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Is Santa Fe Ready for a Makeover?



Photographs by Kevin Moloney for The New York Times

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Flowers in a Santa Fe plaza; a 350-year-old adobe house; design elements by Trey Jordan; diners at Trattoria Nostrani; the Trattoria Nostrani wine cellar; part of the College of Santa Fe building designed by Ricard o Legorreta.

By HENRY SHUKMAN Published: August 5, 2007

Corrections Appended

A SUNDAY evening in late June. A crowd of well-dressed people is spilling out of the St. Francis Auditorium at the Museum of Fine Arts in downtown Santa Fe, a grand adobe building some 90 years old, with monolithic mud towers and tender curvaceous walls connecting them. The late sun doesn't just gleam on the old adobe edifice. It's deeper than that. The red and orange that lights up on the walls, over the heads of the exiting crowd, seems to come from deep within them. The low light tranforms the scene into a vision.

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There's a moment like this almost every evening in Santa Fe, when the light suddenly transfigures the earthen buildings, the lush cottonwood trees, even the blacktop and cars. It all becomes luminous and dreamlike. It's as if the light contains some special MSG of sight, and one can't stop staring. Santa Fe must have offered this spectacle for the last four centuries, since the Palace of the Governors was built on the plaza by the Spanish.

That light — the cottonwood-filtered sunlight of the morning, the thick orange-juicy light of the evening; a light that matches other famed atmospheres, such as Venice's gauzy haze or Provence's luminosity — is one reason why Santa Fe seems to exert such power over both the people

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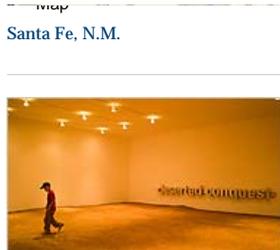
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The New Santa Fe

who live there and the ones who return year after year. Powerful, too, is the pull of its history, a history that is solidified in the mud of its buildings and that seems almost palpable, like some slow-moving river that cuts through the center of the city. Yet around town, there is a sense of change. People are talking about a New Santa Fe.

The Rail Runner commuter train is coming, linking Santa Fe directly to downtown [Albuquerque](#) in an hour and a quarter. A huge new \$100 million commercial center, the Railyard, is being built downtown, a rival hub to the plaza in contemporary-industrial steel and glass. Tax incentives

have greatly enhanced the film industry in [New Mexico](#), and much of the post-production is centered around Santa Fe. The celebrated Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta is now represented not only by the College of Santa Fe Visual Arts Center at the College of Santa Fe but also by the Zocalo, an extraordinary condominium development spilling down a hillside north of town. And in 2005, Santa Fe was designated America's first [Unesco Creative City](#), a global acknowledgment of its place at the forefront not just of folk [art](#), crafts and design, but in new media too.

The old and the new: Can a 400-year-old city change? Do its inhabitants want it to? How much can a tourist town that lives off its heritage welcome change?

On a quiet street on the east side of Santa Fe, among the ochre and rose of the traditional adobe homes, there's one discreet house whose lines are sharper than most, whose stucco is a shade grayer. What you can see of it from the road is an intriguing blend of the masses and layering of traditional Indian pueblos, with a contemporary starkness. You wouldn't imagine that it — and its architect, Trey Jordan — had been at the center of an ugly controversy since it was built two and a half years ago. Vandalized, covered in graffiti, discussed at Historic Design Review Board meetings, the house — and a few others of his around town — have made Mr. Jordan both a *bête noire* of the traditionalists, who would like to see nothing but old-fashioned Santa Fe-style houses going up in historic districts, and a mascot of those who think it's time the city allowed in a breath of change. These days, both parties seem to be winning.

Ever since the 1920's when Santa Fe's Pueblo Revival style, with its adobe walls, viga beams, molded corners and kiva fireplaces, was established and codified, the city has appeared to be one of the best-preserved in the [United States](#). Devotees of its mud [architecture](#), of this southwestern Timbuktu, speak of a native style risen from the earth itself. But the city's look was actually a deliberate concoction, brewed up by the city elders in the 1910s. The railway had bypassed Santa Fe in the 1870's, and the city watched with a tinge of green in its eyes as [Taos](#) became a magnet for the arts in the early 20th century.

