Standing more than 20 feet in height, 300 feet in length and 150 feet in width, the prehistoric earthen mound at Pueblo Grande represents one of the last remaining Hohokam architectural structures of its kind. Since becoming a City park in the late 1920s, over one million people have visited this famous National Landmark. Recent studies, however, have determined that erosion and other environmental factors are severely damaging the mound, creating concern about the future preservation of this large structure. The citizens of Phoenix recently approved funding for a program to preserve and interpret the platform mound, as well as a prehistoric ballcourt feature located to the north of the mound. This program will gather information about the history of previous investigations on the mound and ballcourt, and develop action plans for stabilizing these two important architectural features.

A Brief History of Pueblo Grande Archaeology
Many famous archaeologists and other individuals have reported on Pueblo Grande since Alphonse Pinart first visited the site in 1876. Adolph Bandelier, one of the more well-known anthropologists of his time, drew a detailed map of the platform mound in 1883. Bandelier also recorded several compound-walled ruins and possibly smaller platform mounds located east of the main mound. In 1887, Frank Hamilton Cushing of the Hemenway Southwest Expedition named the Pueblo Grande site “La Ciudad de los Pueblitos,” and noted 28 “lesser” mounds in the area. He also excavated in a 3 or 4 story adobe-walled structure about one mile north of the platform mound. This structure may be similar to the “Big House” at Casa Grande, a national monument located between Phoenix and Tucson. Under the direction of Dr. Joshua Miller, the Arizona Antiquarian Association excavated a tunnel into the east side of the Pueblo Grande platform mound in 1901. In 1907, Jesse Walter Fewkes of the Smithsonian Institution described some of the features Cushing had identified.

During the early 1900s, several attempts were made to save the mound by prominent citizens such as Col. James H. McClintock and State Representative James C. Goodwin. In 1924, Thomas Armstrong, Jr., a local banker, purchased the Pueblo Grande platform mound and donated it to the City of Phoenix. The area of prehistoric canals south of the mound, called “Park of Four Waters,” was obtained by the City in 1929 with the assistance of Dr. Omar A. Turney, who had just published his major study of Hohokam irrigation in the Salt River Valley. Turney convinced Eric Schmidt of the American Museum of Natural History to excavate a trash mound about 100 feet west of the platform mound in 1926-1927. Frank Mitvalsky (later changed to Midvale) was one of the crew members for this excavation project. Schmidt's work here contributed to the first doctoral dissertation on Hohokam prehistory, completed in 1929 for Columbia University.

In 1929, Odd S. Halseth was appointed Director of the newly formed Pueblo Grande monument. Halseth's articles about excavations at the site occurred regularly in the Phoenix newspapers, and his frequent lectures at Pueblo Grande were well-attended by both local and out-of-state visitors.
As part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Julian Hayden excavated on the platform mound and in adjacent areas between 1936 to 1940. Hayden's unpublished notes, photographs and maps constitute the bulk of what is known about the Pueblo Grande platform mound. As part of this same WPA work, Albert Schroeder trained his 1938-1939 survey crews in excavation techniques by excavating a trash mound south of the Pueblo Grande platform mound. Under the supervision of City Archaeologist Donald Hiser, a prehistoric ball court feature located north of the platform mound was excavated in 1954-1955. During the late 1960s and 1970s, numerous field schools excavated in areas surrounding the mound.

Pueblo Grande received recognition for its historical and research significance by the federal government in 1964, when the National Park Service named the site a National Landmark. Pueblo Grande is the only National Landmark in Phoenix.

**Hohokam Occupation at Pueblo Grande**

Pueblo Grande is a large prehistoric village built by the Hohokam who lived in much of Southern Arizona from around the time of Christ to A.D. 1450. The Hohokam farmers of the Salt River Valley relied on an extensive irrigation system to grow corn, cotton and other crops. The exact size of the site of Pueblo Grande is unclear because the original site once extended well beyond the present 100 acre boundary of Pueblo Grande Park. According to Omar Turney, the site may have covered nearly 2 miles by 1 mile. Current research suggests that the site extended over 1100 acres, with the village center approximately 400 acres in size. Hundreds of pithouses and adobe rooms, numerous cemeteries, and many other features still remain buried at Pueblo Grande. The most dominant feature of the site is the imposing platform mound, constructed of adobe, caliche (calcium carbonate), local sandstone and granitic rocks, river cobbles, and wood posts. Other special features at Pueblo Grande include three oval-shaped, earthen structures called ball courts. In addition, over a dozen prehistoric canals are located less than 1,500 feet south of the platform mound.

A sizeable population, perhaps over 500 people, once lived at Pueblo Grande. Located at a bend in the Salt River where the underlying bedrock is high, the canals south of the platform mound were situated at an ideal spot for insuring a constant supply of water from the river. During the later periods of occupation, Pueblo Grande apparently controlled the canals that fed water to several other large Hohokam villages further away from the river, and may have served as an administrative center for at least part of the Salt River Valley.

