

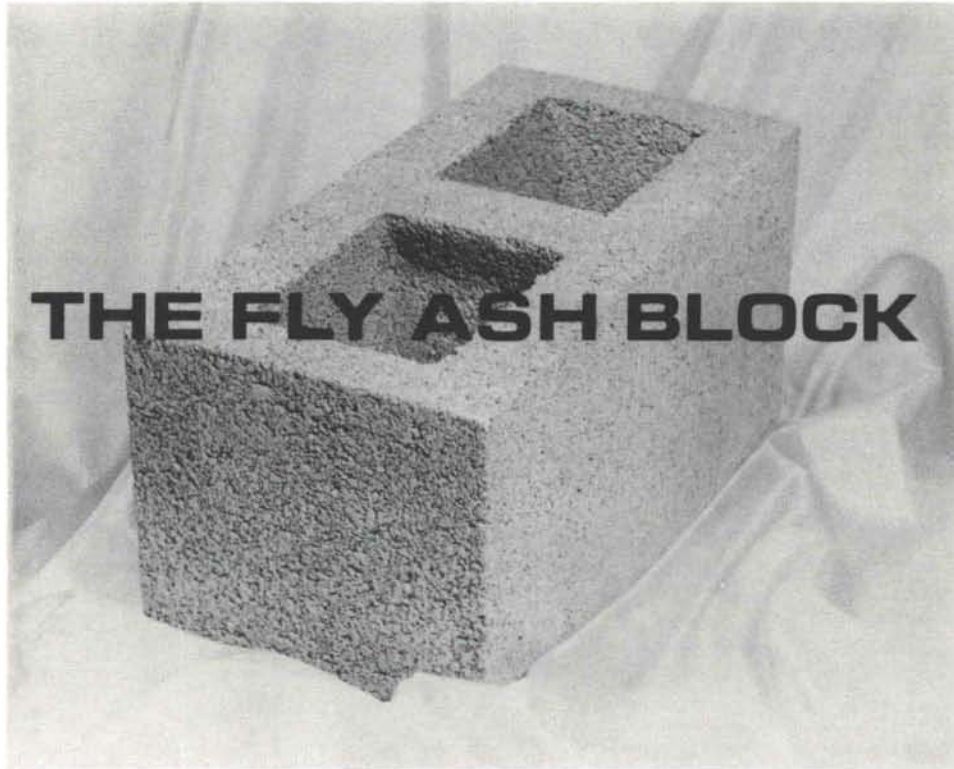
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vol. 19 no. 4

IN THIS ISSUE:

Vivian Grelick Milford, art historian and educator in Albuquerque, brings us an article describing the imaginative Play Towers of Julie Graham. Ms. Milford's articles have appeared in the *New Mexico Quarterly*, the *Teacher's College Record*, and the *Brooklyn Museum Bulletin*. She has worked with children as an art educator, a classroom teacher, and an administrator of a program to actively involve children with the arts as members of a big city museum. As an artist in her own right, Ms. Milford's works have appeared in Albuquerque in recent years at A Woman's Gallery.

□ □ □ □

An apology to the SAH. The article on the Montezuma Hotel by Louise Harris Ivers which appeared in the last issue of *New Mexico Architecture* was printed without giving credit to the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. Although slightly revised by Mrs. Harris for *NMA*, the article first appeared in that most prestigious *Journal* in October of 1974. While proper credit lines were set in the galley stage, they somehow got lost in the paste-up stage of magazine production.

nma

july-august 1977 • new mexico architecture

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by Vivian Grelick Milford

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(Cover — *The Play Tower at the Pueblo of San Felipe*)

