

Conversations in Santa Fe

with Lewis Mumford

This is the first of four articles in the NMA in which various characteristics and problems of Santa Fe architecture and urban planning will be discussed by and with Lewis Mumford. Subsequent issues of the magazine will consider the problem of the historic style ordinance for Santa Fe, the means of achieving architectural harmony in a changing community and plans to regulate Santa Fe's pattern of growth.

This series grew out of a small supper and an evening of informal discussion arranged by Mr. J. B. Jackson and the staff of LANDSCAPE magazine at the time of Mr. Mumford's visit to the city last April. A tape recording which followed the conversation forms the basis of these texts. Occasional sentences have been reworded for the sake of clarity and the order has necessarily been somewhat rearranged to allow a division of the single discussion into four shorter parts. Editorial work on these articles was done by Bainbridge Bunting.

The informality and spontaneity of the occasion should be kept in mind as one reads these remarks. Mr. Mumford and other parties quoted have seen the revised accounts and have very generously conceded their appearance in print.

The editors of the NMA are extremely grateful for this permission. It is, of course, a great honor for a small regional publication to present the opinions of a person of Lewis Mumford's stature. But even more, the editors are conscious of the service they perform in giving the architects and architectural public of New Mexico an opportunity to share in Mr. Mumford's views. These articles cannot help but become important points of reference in any future plans and discussions of New Mexico architecture.

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Mr. Mumford: I couldn't face another public lecture. I've been giving such a number of them And I am a little frightened about discussing the problems of the Santa Fe area and this whole New Mexico culture after having been here just three days. After being in a place for only three days only a very great authority would be able to say anything, and, if he were sensible, he would keep his mouth shut. And yet some of the things I have learned about other parts of the world do have application to this area, which is also a part of the world. It might be valuable for us to discuss these matters.

I don't know the desert country at all well — I know a little of it in the state of Washington; I've been in Arizona and I'm fascinated by it. But I can only give you my first, very rough impressions. I'm really here, however, to learn from you and to get a little better knowledge of what you are doing.

Yet some things have impressed me during these three days. I had a very good morning yesterday with Mr. Jones going around this immediate area, not doing it just by car but also on foot, and I got a little of

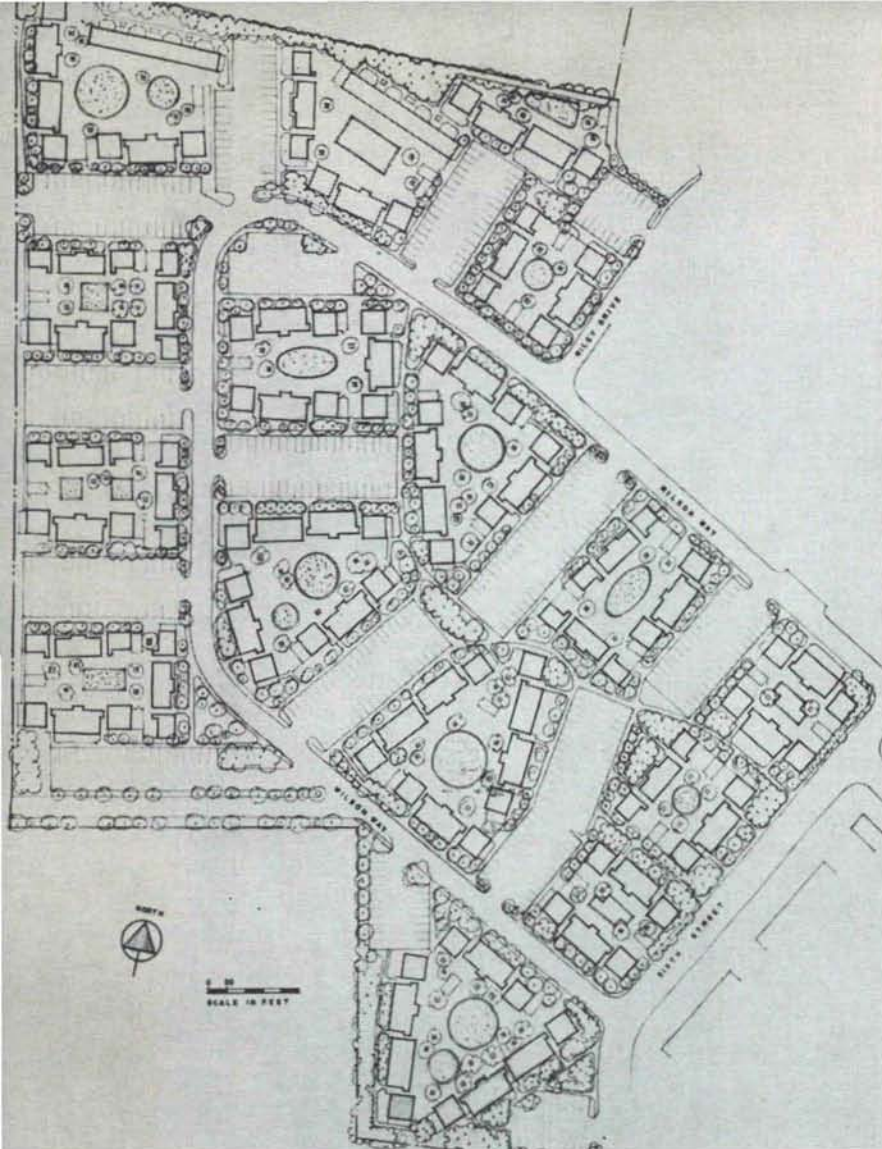
the feeling of the place. Sometimes it happens that things you see about a city during the first 12 hours are more sharply incised on your mind and sometimes truer than the things you discover after being there for 12 months when your impressions become blurred. At least you have my sharp impressions this evening.

