

# NO COUNTRY FOR OLD DEVELOPERS: THE STRANGE TALE OF AN ARTS BOOM, BOHEMIANS, AND "MARFALAFEL" IN THE HIGH DESERT OF MARFA, TEXAS

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**Executive Summary.** Marfa, Texas is an international arts-based tourism hotspot, a growing artistic “haven,” and a popular location for second homes and part-time residents. The town welcomes thousands of visitors yearly, is home to multiple galleries and artists, and has recently hosted two high-profile Hollywood film productions. Marfa’s rise to global prominence is unique in that it was a tiny, dying town deep in the heart of West Texas — a remote, sparsely populated region of the state. The town’s fortunes reversed by chance, not by design, with the 1994 death of resident and globally recognized artist, Donald Judd. This event triggered rapid and largely unplanned E.D. based on his legacy. By examining Marfa, one can assess both the potential and the challenges that arts-based tourism can provide for increasingly remote rural locations.

## **High culture in the high desert**

The night begins with an eclectic culinary experience at a local bistro, and then moves to an outdoor concert by indie rock pioneers Sonic Youth. The evening finishes hours later with casual debate amongst friends concerning which post-modern artist is most influential. Before goodbyes, plans are made to meet for lattes the next morning wherein the day’s gallery browsing will be set. The evening described is like many others for those that pursue cultural interests in cities across the globe.

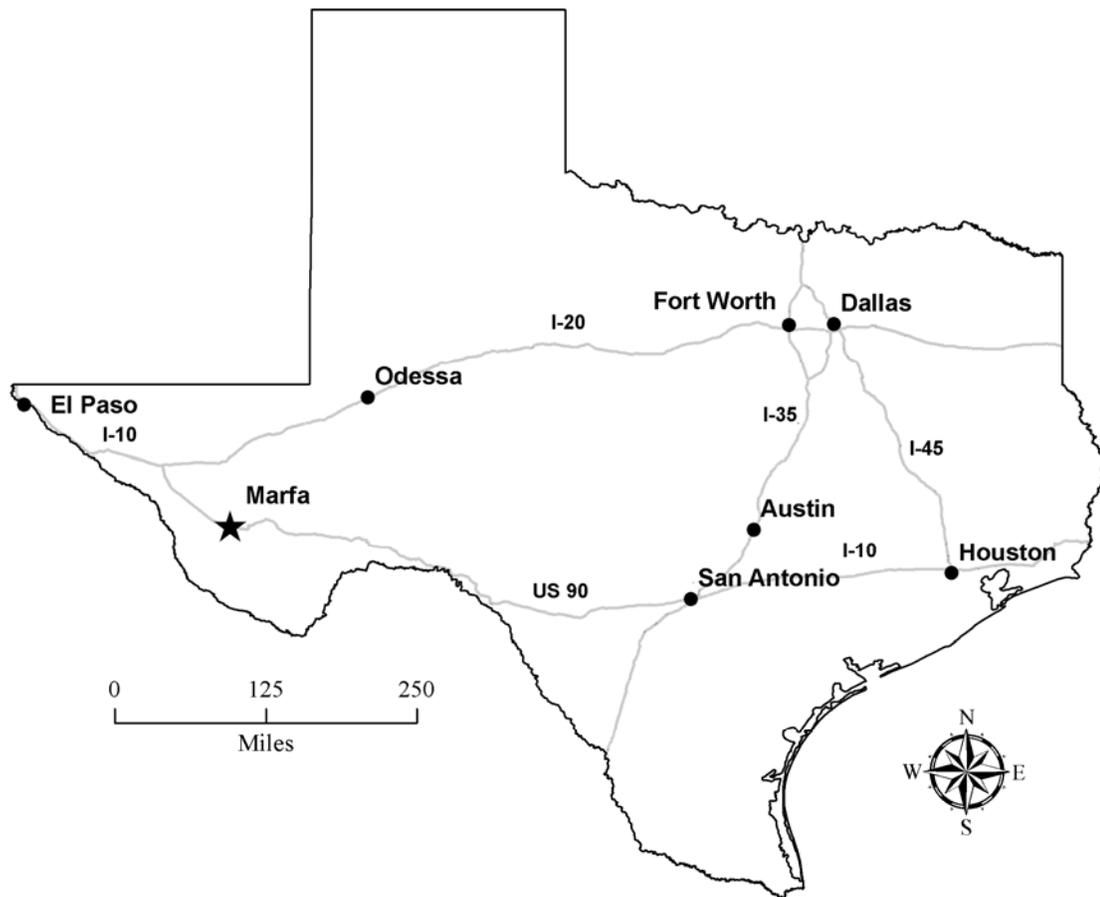
Considered in a geographic context, however, the evening takes on a surreal quality as the town and its cultural aficionados are three hours from the closest airport and surrounded by the vast, empty expanse of West Texas (Map 1). Despite this, the remote town of Marfa, Texas, with a population of just over 2,000 has become a major fixture on the international art map, and an increasingly desirable film location.

