something new" lamented that Monterey was no longer the place he had remembered.

32 Mike Thomas, "What Will Emerge from the Cannery Row Cocoon?" Monterey Peninsula Herald, 21 April 1959. For quote see John Steinbeck to Toby Street, 9 December 1957, Box 3/Folder 28, John Steinbeck Papers, Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California.


And the changes were just beginning. To develop a coherent plan for Cannery Row and to capitalize on a predicted surge in tourism, the Cannery Row Properties Company, the City of Monterey, and other property owners hired planner Sydney Williams in 1961. His “Cannery Row Plan” focused on retaining a flavor of the “Old Cannery Row,” while providing for new retail, commercial, professional, residential, and recreational uses. He wanted to recapture the natural beauty of the shore “long hidden from public view by the Cannery structures” and preserve Cannery Row’s former plants. In short, Williams tried to reconcile contradictory ideals—historic preservation and development, scenic nature and industrial remains.

Williams’s plan generated considerable controversy. One vocal opponent was Planning Commissioner Donald Dubrasich, who believed that the plan would fail precisely because it offered “something for everybody.” In particular, he objected to high-rise buildings, as the plan allowed hotels and apartment buildings of up to ten stories. Dubrasich invoked Steinbeck’s “something new” article and concluded, “I don’t think Mr. Steinbeck would much approve of the attitude we have to preserving old Cannery Row.” As an alternative, he proposed an urban renewal program that would move the railroad tracks to the east and eliminate all buildings on the seaward side of the street, clearing the beach and returning it to a state of “natural beauty, highlighting a winding, rocky shoreline.” Along this stretch of shore, the city could build a coastal drive with terraced bay-view buildings on the landward side of the road.

In favoring ocean vistas and coastal access, Dubrasich adopted Steinbeck’s approach, but his plan to eliminate some of the former canneries made it unpopular among people who relished Cannery Row’s built environment. Dave McCafferty, one of the last remaining canners, insisted that the railroad would have to be left in its existing location for the sake of the remaining fish plants. Planning Commissioner Jack Doughery noted that Monterey did not want a “Riviera,” while Harlan Watkins, who now owned Ed Ricketts’s lab, added that tourists came “to see the beat-up canneries.” The Monterey Planning Commission eventually adopted Williams’s plan as an amendment to the General Plan on 10 July 1962, and the Monterey City Council followed suit on 4 September 1962. In May 1964, the city approved a new zoning ordinance for the “Cannery Row Zone” to develop the area into a “distinct visitor-commercial and multi-family residential area.”

The plan’s passage was not the final word on Cannery Row, as merchants continued to hold conflicting visions for the neighborhood. While most agreed that the

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street should retain its "old character" and keep away "any gaudy motel-convention center things," bookstore owner James Campbell was one of the few dissenters. He noted: "Tradition is hard to come by, and 25 years doesn't compound tradition." In other words, Cannery Row was not "old" enough to warrant preservation. Instead, he advocated opening up the bay to create "... an Atlantic City without the steel pier." However, such radical proposals that started anew, as Steinbeck had suggested, did not prevail. Preserving the remnants of industry—a response that suggested the novelist's influence—proved to be the more widespread and dominant vision. Williams's plan tried to satisfy both camps, but putting his ideas into practice proved to be more difficult than local planners and developers anticipated.

Transforming Cannery Row proved to be a formidable task. Montereyans could eliminate neither the natural processes that came into contact with Cannery Row, nor the ne'er-do-wells that Steinbeck celebrated. Exposed to the harsh conditions of the coast, canneries rotted and fell apart. Vandals, vagrants, and arsonists destroyed them. Believing that Cannery Row's decay could enhance, rather than detract from, its aesthetic beauty, the city wanted to restore some factories, preserve the ruins of others, and incorporate these remains with the rocky shoreline. In other words, it sought to naturalize the built environment, making it an inherent feature of the coastline. But even as an ecological perspective began to shape public policy nationwide, the city's plan did not fully address the underlying cause of Cannery Row's much-needed redevelopment: the collapse of the sardine industry. Instead, it romanticized a past ambition to exploit natural resources and combined this impulse with a persistent desire, dating back to the days of the Hotel Del Monte, to market the splendor of the Monterey coast.