What is the tradition of this desert country? What do you really face here? The land itself is so different from the part of the world where I live, the lush dairy country of Dutchess County, New York, that I perhaps can see with great sharpness what your values are. It is a kind of starkness and austerity in the landscape itself which has a special value of its own. I am very glad to see that few people here have engaged in the futile pastime they indulge in in California of growing grass lawns. Grass lawns are an absurdity in most of California. They can be cultivated only with immense effort and extravagant use of water. In dry areas you are commanded by the climate and the landscape to use the natural vegetation and to keep it relatively austere. There is great beauty in this austerity. If it got cluttered up with either foliage or machines that don't belong here, it would be too bad. The quality of the desert is something that you have to preserve. And yet it takes a strong soul to live in the desert.

Then there is another aspect of the desert that is very important. That is the oasis, a place where water is sufficiently plentiful so that you can have trees and shrubbery, a place where you can have a better climate for daily enjoyment than you could under the harsh sun or in the harsh cold of desert itself. The problem of a city situated in desert country like this is to create an oasis — partly a physical oasis and partly a social oasis.

One can find this kind of oasis here and there in the older parts of Santa Fe and in some of the newer developments too. The little cul-de-sacs — I was in one yesterday — are marvelous examples of how the architecture of an oasis should be arranged. Not the usual straight street of houses, but a circle of buildings more or less hidden from each other by shrubbery, covered by trees, producing a miniature oasis with an excellent micro-climate and a fine human environment. That applies to the city as a whole; it should be an oasis.

