

Arizona mining town looks to turn preservation into possibility

ASU's Project Cities program is working with the town of Miami to revitalize its historic charm

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
March 27, 2026

Perched in the hills above the desert, the [town of Miami](#) tells the story of Arizona's mining past in brick, stone and weathered storefronts.

Its historic buildings are not just relics. They are living markers of identity — reminders of generations who built lives in a narrow canyon shaped by copper and time.

Today, those same buildings stand at a crossroads.

As Miami looks to revitalize its economy and attract new residents and visitors, its historic core — mostly built in the early 1900s — faces mounting pressure. Aging infrastructure, a declining population, limited funding and decades of uneven policy have left many properties vulnerable.

Yet within those same structures lies the town's greatest opportunity.

Now, through a partnership with Arizona State University's [Project Cities](#), Miami is attempting something both ambitious and deeply personal. It is trying to use its past to build a future.

"When I think of Miami, I think of resilience, and historic preservation is a critical part of that story," said [Alison Almand](#), program manager for ASU's Project Cities, housed in the [Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory](#). "Our students have an opportunity to contribute to research and dialogue around historic preservation and what it means for the community. This work has the potential to make a meaningful impact and drive real change."

(Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQVc1k9MMs8>)

A town with stories in its walls

Walk down Miami's Sullivan Street and the history is impossible to ignore.

There are century-old buildings that once housed saloons, shops, boardinghouses and a historic movie palace that catered mostly to copper miners and their families. Today, some have been reborn as antique stores, art spaces and small businesses. Others sit quiet, waiting.

Each building, said local property owner and town of Miami Preservation Committee member Richard Hall, carries many lifetimes within it.

"These buildings are a hundred-plus years old now, and they've had multiple lives," Hall said. "That's part of the story here. Things aren't static."

Hall moved to Miami seeking something different from Phoenix. Less noise. Less heat. More connection. What he found was a town full of character and challenge.

"Nobody's getting rich here," he said. "But there's artists here, musicians, dreamers. People living life on their own terms."

That spirit is part of Miami's charm. It is also part of its struggle.

The weight of history and hesitation

For decades, Miami has tried and failed to fully organize around historic preservation. Town manager Alexis Rivera said earlier attempts to modernize preservation policies in the early 2000s fell apart.

Residents and officials describe a mix of political division, misinformation and long-held beliefs that slowed progress.

"There's always been this up and down," said Ray Webb, a longtime resident and business owner. "You get positive energy going, and then it drops off again."

Part of that instability came from competing visions of what Miami should become. Another part came from persistent myths.

Some property owners believed mining companies would one day buy out the town, leaving buildings untouched and deteriorating. Others feared that historic designation would bring heavy restrictions or erase the town's individuality.

"There's some misinformation out there," said Project Cities student Dana Alvidrez, an engineering services administrator with the city of Chandler. "People think they won't be able to fix anything without government interference."

The result was stagnation.

While other Arizona mining towns like Jerome and Bisbee leaned into preservation and tourism, Miami struggled to align its priorities.

A partnership years in the making

Project Cities did not arrive overnight. It has been working with Miami for several years, tackling projects ranging from emergency management planning to tourism strategies. This latest effort may be the most consequential yet.

The program is offered through the [Sustainable Cities Network](#) in ASU's [Global Institute of Sustainability and Innovation](#). This university-community alliance connects ASU students and faculty with projects and sustainability needs faced by local community partners while providing students opportunities to gain real-world experience and develop potential career pathways.

Graduate students in ASU's [Master of Public Administration](#) and [Master of Public Policy](#) programs, in the [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#), are now developing updated historic preservation policies and district maps for the town. Their goal is to create a framework that aligns with state and national standards, opening the door to grants and long-term investment.

The four students came together just last month, and they're already diving in. Following their initial trip to Miami on Feb. 27, they are updating a draft of a historic preservation policy designed to position the town to pursue a Certified Local Government designation. This effort will open the door to funding opportunities through the State Historic Preservation Office for building preservation and local business support, resources that can play a critical role in helping the community recover more quickly and effectively after flooding events.

"These are students in their final semester, bringing together everything they've learned and applying it in a way that is useful to a real community," said [Daniel Schugurensky](#), a professor in the School of Public Affairs who teaches the capstone course.

For students like Josef Kennis, the work is both academic and deeply practical.

"They're looking to get more organized so they can preserve what they have and build off their history," said Kennis, a senior wastewater facilities manager for the city of Chandler.

That organization is key. Without formal policies and designation, Miami cannot access many state and federal funding opportunities.

Students with real-world stakes

Unlike traditional classroom projects, Project Cities students are often working professionals.

Many are employed in cities like Chandler and Mesa, bringing firsthand experience in planning, engineering, finance and administration.

"As an outsider and a student, we bring an objective perspective," said graduate student Laura E. Wilde, director of studios for Mesa Arts Center. "But we also bring professional experience from larger cities."

That combination allows students to bridge theory and practice.

For Lina Alam, the project is about more than policy.

“Historic preservation is not just about protecting buildings,” said Alam, an accounting administrator/supervisor for Chandler. “It’s about protecting identity, attracting reinvestment and creating funding opportunities.”

