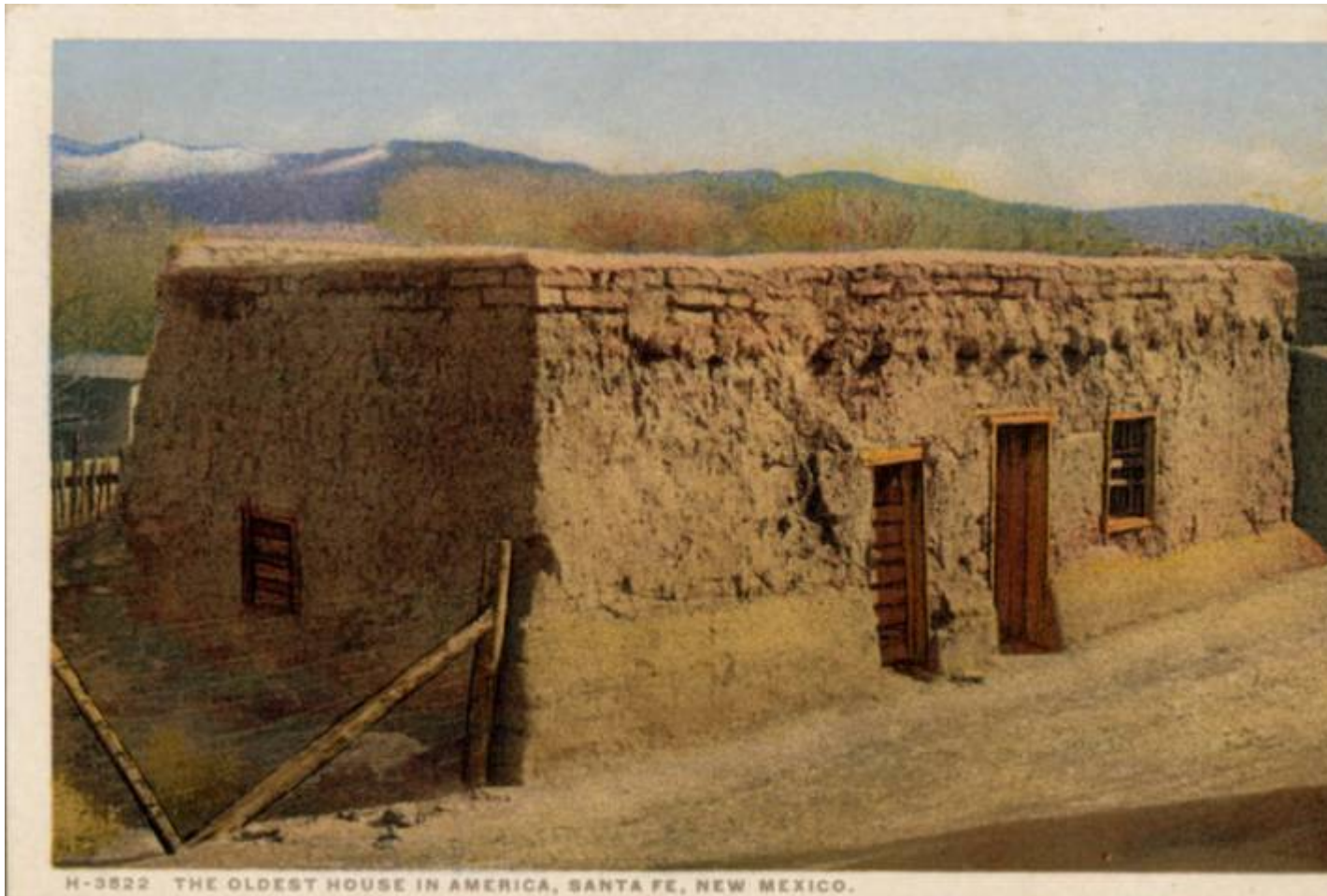


A SENSE OF TIME AND PLACE: HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN SANTA FE (PART 5)