The leading citizens decided it was time to start promoting the state capital. A museum was needed, and a distinctive architectural style, something exotic. First they considered going Alhambra, but after the Scottish Rite Temple went up in 1911 as the first example of the new look — bright pink with moorish arches — they rethought things (mercifully, some say) and went adobe instead.

Their foresight was inspired. Almost a century on, the city they helped design and midwife remains one of the best-loved in America. It has only 75,000 inhabitants but its renown is global. For many decades it has been, and remains, a dynamo of American art and culture. O'Keeffe, Willa Cather, [Bob Dylan](#), Bruce Nauman, Susan Rothenberg, Cormac McCarthy — the roll call of arts greats who have spent time there is disproportionate for such a far-flung desert oasis. In the '80s and '90s, Santa Fe Style, a repackaging of the original Pueblo Revival, became one of the most celebrated design looks on the continent. With success like this, who would want anything to change?

Some don't. Many don't. The Historic Board has done an admirable job over the decades of maintaining a consistent look for Santa Fe, but behind its adobe walls, and behind some

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newer walls made of glass, steel and concrete, there is undeniably a new, and perhaps more sophisticated, more internationally aware cultural center emerging.

For over a century, Santa Fe and northern New Mexico have been a place of healing, a land of the cure. First it was tuberculosis; while [Texas](#) and [California](#) closed their borders to consumptives, New Mexico welcomed them. Then when Mabel Dodge Luhan moved to Taos in 1916, the area became a focus of New Thought, of artists and thinkers who felt called to develop antidotes to the malaise of modern civilization. Urban-refugee hippies congregated in the '60s. It has long been a city for seekers and dreamers wanting to heal the dissatisfactions of consumerist life.

The old days of Santa Fe when one beloved local artist had a billboard up on the highway trumpeting his own brilliance — “Tommy Macaione, New Star of the Art-World Firmament” — are surely gone. A particular Southwestern brand of bohemianism — part Bob Dylan, part [van Gogh](#), part Ken Kesey — is probably dying out. But as Jan Morris commented 20 years ago, beneath the touristic veneer of Santa Fe there has long been a dedicated community of serious sun-cured artists, who work hard and have little to do with the tourist town. And it continues to attract exceptional talent. Mr. Jordan's modernist-Pueblo architecture; the cuisine of chefs like Nelli Maltezos; the jewelry of Denise Betesh; the Nobel-stuffed think tank and research center at the Santa Fe Institute.

I've been coming for nearly 15 years, and while the ancient fabric of this old American city still exerts its powerful magnetism, there is clearly a more contemporary city coming to the fore too, one that is arguably more connected to the rest of America, and indeed the world. It's manifest in art, in design, and even in cuisine. The fact that northern New Mexico has long been a center of innovative green building is also now bringing it into greater prominence as a design hub. What was once crazy hippie solar architecture (“biotecture,” as Michael Reynolds, the Earthship pioneer, calls it) is becoming mainstream thinking on sustainable design. While the hippie-hacienda-ism best seen in ceramic-encrusted bermed homes may still be a fringe look, its principles of green living are not.

It only takes a stroll around the center to see it happening.

[SITE Santa Fe](#), an installation center that pulls in site-specific art from around the world, has been an anchor in Santa Fe's status as an art hub since it was founded in 1995. Located a mile or two west of Canyon Road, the city's traditional art thoroughfare, it has also become the cornerstone of a new colony of art galleries that seem altogether more serious ventures in contemporary art than the cowboy-and-Indian art and the irony-free kitsch that still dominate much of Canyon Road. (Though there are exceptions even there, such as the new Gallery Moda, which has a formidable collection of post-war prints by American artists, [Ellsworth Kelly](#), Jim Dine, [Jasper Johns](#), Wayne Thiebaud and Robert Motherwell among them.)

Because of the Railyard development happening around it, which includes a large public park, SITE will soon become a kind of museum-in-the-park, a fact that delights its current director, Laura Heon. One oddity of Santa Fe's art scene is that although big-name artists live here, and big collectors have homes here, the galleries are mostly regional in what they offer. SITE is an exception: internationally renowned, yet until recently, comparatively unrecognized in its hometown.

Not far up Old Pecos Trail, CCA, the [Center for Contemporary Arts](#), is committed to elevating contemporary regional art to a national level. It's currently undergoing major reconstruction. A derelict World War II tank garage next door is being turned into the Muñoz Waxman Gallery, overlooked by a glass mezzanine; the James Turrell “SkySpace” in the grounds — said to be the first he ever built, 21 years ago — will soon be reopened to the public.