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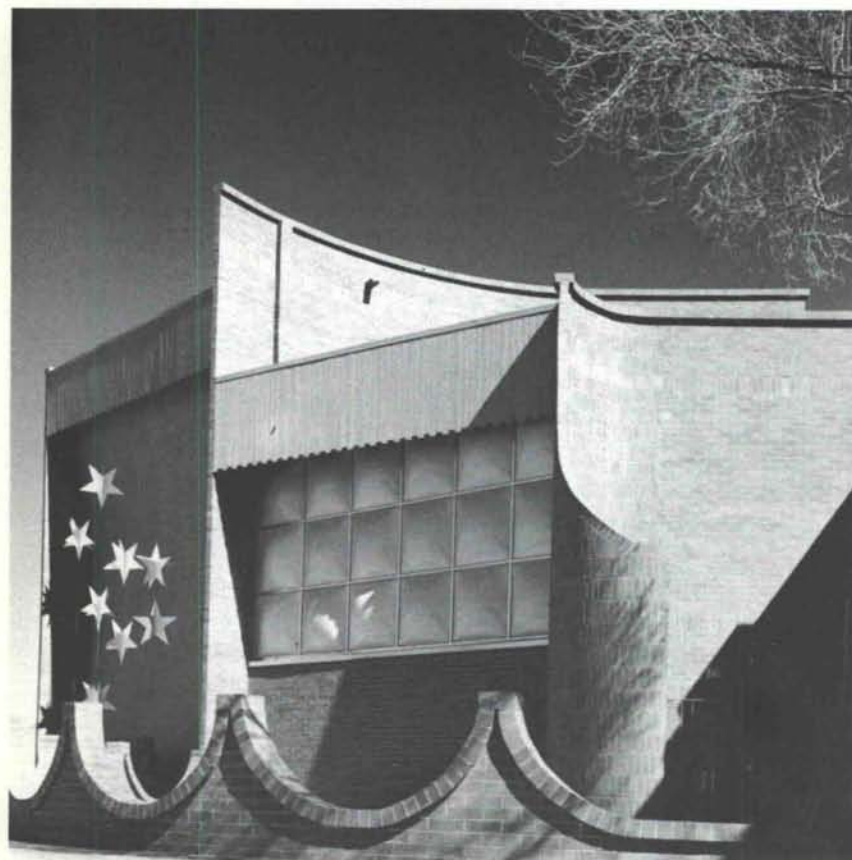
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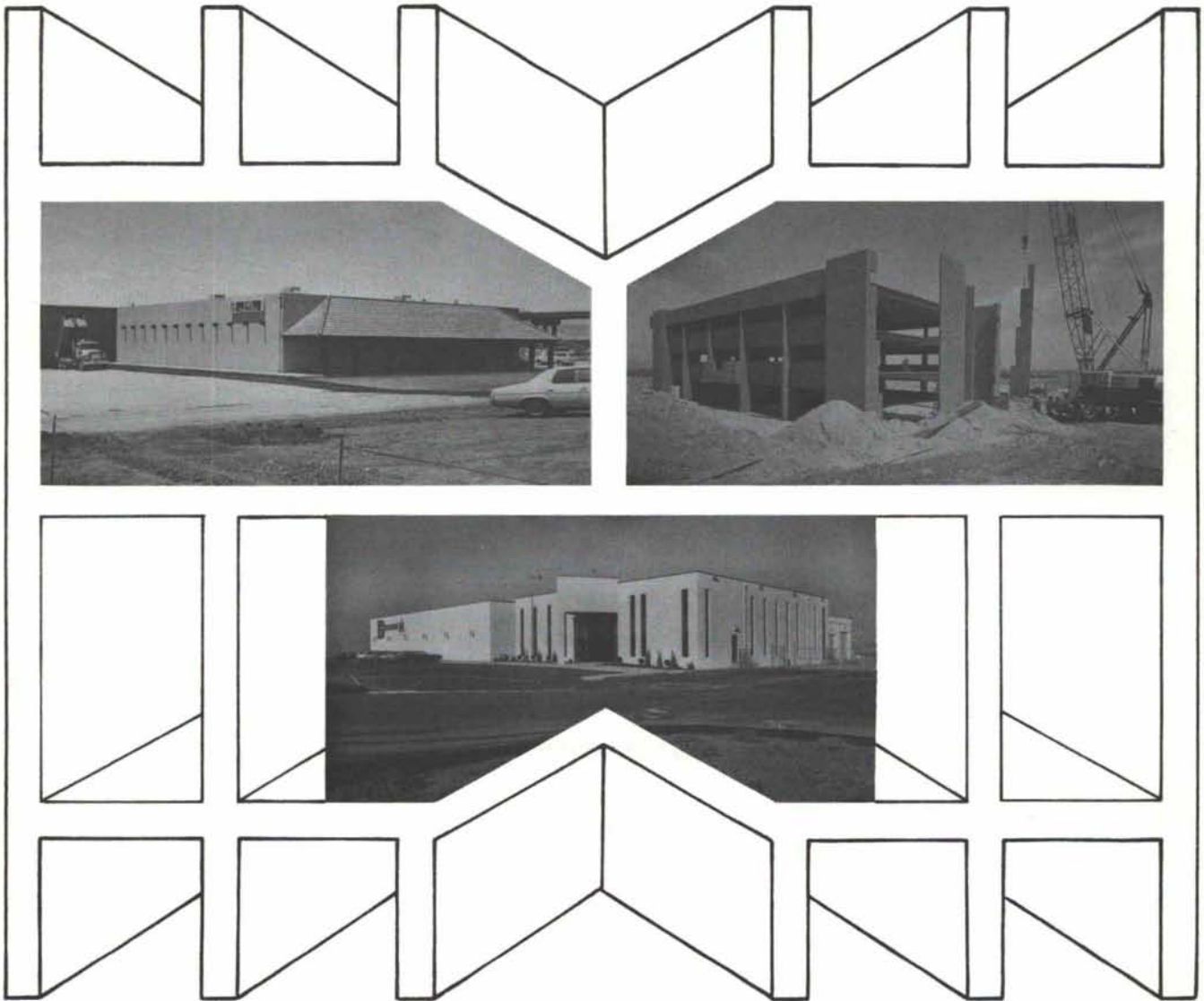
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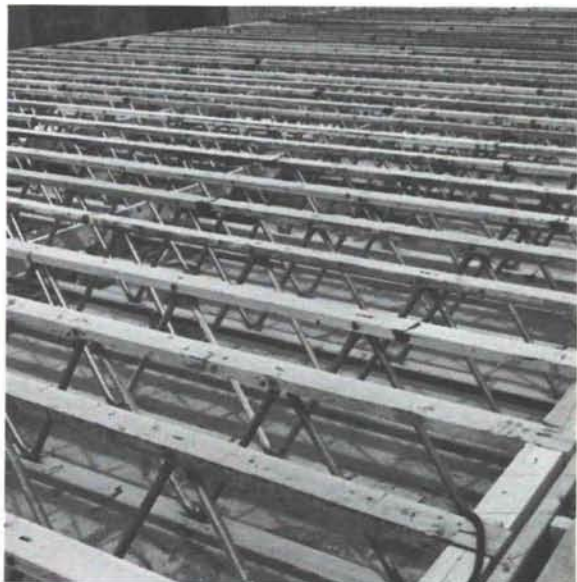