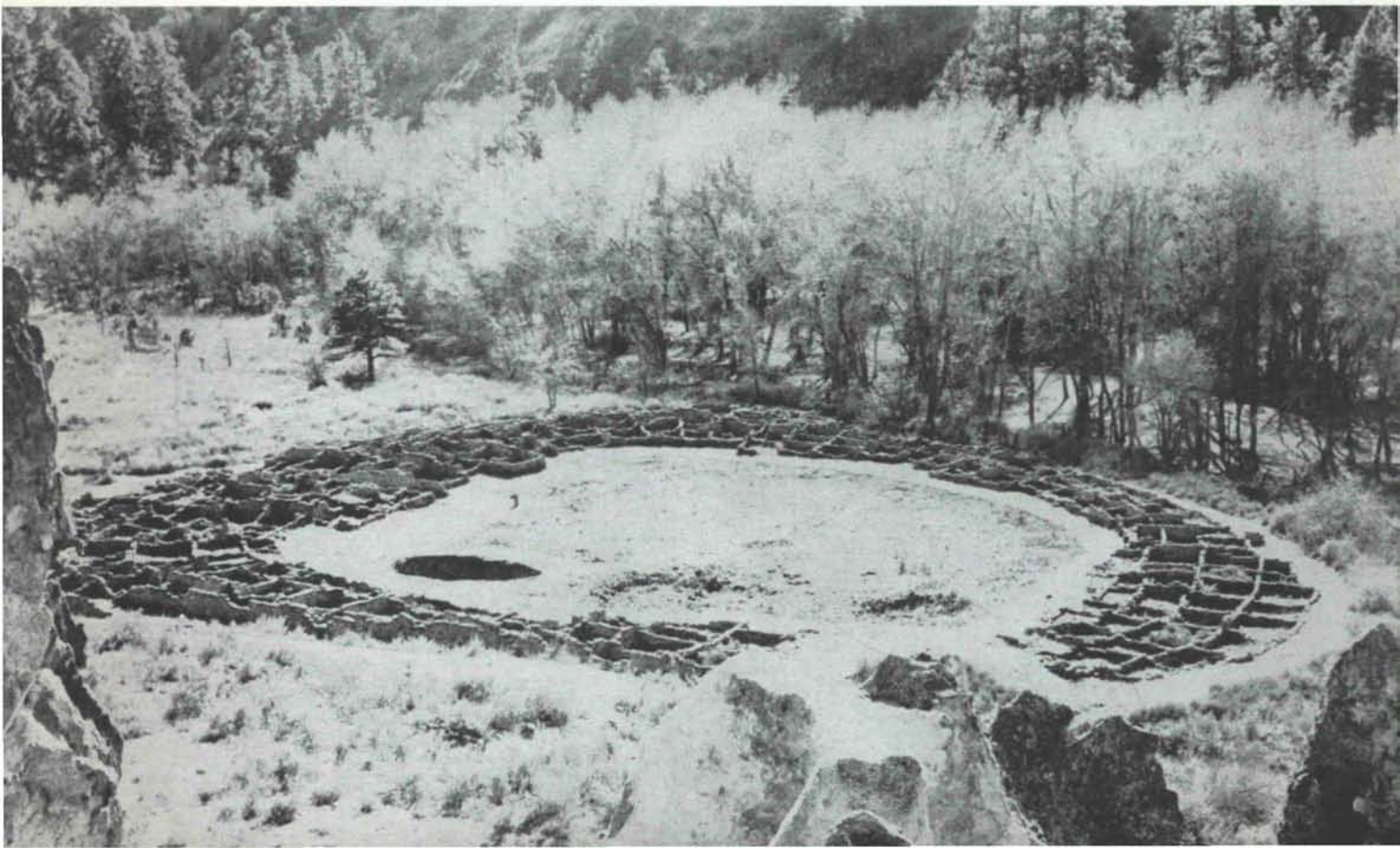
You should be able to recognize Santa Fe, or any other small town in this region, by the richness of its vegetation, with more trees and varied kinds of bushes. But it shouldn't be just a physical oasis or a botanical oasis; it ought to be a social oasis. You want the city to exist as a place where people come together, benefiting by each other's company. Our frontier America was too often settled by people who tried to get away from their neighbors and this bad habit has remained one of the constant features of American life. They would spoil a section of land or a neighborhood and then draw away a little further instead of staying on the spot and cooperating with their neighbors to im-



Left. Housing development for married students, University of California, Berkeley, California. Wurster, Bernadi and Emmons, architects. Project still under construction. Below. Community house, Frijoles Canyon, Bandelier National Mounment, near Santa Fe, N. M. Photo: New Mexico Department of Development and Tourism.

The Pueblo community house accommodated several hundred people during its heyday in the sixteenth century. Consisting of some 250 rooms on the ground floor, it was two and three stories in height. Rooms and terraces opened toward the semi-circular courtyard where daily activities of the community centered and where the kivas (ceremonial rooms) were also located. Limited access to the compound along the flat side insured safety from enemy assaults and furnished a protected area wherein the child could play freely and safely without the immediate supervision of his particular parent.

Although incomparably different in accommodation and appearance, the Berkeley housing development has one essential point of agreement with the pueblo. Hostile elements (today it is wheeled traffic and noise) are screened out by banks of dwellings and walls of planting. A protected nucleus in the heart of each residential block forms a garden area where children can play in safety while their mothers go about their many other household duties.



prove what they had. The city is essentially a social oasis. We have forgotten that.