Even the city's food has felt the shock of the new. [Aqua Santa](#), under the guidance of the Slow Food wizard Brian Knox, continues to fill up night after night with the great and the good. For close to a century now the city has had a sprinkling of notable artists and

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writers, but there seems to be a new and more visible concentration of celebrities here these days. On that Sunday night in June, for example, when a crowd of 400 attended a V-Day reading in the St. Francis Auditorium presided over by [Eve Ensler](#) (of “Vagina Monologues” fame), a number of people wended their way afterward through the narrow downtown streets to Aqua Santa, where a reception was held on its leafy patio. Amid the crowd sipping Gruet sparkling wine (from a New Mexican vineyard run by an old French Champagne family) various stars could be glimpsed: Ali MacGraw, Jane Fonda, Joe Wilson and [Valerie Plame](#) (who recently moved there in a blaze of local publicity) and Val Kilmer. The wealth of second-homers was also in sparkling evidence.

[Ristra](#) restaurant has a gleaming new bar that wouldn't feel out of place in SoHo; [La Mancha](#), the restaurant at the Galisteo Inn south of town, has settled down after a couple of uncertain years with a strong new chef, Kim Müller, formerly of the Compound; [La Boca](#), a new tapas house in downtown, offers contemporary reinventions of traditional Spanish cuisine; and 10 miles south of town at the train station in [Lamy](#), which saw many luminaries pass through — Jung, D. H. Lawrence, Huxley, Stieglitz — a 1950 dining car of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad has been resurrected for breakfast and lunch.

Meanwhile [Trattoria Nostrani](#) continues its meteoric rise in American gastronomy, now recognised as one of the 50 best restaurants in the country by Gourmet magazine. Its chef, Nelli Maltezos, recently rolled out her summer menu, a sequence of dishes that seem to float to the table from some culinary Olympus, a mountainside up which many a \$40 entree elsewhere labors with effort. The Inn of the Anasazi's restaurant has a new chef, Martin Rios, who grew up in Santa Fe before training under French chefs in [New York City](#) and [France](#). He calls his cooking contemporary global, but his expertise is fundamentally French. From the new terrace on the street you can watch a sublime New Mexican sunset cast its spell over downtown.

After decades of careful preservation, Santa Fe is beginning to offer sure proof that the old and new can coexist. As Gov. [Bill Richardson](#) puts it, “Unesco recognized Santa Fe as a Creative City not for the things it makes; it recognized Santa Fe for the way it lives.”

“Thousands of people attend Midnight Mass at the Basilica de Santa Fe on Christmas Eve, a ceremony that's accompanied by a traditional Native American sign language interpreter,” the governor said. “The world's next-generation genome sequencers are being installed just a few miles from the Palace of the Governors built by the Spanish almost 400 years ago, the nation's oldest public building. One son in a family learns their centuries-old tradition of weaving, the daughter does advanced physics research up the hill.”

You can still go there to get away from it all. But if you want to go there to bask in some of the most beautiful light on the continent without leaving the rest of the world behind, you can. Who could ask for more?

VISITOR INFORMATION

WHAT TO SEE

SITE Santa Fe (1606 Paseo de Peralta; 505-989-1199; www.sitesantafe.org; closed Mondays and Tuesdays; \$10 entry, \$5 for students and 60 or older, but free on Fridays). The current show, a dismembered trailer home by the Austrian Hans Schabus, is an intriguing new take on the West.

CCA: Center for Contemporary Arts (1050 Old Pecos Trail; 505-982-1338; www.ccasantafe.org). The inaugural show in the new tank-warehouse gallery, “Chopped, Chromed, Customized,” opening Aug. 25, will feature lowrider-inspired [art](#).

James Kelly Contemporary (1601 Paseo de Peralta; 505-989-1601; www.jameskelly.com). The current exhibition is a much-praised, much-debated show by Sherrie Levine (plain plywood boards a dominant feature).

G. Coles-Christensen Rug Merchants (125 West [San Francisco](#) Street; 505-986-6089; [www.therugmerchants.com](#)). The store, run by Gary Coles-Christensen, is stuffed with thousands of gorgeous kilims, gabbeks and antique carpets from across the world.

