

## Conversations in Santa Fe

with Lewis Mumford

no. 4

*This is the last of four articles in the NMA in which various characteristics and problems of Santa Fe architecture and urban planning have been discussed by and with Lewis Mumford. Earlier issues of the magazine dealt with the unique architectural challenge of Santa Fe, the problem of the historic style ordinance and plans to regulate the city's pattern of growth. The present article considers the means of achieving architectural harmony in a changing community.*

*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, 1962. 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 article 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.*

*Mr. Jones:* Would you be good enough, Mr. Meem, to summarize for us your reasons for advocating the Historic Zone in Santa Fe and for supporting the Historic Style Ordinance?

*Mr. Meem:* I feel very strongly, Mr. Jones, that Santa Fe has a problem of conservation similar to

that which other older cities in America have had. Boston has it on Beacon Hill. If Beacon Hill were allowed to express just any architect's ideas of how Beacon Hill should look in the Twentieth Century rather than how it really did look, we would not 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 are the majority of the older buildings. 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. I have therefore strongly backed the ordinances which attempt to establish the Historical Zone in Santa Fe. And I furthermore think it is legitimate, inside of this zone, for architects to submit to the discipline of certain forms. On the other hand, I do admit that the present Historic Zone Ordinance is probably too rigid and inflexible.

We have no enabling act here which would permit a more flexible type of commission to decide what would be appropriate or not appropriate. The present ordinance attempts actually to decide styles of architecture which is extremely difficult. As you know we have seen built some monstrosities that conform perfectly with the minute stipulations of the ordinance but which are so bad and which defeat our purpose. I would like very much to see us have an enabling act passed, passed through the Legislature similar to those in Massachusetts and California whereby cities can establish an historical zone and set up an advisory commission or a planning commission which would have freedom to pass on the individual designs submitted for its approval.

There has got to be a certain flexibility; you cannot lay down laws about zoning, as our ordinance does now, merely with a definition. There should be a commission of some sort which would permit slight variations in the working out of specific problems.

*Mr. Clark:* Who would make up this commission; architects or laymen?

*Mr. Meem:* In California the commission corresponds to what we have here in the Historical Subcommittee of the Planning Commission. In Santa Barbara



a group including the museum and various civic organizations make the appointments.

*Mr. Clark:* In Santa Fe, who would make up such a commission to pass on what was acceptable? Would it be limited to architects?

*Mr. Meem:* I don't think you would confine it to architects. I think that it should be as wise a group of people as we could find.

*Mr. Clark:* And more wise than our present Historical Style Committee?

*Mr. Meem:* Yes, I would say people with more experience, perhaps, and perhaps more architects on it. And if we had this enabling law passed by the State of New Mexico, we would then be able to have a commission that exercised the function of taste which now it is not permitted to do. As things stand you have automatically to approve a building if it conforms to the formal definitions of one of the several styles of sanctioned architecture—no matter how bad it is. The result has sometimes been very poor buildings indeed.

*Mr. Mumford:* I would agree with you; it is very dangerous to lay down by ordinance a fixed architectural style. That is the way to kill the life of architecture.

*Mr. Meem:* The standard that was established in Massachusetts, I understand, is that the governing body of Beacon Hill is permitted to exercise its judgment of what would conform with the older buildings on the Hill.

*Mr. Williams:* Has that been contested legally?

*Mr. Meem:* They passed an enabling act and then had it tested by the Supreme Court of Massachusetts. This enables the commission to pass judgment on aesthetic grounds without having to prove step by step whether the design in question is actually 18th century architecture or not. If we had something like that, it seems to me that we could have more variety here. We could have many modern solutions that would be completely in the spirit of what we are trying to do and we could exclude unsympathetic work.

*Mr. Williams:* Until very recently, of course, this sort of thing was thought to be impossible. Legislation had to do only with such things as health and safety. But a ruling by the Supreme Court of The United States, in 1958 I think it was, said that a community was just as much entitled to rule on matters affecting the beauty of a town as on matters of health. That decision was written by Justice Douglas, I believe.