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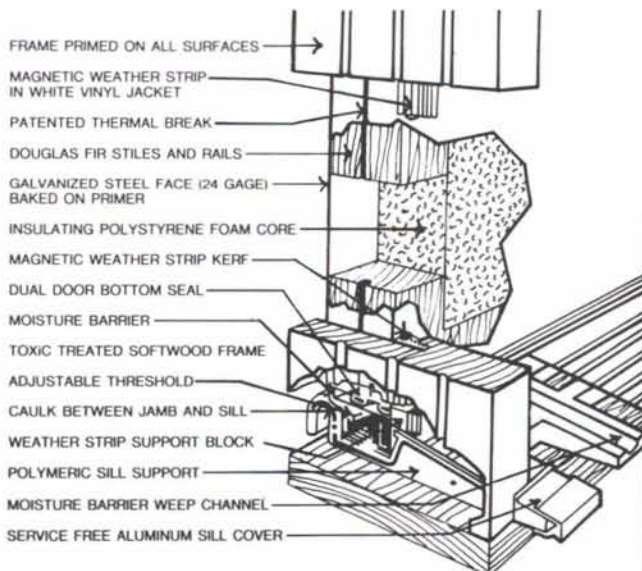
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A scholar of world renown, a longtime resident of La Cienega, New Mexico, John Brinkerhoff Jackson has been awarded a Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts Degree by the University of New Mexico. Jackson was a pioneer in the concern for the relationship between man and his environment. He has explored this special vision in many media — in university lec-

tures of brilliance and clarity, in essays and books, and in his deliberative magazine, *Landscape*, which he edited and published from 1952 to 1968. Through the magazine he created a stimulating and innovative forum for the exchange of ideas.

In celebration of its tenth anniversary Lewis Mumford wrote, "*Landscape* has made a unique contribution to the thought of our time by bringing out the work of those who understand the essential inter-relationship of places and work and people, and, not least, the contribution that the landscape itself makes in all its aspects—esthetic, economic, social, cosmic—to the higher life of man."

In his own words, "I have tried to understand how certain ways of organizing space are characteristic of certain periods of history . . . and how such forms of spatial organization can reveal much about our culture and in particular about the relationships we seek to establish between work and leisure, rural and urban, and between in-

several books about the American landscape, an interest attributed to several experiences, including working on New Mexico ranches and doing aerial photography during World War II.

Combining the insights of poet, philosopher, geographer, and urbanist in his perceptive view of the American scene, he has left a unique and indelible imprint on our environmental thinking. individuals and society."

Jackson now lectures at universities nationwide and has written

LETTER TO EDITOR

Dear Sir:

This is in response to the letter to the editor dated May 17, 1977, which questioned one caption under the picture on page 9 of the March-April issue of your magazine. I noted the above identified letter ended on the emphatic note —"Ask any old timer!"

That is exactly what we did; we asked Claude Graham!

Sincerely,

John DeWitt McKee
Spencer Wilson

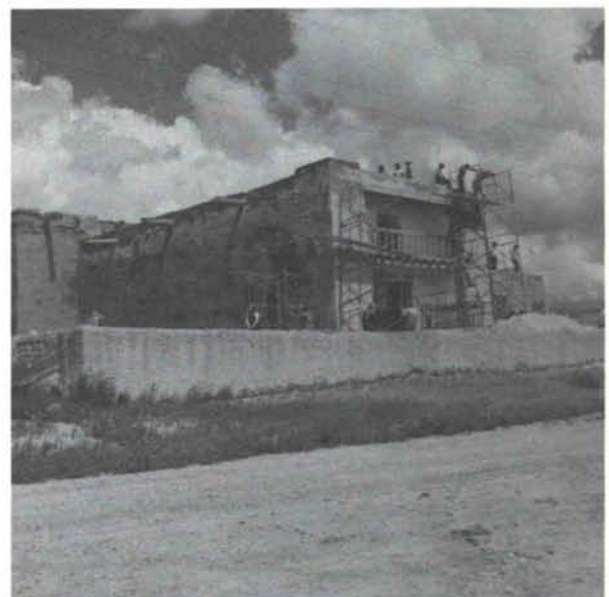
LAS TRAMPAS RECEIVES HISTORIC MARKER & PLAQUES

At 4 p.m. Friday afternoon, June 24, 1977, the sun broke through dark heavy clouds to shine upon the plaza of Las Trampas.

Temporarily placed upon easels in front of the Church of San José de Gracia de Las Trampas were three bronze plaques, and just in front of the campo santo wall stood a bright new state highway historical marker. Gathered in the court yard before the open church doors were the citizens of Las Trampas and their invited guests. On this afternoon representatives from the National Park Service came to present National Landmark plaques in recognition of the historical significance of the village and its church.

The history of Las Trampas (The Traps) stretches back to 1751 when a grant from the governor of New Mexico conveyed more than 46,000 acres to twelve families if they would take up and maintain residence under the leadership of Juan de Arquello. In what today would be described as an extended family closely related by marriage, this group had mixed Spanish, Indian and Negro blood. The negroid strain

Continued on page 17



San José de Gracia undergoing restoration in 1967.

