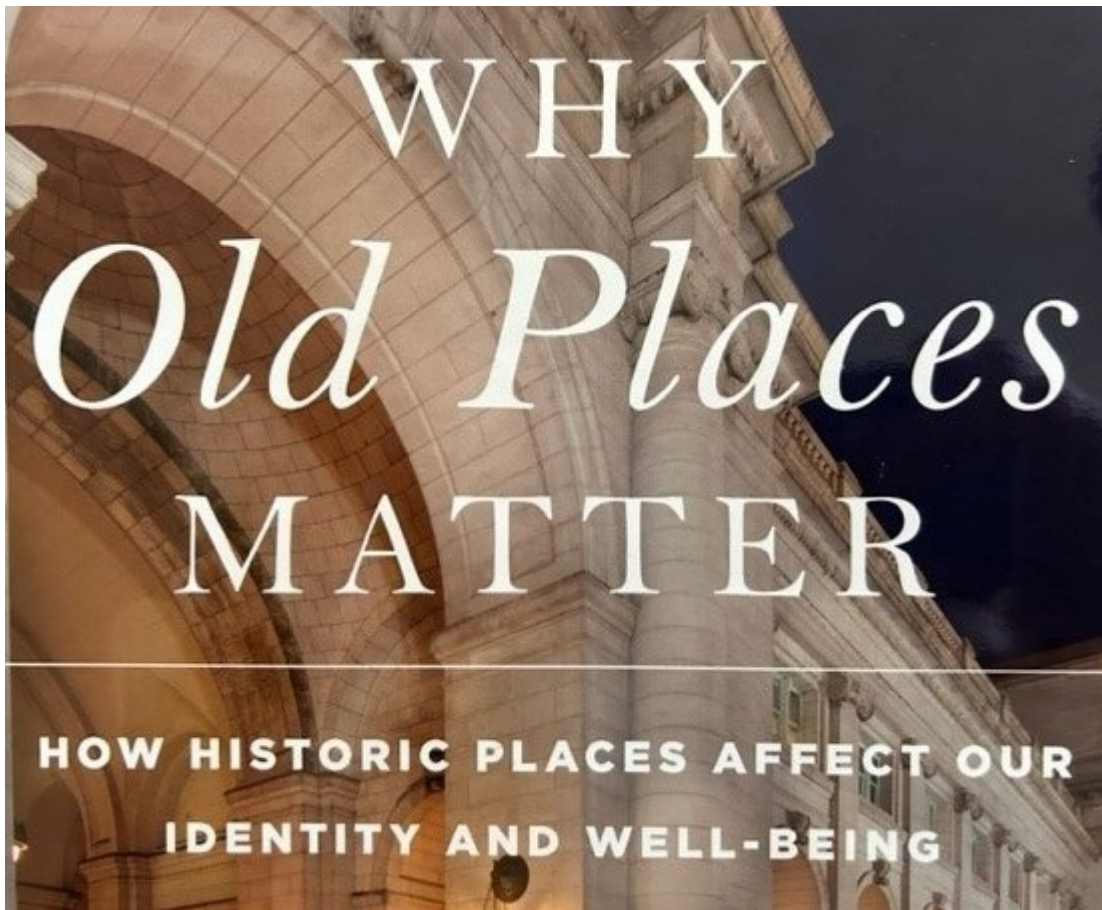




A SENSE OF TIME AND PLACE: HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN SANTA FE (Part 8)

Description



Part 8: Why Preservation?

The city of Santa Fe is over four hundred years old. For the past hundred years, a battle has been waged between those who have sought to preserve Santa Fe as a historic city, and those who wish to see Santa Fe grow and modernize unhindered. That battle was fought in 1912, it was fought in 1957, and it is still being fought in the 2020s. The question of preservation is never settled but is instead forever contested. We must always ask, what

reason is there to continue to preserve and perpetuate the built environment of the past? Or as Thomas M. Mayes of the National Trust for Historic Preservation has put it, why do old places matter?