*Mr. McHugh:* Is it not possible for us to have an ordinance that would permit us to control more than architectural design — because architecture is only a small part of the charm of the city. The varying widths of the streets and street furniture and trees, things like that are important parts of the character of a city. If only we could have an ordinance that would let us preserve and improve that character, would let us build, in any part of the city, a building that bridged the past and the future, as well as the U. S. Embassy does in New Delhi.

What we have had up to now has been a negative kind of law. It has been a failure because some very unfortunate buildings have been approved by a planning commission that couldn't do anything else. Bad designs, but ones that technically were within the law. We need a law such as Mr. Meem is talking about that would give discretion to a commission. We all agree that we want to keep the delight of Santa Fe — I am

all for things that are done for joy. But let us do more than just say "no."

*Mr. Mumford:* A city planning authority with power and confidence could undoubtedly set a much better standard for many other things. 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's built for the pedestrian and on a pedestrian scale. I think it's very important that people who plan the road system should remember that the motor car is only an accessory to the city, not a reason for the city's being. Too much must not be granted to the motor car. One of the things that you ought to be thinking of is establishing a road system, a system of parking lots and garages, which would keep the motor cars from needlessly invading the historic quarter. That insulation would give it infinitely more attraction to the tourist. Tourism, after all, is your major industry in Santa Fe. There is, therefore, every economic reason for reestablishing the pedestrian quality of the historic core while planning the appropriate buildings and parking space on the outskirts, which would mean, probably, the rearrangement of the whole road pattern. You might establish a circular road system which would form a circle around the core, giving access to it, but keeping the major part of the traffic away from the heart of the city.

*Mr. Clark:* I'd like to get back to one item — control of design. Within our framework control goes back to a commission; it goes back to an elected body. Now how are we going to accomplish effective control within the design concept when your control agency is an appointive agency? This commission has almost got to be an appointed group by an elective agency and within the democratic municipal administration. I do not mean to imply I'm against this — I think this is right. But to accomplish the ultimate interpretation of our heritage of historical design we would have to set up some superior, overriding authority even above our elected officials.

*Mr. Meem:* They apparently solved this in California where they appointed a special committee of learned people to pass on these matters.

*Mr. Clark:* Nevertheless, the learned people are responsible to the elected officials.

*Mr. Meem:* Yes, I imagine they would be. If the mayor decided he didn't think they did the right thing, he probably could override them.

*Mr. Jones:* What has been done about this elsewhere, Mr. Mumford?

*Mr. Mumford:* Well, there are all sorts and grades of control. In Sweden every block has a block committee, which decides on the character of the new house or building that is to be erected in the block. I think we have to realize that some of these problems will only be solved by education. They can't be solved at once. We have to create an interest in the problem to begin with or we shall have arbitrary judgments on the part of those responsible. One of the best examples of a large scale project in the country is the great Lake Shore Development in Chicago, a part of Burnham's original plan. The reason that it was so successful is that the school authorities published a book called Wacker's *Manual*, which was required study in the elementary schools in Chicago. By the time he got through school every Chicago voter knew what the Chicago Plan was and what it would do for the city. Even the most crooked administrations in Chicago car-



ried out this grand plan. I don't think it would have worked so well if it hadn't been for the fact that it was introduced into the minds of the citizens of Chicago in that fashion.

*Mr. Williams:* I would like to see this done in Santa Fe; start early with the student.

*Mr. Meem:* Yes, but things are moving so rapidly in this day and age, things change almost over night. Our problems could become acute. If we wait for education, we're liable not to have that Old Santa Fe to save.

*Mr. Mumford:* You have to do the immediate job, naturally. You have to block some immediate things to keep the way open for the good things that will take time to evolve. These are the normal problems of every community. They work best when a community is sufficiently educated to appreciate that the problems are theirs, not just the responsibility of a handful of devoted people.