Description



Part 5: The Core Historic District

William J. Murtaugh, the first Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places, describes historic districts as “areas that impact human consciousness with a sense of time and place.”^[1] By its very nature, a historic district is an ensemble in which the whole is greater than the individual parts; as defined by the National Register of Historic Places, historic districts possess “a significant concentration, linkage, or continuity of sites, buildings, structures, or objects united historically or aesthetically by plan or physical development.”^[2] As architectural historian Steven W. Semes puts it, individual buildings within a historic district “jointly define a collective character greater than that contributed by any one of them” and together, they combine to form “strongly identifiable and memorable places.”^[3] The value that historic preservation attempts to safeguard is precisely this “sense of identity in a place sustained by the decisions of multiple authors over an extended period of time.”^[4]

It was just such a sense of identity embodied in the historic character of Santa Fe that the drafters of the 1957 historic ordinance were anxious to conserve. They wrote that “the character of Santa Fe cannot be preserved merely by saving isolated fine or historic buildings. We must think in terms of areas.”^[5] Irene von Horvath, one of the members of the committee that authored the ordinance, affirmed that the committee wanted to preserve not merely individual buildings, but a “Santa Fe character” that was “centered around a nucleus already in existence—the old Plaza, the old winding trails leading into the city from the south, and the Santa Fe river valley eastward to the Sangre de Cristo range.”^[6]

This core area was established as the original historic district in the 1957 ordinance and was delineated by a somewhat complicated set of boundaries that roughly encompass the historic center of Santa Fe.^[7] Given the importance of the historic character of an area, it is important to be able to define and describe that character in order to ensure that it is maintained. As Semes notes, historic character is “vulnerable to erosion or loss due to the removal of features that define it or the introduction of new features that might alter or diminish it. The objective of any preservation program should therefore be to identify the “character-defining elements” of a historic place and take measures to sustain them by managing change to prevent unnecessary loss.”^[8] Similarly, the Department of the Interior’s Standards recommend “identifying, retaining and preserving building features that are important in defining the overall historic character of the setting.”^[9]

The drafters of the 1957 historic ordinance originally intended to define the character of the historic district in the ordinance but, as von Horvath later explained, “a broad statement of “general character” was not deemed sufficient for an ordinance—and instead “a detailed account was required stating what was or was not to be permitted in the designated area.”^[10] However, von Horvath has herself provided a useful statement of general character in her description of the historic district as having “developed in rambling harmony with the mountains around it, scaled to human beings, as unpredictable, slow-moving and imperfect as they are,” and displaying “the human touch, the handmade look.”^[11] This description is similar to that given by architect Kate Chapman in her 1930 book, *Adobe Notes*, in which she wrote that “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.”^[12] Similarly, John Gaw Meem has described the “fugitive” assets of the historic district, including the “medieval street pattern in the city with narrow winding streets that date from the 17th Century,” and the “curiously shabby” and “gentle type of architecture” that created Santa Fe’s unique atmosphere.”^[13]

In these descriptions we find the key elements that create the distinctive character of the oldest parts of Santa Fe: the human touch, the handmade look, a rambling harmony with the surrounding mountains, a human scale, imperfection. First and foremost, this area is characterized by traditional adobe buildings. These buildings, at least those that are residential, are vernacular in style, which architectural historian Paul Oliver has defined as architecture “of the people, and by the people, but not for the people”—in other words, not designed *for* people by architects, instead made *by* the people themselves.^[14]

This true vernacular architecture was supplemented in the first half of the twentieth century with a style that attempted to adapt to modern needs while still closely emulating the preexisting vernacular architecture of simple, humble buildings made of adobe and timber, as pioneered by artist-builders including William Penhallow Henderson, Frank Applegate, and Kate Chapman, and formally trained architects, most notably John Gaw Meem. Residential buildings continued to be made of adobe but a number of institutional buildings in this style were constructed instead of more “permanent” materials such as concrete block, hollow tile, brick and cement stucco while still reflecting their “adobe origin.”^[15] As described by Meem, this was “a natural evolution whereby erodible materials were replaced by more permanent waterproof substances which still retained the spirit

and character of the original.[\[16\]](#)