Pueblo Grande's prehistoric importance probably extended beyond the Salt River Valley as the site may have been an important trade center for the Hohokam. A wide variety of exotic materials found at the site indicate trade with other Southwestern regions. Gila and Tonto polychrome ceramics at Pueblo Grande suggests exchange networks with the Lake Roosevelt area, where several other large platform mound sites have been recorded. Marine shell ornament manufacture at Pueblo Grande is evidence for interaction with prehistoric Mexican groups, since the shell originated from the Gulf of California.

**Hohokam Platform Mounds**

The platform mound at Pueblo Grande is one of more than 40 recorded in south central Arizona, with at least 23 of these in the Salt River Valley. While the idea for building platform mounds may have originated in Mexico, these specialized features have a long local developmental sequence. Evidence from other sites in Arizona suggests that platform mounds evolved from sloping-sided, oval-shaped mounds that were capped with plaster. Around A. D. 1200, a new construction technique was used: massive, straight-sided retaining walls of coursed caliche adobe, with the space between the walls filled with combinations of trash and sterile soil. Internal support walls were built in some mounds. All platform mounds at this time also were surrounded by rectangular-shaped compound walls similar to the one at Pueblo Grande.

At least four different expansions were built onto the Pueblo Grande platform mound, each rectangular in shape, oriented north-south, and surrounded by a rectangular compound wall. This construction took place between A. D. 1000 and 1300. Features recorded on top of the Pueblo Grande platform mound include adobe-walled structures, mud and wood structures,
courtyards with ramadas, and caliche mixing basins. Firehearths in several of the structures indicate these rooms served as residences, many with replastered floors and filled-in doorways from remodeling.

**Pueblo Grande Ballcourts**
Over 225 large, oval-shaped features called ballcourts have been recorded in Arizona; at least 80 of these architectural structures once were present in the Salt River Valley, but many have been destroyed. Based on analogy with similar features in Mexico, archaeologists have proposed that a ballgame was played in them. Possibly three ballcourts are present at Pueblo Grande: one excavated north of the platform mound during the 1950s, one recorded by Frank Midvale south of the mound, and one reported by Omar Turney northwest of the mound.

Detailed information is only available for the small court located north of the mound. This ballcourt measures about 82 ft in length and 37 ft in width, and is oriented north-south. Each end contains an entrance. Stone markers were present on the floor in the middle of the ballcourt and at the south entrance; another marker may have been present at the disturbed north entrance. Ceramics indicate the ballcourt dates between A.D. 1050 and 1200.

**Stabilization Problems at Pueblo Grande**
A preliminary study of the mound conducted in the early 1980s determined that erosion and other environmental factors are severely damaging the platform mound. The main forces causing mound deterioration include surface water movement, ground water infiltration, burrowing insect and other animal intrusions, displacement of soil by plant roots, and aircraft vibration from the nearby Sky Harbor Airport. The most serious damage involves the erosion of the tops and bases of the adobe/rock walls, resulting in wall sluffing and collapse.

In order to assist the City in the development of a stabilization program, three preservation specialists from the National Park Service (NPS) recently spent two days examining the Pueblo Grande platform mound and ballcourt. A series of solutions were recommended by NPS to prevent or retard the destructive forces affecting the Pueblo Grande platform mound and ballcourt. A philosophy of preservation without replication guided the stabilization recommendations, with the idea that the integrity, craftsmanship, and authenticity of prehistoric structures should be preserved using the least amount of non-native materials (i.e., cement, metal, etc.). To assist in developing a more refined interpretation of the mound’s history, architectural and archaeological documentation will be undertaken before and during stabilization activities, and a report will be prepared on what is learned from this documentation.

The stabilization program recommended for Pueblo Grande involves extensive back-filling of excavated rooms as the primary preservation strategy to prevent further wall erosion. This back-filling also includes a build-up of soil outside the mound walls to ease internal pressure on the walls and to facilitate drainage of rainwater off the mound. The planting of grass will prevent erosion to the sloping fill on the sides of the mound, with buried drain pipes also used in some areas.

The Pueblo Grande Stabilization Program considers not only the need for preservation but also the desire of the public to observe the accomplishments of prehistoric Hohokam engineers. Therefore, parts of the platform mound and the ballcourt will be left open for viewing and public interpretation. A new interpretation program is being developed, in which the old wire fence will be removed, the trail redone and a better self-guided system established. New exhibits will also be installed inside the museum to expand interpretation. The platform mound and ballcourt interpretive areas will require continuous maintenance since native adobe and masonry techniques will be used to repair these areas. All of these efforts reflect the City of Phoenix’s commitment to preserving Pueblo Grande for the enjoyment of future generations to come.

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**Causes of Deterioration on the Mound**

- Rain
- Run Off
- Splash
- Percolation
- Ground Water
- Heat
- Wind
- Dead Load Stress
Suggested Reading

Doyel, David E.

Garrison, James W. and Elizabeth F. Ruffner (eds)

Gregory, David A.

Hayden, Julian D.

Wilcox, David R. and Charles Sternberg

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**Interpretive Pamphlet**

Accompanying an Exhibit Opening

February 12, 1989

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**Arizona Humanities Council**

4619 East Washington, Phoenix, AZ 85034, (602)275-1897, hours: M-Sat:9-4:45, Sun: 1-4:45

Pueblo Grande Museum is a Division of the City of Phoenix Parks, Recreation, and Library Department.

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