

# Conversations in Santa Fe

## with Lewis Mumford

### no. 2

*This is the second 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. The first article considered the unique character and architectural challenge of Santa Fe. The present conversation considers the problem of a historic style ordinance for Santa Fe. Subsequent issues of the magazine will consider the means of achieving architectural harmony in a changing community and plans to regulate Santa Fe's pattern of growth.*

*The 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 followed the conversation and it 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 the architectural public of New Mexico an opportunity to share in Mr. Mumford's views. These articles can not help but become important points of reference in any future plans and discussions of New Mexico architecture.*

*Mr. Solnit: My second question to you, Mr. Mumford, concerns the Historic Style Ordinance which has been in force here in Santa Fe since 1959. This type of thing I first met when I worked in New England. There they also have a rich tradition of architecture. They passed historic zoning in Connecticut and immediately people said "... everybody in this district shall build in this style." Many of us felt it was quite wrong to impose a style that had been developed in days when materials were handled quite differently from what they are today and when many materials that are available today were not then obtainable.*

*I wonder whether you would advocate conforming to a style here in Santa Fe, or would you allow freedom of expression in design?*

*Mr. Mumford: I am very glad you bring up this question. The question of historic style is very interesting. You have adobe construction here, as a native material; it has many virtues and it has a certain con-*

*sistency in it. It also has one virtue which I think is insufficiently appreciated. It's impossible to combine it with an excess of fenestration. Therefore, it has so far saved you from some of the absurdities that followers of Mies van der Rohe have perpetrated in the name of domestic architecture, and I think that you should be congratulated upon that and the moral isn't to be easily forgotten.*

*On the other hand, what is the New Mexican style? You can't stop life at any one moment. You can't stop the development of architecture at any one moment. There are many things and many resources that architects now have that the primitive adobe builders didn't have. You have real adobe construction here still, which as I say, has many admirable features, but you also have a lot of fake adobe construction now being built and I think that the attempt to perpetuate this traditional form by purely external means without regard to the fact that the actual character of the building is different is a dubious one.*

*There is no reason, for example, why there shouldn't be considerable latitude in the development of a regional architecture here. I'm sure the Indians learned a great deal about the proper way to live in this climate and it is pure brashness on the part of an architect to ignore what they have learned. We have a young professor at the University of California who spent a little time investigating peasant architecture in India and he discovered that the educated Indian architect who has been to Paris or to London or to New York, who knows his Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, builds all-glass houses that nobody can live in in the climate of India, whereas the simple, humble peasant has learned how to be comfortable and to be well looked after in terms of his own climate and his own daily life.*

*There are many variations within the general pattern established here which should be permitted, and I would agree with you, it is very dangerous to lay down by ordinance a fixed style. That's the way to kill the development of architecture.*

*Certainly I would have preserved here in Santa Fe some of the buildings of the middle 19th Century that have been destroyed. That was part of the history of this community. You destroy the memory of the past if you ruthlessly wipe out all buildings of an earlier period in order to make the city look more uniform than any really living community should look. So I would say that what some of you are thinking of doing by an ordinance would much better be done by the slower and sometimes embarrassing means of education. The architects who came here and designed a flagrantly non-regional building, non-regional because it ignored the peculiarities of the climate and various other aspects of the scene, shouldn't be encouraged. But neither should people be commanded by law to produce fakes — mere superficial imitations of what was done honestly in the past.*



*Mr. McHugh:* Mr. Mumford, this is a touchy subject and many of us feel very strongly about it.

*Mr. Mumford:* That's my specialty — touchy subjects.

*Mr. McHugh:* We are all, I think, probably in agreement that we find Santa Fe a charming place and that's why we live here. We don't want to see it become another Los Angeles. On the other hand, I feel as do quite a few people, that an ordinance which would require us to build fake antiques is not good for the city in the long run.

*Mr. Meem:* I think that the term "fake" architecture — in fact some people call it "bastard" architecture — is a misconception. This architecture is unique because it goes back perhaps thousands of years. The basic shapes are ones that were inherited by the Spaniards and now by us. I feel that it has been a natural, not a fake development. When the Americans came here in 1848, they found adobe buildings everywhere. Since there has always been the problem of how to maintain adobe because of its vulnerability to rain, these Yankees introduced stucco or hard lime plaster and buildings were preserved. This did not make them fake. As time has gone on other materials have been introduced, materials that are easier to handle and lighter in weight. These have been used as the core of the buildings rather than adobe. You can call it fake to make these buildings look like adobe if you wish to, but there are certain elemental forms connected with them that to me seem to tie the buildings into a tradition. One uses these forms symbolically so to speak. For example instead of having a parapet that is absolutely rigid and square such as concrete blocks would demand, it is softened by cement on the top and finished by hand. I regard this as a symbol and therefore legitimate.