As a result of this combination of the old vernacular building traditions and the development of what would later be called the “revival” styles, the historic area, as typified by the Camino del Monte Sol neighborhood, “kept its rustic, almost rural, historic appearance” characterized by “the traditional Spanish practice of adobe architecture,” alongside the revival dwellings created by artists, less self-conscious continuations of the historic styles, and idiosyncratic expressions of adobe architecture.[\[17\]](#)

Consistent with this historical development, the planning committee set forth detailed descriptions of the two architectural styles that predominated in the historic district: The first, which it calls “Old Santa Fe style,” is described in the ordinance as “characterized by construction with adobe bricks,” and includes “the so-called ‘Pueblo,’ or ‘Pueblo-Spanish’ or ‘Spanish-Indian’ and ‘territorial’ styles.”[\[18\]](#) These names refer to the traditional vernacular architecture of the region, plus the slight modifications to that style during the territorial era. The ordinance then lists a number of specific features of this style, most of which are clearly taken from the article on Santa Fe architecture written by Sylvanus Morley in 1915, in which he defined the “more important characteristics of Santa Fe Architecture.”[\[19\]](#) A comparison between Morley’s article and the Ordinance’s description shows the similarities:

Morley, “Santa Fe Architecture”

“1st. The general effect is low and long. One story is the rule, two stories the exception, and three, save in church towers, unheard of. This makes for stability. The buildings appear to cling to mother earth and do not rear themselves in ineffectual competition with natural elevations.”

“2nd. All prominent faade lines are horizontal. Gable or pointed roofs are never seen. Drainage is effected by a slight pitch, but the ridge of the roof never appears above the top of the fire-wall. The uniform use of flat or very slightly sloping roofs not visible above the fire-wall, is one of the most distinctive characteristics of Santa Fe Architecture, and greatly enhances the low and long effect mentioned above.” “A further application of this same principle is seen in the complete elimination of the Roman arch and semi-circular outlines so common in California Mission Architecture. This is never used in Santa Fe faades, and constitutes the chief point of difference with the California Mission Style.”

“3^d. The faade is broken by a number of architectural devices which relieve the monotony of the otherwise blank adobe walls, such as: inset porches (*portales*), balconies (*balcones*), projecting roof-beams and water-spouts (*vigas* and *canales*), fire-walls *pretiles*, fire-wall apertures, and flanking buttresses. These are disposed both symmetrically and asymmetrically, and give Santa Fe faades an infinite variety.”

Ordinance, “Old Santa Fe Style”[\[20\]](#)

“With rare exceptions, buildings are of one story, few have three stories, and the characteristic effect is that the buildings are long and low.”

“Roofs are flat with a slight slope and surrounded on at least three sides by a firewall of the same color and material as the walls, or of brick. Roofs are never carried out beyond the line of the walls except to cover an enclosed portal, or porch, formed by setting back a portion of the wall, or to form an exterior portal, the outer edge of the roof being supported by wooden columns.” “Arches are almost never used except for nonfunctional arches, often slightly ogive, over gateways in free standing walls

“Facades are flat, varied by inset portales, exterior portales, projecting vigas or roof beams, canales or water-spouts, flanking buttresses and wooden lintels, architraves and cornices, which, as well as doors are frequently carved and the carving may be picked out with bright colors.”

4th. The color preferably should be one of the numerous shades of adobe. These vary from a pale buff or cream to a fairly dark brown; and even pink and red are not unknown colors in the New Mexico soil. By extension however, any light color is permissible. Strong and vivid tones are taboo, particularly blues and greens. This "protective coloration" of the Santa Fe Style harmonizes admirably with its environment, and is one of its chief charms.

All exterior walls of a building are painted alike. The colors range from a light earth color to a dark earth color. The exception to this rule is the protected space under portales or, in church derived designs, inset panels in a wall under the roof, in which case the roof overhangs the panel. These spaces may be painted white or a contrasting color, or have mural decorations.