*Mr. Williams:* Mr. Mumford, do you know of examples where ordinances permitting aesthetic judgment in design have passed muster of such governmental agencies as the F.H.A.? It would be quite possible for us to write a local ordinance here permitting the deletion of front yards, side yards or other restrictions which are usual; but I am concerned lest governmental control negate such permissive local regulations.

*Mr. Mumford:* I think that the F.H.A. regulations have been bad for housing developments. They have a whole set of arbitrary requirements which have kept the imaginative architect from doing a superior job. That's one of the reasons I view with a great deal of hesitation and circumspection the attempts to regulate by law things that have to be regulated but which ought to be regulated in a more subtle fashion. Pressure must be put on people who do the wrong thing to do the right thing. It may ultimately have to take some form of legal regulation, but if you try to put all the regulations into the law itself, you prevent any fruitful development. You have to trust the people who are going to administer the law, especially in municipal matters. You have to give them great powers and of course throw them out when they abuse those powers. That's part of the process.

*Mr. Williams:* Well, suppose you had an ordinance here that permitted a sub-divider to place houses wherever he pleased on a lot, maintaining certain builder's coverage requirements. He still must finance his development through government insurance. Here we get back to the fact that building designs must meet government regulation, not local desire.

*Mr. Mumford:* Now's the time to fight the F.H.A. You are quite right, this is where the communities that have been eager for funds sooner or later have submitted to these arbitrary regulations. But this has gone much too far in this country. Both the Federal Housing Authority and the loan agencies must be challenged by local authorities and be made to be much more reasonable and flexible in their requirements.

*Voice:* Throw the rascals out.

*Mr. Mumford:* Change the methods. And assert the local authority's duty to consider local conditions and pay attention to them.

*Miss Jensen:* Some time back you mentioned educating the community. I wonder if we could pursue that a little. I think we all know whom we have to educate, but could you tell me what methods you would

use and what other communities have used and what groups have led this education?

*Mr. Mumford:* There are many, many things that can be done. The most educative thing for any community is to have a vision of what might be. That was the great thing that Daniel Burnham gave Chicago. I'm a severe critic of Burnham's plan — I feel that he neglected very important elements in the community's life and that these original defects will remain in Chicago for a long time. But he gave his fellow-citizens a vision. It was a partial vision but a splendid one, and it changed the quality of life in Chicago, for the lake front is a great piece of coherent and admirable planning.

Now the main thing in education is to have people with vision. I remember very well an interview I had — a very brief one — with an elder in one of the, the only really successful Utopian community in this country, the Amana community in Iowa. I was complimenting him on the extraordinary nature of the community — it is a balanced agricultural community consisting of six villages. For most of a century they led a very prosperous industrial and agricultural life; the whole layout was admirable, but by the mid nineteen-forties it was obviously going to seed. I asked him how this had happened and he said, "It's very simple. We have had no leader with inspiration for the last 50 years." The thing that really makes a difference in a community are people of courage and vision who aren't merely preoccupied with keeping the community running. We all have to do our share in keeping it running. But you must have a few people who have some sense of what the community might be.

The ordinary man doesn't have it. Don't ask him what sort of a house he would like to live in. He doesn't know. He will accept the one that you give him. Don't ask him what sort of a city he'd like to live in. The one he's been living in all the time seems normal to him and he'll accept its worst features as inevitable consequences of modern progress and the worse they are, the more progressive they seem to him!

Therefore, the really important purpose of education is to give people a sense of alternatives, — a realization that they're not condemned to the kind of half-life that they now live from day to day. But there are many improvements that are available, from the better arrangement of the rooms in his house to the better grouping of houses in a neighborhood community, to the better relation of a group of neighborhoods to the city itself with all that that implies. The real weakness in every American city — I'm not just talking about Santa Fe — has been lack of sufficient boldness of imagination about human beings. About mechanical things we have endless resources, endless willingness to experiment and to use imagination especially if the product will sell. But as far as improving our community goes, we're back in the Stone Ages. We need much greater inventiveness, much greater imagination, and a greater willingness to entertain fresh ideas than we have. Once this is implanted in a community a great deal can be done that wasn't possible before.