Direct effects of this recent boom are a rapidly redeveloping physical landscape and an influx of artists and part-time residents.

At the same time, this new economic boom is also a burden to some. Home valuations are skyrocketing while the household median income remains slightly more than half the national figure. A look at the town’s boom and bust cycle is important to a better understanding of how Marfa’s transformation started.

## **Boom, bust, and Donald Judd**

The history of Marfa, Texas, the county seat for Presidio County, is one shared by many West Texas towns—a cycle of boom and bust initiated by the railroad that made its way through the town in the late 19th century. Marfa initially served as a stop between San Antonio and El Paso, but ranchers soon leveraged the railroad’s potential to establish the town as a hub for wool, mohair, and cattle. The first half of the



**Map 1. Location of Marfa in relation to the State of Texas.**

20<sup>th</sup> century also saw a military presence develop in Marfa, since the town's proximity to the border provided an outpost location to monitor the Mexican Revolution. Camp Albert was established in the early 1900's and eventually became Fort D.A. Russell, which played a part in the country's World War II campaign. In addition, the Marfa Army Air Field helped train bomber aircrews during the same time period (Grube 2008, Hall 2004). By the 1960's, the boom that initially treated Marfa residents well had turned to bust for two reasons. The first was the wholesale withdrawal of military operations from the area soon after World War II, the second being the crippling seven-year drought in the 50's that

decimated the ranching industry. The Border Patrol emerged as the town's largest employer (Hall 2004). No new industry moved to the dying town, and the population was diminishing. Prospects for Marfa's future were at best to be remembered as the location where the film *Giant* was shot, or the place to see the mysterious "Marfa Lights" on the way to Big Bend National Park.

While Marfa's fortunes dwindled, Donald Judd, a world famous artist, began searching for a new place to live and work. (See the Judd Foundation website: <http://www.juddfoundation.org/>). Judd wanted to permanently display his

physically imposing artwork outside of the confines of typical museum settings. The artist also wanted to relocate to an area offering a sparse population and natural beauty. Judd considered locations in Southern California and Arizona before deciding on Marfa as his relocation destination. His knowledge of Marfa's existence was a result of a brief visit decades earlier while in the still in the Army (Hall 2005, Keane 2005). Beginning in 1973 and ending in the mid-80's, Judd bought a sizeable portion of the decaying town, culminating in the purchase of 340 acres of the former Army installation, Fort D.A. Russell (Hall 2004). The resulting effect was to alter areas of the town into an extended museum dedicated to works by the artist and a select few of his contemporaries.

Judd initially made purchases via funding from the New York City-based Dia Foundation; but, by 1985, the Dia Foundation began to encounter financial difficulties and wished to end its involvement with Marfa's transformation. Judd was able to transfer the Dia Foundation's holdings in Marfa to one he created through creative legal wrangling. In 1986, the Chinati Foundation was formed. Named after a neighboring mountain range, the foundation is an independent, non-profit, publicly funded institution that oversees what is now arguably one of the major art museums/experiences in the world (Grube 2008; Nelson and Corley 2005). That pinnacle was not reached overnight, nor was it a focus of either the artist or the town. Unlike a traditional "smokestack chasing" scenario, Donald Judd was never actively courted to relocate to Marfa, nor was it the artist's primary goal for the greater public, art aficionados or not, to visit Marfa. The Chinati Foundation had \$250 in the bank and only a nascent profile in the international art world at the time of Judd's untimely death in 1994 (Lubow 2005). The artist's death, however, was the catalyst that launched the town's economic transformation.

The Chinati Foundation was faced with the need to increase visibility. A large part of the Chinati Foundation's early marketing efforts were rooted in casual and inexpensive word-of-mouth campaigns. Chinati's associate director, Rob Weiner elaborates:

*It was very much word-of-mouth at the time. When [Judd] died and we were broke, we knew we needed to spread the word if we were going to survive. We had a great story to tell people about art and Marfa. (Keane 2005)*

The Foundation eventually developed a more sophisticated approach to raising awareness about their activities in Marfa. By expanding their board of directors, searching for grants, starting a membership program, initiating a mailing list, and sending press releases concerning their activities, the Foundation began what is now a routine strategy of reaching out locally and globally. It should be noted that despite this new direction in marketing, a public relations firm has never been hired and advertising for events never appear outside of the local newspaper (N. Terry, pers. comm. June 6, 2008).