In addition to these principles derived directly from Morley's description, the ordinance also addresses windows and doors for Old Santa Fe Style buildings, specifying that "solid wall space is always greater in any facade than window and door space combined. Single panes of glass larger than 30 inches in any dimension are not permissible except as otherwise provided."[\[21\]](#)

Both Morley's descriptions of "Santa Fe Architecture" in 1915 and the historic ordinance's description of "Old Santa Fe Style" in 1957 are attempts to delineate the most important features of the adobe buildings that were found in Santa Fe over a period of more than three hundred years. The use of the word "style" is misleading because, as noted above, this type of building is more properly referred to as "folk" or "vernacular" architecture, and therefore is not actually a style at all. As one authority describes the difference:

Domestic buildings are of two principal sorts: folk houses and styled houses. Folk houses are those designed without a conscious attempt to mimic current fashion. Many are built by their occupants or by non-professional builders, and all are relatively simple houses meant to provide basic shelter, with little concern for presenting a stylish face to the world. Most surviving American houses are not folk houses but are styled; that is, they were built with at least some attempt to being fashionable. As such, they show the influence of shapes, materials, detailing, or other features that make up an architectural style that was currently in vogue.[\[22\]](#)

In Santa Fe, unlike in the rest of America, owner-built folk houses did survive and indeed predominated. These simple adobe buildings, the opposite of fashionable, were recognized by Morley and the drafters of the ordinance as the very essence of the built character of Santa Fe's historic core.

The second style recognized in the ordinance is referred to as "Recent Santa Fe Style." Whereas Old Santa Fe Style describes purely vernacular building traditions, Recent Santa Fe Style describes the more self-conscious building practices of the early twentieth century artists and architects who emulated the forms, massing, materials, and details of the vernacular tradition. The ordinance describes this style as "a development from and elaboration of, the Old Santa Fe Style with different materials and frequently with added decorations."[\[23\]](#) The ordinance further explains that the intent of Recent Santa Fe Style "is to achieve harmony with historic buildings by retention of a similarity of materials, color, proportion and general detail. The dominating effect is to be that of adobe construction."[\[24\]](#)

As noted by the Santa Fe Planning Department, Recent Santa Fe Style is not a new or contemporary style but instead a "a new term for two older, already flourishing revival styles."[\[25\]](#) These buildings are "essentially modern structures in the traditional Pueblo Spanish and Territorial styles."[\[26\]](#) With respect to specific standards mandated by the ordinance, the primary difference between the "Recent" and "Old" Santa Fe styles is that most of the standards governing Recent Santa Fe Style buildings apply only to "publicly visible

facades.â?• Such visible facades must generally conform to Old Santa Fe Style; for example, doors and windows must conform to the Old Santa Fe Style, doors and windows may not exceed 40% of the facade, doors and windows may not be located nearer than three feet from the corner of the facade, the facade must be of a single earth color, and at least 80% of the facade must be of adobe or simulated adobe finish. In addition, whereas Old Santa Fe Style buildings rarely have more than one story, those in Recent Santa Fe Style can be two stories in height, or even higher provided the facade includes â??projecting or recessed portales, setbacks or other design elements.â?•[27]

Having identified these two styles within the historic district, the 1957 ordinance creates a â??Historical Style Committeeâ?• which â??shall judge any proposed alteration or new structure for harmony with adjacent buildings, preservation of historical and characteristic qualities, and conformity to the Old Santa Fe Style.â?•[28] Elsewhere, the ordinance provides that any buildings â??not in the Old Santa Fe Styleâ?• shall be considered â??non-conforming.â?•[29] These provisions appear to be drafting errors, as the ordinanceâ??s references to Recent Santa Fe Style clearly indicate that conformity to this style is also acceptable.