Cannery Row's deterioration, hastened by several fires, prompted the refashioned strategy. While several fires marked the industrial period, conflagrations proliferated as the canneries shut down. A huge blaze in November 1956 leveled the former San Carlos Cannery, which had become a manufacturing warehouse, while the defunct San Xavier and Carmel Canning Company buildings burned in 1967. The rash of fires persisted into the 1970s. An arsonist set three fires in 1972 and 1973, confessing that he had chosen Cannery Row because he knew the buildings would burn well. After a few silent years, fire hit the Hovden warehouse in July 1977, and another blaze followed in February 1978, damaging several new businesses and destroying the Monterey Canning Company building. Between 1952 and 1978, the fire department fought at least twenty-one fires on Cannery Row and classified seventeen of these blazes as

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arson or of unknown origin. Given their age, ease of access, and drafty interiors, the abandoned canneries provided ideal settings for large, fast-spreading fires.43

Cannery Row's collapsing, burnt buildings were a depressing sight for most, but a sublime, even "poetic" sight for others. As journalist Mark Hazard Osmun put it, the canneries were "in spectacular ruin." When he visited Cannery Row in the mid-1970s, the few standing canneries "leaned over the water on shaky wooden braces, like dry, crippled skeletons. The corrugated tin walls and iron girders were rusted, and the rust had run and given even the timbers and concrete pilings a red-brown patina." Where the canneries had burned to the ground, leaving only foundations, "the steel was melting into the water and the concrete was becoming rock on sand." He concluded that the canneries possessed "an unquestioned goodness." While most only saw decay, Osmun found something of intrinsic value.44

Monterey's Chief Building Inspector John De Groot, however, did not regard Cannery Row's physical blight as virtuous and inspiring. Beginning in February 1970, he conducted a study of Cannery Row's built environment and found the area to be an unsightly safety liability. While some fires leveled buildings, "... the typical site [had] much of the building still in place, offering all kinds of protrusions, holes and hazards to fall upon and into. Not only [did] these sites offer every kind and degree of hazard but they [left] a beautiful shoreline looking like a series of dumps." Age, neglect, and severe natural conditions had caused many canneries to crumble. Tattered rooftops allowed rain to enter. Doors, windows, stairs, railings, and gutters were in disrepair. For buildings that faced the ocean, waves and sea air rusted steel, split reinforced concrete beams and floor slabs, and rotted wood. Many of these buildings simply could not be salvaged, in De Groot's estimation. "All the money the City ever received for the leasing of this shoreline will not pay a fraction of the cost of restoring it to its original condition and one wonders if the earnings of the canneries were really worth the despoliation and the problems that they have now left us with," he noted.45

Empty, dilapidated canneries, in turn, attracted vandalism. De Groot and his crew were able to enter every vacant cannery building with relative ease. He wrote,


"It is almost impossible to find an intact window pane. Everything droppable has been dropped, bundles of paper have been spread far and wide, machinery dismantled, plaster kicked in, plywood torn down; there is no limit to the energy and ingenuity of the vandal and there is no better example of his work than Cannery Row." While De Groot found little evidence of vagrancy, likely because of the cold, damp winter weather, he believed that it could become a problem with milder conditions.\textsuperscript{46} Ironically, the deterioration of Cannery Row attracted the kind of misfits that Steinbeck celebrated in his novels. Real vagabonds and troublemakers, however, did not help Cannery Row tourism. Planners wanted to reproduce the physical ambiance of Steinbeck's Cannery Row, but they did not necessarily want to duplicate all aspects of its social ambiance.\textsuperscript{47}

De Groot also concluded that the former fish processing center had not witnessed any substantial or coherent tourism development. For one thing, roughly 70 percent of the square footage along Cannery Row was unfit for occupation, while nearly 52 percent was unused. Retail uses accounted for only 21 percent of the land, with warehousing and light manufacturing making up the largest use at almost 26 percent. While some people believed that Cannery Row was "full of glittering theaters, shops and restaurants," De Groot countered that there had been little commercial growth and that most occupancies were below minimum standards.\textsuperscript{48}