Mayes answers that historic resources warrant protection because they make everyone's lives better in profound ways:

The feelings of continuity, memory, and identity from old places gives us a sense of who we are. The experience of beauty and the awe of the sacred at old places deepens our connections to a broader world and fosters a sense of empathy with others. Knowing the places where our ancestors are from gives people a deep sense of belonging. Learning history at the places where history happened is a viscerally memorable experience that stays with us for the rest of our lives. The simple act of continuing to use an existing place is one of the most effective things people can do for a more sustainable world. Old places inspire creativity and foster a flourishing economy. The bottom line is that old places matter for more reasons than we generally assume. As such, the preservation of old places is not just something "nice" to do; it provides profound material, emotional, sociological, and spiritual benefits for all.^[1]

Similarly, the American Planning Association has emphasized the value of historic resources, including historic districts, "as major contributions to the quality of life and to cultural vitality, as resources that both remind us about our past and provide a stimulus to economic vitality"^[2] In the words of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the international advisory body to the World Heritage Committee, the physical cultural heritage embodied in historic places is "one of the world's most important non-renewable resources."^[3] This cultural heritage relates to the whole built environment, "and should be seen in the ecological context of the world." Values associated with historic towns include people's identification with, and emotional ties to, the historic site, and the role of the heritage site in establishing social and cultural identity.^[4]

The drafters of Santa Fe's 1957 historic ordinance recognized that "we have a heritage of value for the whole nation, not merely to ourselves, a special quality that is both an asset and a responsibility." Several years later, John Gaw Meem forcefully agreed, "I feel so strongly that here in Santa Fe we architects should recognize that this is a very exceptional town that has inherited a type of architecture that has come to us for a thousand of years, is absolutely native to America, as no other architecture is, and that is worth preserving."^[5] And all of Santa Fe's early preservationists understood that Santa Fe's architecture was not monumental; rather, it was what ICCROM would recognize decades later as the "essence" of many historic towns: "simple buildings without special artistic qualities, anonymous vernacular architecture connected by open squares, lanes, streets, and parks."^[6] This is what Kate Chapman emphasized in 1930: "The outstanding quality of the Architecture of this region is simplicity. The earth, poor or rich, makes the walls, the forest trees the ceiling; so that the house of the Pueblo and the house of the Millionaire are not so very different. It is the only place in the world where this is so."^[7] The drafters of the 1957 ordinance said much the same:

The word "old" as used here refers to character rather than to date of construction. Adobe buildings of true Santa Fe style are ageless. There are a number of areas in which it will probably be impossible ever to determine the age of the buildings, yet all are of pure, native construction, built, usually, by the original occupant of genuine "old Santa Fe" "Being "historical" or "characteristic" must not be conceived of as something to be confined to the areas occupied by the wealthy. Irene von Horvath asked, "What are we trying to save?" and answered: "We would be trying to save only a portion of the present city, a community developed in rambling

harmony with the mountains around it, scaled to human beings, as unpredictable, slow-moving and imperfect as they are.^[8]

These preservationists identified and understood early on what, according to IRCCOM, is the essence and cultural value of historic town centers, which “modern planners have often failed to understand”: “their human scale, the refined traditional structure of their urban fabric, and their narrow winding streets, as well as the relationship between their public and private spaces.”^[9] These pioneers also came to an early understanding of the threats to this irreplaceable historic asset. They understood that to protect this invaluable heritage meant two things. First, the preservation of existing historic structures; and second, the careful regulation of new construction to ensure harmony with the distinctive character of Santa Fe. This is consonant with current preservation practice for world heritage sites which aims “to create harmony, avoid undesirable uses and maintain the existing scale of buildings, as well as their functional and cultural values.”^[10] Similarly, the standards applicable to world heritage sites prescribe that new buildings in historic cities should “harmonize” with the historic context by having a rhythm that harmonizes with the surrounding fabric, a mass in balance in its context, a silhouette respecting the traditional local character, traditional materials or compatible materials, windows that are characteristic in style and window to wall ratio, and high quality in design and construction.^[11] This is just what the drafters of Santa Fe’s historic ordinance set out to achieve in setting forth standards for harmonious new construction.

Santa Fe’s traditional adobe buildings in the historic districts are also of great architectural, cultural, and historic significance as examples of earthen architecture persisting over centuries of development. UNESCO has recognized that “earthen architecture is one of the most original and powerful expressions of our ability to create a built environment with readily available resources.”^[12] Indeed, “its cultural importance throughout the world is evident and has led to its consideration as a common heritage of humankind, therefore deserving protection and conservation by the international community.”^[13]

Preservation of historic structures is also of great value to the environment. “Existing earth dwellings can be considered as a “virtual carbon sink” of sorts “the use of dwellings with such low embodied carbon avoids emissions associated with the production of more carbon-intensive construction materials.”^[14] Transitioning to other construction materials collectively causes “a large amount of [carbon] emissions from the manufacture of those materials,” making it more difficult to achieve climate goals.^[15] The preservation and reuse of existing non-adobe structures is also beneficial environmentally, through the avoidance of the environmental impacts related to the construction process. Even the repair and reuse of historic windows is environmentally sound because new windows have a very short lifespan and continual replacement uses additional energy as well as land for disposal. In short, “the greenest building is one that is already built.”^[16]