NEW PLAY ENVIRON

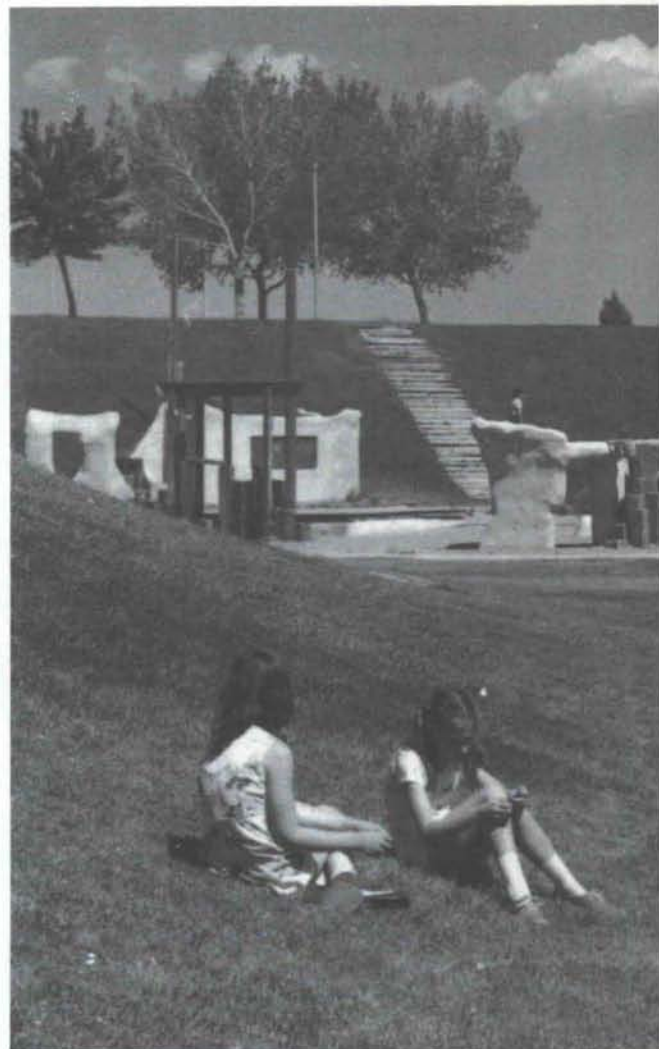
Over a year ago a playground and community recreation area in Albuquerque received national recognition. It was included as one of eight such areas throughout the country analyzed in, "User Needs As Design Determinants;" a study financed by North Carolina State University. The area is in Dennis Chavez Park and was built under the Model Cities Program of Albuquerque. It was designed, and its construction supervised by Julie Graham (see "Sculpture for Play," NMA May-June 1969) and wood sculptor Max Chavez.

Among the seven other areas considered in the study were Jacob Riis Plaza in New York City, designed by Paul Friedberg, and Washington Environmental Yard in Berkeley, designed by Robin Moore. With the work of such prestigious designers in the field for comparison, the study pointed out that:

"Ms. Graham's sensitivity to child space requirements is most significant in terms of comparing the case studies. Her awareness of the need for a range of interactions is matched only by her ability to translate these needs into a physical form. She created 'places to be alone, places to take turns, places to help one another, places only one could be in at a time, places to challenge, and places to encourage interpersonal conflict.' After much analysis of more specific aspects, the study concluded that:

"As a play environment, the Total Environment Play Area (Dennis Chavez Park) is one of the most original, fanciful and stimulating in the country."

The area, in a circular plot of sand, set in a grassy basin, includes three major play structures and one smaller one. The tallest tower has sculptured steps, ramps and jumping off places, as well as a high, private seat for two. There is a tall wooden climbing structure on one side, and three long, sloping wooden ramps on the other for crawling, walking, running or jumping, depending on balance and bravery. Close to this tower on the northwest is the smallest structure, a freeform platform on three columns, with clustered wooden piles forming steps on one side. This proves to be a favorite place for sitting on top and watching others, dangling by arms, jumping down and running up again. Northeast of this is a marvelous curving slide structure with a tunnel at the top and a broad, easy slope favored by small tots for sliding and by bigger children for stretching out and lounging. This is coupled to a large wooden play area with piles of varying up and down levels, some quite high perches, and an intriguing sense of shadowy in and out spaces provided by the tall supports of the wooden canopy. Jutting out of one side is a long, high balance beam, a real challenge for all sorts of show-off ventures. On the south side is a large, low complex, including another platform roof, steps up, cavelike shelters and another canopied wooden climber. A conventional slide and swings are incorporated into this complex. In the center of the sandy circle is a concrete apron with two, raised, hollow stages at each side. These, designed for dance and theatrical performances, are also fine for jacks,



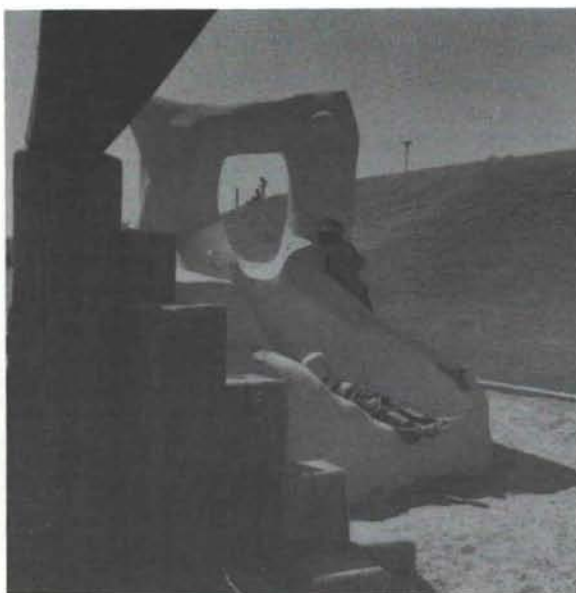
The play environment in Dennis Chavez Park shortly



written by Vivian Grelick Milford



completion.



jump rope and 'red-rover'. In all, the wood designs of Max Chavez and play towers of Julie Graham have been beautifully coordinated in terms of both usage and appearance. It also occurs to me that while three need not feel lonely playing here, with a group of thirty no one need be left out, as so often happens with conventional playground equipment.

