SANTA FE'S WESTSIDE/GUADALUPE HISTORIC DISTRICT: HISPANIC VERNACULAR VERSUS PUEBLO REVIVAL

by Beverley Spears, AIA

The Westside/Guadalupe area just to the west of downtown Santa Fe is interesting architecturally because it is the only historic district in Santa Fe consisting primarily of owner-built houses. These owner-built or vernacular houses express individual values and possibly group values in a way that housing designed and built by professionals does not. Owner-built housing is a New Mexican tradition still common today. Many houses on the eastside of Santa Fe are also owner-built but most have been professionally remodeled in the Santa Fe style due to the high property values in that area and the Historic Styles Ordinance.

The Westside/Guadalupe neighborhood forms the one major area which is part of the Santa Fe Historic District listed on the National Register of Historic Places yet was excluded from the historic district established by the City Council in 1957. The purpose of the 1957 Historic District Ordinance was to preserve and promote the Santa Fe style by requiring that all new construction and remodeling conform to either Pueblo Revival or Territorial style. The Westside/Guadalupe area was excluded because many people felt that the design standards would pose an economic hardship for the lower-income property owners on the westside.

This area lies west of Guadalupe Street, with the part on the north side of the river generally known as the West San Francisco Street neighborhood while the area on the south side is the Guadalupe neighborhood. The western boundary was arbitrarily established in 1964 by the construction of St. Francis Drive which cut a wide swath through what was then a dense and homogeneous neighborhood. The neighborhood to the west of St. Francis Drive has much the same history and architectural character as the Westside/Guadalupe area.

In 1983 the Westside/Guadalupe Historic District was established by the City Council to control architectural styles in that area. These regulations generally follow the Spanish Pueblo and Territorial style requirements but are less stringent than those of the downtown and eastside historic districts. However, the Westside/Guadalupe Historic District regulations do not reflect the existing vernacular character of those neighborhoods.

It is probably no coincidence that the creation of the Westside/Guadalupe Historic District and its design controls coincided with a period of sharply escalating property values and real estate speculation and development in that area. These trends are tending to change these neighborhoods radically in certain aspects.

In order to understand the traditional neighborhood character, it is helpful to consider its historic evolution. From the period after the 1692 Reconquest to the late 19th century, the area consisted of agricultural land laced with acequias. It supported a small number of adobe houses located mostly along the old roads including Agua Fria which was part of the Camino Real, Alto Street along the south edge of the river, and West San Francisco Street which paralleled the river on the north.

The coming of the railroad in 1880 and its extension northward in 1887 along what is now Guadalupe Street fostered some growth in this area but also severed it from the main part of Santa Fe, relegating it to the far side of the tracks. These neighborhoods experienced some additional growth during the prosperous years which preceded statehood. During the 1920s the neighborhood population nearly doubled, and then more than doubled again by the end of World War II. Of the 686 buildings surveyed in the Westside/Guadalupe District in 1985, 71% were built before 1946. The relatively flat level strips of irrigated land were easily divided into building lots, with narrow lanes along the property lines giving access to the houses. This growth occurred not as major subdivisions but as piecemeal divisions of individual agricultural parcels into small building lots.

The agricultural land was predominantly Hispanic-owned and the subsequent neighborhoods remained predominantly Hispanic. On the newly-divided lots owners built small houses using their own labor and whatever building materials they could get together, whether by making their own adobes and cutting vigas, or recycling materials or buying the necessities from the local building supply.

The few remaining 19th century houses in the district often follow the typical Spanish Colonial prototype of a single story of adobe rooms at the street edge, but most of the later houses have compact floor plans and are more or less centered on the lot in the typical American fashion. Because the lots are small, the houses are usually only fifteen or twenty feet from the street which helps to create a small scale and an intimate streetscape. The small size of the houses and the narrowness of the streets add to this effect.

There are a number of outbuildings in the district including garages, storage sheds, workshops, studios and little cottages. These buildings are also owner-built and usually sited towards the rear of the property. They increase the diversity of the neighborhood and contribute to its historic appearance. The irregular building placement and the large number of houses tucked away on private alleys and shared driveways also help dispel a suburban appearance.

The houses of the district are traditionally single story in height. Of the nearly 700 buildings in the district, only about 31 have a second story. All but three of these two-story houses were built after 1945. In fact, most of the two-story houses have been built within the last ten years. Historically, the district was about 99% single-story and is still 95% single-story despite the recent trend toward...
second-story construction. Single-story construction is typical of Hispanic building traditions in New Mexico and is more manageable for non-professional builders.

Most properties have some sort of wall or fence at the street edge. These are nearly always low (2 or 3 feet high) and many are transparent, being made of chain link, wire, rock or concrete block. The low walls and fences allow houses and yards to be seen from the street. High (6 feet) walls are being introduced on various streets throughout the district as various properties are developed or remodeled. These are built most frequently by people who have recently acquired property in the neighborhood. High walls are built for security and privacy as well as to achieve a "Santa Fe style" look. These high solid walls drastically alter the streetscape. House facades have traditionally been the dominant streetscape element in this neighborhood. When yards and house facades are concealed behind high blank walls, the sense of pedestrian scale and intimacy is lost.

Some of the small yards of the district are planted with grass, flowers and shrubbery while others are bare earth which has been cleared of weeds. There are virtually no examples of desert landscaping with scoria or gravel and native plants such as cactus and chamisa. There are relatively few trees in the neighborhood most of which are fruit trees or volunteer trees including Chinese elm and Ailanthus (Tree of Heaven). Foundation planting is not common. There are no street trees in the district except for some random plantings along St. Francis Drive.