WHERE TO EAT

All prices are for two without wine or tip.

Aqua Santa (451 West Alameda Street; 505-982-6297). Among the offerings are truffle-infused halibut with chard, and endlessly braised shepherd's lamb; and they have a good supply of wonderful Domaine Tempier Bandol rosé. Lunch Wednesday through Friday, about \$40 to \$60; dinner Tuesday through Saturday, about \$90.

La Boca (72 West Marcy Street; 505-982-3433; [www.labocasantafe.com](#)). On the current menu are grilled artichokes with Spanish goat cheese, orange zest and mint, and ginger grilled shrimp with Moroccan spiced yogurt. Lunch Monday through Saturday, \$30 to \$50; dinner daily, \$50 to \$100, with a limited tapas menu from 3 to 5:30 Monday through Saturday afternoons.

Inn of the Anasazi (113 [Washington](#) Avenue; 505-988-3030; [www.innoftheanasazi.com](#)). Highlights include chilled avocado soup with chipotle-glazed prawn, [Colorado](#) lamb chops and semi-boned quail with foie gras brioche. Daily, lunch \$45 to \$60; dinner \$90 to \$140.

La Mancha (Galisteo Inn, 9 La Vega Road, Galisteo; 505-466-8200; [www.galisteoinn.com](#)). A small dining room in a lovely 300-year-old hacienda inn, surrounded by lawns, giant cottonwoods and grazing llamas. Dinner Wednesday through Saturday, \$50 to \$100; Sunday brunch, \$20 to \$40.

Lamy Station Café (505-466-1904; [www.lamystationcafe.com](#)). A railroad dining car restored by Michael Gintert and Sam Latkin, full of chunky original stainless-steel features. They're not in the market for Michelin stars, but Mr. Gintert's huckleberry barbecue sauce has been featured on the Food Network. Breakfast and lunch Wednesday through Saturday and brunch on Sunday, \$18 to \$32.

Ristra (548 Agua Fria Street; 505-982-8608; [www.ristrarestaurant.com](#)). The restaurant has achote grilled elk tenderloin and tempura squash blossom with Boursin cheese and red chili beurre blanc. Dinner \$75 to \$110.

Trattoria Nostrani (304 Johnson Street; 505-983-3800; [www.trattorianostrani.com](#)). The summer menu includes savory crepe with crab, spinach and egg and marinated swordfish with smoked prosciutto salad with wild dandelions. Watch out for the ruthlessly enforced no-scent policy; there have been reports even of octogenarians summarily dismissed for a dab of Chanel. Dinner Monday through Saturday \$135 to \$180.

WHERE TO STAY

Inn of the Anasazi (113 Washington Avenue; reservations, 800-688-8100; [www.innoftheanasazi.com](#)). A few steps from the plaza, this is generally reckoned to be the best in town. Rates for doubles currently start at \$349.

The Inn of the Five Graces (150 East DeVargas Street; 505-992-0957; [www.fivegraces.com](#)). Hidden away down a back street a short walk from the plaza, and incorporating a favorite old restaurant and bar, the Pink Adobe, this is a sumptuous, somewhat eccentric hideaway. Suites from \$385.

Garretts Desert Inn (311 Old Santa Fe Trail; 800-888-2145; [www.garrettsdesertinn.com](#)). The best things about this place are that it's right in downtown, and great value; the worst is that it actually charges hotel guests to park during the day, even though it's a motel. Incredible, but true. Doubles from \$109 through October.

Santa Fe Sage Inn (725 Cerrillos Road; 505-982-5952; www.santafesageinn.com).

About as nice as a motel can be, and a very short drive from downtown, this is very conveniently located for the Railyard and SITE Santa Fe. Doubles from \$85.

HENRY SHUKMAN'S first novel, "The Lost City," will be published by Knopf in January 2008.

Correction: August 19, 2007

An article on Aug. 5 about architecture in Santa Fe misspelled the name of an actress who was seen at a reception there. It was Ali MacGraw, not McGraw.

Correction: August 26, 2007

An article and a caption on Aug. 5 about architecture in Santa Fe misstated the name of a building designed by the Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta. It is the College of Santa Fe Visual Arts Center, not the Marion Center for Photographic Arts, which is housed in the building.

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