I speak from the experience that England had in building its New Towns. Half a century ago — sixty years, now — Englishman named Ebenezer Howard had a conception of a new kind of town which would marry agriculture to industry, town life to rural life. He called this the Garden City. And this solitary Englishman gave a picture of a possible life so attractive that he



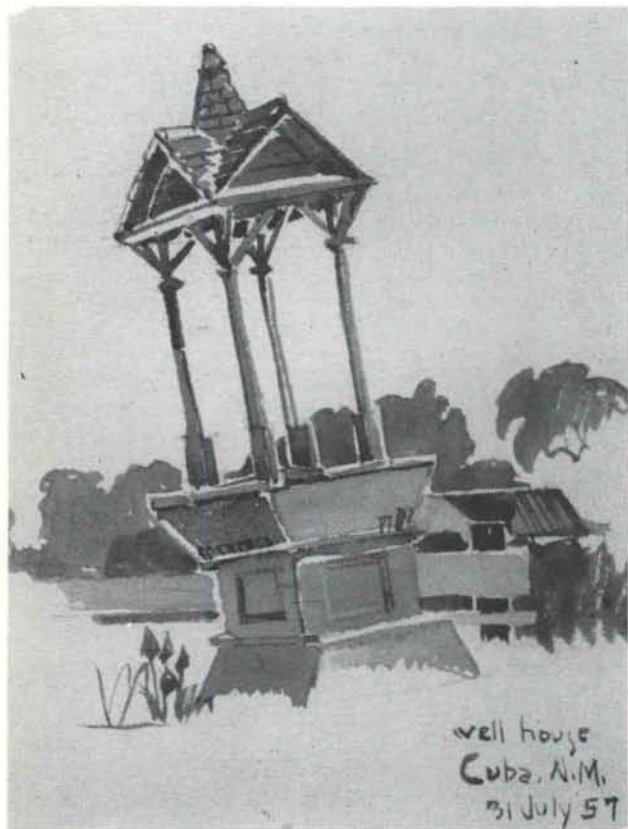
actually got people to invest money in it. The first of the new towns was built in Letchworth, beginning in 1904. This was successful enough, not as successful as he hoped, but successful enough to permit him to start another one after the First World War. After the Second World War, as a consequence of Howard's vision spreading among the people in England and among all parties, fifteen new towns, which eventually will hold a population of a million people, were built. The people who first listened to Howard sixty years ago couldn't have had the faintest notion that such a very large change would take place as a result of this meek little man's fresh idea. Howard really brought a fresh notion of city development into the world.

We need more of that sort of thing and less conformity, less acquiescence, to government regulations, less grabbing for money as in the case of F.H.A. loans or most of the federal highway and urban renewal projects. There ought to be much more municipal and state initiative than there is. We wait around apathetically until the money begins to pour in from Washington; whereas every state could do much more for itself than it dreams possible of doing now, if it spent its money on the right things and didn't waste its money on things which were relatively useless.

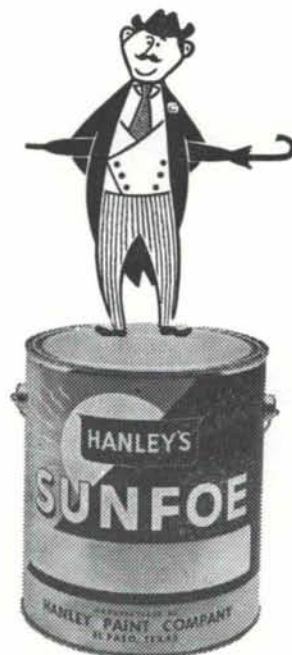
I think that's about all for tonight as far as I'm concerned and I'm very grateful to have had the opportunity of finding out what Santa Fe is thinking about for its own future. I'll carry home with me some very precious memories and this evening is not the least of them. Thank you.

*Mr. Clark:* I predict if you stay here another day, you'll be back. END

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