In other words, Cannery Row was far from revitalized. Local developers could not repel the natural processes that ate away at the canneries, nor the vandals and arsonists who preyed on empty buildings. When Sydney Williams introduced his plan in 1961, most buildings were in good or fair condition. A decade later, many structures were on the verge of collapse. According to local historian Tom Mangelsdorf, the Cannery Row Properties Company made no effort to reverse this deterioration; the partners "seemed content to 'sit' on their investments while waiting to see what would become of the area." Even when San Francisco hotelman Ben Swig bought the company's holdings to form the Cannery Row Development Company in 1967, Cannery Row remained, according to writer Anne Poindexter, "in a state of suspended animation, not yet dead and gone, but not exactly growing in leaps and bounds either." While art galleries and stores selling furniture, antiques, imports, clothing, and books cropped up in the area during the late 1960s, they did not bring substantial economic growth.\textsuperscript{49}

Even though the local tourism economy was gaining steam—tourist dollars spent on the Monterey Peninsula more than doubled from $32 million in 1959 to $67

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{47} Martha Norkunas makes a similar point about a later period in \textit{Politics of Public Memory}, 71.

\textsuperscript{48} De Groot, "Structural Conditions."

\textsuperscript{49} Monterey Department of City Planning, Cannery Row Plan: An Element of the General Plan (Monterey, CA, 1973), 35; Mangelsdorf, Steinbeck's Cannery Row, 195; Poindexter, "More Nostalgia," 3–8, 27.
million in 1969—Cannery Row made only a minor contribution. A 1970 employment survey indicated that the Cannery Row area provided just 3 percent of the city’s jobs; six hundred people worked in the neighborhood out of a total of eighteen thousand people employed citywide. While the taxable sales for Cannery Row grew 23 percent from the third quarter of 1970 through the second quarter of 1971—far exceeding the 14 percent average citywide—this only comprised roughly 3 percent of the city's total taxable sales. Moreover, Cannery Row property accounted for a paltry 1 percent of the city’s property and building improvements.50

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons why redevelopment did not take off. Recovering from the collapse of the sardine industry and shifting to a tourism economy was not going to happen overnight, yet time did not work in Cannery Row’s favor. The neighborhood continued to deteriorate, likely deterring the many tourists who, according to a 1963 survey, came to the Monterey area “simply to look at the natural beauty of the Peninsula.” But there were other factors. Changing land-use values made the high percentage of multi-family dwellings proposed in the 1961 plan unfeasible. Attempts to revitalize Cannery Row, moreover, coincided with a large urban renewal project that targeted downtown Monterey. Cannery Row eventually benefited from and became incorporated into these efforts, but construction was not completed until the 1970s, well after many of the canneries were in decline.51

It was clear that Monterey needed to modify its strategy. The goals of the revised plan of 1973—such as preserving the “unique character” of Cannery Row, recapturing the beauty of the coast, and guiding tourism development—were similar to those of the original 1961 plan. But the revised plan also took a distinct approach by highlighting the juxtaposition of the natural and built environments. The foundations, pilings, and contours of the old sardine plants punctuated rocky points, sandy beaches, and crashing surf; this blending provided “one of the important attractions on the Row.” As city planners explained, “One does not expect to find an industrial area nestled on a stretch of magnificent coastline in a residential and tourist oriented community.” Capitalizing on this “unique heritage and special environment” would turn Cannery Row into “one of those outstanding tourist attractions that also enjoys great economic success,” the plan maintained.52

Pointing out the positive physical and historical attributes of the fish factories and their remnants was key to the plan’s refashioned approach. “The visual forms created by the old canneries are a source of delight, and certainly are a major contributor to the unique physical environment of Cannery Row,” it explained. Discarded cannery equipment that littered vacant lots was really “landscape furniture,” while cannery elements that extended out into the water could become unique sculptural forms if

51 Peninsula Tomorrow, 2, 52–4; Cannery Row Plan, 31, 35; Walton, Storied Land, 240–9.
52 Cannery Row Plan, 23, 26–8, 31, 37.
severed from the shore. As a whole, the canneries comprised "abstract visual composition" that inspired some "to have a brief romance with the past" and others "to become nostalgic about American know-how and ingenuity." For instance, the crumbling Hovden cannery was significant because "most of the technological advances in the fish canning process took place in this building." The plan explained: "Items which would be regarded as junk anywhere else arouse feelings of nostalgia for days gone by."53