I also feel very strongly that Santa Fe has a problem of conservation, similar to the problem that other old cities in America have had. Boston has it on Beacon Hill. If Beacon Hill were allowed to express any architect's ideas of how Beacon Hill should look in the 20th Century rather than how it really did look, we wouldn't have a Beacon Hill; we would have something very different. The same is true here in Santa Fe. I therefore think that it is absolutely legitimate for Santa Fe to have an Historical Zone in the center of the city where the majority of the older buildings are. In conserving the old buildings and in building new ones, we should follow very closely the patterns that have been set from time immemorial in this area. It is these patterns which give our architecture its character and individuality and which make Santa Fe. I have therefore felt strongly and have backed the ordinances which attempted to establish an Historical Zone in Santa Fe. Furthermore I think it is legitimate, inside of those zones, for architects to submit to the discipline of certain forms although I admit that the present historic zone ordinance is probably too rigid and inflexible.

We have many types of architecture here that should be recognized as belonging to this area. We have the original pueblo, which has been tremendously modified by the Spanish occupation. This constitutes one type of architecture — the Spanish Pueblo type. Then with the opening up of the Santa Fe Trail, other factors came into being which produced a type of architecture similar to that of Monterey. My feeling

is that inside of our historic zone we should stay closely in spirit to these, because there is a charm here, there is something that is very unique that should be preserved. There is a humanness in our individual quality here, that is different from anything else in the world, except perhaps in certain parts of the Old World, like North Africa. It's a rarity in America — a little enclave, so to speak, of architecture of a very distinctive type.

I regret having it called "fake" architecture, because architecture should be very flexible. And for the sake of joy, of recollection, of familiarity, I think the architect should be free to — shall we say, to violate certain material functional requirements. There are many great periods in architecture where certain functional requirements have been violated for the sake of the spirit. It's part of the joy of architecture. So that when you build a wall with a slight batter or entasis in it, you somehow recall the ancient type from which it derived thousands of years back. I don't feel that we are doing something that is wrong, something that is reprehensible. I believe that the architects of Santa Fe should rally around the efforts to preserve, even beyond the historic zone, something of the quality of Santa Fe. It is possible to produce delightful, comfortable buildings inside of this general pattern. And so if it were discarded because modern materials used in the style makes the building a fake, I think it would be a very grave misfortune.

I also feel that the minute we allow architects to express themselves within the Historic Zone in any way that they felt would be proper, that it would be a misfortune, because very frequently architects haven't got foolproof-good-taste. You can get some very bad things; you can get buildings quite out of character, buildings that would destroy certain qualities which exist in a sense that is unique. In other words, the effort to conserve something that has been inherited legitimately is, I think, a laudable thing. This little city which is unique in America, I think we have a special duty to preserve.

*Mr. Mumford:* Haven't we got three different problems here? One is the preservation of historic structures within the old core; the second has to do with other buildings within the historic core but built for modern uses; and thirdly we have to remember what goes on in Santa Fe outside the historic center.

Let's think first of the historic core where you have a number of traditional buildings, many of them very charming and characteristic, some of them in need of rehabilitation, but essentially sound and full of the old historic character. They're not all of one piece. Everything is to be said for preserving as much of these as one possibly can, and taking those that have become decrepit and making them public charges, bringing them back into life again by making them useful. This is an essential and valuable task. But what are you going to do about Bishop Lamy's Cathedral? That isn't adobe; it is an entirely different kind of creation introduced at a very early stage as part of Santa Fe's core. Nevertheless, it is a valid part of your tradition, it recalls a phase of history that should not be forgotten.

Secondly, there are more recent structures built for modern needs and the new ones that are going to be built. There are gas stations (and you have some hideous ones) and department stores and other kinds of special stores. I don't quite see how these can be done



over into the traditional adobe style. They can be made inoffensive, they can be kept from shouting too loud by zoning for height or even by passing on the finish and color of the buildings. Huge glass fronts might be reduced in size so that there would be more wall and less window space. Buildings can be kept from being offenses to the eye. But I do not see any way, without actually caricaturing the very thing we wish to preserve, of making a new building conform to an obsolete pattern.

Here, it seems to me, it is a matter of how to carry your old traditions further. Though there is room for great respect for the old tradition — and this is the thing I was emphasizing — perhaps the real adobe construction itself should be pushed even further. It has many virtues and the architect has a great deal to learn from the experience of the region. There is every reason why the New Mexico house should look different from a house in Connecticut or in California. One of my young friends, a young architect who used to live in New Mexico, even suggested the design of such a house. It was published, I think, in your Santa Fe newspaper (and a similar project in the *NMA*, May-June 1961). It was a house in which the rooms were rounded, a house turned in upon itself which would need a minimum of windows with a maximum sense of enclosure, light only where you needed it. I suspect there are many innovations still possible using the adobe form of construction which would come closer to the climatic needs.

Finally, it would be a great misfortune if in the emphasis on the purely historic core of Santa Fe you forgot what was happening at the outskirts. If you forgot that some of the main roads entering into Santa Fe are absolutely hideous in every aspect. They are typical of the very worst American practices from Buzzards Bay, Mass., to the Bay Area in California. One of the things that makes Old Santa Fe so charming is that the street network is composed largely of narrow streets with only an occasional opening. It is built for the pedestrian and on a pedestrian scale. This point you must remember both in preserving the old city and in laying out the new.

*To be continued.*

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