Preservation of the ensemble constituting the historic districts of Santa Fe is also beneficial for equitable housing. The historic districts, particularly the Downtown and Eastside District and the Westside-Guadalupe district, are characterized by relatively dense housing patterns. Houses have grown organically to accommodate growing families; lots have been split to provide housing for children and parents and houses are frequently found adjoining or closely sited next to adjacent residences; family and residential compounds are characteristic features of many neighborhoods. It is impossible to stop escalating house prices in a small town as desirable as Santa Fe, but the strict regulation of alterations and additions to, and demolition of, this housing stock has almost certainly kept the prices in these areas lower than they would otherwise have been, as is evident by comparison to other desirable but non-historic areas of Santa Fe.

In addition, the ordinance seeks to maintain the ability of long-time residents to continue to reside in the historic districts through, for example, granting exceptions when required to “prevent a hardship” to the resident and to “ensure that residents can continue to reside within the historic districts.”^[17] This is an important

recognition that preservation is for people not just buildings, and that individual monuments and historic buildings are only part of the larger ensemble of the heritage resource.¹⁸ As ICCROM has emphasized:

Every historic area and its surroundings should be considered in their totality as a coherent whole whose balance and specific nature depend on the fusion of the parts of which it is composed and which include human activities as much as the buildings, the spatial organization, and the surroundings. All valid elements, including human activities, however modest, thus have a significance in relation to the whole which must not be disregarded.¹⁹

Finally, historic preservation is beneficial to Santa Fe through cultural tourism. Many of us who are not directly involved in the tourist economy may recoil at the idea of tourism being a positive good, but it is undeniable that Santa Fe's economy is largely dependent on the tourism sector as a source of jobs, revenue, and taxes, all of which are critical to a healthy municipal economy. In addition, tourism provides other benefits besides those that are merely commercial. Tourism facilitates cultural exchange, cultural diversity, and cultural understanding, which benefits all of us—these are the very things we seek when we travel elsewhere as a means to personal fulfillment. Tourism also attracts visitors who contribute to the vitality of the community and who often add their knowledge, skills, and other resources as part-time or full-time residents. For all these reasons, the benefits of cultural or heritage tourism are of value to Santa Fe; what is equally important is ensuring that tourism is managed responsibly and equitably for the benefit of every member of the community.

Some continue to chafe at architectural restrictions, arguing instead for the continuous evolution of styles, for the freedom to create architecture expressing an ever-renewing "today." These arguments are the same as those raised by architects against the passage of the historic ordinance in 1957. Then, as now, the opponents of the ordinance contended that the result of architectural controls would be that Santa Fe's architecture will become a mockery and a lie. New construction will be forced to masquerade in century-old costumes, with no distinction made between genuinely old edifices and recent imitation. Instead, it was argued, the "honest approach" would be for Santa Fe's architecture to be based squarely upon twentieth century technology though at the same time considering carefully what the City's past offers as a starting point. The result would be "an architecture which looks proudly towards tomorrow and not timidly at yesterday."²⁰

The responses to these arguments made then are equally valid today. Irene von Horvath noted that the intention of the ordinance was to save "only a portion of the present city."²¹ John Gaw Meem also emphasized that the ordinance was designed not to restrict architectural creativity throughout the entire city, but applied instead only to "a small area of Santa Fe, the historical area," which it was both legitimate and important to protect through restrictions on the styles of architecture.²² Moreover, as pointed out by Oliver La Farge, one of the characteristics of Santa Fe's historical areas was the stability of its architectural character over time, as contrasted with more dynamic cities like Albuquerque. To preserve this rare quality, it was necessary to enact a "self-denying ordinance."²³ In other words, the very idea of preserving the unique characteristics of a historic area involves consideration of whether that area is characterized by stability or change. If it is characterized by change, as is true with most American cities, then that characteristic should be permitted to continue even within a designated historic district, rather than freezing the district at a moment in time. But when a historic area is characterized by stability over time, as is the case in Santa Fe's core historic district, then stability, not change or "evolution" is one of the important characteristics to be conserved. But property owners, builders and architects retain the freedom to design and build however they please outside of these districts, permitting continued evolution of architectural styles in the city and surrounding area.