The individual houses in the area have a wide variety of details although few can be labeled as a clear example of a particular style such as Territorial, Spanish Pueblo, Bungalow or Craftsman. According to the 1985 survey of the existing structures built between 1920 and 1945, there are four vernacular style buildings for every Spanish Pueblo style building. In this case, vernacular means that the structure is owner-built and does not conform to a particular style, but rather incorporates individual features, details and materials which the owner-builder chooses. However, the features which are chosen are often influenced by popular trends, either within the neighborhood or on a citywide or regional scale. For example, curvilinear parapets can be found on many Santa Fe buildings, but they seem to be particularly plentiful in the Westside/Guadalupe neighborhood. Curvilinear parapets were a prominent characteristic of Mission style architecture which originated in California and was popular throughout the Southwest during the early part of the twentieth century. Santa Fe had a number of Mission style buildings including the Elks Club on Lincoln Avenue, the Women's Board of Trade on Washington Avenue and the Guadalupe Church, all of which have since been remodeled into other styles.

The Pueblo Revival style sprang from the same romantic visions as the Mission style. The curvilinear parapet theme was borrowed from the Mission style and carried out in stuccoed masonry rather than stone or terra cotta. Many of the early Pueblo Revival buildings had curvilinear parapets including the Old Post Office on Cathedral Place, the Gross Kelly Warehouse at the railyard and La Fonda Hotel. This was a fashionable architectural detail that was reasonably easy and inexpensive for homeowners to build. The curvilinear parapets in the Westside/Guadalupe neighborhood usually have a simple profile and are an integral part of the stuccoed wall, although one example of a curvilinear parapet in stone atop a stuccoed house can be seen on West Manhattan Avenue. Elsewhere in the neighborhood a yellow stuccoed house has a curvilinear parapet of red-painted brick.

A second architectural feature borrowed from the Mission style is the window or door canopy. This element is also related to the Craftsman style with its broad overhanging roofs supported by diagonal wood braces. The projecting canopies over windows and doors most often have roofs of pressed metal tiles molded in the shape of Spanish mission tiles. These are often painted red while
Distinctive window treatment with artificial stone surround, glass block, turquoise and white wood trim. Patterned pink stucco, decorative tile accents at 236 Ambrosio Street.

Homemade decorative porch detailing at 201 Ambrosio Street.
In summary, the typical Westside/Guadalupe house is a small single-story house with a low profile. It was built sometime after World War I by its original owner/occupant using inexpensive materials. The house probably grew incrementally as the family needed and could afford extra rooms. The property is ornamented and personalized in a simple way using colorful accents, a name plaque and/or distinctive details. A low fence or wall probably surrounds the property. The typical streetscape is a narrow quiet street lined with low fences and small, distinct and personalized houses set close to the street.

Although the styles ordinance in the Westside/Guadalupe neighborhood is less stringent than for the eastside of Santa Fe, it prohibits certain features which contribute to the historic character of the neighborhood while allowing other features which detract from the historic character.

The allowable colors for building walls in the neighborhood should be extended to include pastels and white as well as earth tones. Owners should be allowed to paint brick or stone as is frequently done in this neighborhood.

Low chain link and wire fences are common to the neighborhood and contribute to the openness of the neighborhood. On the other hand, high solid walls are currently permitted, but they are quite uncharacteristic of the neighborhood. Their presence creates a dull and claustrophobic streetscape.

The Westside/Guadalupe neighborhood is particularly vulnerable to a jarring effect caused by two-story buildings because the neighborhood consists almost entirely of one-story small-scale houses on small lots with narrow streets. The relatively flat terrain and scarcity of trees provide no visual buffer for the upper stories. This neighborhood should be downzoned to reduce or eliminate multistory construction. Steeply pitched roofs are uncharacteristic of the neighborhood and should be prohibited by the styles ordinance.

The underlying question behind these ordinance issues is whether the unique character of the Westside/Guadalupe neighborhood should be protected and encouraged or whether the neighborhood should be either allowed to or forced to transform itself into the stereotypical "Santa Fe Look" with earth-colored buildings, high solid walls and standard unpainted vigas, corbel...
and lintel details. Within the downtown area the City has recently recognized thirteen different townscapes and has written a separate set of design standards for each in order to protect and perpetuate the individual townscapes. Some recognition of vernacular architecture and existing neighborhood character was incorporated in the Westside/Guadalupe Historic District Ordinance, but not enough to adequately protect it, and certainly not encourage it.

It is apparent from interviews with neighborhood residents that there is not a clear consensus about what direction the neighborhood should take regarding its future growth and appearance. Some residents value the traditional character of the neighborhood including its distinctive architecture and the sense of community fostered by small quiet streets and houses close together and readily accessible from the street, as well as by a stable population of long-term homeowners. Other residents feel that the popular Santa Fe style architecture with its tan and brown colors and high stuccoed walls would improve the neighborhood and increase property values. One person commented that the long-term residents were leaving the neighborhood for various reasons and were concerned primarily with property values rather than future neighborhood character.

Zoning is closely linked to the question of future neighborhood character. The neighborhood is currently zoned RM-1 and RM-2, the two densest residential zonings possible. While in some cases this zoning increases property value through increased develop-
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