



Its Own Beautiful Self

Manifesting Santa Fe Style from dreams, diagrams, and dust

By Christine Mather

In 1912, the year of New Mexico statehood, Santa Fe's city fathers, including Edgar Lee Hewett, Sylvanus Morley, and Carlos Vierra, formed the city's first Planning Board. With little money, but astounding drive, this prescient group launched itself into the unknowns of historic preservation, town planning, revival architecture, and commercial success. They feared that without this sustained campaign, Santa Fe might fade into rural backwater oblivion. At the beginning, they expressed a vague wish to no less distinguished a planning guru than Frederick Law Olmstead "to plan a residence and resort city." As a result of these intentions and agitations, Santa Fe Style was born. The vision outlined in the early Planning Board documents sought to modernize Santa Fe "without destroying the city's atmosphere of antiquity." The 1912 report to the mayor and council stated that "the preservation of the ancient streets, roads and structures in and about the city is of the first importance and . . . these monuments of the first Americans should be preserved intact at almost any cost." They also recognized that preservation alone was not enough. Development must be pursued—but carefully. "The attraction of Santa Fe can best be preserved and increased by developing the town architecturally in harmony with its ancient character. We believe that everything should be done to create a public sentiment so strong that the Santa Fe style will always predominate." Ironically, revival-style architecture had yet to be clearly defined in New Mexico despite the fact that some of the earliest extant dwellings

in the country could be found in the pueblos and Santa Fe. In addition, vernacular-style architecture unique to the region was still alive and well in early twentieth-century New Mexico. Pueblo and Spanish colonial styles authentic to the region were often superseded by manifestations of Spanish colonial architecture as seen in California missions. This revival style—tile roofs, arches, and volutes found in residences, hotels, and train stations—became the kudzu of southwestern architectural style at the turn of the twentieth century. Thus, defining a New Mexican revival style was inextricable from the Planning Board's goals.

As one involved in both museum and city matters, Edgar Lee Hewett was chief among the participants. In 1912, when he wasn't running the museum in the Palace of the Governors and spearheading the exhibits for the upcoming, ambitious Panama-California Exposition in San Diego (see "The Adobe Ambassador," elpalacio.org/articles/summer16/ambassador.pdf), he found time to make lists of romantic street names for the Planning Board's nascent redesign of "ancient streets." Meanwhile, archaeologist Sylvanus Morley, a crucial member of the planning team and part of the Museum of New Mexico staff, became an adamant defender of the city's special architecture, seeing it as the fountainhead for the town's future. Carlos Vierra, Santa Fe's first resident artist, took on the task of documenting the endangered monumental structures of New Mexico's Spanish colonial past with the backing of patron Frank Springer.

Opposite above: Mission Church, Acoma Pueblo, ca. 1960. Neg. No. HP.2014.14.501. **Opposite lower left:** The New Mexico Museum of Art. Hand-colored lantern slide, ca. 1920. Photographer unknown. Neg. No. LS.0454. **Opposite lower right:** Edgar L. Hewett at the entrance to the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, ca. 1920. Neg. No. 028851. All courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA).



The Colorado Supply Company store in Morley, Colorado, was the first iteration of Rapp & Rapp's design, which, after Sylvanus Morley became aware of it, became a model for the New Mexico Building and the New Mexico Museum of Art. Ca. 1910–1917. Welborn photograph collection, Ph.00467 (20005018), History Colorado.

During that first year of the board's existence and planning, Morley stumbled upon a picture of what, to him, exemplified Santa Fe Style (a term he is credited as creating), although it was north of the state's border. He wrote the architect:

Dear Mr. Rapp:

Quite by accident, there was fallen into my hands a picture of The Colorado Supply Co.'s Store at Morley Colorado, designed by you. The thing is so absolutely in the spirit of "The Santa Fe Style" that I am taking this liberty of asking you to allow us to exhibit the original drawings, maps, elevations etc., of this structure at our coming Exhibition.

—Morley to I. H. Rapp, September 20, 1912

The well-known architectural firm of the brothers Isaac Hamilton Rapp and William Morris Rapp, in nearby Trinidad, Colorado, had been happy to oblige an insistent patron and president of the supply company, C. M. Schenk, by designing a building based entirely on the church of New Mexico's San Esteban del Rey of Acoma Pueblo. Prior to this time, the Rapp & Rapp firm had been engaged in designing institutional buildings, many in ashlar masonry, some in brick, in various styles that might be termed Rocky Mountain Midwestern but with periodic, obliging adventures into the exotic, of which the Colorado Supply Company was one.