Rather than seeing Cannery Row's built environment as a liability and eliminating the collapsing structures, city planners adapted their proposals to the material conditions they found. Even as they called for the preservation of Steinbeck-related landmarks, including Wing Chong's store and Ed Rickett's lab, they also cast the seemingly unattractive elements of Cannery Row as assets, items of curiosity for tourists to seek out and enjoy. They recognized that industrial relics provided evidence of past manufacturing feats, while decay could heighten "temporal awareness, generally inducing nostalgic and other reflections on time's changes," as historian David Lowenthal explains.54 Combined with the natural features of the coast, moreover, cannery foundations and discarded machinery could add to the street's aesthetic appeal. Thus, Cannery Row did not have to be known as the run-down, seedy part of town, as the residue of industry could be a fascinating tourist attraction and a source of the street's renewal.

To maintain Cannery Row's industrial ambiance, the plan recommended that buildings adopt one of two architectural forms: the large warehouse or the complex cannery collage, a conglomeration of towers, skylights, smoke stacks, and other "odd structures." Other architectural styles, such as Spanish, Victorian, Old English, or Colonial, would detract from the unique character of Cannery Row. The plan explained: "Sham architecture and garishness is out of place on Cannery Row because sham architecture and garishness destroy the quality of being unique. If the tendency towards sham architecture and garishness continues on Cannery Row, the tourist industry will be the second industry to destroy itself in the same location." To prevent this potential disaster, the plan advocated the "accurate reconstruction of an historic building" and the use of "proper" building materials, such as corrugated sheet metal, horizontal wood siding, brick, and multi-lighted windows.55 The crude, unrefined look of the canneries was now something to be reproduced and cultivated.

Industrial architecture was only half of Cannery Row's allure, as the neighborhood also offered many opportunities to enjoy the beauty of the coastline and ocean. Coastal vistas, rocky points, and tidepools dotted the waterfront, while three beaches provided potential entry points for scuba divers and "a desirable area of tranquility in

53 Ibid., 23–6, 62, 68–9.
54 Ibid., 25–6 and Lowenthal, Past is a Foreign Country, 175.
an otherwise highly developed and active environment.” The city wanted to show off this scenic coastline by creating public beaches and using a side yard setback requirement of 30 percent, which created a buffer between construction and unobstructed views and access to the bay. After all, the ocean was “. . . only an asset to the Row if it [could] be seen.” However, the plan acknowledged that these ideas would require careful planning and negotiations, as most of the valuable oceanfront land was in private ownership.56

The revised plan tried to resolve the contradictions of the Cannery Row environment by blending a utilitarian ideal of nature, represented by the canneries, with an aesthetic ideal of the coastline’s splendor. But neither of these principles addressed the major cause of Cannery Row’s transformation: the collapse of the sardine fishery. Indeed, the former fish plants were more than just a testament of “American know-how and ingenuity,” and the bay was more than just scenic backdrop; they also represented the failings of sardine management and the unpredictability of the ocean and its fisheries. The city’s approach was all the more notable, since ecological principles that accounted for human pressures on natural systems influenced the plan’s development. Because of the California Environmental Quality Act of 1970, which followed on the heels of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the city had to prepare a separate environmental impact report that analyzed the possible effects of redevelopment, effects such as damage to wildlife, vegetation, traffic, and air quality.57 Even if the plan itself did not fully analyze the environmental complexities of Monterey Bay or the past impact of natural resource use, the state’s expanding policies mandated the incorporation of ecological concepts.

The Monterey City Council approved the Cannery Row Plan in November 1973, although it served only as a guideline and not an actual policy. The plan’s passage came several months after the closing of the Hovden cannery in February 1973, the last plant left on Cannery Row. Surrounded by half-burnt canneries, seafood restaurants, and art galleries, the Hovden cannery could no longer keep going. As journalist Kevin Howe reported, “The last fish has been canned on Monterey’s fabled Cannery Row.”58 But any fish processed by the Hovden plant up until its closure held only symbolic value, as tourism had eclipsed industrial activities for several years. Tourists, not canny- nery workers and sardines, continued to fill the former fish plants. It was doubtful that Cannery Row would support a functioning cannery ever again.