Students are also studying other Arizona towns that successfully leveraged preservation, including Jerome and Bisbee, to identify strategies Miami can adapt.

A plan for revival

At the center of the effort is a clear vision.

Miami wants to modernize its historic preservation ordinance, expand its designated district and strengthen its preservation committee.

With those tools in place, the town can pursue grants, invest in key buildings and create a more cohesive downtown experience.

Rivera said the focus will be on revitalizing the historic core along Sullivan Street and enhancing buildings and public spaces to attract visitors and businesses.

The town is already seeing signs of momentum.

Events like car shows, festivals and holiday markets are drawing larger crowds. Participation has grown from a few hundred attendees to several hundred more in recent years.

“We want to create more opportunities and expose the town of Miami,” Rivera said.

Community voices and cautious optimism

For many residents and business owners, the project represents hope, but also realism.

Kate Stewart, who owns an antique shop on Sullivan Street and creates mosaics in the sidewalks, sees potential in the town’s character.

“It’s a great town,” said Stewart, who runs Stewart's Antique Nook. “Recently it has been hit hard by floods, fires and road closures, and it deserves to be rediscovered.

Her small acts of beautification, filling cracks with handmade art, reflect a broader desire to make Miami feel alive again.

Bunny Kessler, who runs a thrift and antique shop inside a historic YMCA building, has built a business that serves both locals and visitors.

“Locals come because I’m close,” she said. “But we also get people from out of town who want vintage and want to explore.”

That mix of everyday life and tourism is exactly what the town hopes to grow.

Town Council member Phil Stewart believes the partnership with ASU sends a powerful signal.

“It speaks volumes,” he said. “We’re small and quaint, but we’re growing and doing it in a smart way with guidance from one of the most prestigious universities in the country.”

At its core, the effort is about balance.

Preservation must respect the town’s identity while creating opportunities for economic growth. Lee Ann Powers, a local researcher, sees historic buildings as living assets.

“You can repurpose them into something wonderful while keeping the flavor of the history,” she said.

That idea is central to the students’ work. They are not trying to freeze Miami in time. They are trying to help it evolve.

“This is the first step in a lot of steps,” Wilde said.

More than a class project

For ASU, Project Cities reflects a broader mission.

It connects academic work with real community needs, creating tangible impact while training future public servants.

“When you put teaching, research and community development together, you can provide tools that are very useful,” Schugurensky said.

For Miami, those tools could mean something more profound: a chance to tell its story on its own terms.

“This work goes beyond the classroom,” Alvidrez said. “We’re not just studying policy. We’re helping create something the town can take forward, something that can actually be used.”

Back on Sullivan Street, the buildings stand as they always have, layered with history and possibility. The difference now is not in the bricks or the mortar.

It is in the intention.

Miami is no longer waiting for change to arrive. It is trying to create it. And if the effort succeeds, the town’s past will not just be preserved — it will be the foundation for everything that follows.

“Communities like Miami remind us that the past isn’t something you move on from — it’s something you build from,” Almand said. “If this work succeeds, their history won’t just be preserved. It will guide what comes next.”

Learn more about Project Cities

[From sludge to solutions: ASU students collaborate with city of Tempe on water treatment](#)

[ASU, Chandler partnership brings sustainability to local parks](#)

[ASU students impact Arizona communities through design innovations](#)

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Town of Miami preservation board member Ray Webb (left) talks with ASU Professor Daniel Schugurensky as a group from Project Cities tours the town's downtown area on Feb. 27. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Remnants of the town's copper mining past are still visible in Miami, Arizona. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



The Miami YMCA used to house miners and once offered locals a place to play basketball, but it now serves as large used dry goods store. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Miami town manager Alexis Rivera talks about the community during lunch at Guayo's El Rey restaurant. Students from ASU's Project Cities toured the town on Feb. 27 to meet with local leaders about preservation strategies for the historic mining town. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery



Arizona Silver Belt and Copper Country News ad sales agent Kathy Riley (left) and town of Miami preservation board member and historian Lee Ann Powers chat in front of Miami Studio Cafe in downtown Miami, Arizona, on Feb. 27.



Stewart's Antique Nook is one of several antique stores that dot downtown Miami, Arizona.



Kate Stewart, the owner of Stewart's Antique Nook on Sullivan Street in downtown Miami, say she sees potential in the town's character. "It's a great town. Recently it has been hit hard by floods, fires and road closures, and it deserves to be rediscovered."



A colorful mural adorns a wall in downtown Miami, Arizona. ASU's Project Cities program is working with the leaders of the historic town to help revitalize its downtown district.



Signs in the town of Miami, Arizona, embrace its historic mining heritage.

Gallery



Graduate students from ASU's Project Cities program tour the downtown district of Miami, Arizona, with members of the Miami preservation board on Feb. 27.



Watts College graduate students (from left) Josef Kennis, Laura E. Wilde, Lina Alam and Dana Alvidrez take a tour of downtown Miami as part of a partnership between the town and ASU's Project Cities.



The Project Cities group meets with members of the Miami preservation board and the town manager during a trip to the Arizona mining town on Feb. 27.