A SENSE OF TIME AND PLACE: HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN SANTA FE (Part 3)

Description

Part 3: 1917 to 1956

The purpose of the â??Campaign of 1912-1913,â?• as expressed by Sylvanus Morley, was for â??awakening public sentiment in the preservation of our historic buildings and for the education of the public to the appreciation of the Santa Fe style of architecture.â?•[1] The outcome of this effort was mixed. While â??the pendulum of public opinion started to swing more favorably toward the perpetuation and preservation of traditional Santa Fe architecture,â?•[2] no laws or regulations were passed, historic properties remained unprotected, and new construction remained unregulated. In addition, the traditional style of architecture continued to compete â??with the bungalow and other styles that prevailed in the rapidly developing portion of Santa Fe to the south of the state capitol.â?•[3]

In 1917, however, the New Mexico Museum of Art was completed and dedicated. It was this building, in the view of Jesse Nusbaum, that finally turned the tide of public sentiment. He wrote:

> It has long been the general consensus that the Art Museum, more than any other structure, turned the public trend firmly in favor of the Santa Fe style, and promoted the city-wide and public interest which has since not only dominantly characterized home, business and public building architecture in Santa Fe, but influenced architectural trends elsewhere in New Mexico, and more widely.[4]

Ralph Twitchell agreed that it was the erection of the New Mexico Museum of Art that â??clinched the argumentâ?• in favor of the continuation of Santa Feâ??s traditional architecture and â??brought home even to the most obtuse a realization that Santa Fe had an American architecture and an American art.â?•[5] He wrote:

> The influence of the art museum, an object lesson readily learned, was all powerful in solidifying public opinion, and shortly in the changes of commercial structures, in repairs and modifications, wherever possible, the Santa Fe type was followed and adopted.[6]

The communityâ??s embrace of the â??Santa Fe typeâ?• at this point in time was consistent with a general transition in architectural styles throughout the country during that era. Whereas the previous era had been characterized by a profusion of disparate and competing styles, including Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Italianate and Exotic Revivals, Second Empire, Stick, Queen Anne, Shingle, Romanesque and Folk Victorian, along with Prairie and Craftsman styles, after World War I â??fashions in domestic architecture quickly shifted back toward traditional stylesâ?• in which homes â??strived to present exteriors with relatively â??correctâ?? architectural detail.â?•[7] This widespread shift in stylistic preferences no doubt assisted in the new-found appreciation of Santa Feâ??s traditional architecture.

Important commercial and institutional buildings in the â??Santa Fe typeâ?• that were built in the decade following the Museum of Art include Cartwright Hall, designed by Isaac Rapp, built in 1917; the La Fonda Hotel, also designed by Rapp, built in 1921-22; the Federal Building built by the Treasury Department on Cathedral Place in 1921-22; the Cassell Building (OÃ±ate Theater), built on the northwest corner of Plaza in 1921; and the expansion of the La Fonda Hotel by John Gaw Meem in 1927. These structures were all in the same monumental style found in the Museum of Art and shared a common design language.

Residential buildings developed somewhat differently. Rather than being architect-driven, the â??Santa Fe typeâ?• in residential buildings during this period was more artist-driven and was based more directly on the vernacular styles that characterized the historic neighborhoods. Examples include artist Carlos Vierraâ??s house on Old Pecos Trail, built in 1918-19; homes renovated or constructed by artist Frank Applegate in the 1920s in the Camino del Monte Sol area; homes designed and built by artist William Penhallow Henderson, including â??El Delirioâ?• for the White sisters (now the School for Advanced Research), his own home on Camino del Monte Sol in 1922, the Edwin Brooks house on Canyon Road in the 1920s, and the addition of the second story to Sena Plaza in 1927; and renovations and new construction by Kate Chapman in the Acequia Madre and Canyon Road area in the 1920s.