Judd's legacy started to attract visitors and entrepreneurs with a sophisticated appreciation of the arts eager to utilize Marfa as a place to create, vacation, and live. New York City hipsters, Hollywood taste-makers, artists, art dealers, actors, architects, restaurateurs, the wealthy children of Texas' storied oil and cattle dynasties—all have visited or taken up residence in Marfa (Hall 2004, Lawlor 2005). The most pivotal visitors were Tim and Lynn Crowley, who began to inhabit Marfa in 1997. A Houston lawyer and art gallery owner respectively, the Crowleys spearheaded Marfa's next wave of physical redevelopment by buying both commercial and residential properties, rehabbing them, and then either selling or renting them. The Crowleys also engaged in their own word-

of-mouth marketing campaign targeting their friends (Lawlor 2005). The trickle of outside economic activity that began in the mid to late-90's quickly matured into a steady flow by 2000. Entrepreneurial activity has taken the traditional route such as aging motels being rehabilitated into hipster spas as well as the untraditional as embodied by the highly stylized "Food Shark," a refurbished vending truck that serves fresh Mediterranean food such as "Marfalafels." Also in the mix are galleries, restaurants, coffeehouses, and a bookstore. All of this activity caters to the roughly 10,000 yearly visitors and growing number of semi-permanent and permanent residents (Hall 2004, Keane 2005, Lubow 2005).

Basing E.D. around a formal museum—even when meticulously planned—does not necessarily guarantee success (Grodach 2008), making Marfa's ad hoc culture-based E.D. success all the more impressive.

Judd's original minimalist sensibilities are visible today not only in his work and the buildings he adaptively reused, but also in the redevelopment efforts of others attracted to the town. This situation represents a reversal of roles when considering other artists prominently associated with specific landscapes and built environments. For example, Georgia O'Keeffe's aesthetic was notably influenced by her time spent in Taos, Santa Fe, and Abiquiu, New Mexico. Conversely, the landscape and built environment of Marfa is influenced by Judd's aesthetic. Few artists have entire buildings and sprawling outdoor spaces dedicated to their work; even fewer have their work and aesthetic integrated throughout a town, and so metaphorically extending the art appreciation experience. Former Marfa mayor David Lanman notes that, for artists, art students, and art aficionados, visiting Marfa is akin to making a religious pilgrimage (D. Lanman, pers. comm., March 22, 2006). Add in the fact that the town continues to host an increasing number of cultural and educational events

appealing to an expanding demographic, and Marfa's future looks to be one that will not fall victim to fickle tourism trends.

Hollywood has also once again recognized Marfa's potential as a backdrop for films needing locations evocative of the rugged, yet sparse nature of the American West. In 2006, two movies were filmed in Marfa, *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*. Both films achieved box office success and critical acclaim affording Marfa additional exposure. The town benefited financially as well from Hollywood's renewed interest. The economic impact on the state for both productions reached \$16 million with a majority of that impact felt directly in Marfa (R. Brown, pers. comm., February 26, 2008). Upon closer analysis of the genesis of *No Country for Old Men*, even Hollywood's renewed interest in Marfa was partially a result of the town's growing cultural agglomeration. Local artists Jason and Ree Willaford, who three years prior bought and renovated a structure to serve as their home, studio, and gallery, happened to be friends with the Coen brothers, the producer/directors behind *No Country for Old Men*. The Coen brothers scouted Marfa upon the Willaford's invitation and found the town and surrounding area to be a good match for their filming needs (Graczyk 2008).

With the two films serving as multi-million dollar postcards for Marfa and an arts-based tourism economy continuing to energize an active real estate market, what was once a dying town is now booming. Marfa, like many other towns in the American West, has successfully supplanted prior industries with tourism and is now in the process of becoming a second-home haven. This is not being accomplished, however, without growing pains.

### **Location, location, location**

Marfa's power as an art world destination and second-home hotspot hit critical mass by 2000. At the time, its real estate values

largely reflected the town’s former economic troubles, setting the scene for a continuing aggressive escalation of market values for residential and commercial space. Much of this rise is due to rehabilitating and historically preserving existing structures—most often by out-of-towners looking for a part-time residence. Unfortunately, this escalation continues to push real estate out of reach for the majority of the town’s residents, who are not part of the art world juggernaut. Those long-term residents who owned real estate before the transformation are not immune to this situation, either, as increasing assessment values pose a constant threat (Table 1). A fair assessment of this

real estate boom is detailed by an author discussing the popularity of Marfa and the yearly “Open House” event that the Chinati Foundation hosts:

*If the popularity of Open House is one gauge of Marfa’s growth, another is the escalating cost of real estate, which inspires comparisons to the early days of Aspen and Telluride. Whereas just ten years ago it was possible to buy an adobe house for \$30,000, the same property today might sell for \$300,000. For Sale signs by Marfa Reality, with its dramatic longhorn logo, litter the town. (Finkel 2007)*

**Table 1. Change in Appraised Value for Single Family Residences in Marfa Texas 1998 – 2006.**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Value (in thousands)</b>
1998	\$26,557
1999	\$27,478
2000	\$28,027
2001	\$28,616
2002	\$29,363
2003	\$30,070
2004	\$32,131
2005	\$33,600
2006	\$42,695
Total Percent Change '98 – '06	61%

Source: Texas Comptroller

### Read more about Marfa

Dallas Morning News Feature

<http://www.dallasnews.com/share/content/dws/photography/2006/marfa>

Chinati Foundation

<http://www.chinati.org>

Dia Art Foundation

<http://www.diacenter.org>

Judd Foundation

<http://www.juddfoundation.org>

Marfa Blog

<http://www.marfa.org>

Food Shark

<http://www.foodsharkmarfa.com>

Marfa Book Co.

