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arts & entertainment

For "RealWorld," a reality check

What happened in some host cities after the show left town

By [Ricardo Baca](#)
Denver Post Pop Music Critic



Cast members of the Denver version of MTV's "Real World" show are living downtown at 1920 Market St. (Post / Karl Gehring)

In a way, "The Real World" is like a swarm of army ants, altering everything in its path and leaving its imprint on a neighborhood for years to come.

But the television show in LoDo, now filming its 18th season, can also resemble a mosquito, buzzing, baffling and annoying ... then disappearing, leaving only a small bump in its wake.

It all depends on the neighborhood - and more specifically, the cast. But as economic-impact numbers are flung around Lower Downtown like a Real Worlder's shucked swimsuit, and as onlookers ponder the show's lasting cultural impact - if any - history offers some lessons.

Take Season 16, when seven strangers shared an Austin, Texas, warehouse three blocks off the bustling Sixth Street entertainment district, quaffing and reeling at bars such as the Chugging Monkey and the Dizzy Rooster. Or Season 13 in Chicago, when the cast reigned over the Wicker Park District, driving rents up and ruining nightlife for discerning hipsters.

Las Vegas, host to the 14th season, was fittingly bizarre. The

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cast landed a 2,900-square-foot suite - nearly an entire floor - at the then-new Palms Resort Casino. Many industry experts agree that the hard-partying cast helped solidify the celeb-heavy, bad-boy reputation the Palms boasts today, five years after opening.

"The Real World" won't necessarily transform LoDo's Market Street (the house sits on the 1900 block) into Bourbon Street. In some cities, the popular reality show has come and gone, leaving little more than memories and empty beer bottles.

"In the end, did having that show tape in Philly for three months have any lasting effects on the neighborhood?" offered Mark Shields, who lived a block from the Philadelphia "Real World" house in the Old City neighborhood during production. "It was already an area that was on the positive side of improvement, so it's tough to say."

Shields was the webmaster of therealworldphilly.com, a site similar to The Post's getrealdenver.com: It tracked the cast down, identifying them and their conquests before it aired - and before MTV was ready to release the information.

The Real World didn't turn the neighborhood around. Once the home of warehouses and boarded-up machine shops, Old City was already on its way.

"Rents and mortgages were going sky-high everywhere in the U.S., but it didn't help that they finished gentrifying the neighborhood," Shields said. "There was no more room to grow and 'The Real World' was shooting there all at the same time."

The hipsters and artists have moved on from Old City, he said. The "Real World" digs, housed in the old Corn Exchange bank building (now the F.U.E.L. art gallery) is a new hometown monument, a quick walk from Ben Franklin's grave, Betsy Ross' house and the Liberty Bell.

Talk about your American history.

The show left a larger wake when it filmed in 2001 in the northwest Chicago neighborhood of Wicker Park.

"They put a nail in the coffin of what used to be a cool neighborhood," said Aaron Leverenz, a 37-year-old bartender at the popular Beachwood Inn, a hole in the wall offering cheap beer and "Sister Christian" on the jukebox. "It used to be a starving artist place. It used to be on the hip side. But the area is not exactly what it used to be. It's not an artist neighborhood anymore. There's a lot of soccer moms now.

"But it was kinda headed up in that direction anyway."

Tony Jops, a manager at pizza joint/brewery Piece (where Chicago cast members worked for a spell), said the show didn't start the neighborhood's gentrification - but it certainly fast-forwarded it.

Before "The Real World," "it was still a real cool, edgy

neighborhood," Jops said. "But now you see yuppies walking around with kids. You didn't see that five years ago."

Tony chain shops like Cold Stone Creamery and Urban Outfitters have moved in.

In 2002, Las Vegas was a different kind of market for the show, given that the posse's posturing and partying took place in a tourist mecca and



splashed down in a new hotel, the Gen Y-skewing Palms, rather than an established neighborhood.

"For that group of people who were fanatics of the show, going to the Palms is like going to the holy shrine," said Thom Wise, a former Denver restaurateur and writer who is editor of Las Vegas Magazine. "It's become a real tourist mecca. And it absolutely had an enormous effect on the Palms. They use it in their press releases, so they're very aware of it."

Yes they are.

"We opened in November 2001, and 'The Real World' suite was constructed in 2002," said Chris Walters, public relations coordinator at the hotel. "Within a year of opening, we had a mainstream TV show being filmed out of the hotel, and it helped to confirm and cement that image of the Palms as a one-stop resort destination.

"And we hit that young, hip MTV kind of crowd. We're very celebrity-friendly."

"The Real World" jump-started the hotel's reputation. "It depicted the Palms as this place where people could stay in a fabulous suite with access to fabulous nightlife and fabulous food and never have to leave," Walters said.

"The Real World" suite still exists at the Palms as it did on the show. A night can be yours for \$10,000. In direct response to demand, the hotel is creating more themed rooms as part of a \$650 million renovation.

But the less obvious - yet much larger - cultural imprint left by "The Real World" is in the casino's relationship with the entertainment industry. Many Vegas casinos have a strict no-video cameras policy that includes the media and its Hollywood counterparts. But "The Real World" and its relationship with The Palms started a sea change.

"What was interesting about 'The Real World' and the Palms and Las Vegas casinos in general is that we opened up the doors and let the cameras in, which isn't something we do," Walters said. "That's why we have such a wonderful relationship with the media now: 'Party @ the Palms,' 'Inked,' 'The Girls Next Door.'

"They film here a lot, and we participate in movies and TV shows, like 'CSI' and 'Las Vegas' all the time. And they're so happy to do business with us because they don't have to go through the red tape that they would have to deal with at the corporate casinos."

In Austin, the show's impact is seen more at the South By Southwest music festival than it is in everyday life.

When the show arrived in Texas in 2005, one of the cast's jobs was making a music documentary on the festival. After that season aired, revealing to the world the gritty rock 'n' roll beauty of SXSW, the festival and the city enjoyed a massive March this year. Hotels sold out more quickly than usual and the festival seemed more packed than it has in the past five years.

But as Eric Zorr soaked in a sunny Wednesday afternoon earlier this week at the Halcyon Coffeehouse Bar and Lounge, located in Austin's warehouse district only a few blocks from the old "Real World" house, life was simple and quiet.

"It all seemed pretty canned," said Zorr, a barista at Halcyon. "I don't know if it affected us, really, other than that we're glad it's done and they're gone."

Staff writer Scott Lieber contributed to this story.

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