This residential style of architecture was different than the more imposing and original style that was developing at the same time for institutional structures. This residential style was closer to the vernacular tradition that had persisted for centuries and was based on traditional methods of construction and traditional materials, primarily adobe and wood. Some, like Carlos Vierra and to some extent Frank Applegate, pushed these traditions to a more grandiose style than had previously been the norm, but most adhered to a simpler style that more closely emulated the humble adobe houses that were already present. This approach was captured by Kate Chapman when she wrote:

> The outstanding quality of the Architecture of this region is simplicity. The earth, poor or rich, makes the walls, the forest trees the ceilings; 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. Many people who could easily afford the exoticism of red tiles and plaster, lovely in other adobe countries, have with commendable restraint decided against them in favor of the homely â??mudâ?• of the land. In this lies Santa Feâ??s distinction. There is a feeling almost of apology for any appearance of prosperity too great to be in harmony with the surrounding bad lands, never far away, encircling each little fertile valley where the â??gente,â?• close to the earth and unhampered by many possessions, still wrest a living from great space and little water. There life goes on enriched by a sense of beauty and an innate dignity that are left over from an older time, when hard work and infinite care, not money, were spent to beautify a house and its furnishings.[8]

These artists and self-taught builders designed and built houses, and renovated older houses, in this spirit, building houses that were built of adobe bricks and that were, as Chapman insisted an authentic house should be, â??low, long and close to the earth,â?•[9] with soft, irregular surfaces. The major exception to this artist-driven pursuit of traditional building practices was the more refined work of John Gaw Meem. As a trained architect, Meem naturally had a more formal approach to his designs. Whereas the artist/builders were often designing houses for fellow artists without money, on small parcels of land on the narrow streets of eastside Santa Fe, Meem was more often designing for a wealthy clientele who wanted large homes on large tracts of land with expansive views. His first Santa Fe residence was the 1925 Pond-Kelly House at 535 East Palace, a two-story structure not particularly related to Santa Fe style. His next houses, though, were designed in a manner consistent with the basic tenets of the style, including the Conkey Residence in 1927; the Directorâ??s Residence in 1930; the Hollenback Residence in 1932; the Tatum Residence in 1937; the Dodge-Bailey Residence in 1940; and the McHarg-Davenport Residence in 1951.

Meemâ??s homes are important examples of the development of this style in residential architecture; his influence, though, was more pronounced on the development of commercial, institutional, and ecclesiastical buildings. He designed the remodeling of the La Fonda Hotel in 1929; the Laboratory of Anthropology in 1930; the remodeling of the Fray Angelico Chavez Library in 1932-33; the Berardinelli Building in 1932; the FEMA Building in 1934; the Santa Fe County Courthouse in 1938; Cristo Rey Church in 1939; the remodeling of the First Presbyterian Church in 1939; the Immanuel Lutheran Church in 1948; the St. Francis Cathedral School in 1938; Kaune School in 1949; Salazar School in 1952; Gonzales School in 1953; Acequia Madre School in 1954; the remodeling of the Cassell building on the northwest corner of the plaza for the First National Bank of Santa Fe in 1953. Many of these were built in what would now be called a Spanish Pueblo Style, but with the Berardinelli Building and the FEMA Building, Meem introduced a new style for institutional architecture that had crisper corners and brick coping, with other territorial-era details such as pediments surrounding windows and doorsâ??the style now known as Territorial Revival.

These buildings were not intended to create an illusion that they were old, but rather were attempts to define a regional architectural style that harmonized with older traditions. As Meem put it in 1953:

> It may be said that any style is regional that employs suitable available materials, adapted to the climate and to local requirements of living and is expressive of certain spiritual values such as conscious recollection of history and joy in evocative forms and elements not necessarily found in a strict interpretation of the maxim â??form follows functionâ??â?¦ It is for this reason that walls are slightly battered and that bricks on parapets are sometimes clipped to accentuate the curve of contoured outline. This is done not necessarily to imitate adobe, but to recall by means of a

> conventionalized symbolic form the heritage of ancient buildings or the characteristic shapes of the landscape.â?•[10]

Meem later reaffirmed this view in an oral interview conducted in 1964, saying:

> I think itâ??s perfectly legitimateâ??not only legitimate but almost a duty in this part of the world where we have a native architecture with these wonderful shapesâ??that we should recall them. So it has been done. An example, for instance, is the First National Bank of Santa Fe. You can look at that and then look across at the Fine Arts Building of the Museum, and you can see the contrast. The Fine Arts Museum does look very much as if it were actually an adobe building whereas the First National Bank Building, when you look at it, it simply doesnâ??t look like an adobe building, it has an adobe color and it has these soft parapet lines, it has a slight entasis, or batter to the walls, but actually itâ??s all much more formalized and more rigid in its interpretation and brings in shapes that are not particularly indigenous. But there are enough of the actual indigenous forms so that it seems at home, and I feel by doing thatâ??especially in these big, public buildingsâ??that it has enabled Santa Fe to keep its architectural style, its character going, because if this had not been done, the existing adobe buildings simply would have gone to pieces and wouldnâ??t have been kept up and we would have lost, I think, the kind of city that Santa Fe is right now.[11]

In sum, during the first several decades following the Campaign of 1912-13, there were two parallel paths in the development of architectural style in Santa Fe. In institutional, commercial and ecclesiastical architecture, there was the development of a new, architect-driven style that consciously attempted to adapt the key characteristics of pre-existing building patterns (massing, color, proportions) to modern institutional needs. In residential architecture, there was a less architect-driven and more artist-driven development of a style that attempted to closely emulate the preexisting vernacular architecture of simple, humble buildings made of adobe and timber. In addition, homes continued to be built in the vernacular style by the people themselves, who inherited plots of land and built their homes from the very dirt on the ground in the same way as their parents and ancestors.

Neither of these building trajectories was a matter of public policy or legislation. No architectural controls were enacted in Santa Fe following either the Planning Boardâ??s report or any of the other activities of the Campaign of 1912-13. Every property owner was free to build as they saw fit. The only controls that existed were those enacted through restrictive covenants, such as those imposed by the White sisters when they developed property they owned as the De Vargas subdivision, with covenants requiring homes to be built in the â??Santa Fe style.â?• To the extent, then, that these styles predominated in Santa Fe in these decades, that was entirely due to private choices made by private individuals for private reasonsâ??presumably because they favored this style over any of the other unlimited styles available to them.

While these years were fertile for the furtherance of traditional style in new construction, thereby helping to perpetuate the historical character of Santa Fe, the actual preservation of existing buildings was neglected. There were no ordinances or regulations that required preservation or that prohibited alterations or even demolition of historic structures.

The Old Santa Fe Association was formed in 1926 in part to act as a preservationist force (its original charter included the objective to â??preserve and maintain the ancient landmarks, historical structures, and traditions of Old Santa Feâ?•), but no actual preservation seemed to have come from this organization for the next several decades. Its most notable success was to organize the successful opposition to the Texas Womenâ??s Chautauqua plans in the 1920s. Following that victory, the organization fell into years of passivity. The Association was revived in 1949 when the pre-1836 Magoffin-Fiske home across from the cathedral was demolished to make way

for La Fondaâ??s first parking lot. Ina Sizer Cassidy led the unsuccessful effort to prevent the buildingâ??s demolition, whose loss created renewed interest in preserving the historic buildings still standing in the city.[12] Nonetheless, there were still no legal prohibitions or other means by which to protect these buildings if a private landowner wished to alter or destroy them.

The decade of the 1950s witnessed new challenges to the preservation of Santa Feâ??s historic character. On the one hand, the 1950s witnessed the modification of a number of buildings to be in greater harmony with the traditional architecture of Santa Fe, including the domed First Territorial Capitol, remodeled in territorial revival style by Kruger and Associates in 1950-1953; one of the two Italianate-style buildings on the south side of plaza, modified by Meem with a territorial faÃ§ade in 1953; and the Cassell building on the northwest corner of the plaza, modified by Meem into a pueblo revival style building for the First National Bank in 1953.