Architectural historian Vincent Scully observed in 1988 that Santa Fe's early proponents of historic preservation "took a lot of flak" from those who wanted to modernize the city, "but time has proven them

dead right.â?• He continued:

Santa Fe is a very large town, but it fits in to the sandy foothills of the Sangre de Cristos not only unobtrusively but as if it had grown there. Extensive suburbs blend into the landscape because the colors of the buildings are those of the earth and their shapes are simple and all the same, as well as being culturally traditional to the place. Santa Fe is therefore one of the best demonstrations in the world right now of the concept of contextuality which has come to play so large a part in contemporary architectural theory. Contrary ideas, promulgated by advocates of the International Style, that every new building should reinvent the wheel in its forms and should be different from all other buildings, or should at the very least express â??modern materials,â?? turned out in practice to be very destructive indeed, and they powerfully assisted the automobile in destroying the fabric of our cities everywhere. It therefore begins with the relationship of everything to everything else. Thus the essence of the buildings of a city is not invention but the formation of building types, creating shapes consonant with the place and with all other buildings there. That is exactly what the Southwest has always had, beginning with the pueblos themselves. Now Santa Fe has it, and has learned how to use it supremely well.[24]

In 1916, Edgar Lee Hewett observed of Santa Fe that â??the town of three hundred years ago actually survives.â?• [25] One hundred years later that ancient city continues to endure, due to the efforts of the proponents of the â??Campaign of 1912-1913,â?• the artists and builders who carried forward the language of traditional, regional architecture into the twenty-first century, and the foresight of those who drafted and enacted the historic ordinance of 1957 and guided its subsequent amendments. These early preservationists all recognized that Santa Fe was a rare, irreplaceable, and still living historical and cultural asset that needed to be protected as the common heritage of the community and indeed the world. As a result of their legacy, Santa Fe has preserved and perpetuated its unique sense of time and place.

[1] Thompson M. Mayes, *Why Old Places Matter: How Historic Places Affect Our Identity and Well-Being* (Lanham: Rowland & Littlefield, 2013), 111.

[2] American Planning Association, â??Policy Guide on Historic and Cultural Resourcesâ?• (2007).

[3] B.M. Feilden and J. Jokilehto, *Management Guidelines for World Cultural Heritage Sites* (Rome: ICCROM, 1998), 12.

[4] *Ibid.*, 18-20.

[5] John Gaw Meem, interview by Sylvia Loomis, December 3, 1964, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-john-gaw-meem-12968>.

[6] Feilden and Jokilehto, *Management Guidelines*, 78.

[7] Catherine Colby, *Kate Chapman: Adobe Builder in 1930s Santa Fe* (Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2012), 77

[8] Irene von Horvath, â??An Architectural Ordinance for Santa Fe? yes!,â?• *New Mexico Architect*, November-December 1960, pp. 13-14

[9] Feilden and Jokilehto, *Management Guidelines*, 79.

[10] Ibid., 80.

[11] Ibid., 92.

[12] UNESCO, "World Heritage Earthen Architecture Program (WHEAP)," <https://whc.unesco.org/en/earthen-architecture/>, last accessed May 5, 2023.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Alastair T. M. Marsh & Yask Kulshreshtha, "The state of earthen housing worldwide: how development affects attitudes and adoption," *Building Research & Information*, 50:5, 485-501, DOI: 10.1080/09613218.2021.1953369, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09613218.2021.1953369> (last accessed May 5, 2023).

[15] Ibid.

[16] Carl Elefante, "The Greenest Building Is One That Is Already Built," *Forum Journal*, 21, no. 4 (Summer 2007), quoted in Mayes, *Why Old Places Matter*, 77.

[17] SFCC Â§ 14-5.2(C)(5)(b).

[18] Feilden and Jokilehto, *Management Guidelines*, 15, quoting UNESCO's 1976 Recommendation Concerning Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas.

[19] Ibid.

[20] John P. Conron, "An Architectural Ordinance for Santa Fe? no!," *New Mexico Architect*, November-December 1960, 12-16.

[21] Irene von Horvath, "An Architectural Ordinance for Santa Fe? yes!," *New Mexico Architect*, November-December 1960, 13-14.

[22] John Gaw Meem, interview by Sylvia Loomis, December 3, 1964, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-john-gaw-meem-12968>.

[23] Oliver La Farge, "Santa Barbara's Architectural Feuding Follows Same Pattern as Santa Fe's," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, October 20, 1957.

[24] Vincent Scully, *Pueblo/Mountain, Village, Dance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd Ed 1989), 372.

[25] Edgar L. Hewett, "Santa Fe in 1926," *El Palacio* 4, no. 1 (1917), 24.