<http://www.marfabookco.com>

Ballroom Marfa

<http://www.ballroommarfa.org>

Thunderbird Motel

<http://www.thunderbirdmarfa.com>

Livingston Real Estate

<http://www.marfarealestate.com/>

Despite the imbalance between the town's predominantly poor full-time residents and the newer, much wealthier part-time (and increasingly full-time) residents, polarized opinions on the town's redevelopment seemingly do not exist. Some full-time residents see the redevelopment as saving the town and are impressed with the attention to vernacular detail people are exhibiting in their redevelopment projects (Hanna 2005, Keane 2005). A former mayor sees both sides of the coin, noting that although Marfa was "dying on the vine" before Donald Judd arrived, the subsequent economic and cultural development is

causing the "fiber of the community" to disappear (Hanna 2005, Lawlor 2005). Current mayor Dan Dunlap sees the redevelopment as beneficial to the town and also notes that the economic impact felt by Marfa is extending regionally and beyond Donald Judd's initial sphere of influence (D. Dunlap, pers. comm., June 14, 2008). Local newspaper publisher, Robert Halpern, echoes this sentiment when stating, "This town is not about Judd anymore. There are so many things going on: we have theater, music, literature, art" (Finkel 2007).

### Initial conclusions and more questions

Towns transforming from resource extraction and commodity hubs to amenity-rich vacation and second-home spots are nothing new in the American West (Di Stefano 2004). Inevitably, when a mention of Marfa is made, a nod towards Santa Fe, New Mexico, comes soon after. And while there are definite similarities between the two art hot spots, it took decades to establish Santa Fe as a globally recognized arts community, even with the city being located on an historic trade route. In comparison, Marfa's success happened practically overnight, in a far less accessible location. While more extensive qualitative research would be needed to confirm any speculation, one contributing factor for the rapid growth may be a "theoretical propinquity" or imagined nearness felt by new residents and visitors, aided by modern technologies. Coinciding with the rapid development of Marfa as a tourist and second-home destination are advances in inexpensive communication technology such as mobile phones, and the Internet. These new communication tools allow for national and international visitors to remain connected to family, friends, business, shopping, and the world while hours away from a major metropolitan area: the global being offered locally. With a more diverse and cosmopolitan population, a Marfa market, however unlikely in far West Texas, is now possible for specialty items such as the *New*

*York Times*, gourmet food, and eclectic films. Former Marfa mayor, David Lanman, confirms that the changing nature and “mindset” of the town is one that is distinctively global (D. Lanman, pers. comm., March 22, 2006).

If indeed there is a technologically-fueled imagined nearness in play, can it be leveraged to create other arts-based tourism opportunities in previously unthinkable locations? Recent research examining the emergence of “rural artistic havens” shows that artists are increasingly considering rural locations as viable alternatives to urban ones (Wojan, Lambert, McGranahan 2007).

Would it be wise for rural areas to court prestigious artists with incentives in a modified form of “smokestack chasing”? Paducah, Kentucky, has pursued a similar path with its “Artist Relocation” program. Paducah began courting artists with public programs and private financing incentives tied to the redevelopment and ownership of derelict structures in its struggling “Lowertown” neighborhood (Hurley 2002). The program has met with a great degree of success since its inception in 2000: it is estimated that private investment and tourism revenues have both surpassed the \$10 million mark as artists relocate from across the country (Downtown Research & Development Center 2004).

While what has happened in Paducah—multiple artists being courted and subsequently owning and renovating spaces—is largely different than the phenomenon in Marfa, both concepts have succeeded. Marfa’s example of success with one major artist and no government involvement bears merit, as does Paducah’s community building victory resulting from several local government initiatives.

Much more research needs to be completed in Marfa to examine whether or not the largely unplanned development of a globally recognized rural artistic haven can be

sustainable. This question of sustainability needs to be considered in a holistic sense. Growth and redevelopment will most likely continue in Marfa and questions will invariably arise concerning natural resource management, economic balance, and land use. Despite these potential hurdles, Marfa’s successful reinvention will continue to serve as a symbol of a new Texas that is global, urban, and yet still fiercely loyal to its rural past.

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