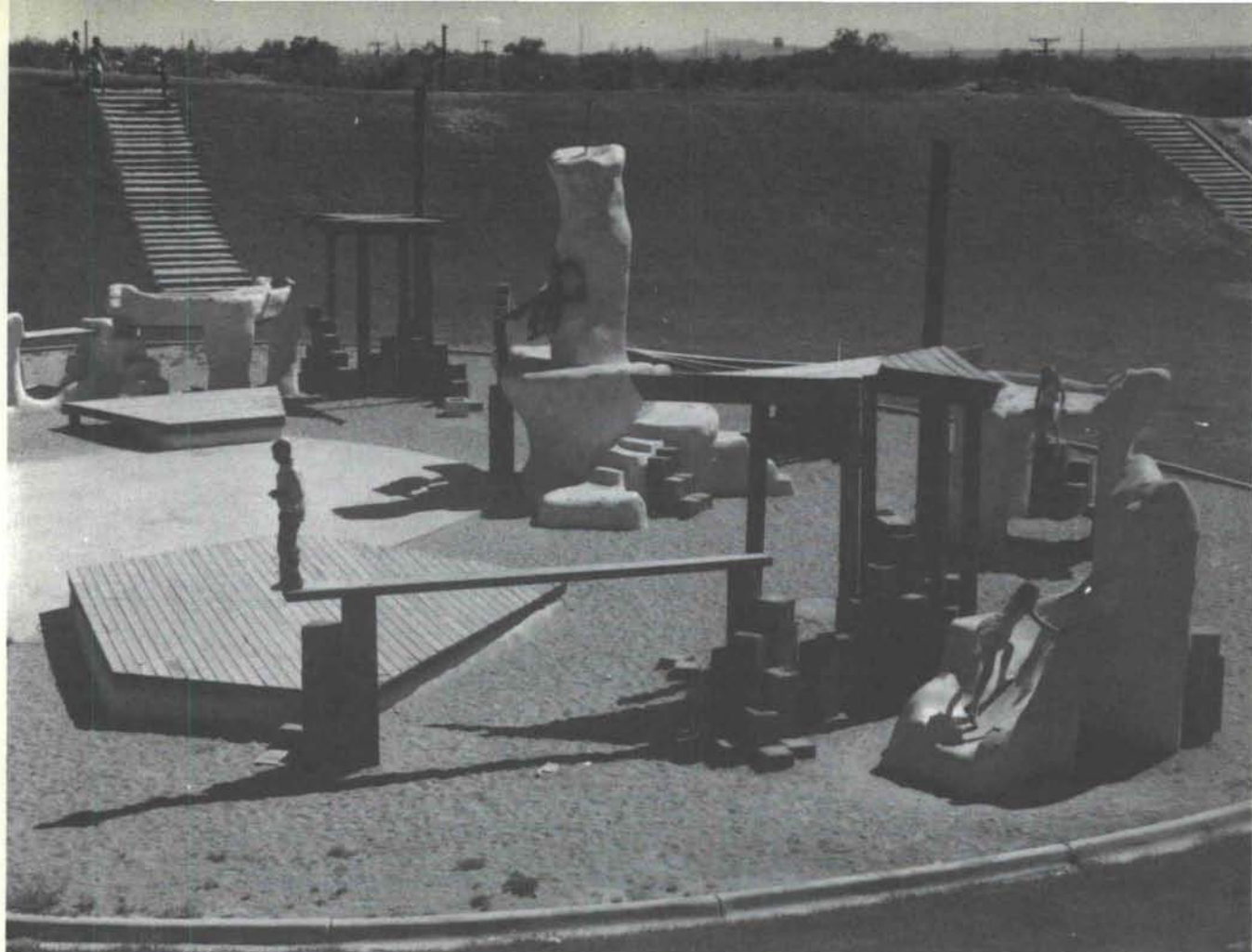
When I first arrived at the amphitheatre with a group of children ranging in age from 5 to 9 years, the words of the 'User Needs' study echoed in my head as I watched the ecstatic reaction. They ran from one tower to another, discovering places and activities, ways up and ways down, and asking why I had never brought them to this marvelous place before. They invented a game in which they were animals and hunters, each with special lairs and secret approaches. Other games followed, including much dare-devil jumping off high places into the soft sand below. It was with great difficulty that I pried them loose after an hour and a half. It was surprising to all of us that the area was empty of children when we arrived, and only three came over to join the group when the joyful activity attracted them. This light usage became more understandable on a later visit.