While Old Santa Fe Style and Recent Santa Fe Style are the only two architectural styles expressly recognized by 1957 historic ordinance, the ordinance does include two means by which non-conforming styles might be allowed. First, buildings outside the two accepted styles are not treated as non-conforming if â??given special approval by the Historical Style Committee for architectural or historic interest.â?•[30] This provision would protect significant non-conforming buildings in existence at the time the ordinance was passed, such as the Federal Courthouse, the St. Francis Cathedral, and the Scottish Rite Temple. Second, the ordinance permits the committee to recommend exceptions and waivers, â??provided such exceptions do not damage the character of the district, and are required to prevent a hardship to the applicant or an injury to the public welfare.â?•[31] These two conjunctive criteria set a very high bar to approval of any deviations. Only in quite unusual circumstances could both criteria be met, because any significant deviations from Santa Fe Style, whether Old or Recent, would necessarily damage the collective character of the district which is defined by that style, and would therefore be disallowed under the first criterion, and any less significant deviations would be unlikely to be required either to prevent private hardship or public injury.

In 1972, the city council voted to extend the boundaries of the historic zone to encompass the previously unprotected areas of the east side of the city, resulting in the boundaries now referred to as the â??Downtown and Eastside Historic District.â?• The Santa Fe New Mexican reported that none of the members of the city council opposed the extension, but one member, Alex Padilla, did ask, â??Is there anything historical on the westside of town?â?• According to the newspaper, â??there was no specific answer.â?•[32] Another decade would pass before the city council took up this question again.

Next: [Part 6: The Additional Historic Districts](#)

[1] Jukka Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999), 267.

[2] *National Register Bulletin 15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, (National Park Service, revised for internet 1995), 5.

[3] Steven W. Semes, *The Future of the Past: A Conversation Ethic for Architecture, Urbanism, and Historic Preservation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 67.

[4] Ibid.

- [5] Quoted in “Proposal for ‘Historic Zone’ To Be Aired April 11th,” • *Santa Fe New Mexican*, March 31, 1957.
- [6] Irene von Horvath, “An Architectural Ordinance? yes!,” • 13-14.
- [7] Santa Fe Ordinance 1957-18, Section 4 (1957).
- [8] Semes, *The Future of the Past*, 67.
- [9] Ibid., 66.
- [10] von Horvath, “Architectural Ordinance,” • 13-14.
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Catherine Colby, *Kate Chapman: Adobe Builder in 1930s Santa Fe* (Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2012), 77.
- [13] “Architectural Plan Offered To Chamber,” • *Santa Fe New Mexican*, March 4, 1957.
- [14] Paul Oliver, *Dwellings* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003), 15.
- [15] John Gaw Meem, “Spanish Pueblo Architecture in Permanent Materials,” • *Exploration* (May 19, 1975), 2-5.
- [16] Ibid.
- [17] National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for the Camino del Monte Sol Historic District (1988).
- [18] Ord. No. 1957-18, Â§ 3(a).
- [19] Sylvanus Griswold Morley, “Santa Fe Architecture,” • *Old Santa Fe: A Magazine of History, Archaeology, Genealogy, and Biography* 2, no. 3 (January 15, 1915), 283-284.
- [20] Ord. No. 1957-18, Â§ 3(a).
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] Virginia Savage McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America’s Domestic Architecture*, rev. ed. (New York: Knopf, 2022), 5.
- [23] Ord. No. 1957-18, Â§ 3.
- [24] Ibid., Â§ 4(b).
- [25] Harry Moul et al., *Design and Preservation in Santa Fe: A Pluralistic Approach* (Santa Fe: Santa Fe Planning Department, 1977), 31.
- [26] *Historical District Handbook: A Guide to Architectural Preservation and Design Regulations in Santa Fe’s Five Historic Districts* (Santa Fe: City of Santa Fe Planning Department, 1986), 13.

[\[27\]](#) Ibid.

[\[28\]](#) Ibid., Â§ 7(f).

[\[29\]](#) Ibid., Â§ 13.

[\[30\]](#) Ibid., Â§ 13.

[\[31\]](#) Ibid., Â§ 11.

[\[32\]](#) â??Cityâ??s historic zone extended,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, April 13, 1972.