On the other hand, the 1950s were the decade in which modernism arrived in New Mexico. Modernism had developed earlier in the century in Europe and had a presence in the United States since at least the 1932 exhibit of modernist architecture at the Museum of Modern Art and the publication of the exhibitionâ??s catalogue, *The International Style*, that same year. But the modernist doctrine did not really make inroads in most of the United States, including New Mexico, until after World War II. Modernist architecture was especially well suited to the exploding urban center of Albuquerque; as one study put it, â??as a city very much in its prime in the postwar era, Albuquerque became the site of scores of new buildings that represented modernismâ??s ideals of technological progress, material and spatial experimentation, and social change.â?•[13] John Gaw Meem himself experimented in a regionalized form of modernism in his 1949 design for the Southern Union Gas Company in Albuquerque. But it was the local architects of Flatow and Moore that were the true champion of modernism in that city, as represented by their Simms Building in 1954 and numerous buildings that followed.[14]

In Santa Fe, a few isolated examples of modernist designs began to appear. Local architect W.C. Kruger designed and built the Kruger Building on Palace Avenue in 1950, and architects John Conron and David Lent remodeled a 1910 home into the modernist Centerline building in 1954. The Desert Inn, another highly nonconforming building in a mid-century Contemporary style, was erected on Old Santa Fe Trail not far from the plaza and opened in 1957.

As an architectural philosophy and practice, modernism defined itself as being not just another style, but beyond style. As described by Marc Gelernter, Dean and Professor of Architecture at the University of Colorado, modernism â??rejected the use of traditional design altogetherâ?• and claimed that the kind of architecture it championed was â??shaped solely by â?¦ contemporary realities and needs.â?•[15] Hence, by self-definition, modernism was opposed to the perpetuation of traditional forms of architecture, and thus posed a distinctive threat to the continued use of traditional architecture in Santa Fe that previous non-conforming architectural styles, which were themselves based on historical models, did not. As these conflicting trends came to a head in the mid-1950s, members of the community once again began to agitate for legal controls to preserve Santa Feâ??s historic character.

Next: Part 4: The Battle for a Preservation Ordinance

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[1] H. H. Dorman to Fred Harvey, 9 September 1912, Santa Fe City Planning Board Records, Fray Angelico Chavez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

[2] Nusbaum, â??Vay Morley,â?• 172.

[3] Marit K. Munson, ed., *Kenneth Chapmanâ??s Santa Fe: Artists and Archaeologists, 1907-1931* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), 61.

[4] Nusbaum, â??Vay Morley,â?• 173.

[5] Ralph Emerson Twitchell, *Old Santa Fe: The Story of New Mexicoâ??s Ancient Capital* (Santa Fe: Santa Fe New Mexican Publishing Corporation, 1925), 460.

[6] Ibid., 460-461.

[7] Virginia Savage McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding Americaâ??s Domestic Architecture*, rev. ed. (New York: Knopf, 2022), 405.

[8] Kate Chapman, *Adobe Notes or How to Keep the Weather Out with just Plain Mud* (Taos, NM: 1930), reprinted in Catherine Colby, *Kate Chapman: Adobe Builder in 1930s Santa Fe* (Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2012), 77.

[9] Ibid., 70.

[10] Quoted in â??John Gaw Meem Honored at SJC,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, February 20, 1972.

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

[12] Meem, Loomis Interview, December 3, 1964.

[13] Ryan Morton, â??Galles Motor Company,â?• *Albuquerque Modernism*, https://albuquerquemodernism.unm.edu/wp/galles-motor-company/, last accessed June 22, 2023.

[14] Ryan Morton, â??Simms Building,â?• *Albuquerque Modernism*, https://albuquerquemodernism.unm.edu/wp/simms-building/, last accessed June 22, 2023.

[15] Mark Gelernter, â??Making Room for Traditional Architecture,â?• *Traditional Building Magazine* (July 28, 2015, updated May 13, 2020), https://www.traditionalbuilding.com/features/making-room-for-traditional-architecture, last accessed June 27, 2023.