It was almost two months before the children and I returned to Dennis Chavez Park. It was May, a lovely sunny day, and photographer Joe Laval accompanied us. To our dismay, and my amazement, we had trouble keeping the children in the play tower area long enough to get a good range of pictures. Their constant complaints were, "It's too hot!" or "I'm thirsty." Always anxious to encourage children to experience and enjoy creative and enriching situations, I was reluctant to admit they were right. But they were. The change in climate had completely altered the experience. The previous complete delight on a cool day had been all but obliterated by sensations of heat and thirst.

As I learned years ago teaching art, children will not put up with discomfort for the sake of some greater goal; 'suffer for art' as we say. If the distribution of supplies or clean up of the classroom was too drawn out and uncomfortable, their creative experience was ruined. It was this directness and lack of patience with uncomfortable obstacles which had destroyed the children's delight in the park. The play area is in a very deep hollow, surrounded on three sides by steep, grassy embankments. There is not a tree or bush in sight, except at the top of the embankment. The only water fountain in the area is also on top, some distance from the edge. Those below cannot see the water fountain, but becoming thirsty tend to climb and search.

Once the children found the water they preferred to play in the grass above, or under a tree. The area below, all dry sand, plaster and wood, and effectively protected from the light breezes of summer, looked less and less attractive. Also the prospect of another long climb, when they got thirsty again, was not appealing.

The original plan by the two designers calls for



Above, the Dennis Chavez Park Play towers shortly after completion; and below, the Pueblo of Zia Towers under construction.



a stand of California Cypress on the western edge of the play area, and three cottonwood trees placed close to each of the towers. If these had been planted five years ago as promised, they would by now be providing attractive afternoon shade. At present the only shade is from wooden canopies prudently provided as a temporary measure by Max Chavez on two of his wooden structures. On strong advice from Parks and Recreation no water or restrooms were specified in the plans, though water pipes are present for an extensive grass sprinkler system. Given the park location, up against the freeway, far from the nearest street and effectively several blocks from the nearest homes of those who would use it, these lacks are especially crippling. Benches were also planned for under the trees, but never installed. Considering that this was conceived as a community recreation area for young and old, for play, rest, meetings and impromptu theatricals, the lack of these basic facilities for shade and comfort is tragic. It makes these effective and creative structures, worthy of high praise from professionals in the design field at the other end of the country, rather like a superior new airplane, grounded because it's owners claim to have run out of funds for a motor.

In addition to these problems noted some time ago there is lately evidence of severe and crippling neglect by park maintenance crews. Sprinklers are left on until the long approach area becomes a mucky bog; pieces of glass have not been raked from the sand for many months, though originally, the area was to be raked weekly; small cracks in the plaster finish coat are not repaired and have become big cracks. The wooden structures, which were to be treated with cresote each year, have been neglected. The wood is warping, splintering and pushing up nails in many places. Yet after five years the main structures stand intact and usable, (with the addition of just a few graffiti) in an open and out of the way place. This lack of major vandalism is a testimony to community respect.

There is doubt, however, that lack of bureaucratic interest has eroded the community sense of pride and ownership of the area. Even Model Cities, the original funding agency, has had its funds cut in this area. The Model Cities Library, which was to supervise the theatrical, musical and educational uses has completely closed down. Other play tower areas designed and built by Ms. Graham have fared much better, even without so much fanfare. These are often in Pueblos, where the mechanism for community involvement is traditional, or in closer situations like school yards. Dennis Chavez Park Amphitheatre, however, was a large grant project built under city administration. The location the city allotted for is far from choice. While many attempts were made by the designers to involve the local people, and much of the final form follows the people's suggestions, somehow the bridge to a real sense of community ownership has been lost.

Though it has received so much in the way of

rewards and problems, Dennis Chavez Park is only one area in a growing galaxy of play towers designed by Julie Graham. Educated and skilled as a sculptor, Julie took naturally to the "mud" architecture of adobe when she came to live in New Mexico. The sculptural potential of this pliable material plus the interests and needs of two growing children, spurred the building of the first play tower in the Graham patio some nine years ago. At the urging of friends like Palmyra Andrews, an expert in child development, ways were found to finance the building of more play towers in schoolyards and community centers. There they not only provide effective play space, but a logical and innovative use of adobe and wood.

To date over 30 play towers have been built, including a tribal amphitheatre and play area at Ft. McDowell, Arizona. In each case a completely new sculpture is conceived as a working model, with the needs of the users and the site in mind. In all but one case, Ms. Graham and/or her partner in construction, Robert Gallegos, have participated in and supervised the construction. The building has often involved the work of local adults and, occasionally, of the children who will finally play on the towers. This practice is both necessary and desirable; budgets are usually tight, and a real sense of participation enhances the usage experiences with the finished structure.

Such involvement worked out especially well at Zia in 1974, where young adults did much of the work of construction. The play tower was the first of six built between 1974 and 75 in Sandoval County Indian Pueblos under the OEO Headstart Program. It was teachers of young children from these pueblos who wanted the play towers, and who asked for and got funding to make them possible. They had attended a workshop given by Ms. Graham, and came away with great enthusiasm for the expanded play possibilities of the towers. The spirit of the project was given a further boost by Juan Medina, director of the Neighborhood Youth Corps at Zia. He kept the young people building, and when their interest waned he put some older people to work under the Community Self Help Program. The momentum built up was so great that several of Zia's pottery makers voluntarily adorned the finished tower with traditional pottery decorations.