Only a few days earlier, Morley had also secured a promise of \$500 from the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway

System through their agent W. H. Simpson for the city's exhibit at the Panama-California Exposition, slated for 1915. Simpson stated, "Am glad that you and other public spirited citizens realize the necessity of preserving Santa Fe's identity as an adobe city." Because the Colorado Supply Company Store design advanced an architectural style suitably identifiable with Santa Fe, the Planning Board hired Rapp & Rapp to quickly adapt it as the model for the New Mexico Building at the exposition.

The style of the store that gave Sylvanus Morley his eureka moment was hardly surprising considering what was occurring in New Mexico in the early years of the twentieth century. Down the road in Albuquerque, UNM president William George Tight was redesigning the university around Puebloan architecture—a decision that probably cost him his job. He installed kiva-shaped buildings, stucco-covered brick remakes, dormitories with Hopi names, horno-like structures on rooftops, multistoried communal Puebloan structures—all before 1909. Other revival-styled architecture was being tested throughout the region, but it often lacked visual continuity and historical context.

By designing a building that was monumental in scale based on Spanish colonial architecture from the seventeenth century in New Mexico, the Rapps had bypassed, in large part, Puebloan architecture's communal residential structures, and more importantly, escaped the confusing California mission style that had plagued New Mexico. The firm's Colorado Supply Company building offered a satisfactory formula, with pure New Mexican roots, drawings, and an established architectural team eager to execute a client's expectations. Their design for the New Mexico Building in San Diego scored an easy and immediate victory.

Besides setting up the exhibits for the New Mexico Building and overseeing the balance of exhibits for the exposition, Hewett was busy collecting capital and nailing down the perfect site for a new museum as he whipped up enthusiasm for the birth of an institution that would contribute what he found was profoundly lacking in Santa Fe. Enlisting and extolling from any available podium, Hewett brought his enormous personality to bear upon the entire greater community of New Mexico, arguing that a structure be built as an auditorium, place of education, and art gallery—"a building which shall be substantially a replica of the building known as the 'New Mexico Building'" in San Diego.



According to an article by the artist Carlos Vierra, published in 1918, San Felipe Pueblo's mission church served as inspiration for the Museum of Art's auditorium. Photograph by Fedor Ferenz, ca. 1930–40. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 100304.

Hewett's vision for a new museum was perfectly aligned with the goals of Santa Fe's Planning Board. So the approval of New Mexico's House Bill No. 196 in March 1915 cleared the way for the making not only of a museum, but also of a new way of presenting the city of Santa Fe.

Construction began the same year. Hewett, along with Frank Springer and other members of a building committee, wrangled away from an initially skeptical Santa Fe Board of Education a very special site that had once held US Army residential and barrack structures for Fort Marcy on the corner of Palace Avenue and Lincoln Avenue, on the northwest corner of the plaza. Although the state had appropriated one-half its estimated cost, \$30,000, to be matched, the total proved inadequate. Largely through the generosity of Frank Springer and friends, the match and additional funds were raised.

Jesse L. Nusbaum, who had directed the Palace of the Governor's rehabilitation, served as the construction supervisor. The building that arose featured a brick core with a stucco surface mimicking the curved lines of a large adobe structure.

With two primary facades, south and east, viewers still enjoy the greatest visual impact when the building is viewed on the diagonal from the plaza. Inside, concrete floors and thick walls continue this impression of a New Mexican Spanish colonial-styled building, while carefully adzed and decorated beams and ceilings extend the theme. The light and shadow created by insets, bulging walls, recesses, and rows of protruding beams gives a constant subdued flow upon a dynamic surface.

The 1917 New Mexico Museum of Art differed from its two predecessors with a far more extensive use of a variety of pueblo church façades and architecture, as well as a more liberal use of rounded forms. Architecture found in the pueblos ignited the greatest design influence upon the burgeoning revival movement in New Mexico.

Carlos Vierra, a painter who had traveled to the pueblos making a photographic record of buildings (some in ruins), used these observations and recordings as inspirations for his oil on canvas paintings. In an article published in 1918, he named those churches or pueblos that had served as the

The interior of Saint Francis Auditorium, a popular community venue for concerts and weddings, looks very much the same today as it did in 1918, when this photograph was taken. Photograph by Wesley Bradfield. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 006741.



models for the “New Museum”—Acoma Mission, San Felipe Mission, Laguna Mission, Taos Pueblo, Zia Mission, and Cochiti Pueblo. Elsewhere, Pecos is also mentioned. The melting away of adobe features found in these structures by the early twentieth century was translated into the rounded forms that came to characterize the new museum, especially. Incorporating this sense of a beautiful ruin, now called “romantic erosion,” into the museum was a unique inspiration. So while a new museum built in an old style was hardly a new concept, a new museum with unique design roots in regional architecture was to be a revelation.

