

Conversations in Santa Fe

with Lewis Mumford

no. 3

This is the third of four articles in the NMA in which various characteristics and problems of Santa Fe architecture and urban planning are discussed by and with Lewis Mumford. The first two articles dealt with the unique architectural challenge of Santa Fe and the problem of a historic style ordinance. The present conversation considers the need for planning to regulate the city's pattern of growth. The final installment will discuss the means of achieving architectural harmony in a changing community.

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 in April, 1962. 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 discussion of New Mexico architecture.

Mr. Jones: One of the question that I would put to you, Mr. Mumford, is: How large should Santa Fe become?

Mr. Mumford: That's an interesting question because I think there's an upper limit to the size of all cities. When they grow without control they cease to perform their functions. They end up by just going in for bigness for bigness' sake. Most American cities haven't any notion of what their real character is and how big they can afford to be. I think this is a question Santa Fe should very definitely ask itself. It may

be that by the time you've reached a population of 75,000 you should appeal to the State Legislature to provide the guidance, leadership and planning which would establish another city within 20 or 30 miles of Santa Fe, and not just continue to spread out over the landscape because you can sell the real estate. I have no doubt that the many attractive features of Santa Fe will make more and more people want to come here. They are doing it relatively slowly as compared to, say, California, but that is your advantage.

There is a top limit to the population in such a region as this that was set long ago by the nature of the water supply. You must meet this problem, meet it in advance by making the public authorities aware of the fact that your very existence would be menaced by an indefinite increase in population. There isn't an unlimited supply of water. The very character of the community — the kind of intimacy you get from a city of 50,000 to 75,000 — you will not have if you expand to 200,000 which you might very easily do in the next 25 years with the way things are going in this country. If you don't take precautions, you may find yourselves in the same dismal state as so many California cities today, which have destroyed the very attractions that people originally came there to enjoy.

I would, therefore, introduce this question of maximum population at an early date. Realize that there is a top limit if you want to keep your character and integrity. Once you face that, you will have to take measures to prevent growth beyond a certain point. There are many ways of doing this: you could control the amount of land which would be permissible to put into subdivisions, you could zone the part outside this area for permanent agriculture or recreational use. There are many ways of doing this legally. Not all have been tried in this country, but they have been tried in one place or another.

Now I would like to hear what you gentlemen have to say.

Mr. Clark: I would like to comment on the limitations to the size of Santa Fe. As I see them, our limitations are more a matter of geography than one of water supply. Santa Fe cannot just spread out in any direction because of certain limiting geographical factors. The rough terrain — steep hillsides cut by barrancas — limit the amount of building that can be done to the east, north-east and north of the present city. These areas are necessarily limited to extremely low density housing. That explains the present drawing-away from the historic center of Santa Fe. His-

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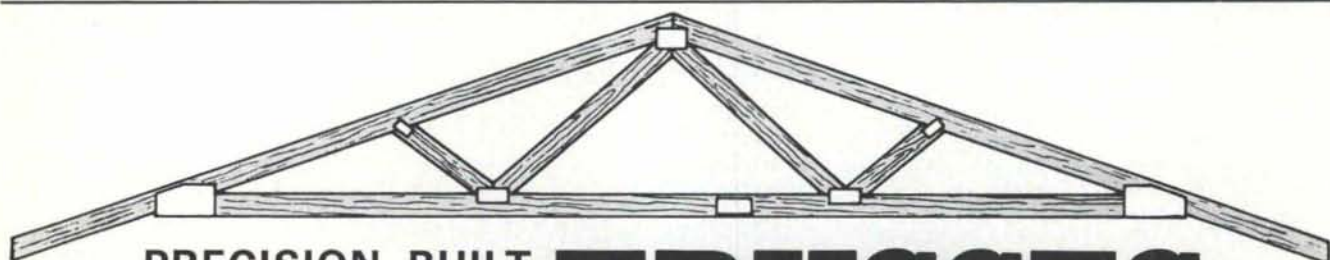
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torically, the town was placed where a town of its time and size should have been placed — in the upper regions of its valley. Now, when the present growth reaches the point where it cannot be accommodated within the valley, then another center will be evolved. The possibility of another center out at Agua Fria or down Highway 85 some place would seem very reasonable if urban development demands it. I think that all factors together will move to control the population of Santa Fe.