In that same summer play towers were completed at Jemez and San Felipe. The latter is an especially handsome one. The main structure is very tall, with children at the top appearing as at the prow of a big ship. The many ways up include toe-hold steps up one side and a broad slide down from the top. There is also a smaller structure connected to the main one by a log suspension bridge. The bridge provides both a contrast of material, and a fun, scary thing to run across.

At Manzano Day School in Albuquerque there is another suspension bridge incorporated into a smaller tower than the one at San Felipe. This one, too, was



Above, the Pueblo of Zia play towers and below the bridge and tower at the Pueblo of San Felipe.



built in 1974, with the work of volunteer parents who came whenever they could spare the time to lay some adobes. Manzano gives a fine illustration of a wanted and appreciated structure, placed in a carefully chosen site. It relates to the adobe building nearby, as well as to the many trees in the wooded area immediately surrounding it on two sides. This relationship to the natural area emphasizes the organic quality of the adobe sculpture, as if it were a wonderfully shaped giant rock on the edge of a wood.

It is unfortunate that while play towers fairly cry out for this kind of nature-related placement, they have often been placed in barren school yards, next to chain link fences, in the same way that metal play equipment would be positioned. This is especially unfortunate in sections of the city where there are neither grass, trees nor adobe buildings nearby. In Pueblos there are often mesas or mountains, as well as the adobe houses, to form a fitting habitat for the play tower, with or without trees.

One of the more recent projects completed by Julie and Robert was at Cochiti. It is a long, low structure, specifically designed for the fairly small Head Start youngsters. We took the pictures while it was under construction. While we were there some of the children who will be using it came out to help fill in around the adobes with great, joyous handfuls of mud. The huge, mirror-like chrome drum added to the top was discovered by Julie and Robert at a salvage yard. The tower was completed in October, and is so much enjoyed that the governor of Cochiti sent the designer a letter of appreciation.

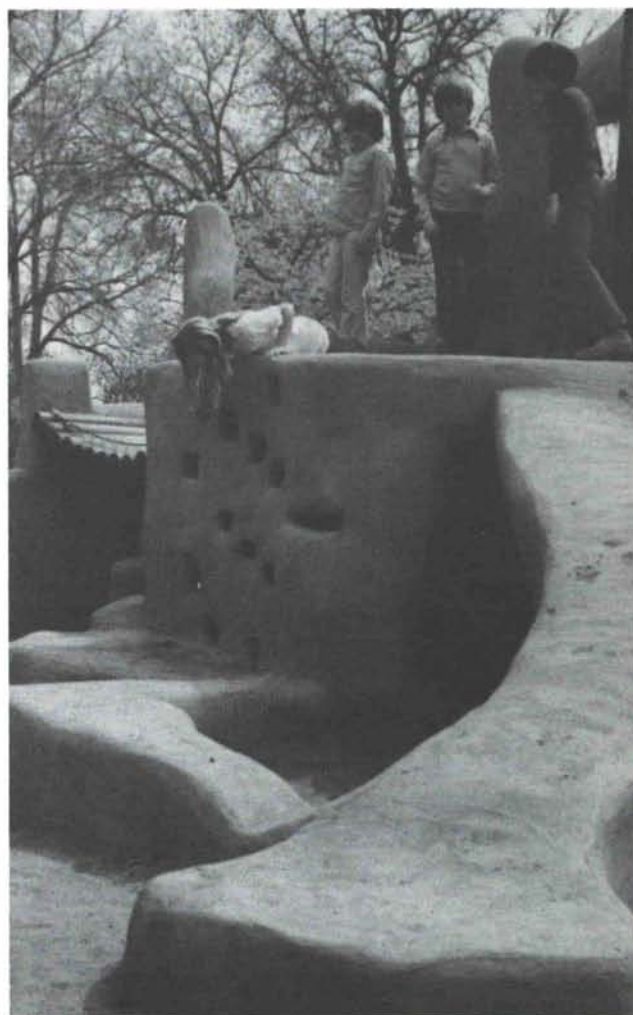
All of the above, except Dennis Chavez Park, are built of adobe, as are most of the other existing play towers. This malleable material allows for the sculptural shaping of forms and surfaces which gave rise to the original sculpture for play idea in Ms. Graham's mind. However, in 1970 she discovered a new form of an old and very permanent material which could be adapted to her designs. This is the Dicker Stack Sack method of cement construction. It was developed by Dicker Construction Co. of San Antonio, as a self help method for low cost housing. Its technique of 6x24 burlap bags filled with dry cement, then wetted and stacked, turned out to be very usable in building free form play towers, which could thus be considered more permanent, and adapted to any climate. In the next three years designs were completed for Stack Sack construction of nine areas, under the auspices of such agencies as the BIA, ISRAD, Model Cities, FHA, and APS. While possible wider applications of play tower forms is an advantage, there are drawbacks. In Stack Sack, forms once laid in are irrevocable, unlike adobe forms which grow and change organically as they are worked.

Whether in adobe or Stack Sack, the play towers offer a much needed new form for children's play. The natural areas children once enjoyed, the climbing trees, ditches and caves, thickets, hollows, hills

and rocky outcroppings, are less and less available to more and more children. Play towers lend themselves, as mechanical equipment cannot, to the same kinds of activities once offered by nature. Physical activities such as climbing, crawling, rolling, jumping, hanging, perching, crouching and hiding are all possible. The forms also offer fertile material for the transformations of fantasy play, as with the animals and hunters I watched at Dennis Chavez Park. For instance at Santa Clara the tower became a galley for the girls who were playing airline hostess, while later, for the boys, it became a kiva. In addition to imaginary changes, real ones can be made by the children when they add their own touches. Boards, ropes, pieces of fabric or branches have all been used. Anyone who has seen fancy toys put aside for the delights of creating a cave of overturned chairs, pillows and blankets, knows how important this creation of their own fantasy environment is for children. It makes them feel they can shape and change their own world. The flexible play tower forms allow for, even invite such changes and fantasy play.