Further, what happened within the building was to be every bit as influential, since it became the site of the earliest efforts to create regional furniture based, again, upon

examples from New Mexico’s Spanish colonial period. Like the museum exterior, these works were based on study but also upon inspired leaps, since much of what was needed in a twentieth-century museum was nowhere to be found in a colonial repertoire—office desks, large tables, a podium, auditorium furnishings. Saint Francis Auditorium was given special treatment with murals, church interior decoration of massive corbels, and even a choir loft. It so cleverly mimics a church interior that almost a hundred years later, it continues to be confused with a church.



The East Gallery of the Museum of Art the year it opened, 1917. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 016781.

The colonial structures of sixteenth-century Mexico that were models for those of seventeenth-century New Mexico also did not translate neatly into a twentieth-century museum design. In general, revival architecture of any sort has inherent difficulties, since it takes building styles meant for one purpose, such as to honor the gods or God, and repurposes those designs for very different functions—banks, capitol buildings, museums. This difficulty surfaced in relation to the museum entrance.

Mission churches have two main entrances: the clearly defined entrance to the church, and the less prominent, adjacent entry, the *portería*, which leads to priest’s quarters and other residential spaces. The museum’s main entrance was initially sited on the east wall, facing Lincoln Avenue, but the south wall’s Acoma Mission and San Felipe Mission facades created the expectation that the entrance would be

Santa Fe Style, Today

The 1917 completion of the New Mexico Museum of Art put a stamp on Santa Fe Style, but it didn't end debates about how to design new buildings and preserve historic ones. Settling on the main design features and chiseling them into city code took another forty years of wrangling, with the final rulings laid out in part by architect John Gaw Meem, himself a star practitioner. But even in 1975, Meem felt driven to attempt an explanation of the style, which included separating it into older versions and newer construction—"old Santa Fe Style" (adobe buildings from way back when) and "new Santa Fe Style" (buildings with modern materials that looked like the original ones).

"That really gave me insight into how he helped craft the code," said David Rasch, an architectural historian who works in the city's Historic Preservation Division. "There are two ways to look at Santa Fe Style—a preservationist way, so that, say, portals are made of wood, and a vocabulary way that says, 'We must have portals.'"

Consider what we've learned about eco-building in recent years. Adobe walls may be great insulators, but vigas that poke out of those walls, lovely as they are, can warp over time, causing gaps that notoriously transfer cold air in winter, hot air

in summer. Given that, should a building in the historic district use wood vigas in the preservationist way, or something like Corten steel, which mimics the vocabulary of vigas (with a fetchingly rusty look) and boasts temperature-trapping powers?

The irony, Rasch noted, is that even though the museum has achieved century-old historic status and serves as the "quintessential definition of Spanish Pueblo Revival architecture," it doesn't contain the adobe blocks, mud stucco, and dirt roof of its prototypes. Instead, it's built of bricks, cement stucco, and an asphalt roof—materials that speak more to vocabulary than to preservation. "What the museum really does is define new Santa Fe Style," Rasch said. "The big debate right now, 100 years after the museum was built, is do we have a twenty-first-century Santa Fe Style, and what is it?"

Right now, no one agrees. Rasch is hoping to rewrite the Historic Districts Overlay Zoning Code and finds himself mediating among preservationists who want what was good enough for Edgar Lee Hewett, green builders who want to incorporate new materials, and architects who want to simplify their designs. In other words, a colossal lot of consensus building.

—Kate Nelson

there, as it would in a mission church. And so the main entrance migrated to the south wall. Beside the massive auditorium, the modest porteria-styled doorway to the right serves instead as the main entry.

The process of naming the complex had a few false starts. The apparent first name, the Museum of Santa Fe, clearly demonstrates its importance to the immediate community, but it failed to take in the bigger commitment of the state, as well as its function as an art gallery. A wince-inducing moniker, Temple of St. Francis and the Martyrs—marginally better than one preconstruction name for the entire complex, the Cathedral of the Desert—never made it beyond the inaugural stage and resolved into Saint Francis Auditorium. Other names have come and gone over the intervening 100 years. In 2007 it became the New Mexico Museum of Art. In 1917 Santa Feans happily embraced a new museum set upon a prime location at the corner of Palace and Lincoln Avenues, built in a style that seemed to embody all of their dreams for their community. It succeeded in setting the town on a path towards the desired

future of preservation and development in harmony with "its ancient character." The prominent painter Robert Henri described Santa Fe and the museum enthusiastically to a friend:

Santa Fe can become a rare spot in all the world. Nearly all—one might say all—cities and towns strive to be like each other and not to be like themselves. Under this surprising present influence Santa Fe is striving to be its own beautiful self. . . . The Museum here looks as though it were a precious child of the Santa Fe sky and the Santa Fe mountains. It has its parents' complexion. It seems warmly at home as if it had always been here . . . it is a treasure of art in itself. ■

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