People tend, when they think of their ideal home, to picture one as far as possible from the center of town. How unfortunate! For two reasons. First, as I said, it's an ordeal to live in the desert and not have sufficient company. Some of us are sufficiently developed spiritually so that we can face that ordeal; but most of us require companionship, friendship, neighbors who will help when we are ill or when some crisis occurs. So the habit of spreading out into the open country doesn't seem to me to be one that should be indefinitely encouraged, and this for a very interesting reason. Not at all because it spoils the landscape. Here in Santa Fe these adobe houses which are spreading over the landscape, further and further from the city, blend into the landscape. Set in the midst of pinon trees, they're not ugly; they're not disfigurements. They are really part of the desert itself; they have the same characteristics. So I wouldn't say that on aesthetic grounds this spread-out is as undesirable as it is in many other parts of the country. So far it has been handled fairly well. But I do think that after a while the people who live there will realize that there were values in the heart of old Santa Fe with its pleasant little cul-de-sacs and irrigation canals, where trees can flourish and one can get a few plants to bloom. And secondly, there are the values of neighborliness and accessibility, of having choices which you don't have when you are by your self out in the midst of unoccupied country.

You have a great tradition here in New Mexico which until now has been terribly neglected. The Indians, especially the Pueblo Indians, had a notion of a coherent community life in which there was a great deal of mutual aid. A child grew up not only under the eyes of his mother and a few other children, but with a whole nest of mothers and uncles and aunts who also had some influence on his life. This suggests an interesting problem for the architect when he designs a new subdivision. How are you going to relieve the modern mother of 24-hour duty of looking after children in a two-generation family, when one needs a three-generation family in order to relieve her of the incessant grind and harassment of daily duties? There was a time when you could have servants to do these things. Very few people today can afford the servants necessary to run a good household. Therefore, you have to introduce into the very community pattern itself an arrangement of families that will enable a little assistance to be given back and forth, and will give the child itself the effect of having grandparents and uncles and aunts around even though these blood relations are not actually on hand.

It happens that my friend William Wurster, the university architect in Berkeley, has designed a new group of houses for graduate students which, without going back to the Pueblo style of architecture, has reinstated its principle. He has groups of houses so arranged that in each group there is a playground in the middle with limited and controlled entrances. The little interior oasis of grass and trees of these houses look very much like an old pueblo, as a matter of fact, and the children are perfectly safe there under the eyes of more than their own immediate parents. The whole group turns its back on the roads and small parking lots placed at intervals around the community.

This is the sort of thing that I think you should be thinking of when you lay out new housing communities.

I would emphasize again the fact that you should be able to recognize Santa Fe by the richness of its vegetation, not by the number of neon signs, nor the number of gas stations along the entrance road, nor the sprawl of supermarkets. Supermarkets in any community should be scaled down to the size of the community. The scale of some of your big supermarkets here is wrong for a city of 50,000. It is absurd that people here have to go two miles in a car to get a loaf of bread just as people have to do in a metropolitan suburbia. There should be more small markets run by people who are now almost on relief, people who would then have a valuable contribution to make to the community.

Since Santa Fe is a unique town, so different in its problems from those of almost any town I know, either in the east or west, it should be built according to the right scale and in accordance with its own character. Your population is growing slowly and you should thank heaven for that, but you should see that the new enterprises that come in do not entirely violate the spirit of the community. It is a hideous misfortune — and an example of inadequate planning and foresight — that the square that holds all your state administrative buildings should have a screaming line of gasoline stations on one side of it.

If you take the pattern of Santa Fe from some other part of the country, you are going to make it even worse than its bad parts are now — and there are bad parts! I read in the paper yesterday that you are going to get Federal funds for urban renewal. This is a very grave danger because most of the urban renewal projects are so bureaucratically conceived and so mechanically organized that they are almost prime examples of how *not* to build housing for any group, whether rich or poor. And the curious thing is that the poor and the rich are both condemned to live in high-rise apartments in most parts of the world.

I should hope that the people in Santa Fe who are prepared to do urban renewal projects will fight Washington tooth and nail to get something that really corresponds to the needs of a modern community and to the needs of a region like New Mexico and not let the standard pattern guide their designs.

Well, I've said enough, I think, to loosen up your responses and to give you a chance to tell me what I ought to know about this region and what further things you are planning to do. Now the floor is yours. I've taken more time than I meant.

Mr. Solnit: Mr. Mumford, I feel it is incorrect to describe Santa Fe as being in the desert. This is a public image which we hope to dissipate. I do not think that our altitude or our type of vegetation corresponds with the public conception of a desert which is one of searing temperatures and extreme aridity such as one finds in the southern parts of New Mexico and Arizona.

Mr. Mumford: Oh, I wasn't thinking of the Gobi desert or the Sahara, but the semi-desert. Any country that has to guard its water supply very carefully is on the verge of being a desert. And if it doesn't guard its water, it will soon be desert.



Rendering of New York City Housing Authority's Simkhovitch Housing Project in Manhattan.
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