Mr. Franke: I question this expansion to the south and west of Santa Fe. If we sprawl out onto the flatlands just like any other highway town, then the essential character of Santa Fe will be lost. Tonight we have talked a good deal about Santa Fe's architectural heritage as the basis for the city's uniqueness. Personally, I question that; I think that Santa Fe's unique character is more a matter of the city's organization in terms of the narrow street pattern, the central plaza the quiet cul-de-sacs. Then beyond this we have roads radiating out.

Mr. Mumford: This radiating growth goes against the original compactness.

Mr. Franke: Yes, but the town will have to grow; if the city is to grow, it will grow out.

Mr. Mumford: The question is the mode of growth. You see the city is currently growing out linearly, without the close organization that you got in the old Spanish city plan.

Mr. Franke: I feel that if you lined Cerrillos Road with what we call "Santa Fe style architecture," it would still not be Santa Fe.

Mr. Mumford: I agree, because the motor road itself belongs to a different order.

Mr. Franke: The growth of this type of close-knit community does not grow out properly into flatlands with great, wide streets. I think the attractive growth in Santa Fe is up into the hills behind the city. I think it fits in there.

Mr. Williams: But we have to face the economics of building. I don't see how Santa Fe can expand in any direction except to the southwest for the simple reason that economics dictate growth in that direction. We built the sewer plant that pulls growth in that direction. The topography of the ground itself is pulling it in that direction. You can't build houses at three to five families per acre in the Dempsey Estates. Economics itself won't permit this. You might build on 5-acre tracts, but not all people can afford to live on 5-acre tracts.

Mr. Franke: Nevertheless, I feel that the continuation of the old close-knit street system is necessary to preserve the character of Santa Fe.

Mr. Williams: Well, I simply can't argue this point. A more sprawling growth to the southwest may be necessary to contain the population. If this is necessary, then I'm ready to give up on the character of Santa Fe.

Mr. Clark: We're not going to give up on that. But we are going to have to acknowledge the fact, I think, that if you can get one dwelling per two acres on our eastern mountainsides, this is about as much as one

can hope for. To the north there are some areas that could possibly contain one dwelling per acre. But this is low-density dwelling. I'm not talking about the quality of the dwelling or how nice a home you can have there or the architectural character of the house. I'm talking about how many people per acre you can accommodate.

Mr. Mumford: As a matter of fact, that brings up something that occurred to me only yesterday while going through this area. No attempt has been made to use the hillside itself as a building element, as some of the old pueblos did. Actually, there may come a time when it might become very valuable for Santa Fe to have apartment complexes where the hill itself is the background. They build that way in San Francisco, and it would be very much in the style of this region if you had groups of houses instead of letting them be scattered over one and three and five-acre tracts. Here there would be a much richer kind of neighborly life for the people living there, and you'd spoil less of the country and have more of the fine, rugged wildness of it left. The intimate part of it would be pleasanter to live in. Except in certain parts of old Santa Fe, I don't think there is anything here like a really first-rate environment, even for the good houses.

Mr. Conron: Isn't that partially because we put in laws? Before we had zoning, we had Santa Fe. Since we had our first Master Plan, we have had zoning and that took care of Santa Fe.

But seriously, we can certainly increase the density to the north and to the east if we want to. Saying that we have to go southwest is merely basing our thinking on a sewage plant. I think that our laws — our zoning laws — are very definite factors in determining these things.

Mr. Williams: Well, there's one more thing—deed restrictions. Deed restrictions exist in vast areas to the north and east, regardless of what we might write in laws, and these restrictions override the public control. They still exist.

Mr. Conron: Public control has to be met, again, by education.

Mr. Clark: Now there is one more fact that overrides everything else: it is cheaper to build a 3-bedroom house on a level site than it is on a hill site. I'm not now talking about where we prefer to keep the city center or anything else; I'm just talking about the economics of it. It's cheaper to build on a relatively level site than to cantilever off a hillside. Now when the economic pressure becomes such that somebody wants to live up here on the side of Atalaya, he'll pay the difference.

Mr. Mumford: Yes, but there is another aspect of this economic question. The tendency to over-scatter the population of Santa Fe is to be guarded against for many reasons. Not only for the convenience of domestic life and neighborhood life, but also not to overburden the city budget with unnecessary extensions of paved streets and utilities. You spread too far and you automatically increase the taxes to provide these utilities.

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