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spectacular vernacular

For Santa Fe architects, Santa Fe style boils down to three key things—materials, materials, materials

by Dianna Delling

spectacular vernacular

SAY THE WORDS *Santa Fe architecture* and most people immediately think of an adobe (or faux adobe) building with a flat roof, earth-toned stucco, brick or Saltillo tile floors, arched doorways, vigas, and a charming kiva fireplace. Such traditions have been part of Santa Fe's identity since at least the turn of the twentieth century, and they've given the city a look that's known around the world.

For architects in Santa Fe, though, good design doesn't start with any sort of predetermined style. They may draw on the region's vernacular architecture, but for the most part they're building on traditions, not resting on them. Ask a bunch of local architects to define Santa Fe style and you're bound to get a bunch of different answers—with the word *lifestyle* popping up more often than terms like *portal* or *kiva*.

"Your goal is related to [the southwestern] lifestyle, not a particular exterior look," says architect John T. Midyette of John T. Midyette III and Associates, who's been designing homes in Santa Fe and the Southwest since the 1960s. "Here you design from the inside out. You don't have to create a certain streetscape facade, such as Colonial Williamsburg or California Mission. That gives you a great deal of freedom in how you organize spaces. Our lifestyle here is less formal, not as rigid."

As architect James Horn of Spears Architects sees it, northern New

Mexico architecture is simply shaped by the realities presented by the region, not by a style or trend. "It's the incredible lifestyle here—and the weather—that are the starting points. Buildings happen in response to those things.

"I see designing as a process where you consider the seasons and the weather, and the color of the soil and the sky, and the materials that surround you," adds Horn. "You really have to listen to the environment here."

That's what Native Americans did a thousand years ago, when they built structures such as the Taos Pueblo using adobe—bricks made of earth, straw, and water. The pueblo's walls are two to three feet thick (protecting inhabitants not just from intruders but from the elements) and supported by what the Spanish called vigas, timber beams harvested from the northern New Mexico forests. External beauty aside, the fact that the Taos Pueblo has withstood centuries of intense sun, wind, heat, and cold weather can be seen as a testament to the benefits of working with locally available materials. "There's a reason massive walls and indigenous materials like earth and stucco are part of the regional architecture," says Horn.

Working toward that time-honored end, Horn and other local architects design homes that not only build on regional traditions but incorporate elements such as concrete, glass, and steel for a sharper, more contemporary





Top: Designed by James Horn (Spears Architects), this Tano Road home combines traditional materials with contemporary glass and stainless steel; above: A custom-designed fountain graces the backyard in a home by John T. Midyette III and Associates. Opposite page: Cement floors and a minimalist fireplace in the Tano Road home by James Horn (Spears Architects).

“I see designing as a process where you consider the seasons and the weather, and the color of the soil and the sky, and the materials that surround you,” says architect James Horn. “You really have to listen to the environment in Santa Fe.”

look. “Once you put in vigas, you have a traditional house,” says A. Christopher Purvis of A. Christopher Purvis Architects. “But instead you can use very small steel beams—so you have that same rhythm that you get from vigas but without that exact look. We make reference to the way things were, but we’re using new materials.”

Given today’s high-tech building materials, New Mexico architects have myriad new ways to work with New Mexico’s intense sunlight and other unique environmental factors. “We work with heavy masonry walls and punch openings to move the light around; it can help us define a space,” says Purvis. “With newer technologies, we can let some of the light in—but indirectly, so it doesn’t heat up the room.”

While pursuing new approaches, Purvis is aware that clients and Santa Fe visitors still look for certain elements in Santa Fe and northern New Mexico structures. “What everybody seems to like here is that kind of handmade quality—plaster walls, fences that are made by hand as opposed to machine. Even in our more modern buildings, people can see there is hand plaster or other handmade things at work.”

He also recognizes that Santa Fe’s buildings and the design of its downtown area remain important aspects of Santa Fe’s appeal as a tourism destination. “We have an urban fabric that people come from all over the world to see,” he says. “Windy little streets that connect you in a very nonlinear fashion. Walls that sometimes come all the way to the street. I think that’s why people like to live and visit here.”

OF COURSE, SANTA FE’S COHESIVE LOOK is no accident. “Santa Fe style” was born in the earliest years of the twentieth century, when local planners realized that the city’s rich Native American and Spanish colonial heritage could be played up to increase its potential as a tourist destination.

“Because the railroad bypassed Santa Fe,” explains architect Trey Jordan, of Trey Jordan Architecture, “city fathers wanted to create a tourist destination, something to convince people to come in from Lamy [where the train station was] and help generate a vital local economy.”