56 Cannery Row Plan, 22–3, 62, 72, 86.
The irony of Cannery Row's evolution did not escape building inspector John De Groot, the same person who had recorded the destruction that stemmed from Cannery Row's industrial era. He argued that Steinbeck's novel had "created a romantic legend out of a bunch of stinking sweatshops" and that the name "Cannery Row" would "outlast every building as it has already outlived by a couple of decades the fish canning industry."59 De Groot had no sentimental attachment to this once-bustling neighborhood and its fading industrial ambiance. City planners, on the other hand, wanted to transform Cannery Row into a tourist attraction that merged its natural setting with its industrial past and spoke to Steinbeck's picturesque novel. While this plan was fraught with contradictions, they endeavored to make the name and legend of Cannery Row an enduring physical reality along Monterey's storied shores.

Monterey's transition to tourism after the decline of an extractive economy paralleled other western places, but the blending of nature, industry, and literature made its history distinct. While some industrial-turn-tourist towns eliminated the most egregious signs of decay and pollution, Monterey planners and developers highlighted industry, represented by the crumbling built environment, because it evoked the atmosphere for a romantic portrayal of the sardine era, as presented largely in Steinbeck's novel.60 They also maintained that the physical residue of industry served to enhance Monterey's nature, from its dramatic shoreline to its splendid bay vistas. This approach to promotion did not guide coherent development or revitalize Cannery Row overnight, but it was clear by the early 1970s that the faux industrial façade of the former Ocean View Avenue now served tourism, not the sardine fishery.

Monterey planners and developers essentially tried to harness its natural and cultural assets and liabilities for the purpose of tourism development. This local involvement in tourism suggests that Cannery Row did not clearly follow the pattern of large-scale outside capital wresting control from locals, as Hal Rothman outlines in his sweeping study, Devil's Bargains. While the Cannery Row Properties Company and the Cannery Row Development Company were outside investors that acquired large tracts of property, neither company implemented an expansive plan for development. By 1976, moreover, a group of local restaurant owners bought these vast holdings.61 Thus, city officials and local developers retained considerable influence over initial tourism plans, even if their ideas were difficult to get off the ground.

By the mid- to late-1970s, environmental regulations began to further complicate tourism development on Cannery Row. In November 1972, California voters passed Proposition 20, the Coastal Initiative, establishing a coastal commission system made

59 De Groot, "Structural Conditions."

60 For the elimination of decay, see Christensen, Red Lodge, 217, 221–6, 235–7 and David Hamer, History in Urban Places: The Historic Districts of the United States, Urban Life and Urban Landscape Series (Columbus, OH, 1998), x.

up of one statewide and six regional commissions. The California Coastal Act of 1976 later made the California Coastal Commission (CCC) the "permanent mechanism for coastal protection and management." The act required that the CCC approve all coastal projects and that local governments prepare a Local Coastal Program (LCP) for areas within the coastal zone, the region three miles from shore to the nearest coastal ridge. The commission proceeded to reject a string of Cannery Row projects in the late 1970s, angering many merchants and would-be developers. When preparing the LCP, it also argued that the 1973 Cannery Row Plan allowed for too much development. After almost twenty public hearings, the commission and the city finally agreed on a plan in 1980.62

While some Montereyans saw this maze of regulations as a hindrance to Cannery Row's redevelopment, the policies reflected a concern for coastal protection and a desire for natural amenities. These environmental ideals would ultimately carry over to the tourism industry and breathe life back into Cannery Row. Opened in 1984 on the site of the former Hovden cannery, the Monterey Bay Aquarium became an overnight success. In highlighting Monterey's ecological diversity and educating visitors about issues facing marine ecosystems worldwide, the aquarium appealed to the environmental values and concerns of many middle- and upper-class tourists. A visit to the aquarium became an entertaining leisure activity that allowed them to express their "green" politics at the same time.63 Of course, Steinbeck's novel remains an indelible part of Cannery Row, but tourism has come to focus more on the ecology of the coastline than on the novel confluence of nature, industry, and literature.

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63 For related ideas about the aquarium and environmentalism, see Walton, Storied Land, 253.