When New Mexico was granted statehood, in 1912, a Santa Fe

spectacular
vernacular


"My interpretation of Santa Fe style is that it's about the artisans and craftsmen: the stonemasons, the plasterers, the people doing the details and carving the wood," says architect Barbara Felix. "Because what you're really focusing on is that quality of material."

revitalization plan recommended that all Santa Fe buildings should conform to a newly developed style, "Spanish Pueblo revival," which combined elements from pueblos, churches, and other historical buildings in the region. Among those elements were brown exterior stucco, rounded corners, and irregular parapets. Later, in the 1930s, the official look was expanded to allow for territorial-style buildings (which have straighter walls; larger, wood-framed windows; and brick-trimmed parapets). In 1957 Santa Fe established the Historic Zoning Ordinance, which required all buildings in the central part of the city to conform to historic building styles. The ordinance remains in effect today, preserving Santa Fe's unified look but fueling debate among some City Different architects.

"Don't get me wrong; if we hadn't had the historic style ordinance, who knows where the Santa Fe environment would be," says Midyette. (Another local architect, who prefers to remain anonymous, put it less delicately: "If you take out all the constraints, you end up with a place that looks like Houston.") Midyette says he objects to what he sees as the city's overly strict interpretation of the building ordinance in recent years. The guidelines could be loosened, he believes, while still keeping their original intentions intact. "The historic founders were trying to preserve a Pueblo territorial style instead of an East Coast gingerbread style that was spreading across the country," he says.

AS IT HAS FOR THE PAST CENTURY, Santa Fe architecture will continue to evolve in response to clients' changing lifestyles, design trends, and the development of new building materials. It's also being shaped by a growing awareness of environ- *Continued on page 64*

Redesigned by Barbara Felix, this Santa Fe condo features a cantilevered loft and a single-piece steel staircase.



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custom tiles, hand-glazing them to match my rendering.

Tile and flooring are not the only dilemmas. Home lighting also presents challenges. We've collaborated often with Victoria Price, of Victoria Price Art and Design, on lighting for her remodel projects. In one of Victoria's recent projects for Matthew Sample and Greg Aragon, for instance, we added pendants over the dining-room table, accentuating its elegance and heightening the room's already high style. Still, as easy and elegant as it looked, it took some work: Because of limited electrical access in the ceiling, I suggested a line-voltage rail system to support the fixtures. These changes helped highlight the glass-covered fireplace and the artwork on the walls.

Perhaps the most effective tool at my disposal—at the disposal of any good interior design store or design professional—is the ability to listen. Actively. Our experience and our questions will help you define your style, scope, timeline, and budget. That's always been my approach, and my goal: elegant solutions and one-of-kind designs. **sf**

Kim D. White purchased Statements in Tile/Lighting/Kitchens/Flooring in 1999, after starting with the business as the showroom manager in 1994. She has a background in interior design and costume design in New York and San Francisco.

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mental issues and volatile energy prices. Sustainability is a word we'll only be hearing more of on the local building scene.

Passive solar designs and recycled and natural materials—adobe and salvaged doors and vigas—have long been popular in northern New Mexico. But now there is more official oversight. As of July 2009, when the city's Green Building Code went into effect, all new homes built in Santa Fe must meet energy-efficiency, water-efficiency, and other eco-related standards. Some of the city's most prominent new buildings—the Santa Fe Community Convention Center (Spears Architects and Fentress Architects), the Thornburg Investment Management campus (Mexico's Legorreta + Legorreta and Albuquerque's Dekker/Perich/Sabatini)—and dozens of new private homes have been awarded prestigious LEED green-building certification. Given northern New Mexico's abundant year-round sunshine, Jordan believes there may come a day when solar panels aren't just tolerated in a building design but are seen as synonymous with Santa Fe style.

Aside from sustainability issues, local architects notice other trends. Clients are looking for smaller, more functional homes.

"I see a trend toward a cleaner, more sophisticated style," says architect Barbara Felix of Barbara Felix Architecture + Design. "My personal interpretation of Santa Fe style is that it's actually all about the artisans and craftsmen who build the structure—the stonemasons, the plasterers, the people doing the tile details and carving the wood," she says. "When their workmanship gets to shine through, the space by default becomes more simple, clean, and sophisticated. You're really focusing on that quality of material. And that is actually what Santa Fe style is all about." **sf**

Plastered adobe walls, a ceiling with vigas and latillas, and soft, rounded corners are trademarks of traditional Santa Fe style. Home designed by John T. Midyette III and Associates.



JOHN T. MIDYETTE AND ASSOCIATES