In addition to their functional success, Julie Gra-

Manzano Day School.





Above, the children of Cochiti help with the building and below the children enjoy the towers at the Manzano Day School.



ham's play towers can become a harmonious addition to our southwestern landscape and architecture. Their adobe and wood construction give a surface texture over which our desert sun plays in familiar and satisfying ways. Though the forms are not always successful as pure sculpture, many of them are, providing further visual enhancement. Not only are they less expensive than metal playground equipment, but much more comfortable to the touch in both very cold and very hot weather. I hope to see more of them in public places where they can be enjoyed by many more of our city dwelling New Mexico children.

Vivian Grelick Milford

Photographs on pages 10, 11 and on top of page 12 are by J. Paul Laval of Albuquerque.

LAS TRAMPAS —continued from page 9

was introduced by Melchior Rodriguez, son of de Vargas' African drummer; he was a prominent elder of the community with a son and daughters married to other settlers. This group was typical of many land-hungry settlers whose only hope of gaining a foothold in the province was to take up residence on the periphery of established zones where the soil was often poor and the location open to Indian attack. Las Trampas stood as a buffer between roving Apache, Ute, and Comanche Indians east of the mountains and the older Spanish settlements in the Rio Grande Valley.

(For a more detailed history of Las Trampas and its church see *New Mexico Architecture*, September-October 1970).

In presenting the plaques dedicating the Village of Las Trampas as a National Historic Landmark, Theodore Thompson, National Park Service Southwest Region Deputy Director, stated that the village remains as "one of the finest examples of Spanish-American agricultural communities in the United States. Because Las Trampas has preserved its 18th century heritage almost intact, it is therefore being honored today." Receiving the plaque with justifiable pride and great dignity were village elders, Jose Teodoro Lopez and Tranquilino Lopez.

Although the text on the two village plaques are the same, the language is different. It is the first time, I believe, that bilingual National Landmark plaques have been presented; for Las Trampas they are in English and Spanish.

Archbishop Robert F. Sanchez was on hand to receive the plaque designating the Church of San José de Gracia as a National Landmark from Deputy Director Thompson. Uniquely well preserved, San José is a textbook example of 18th century ecclesiastical architecture in New Mexico. License to build it was granted in 1760 by the Bishop of Durango, Mexico who claimed New Mexico as a part of his diocese. Records of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe reveal that the first officially recorded burial in the church was made in 1771 though a funeral mass is recorded in the parish records as early as 1762. In 1776 Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez, who had been sent by Franciscan authorities in Mexico City to investigate and report on the state of Franciscan missions in New Mexico, said that the church of San José was all but complete and described it in detail.

Next on the day's program was the dedication of a new state highway marker; to present the marker to the community was Dr. Myra Ellen Jenkins, state historian who was representing the New Mexico Cultural Properties Review Committee. Accompanied by your silent editor, who also serves on the Cultural Properties Review Committee, Dr. Jenkins reminded the citizens of Las Trampas and their guests of the

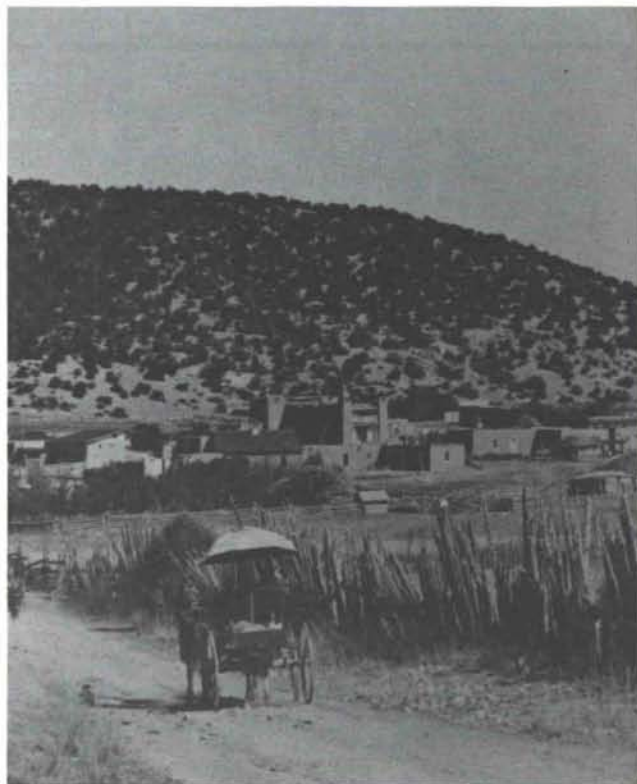
importance of this village and its valley to the historic patrimony of our state, and read the text of the new sign in flawless Spanish:

"La poblacion de Las Trampas fue establecida en el año de 1751 con doce familias de la Villa de Santa Fe, conducidas por Juan de Argüello. Los pobladores recibieron una merced para este lugar del Gobernador Tomás Vélez Cachupín. La iglesia de San José de Gracia, que fue construida en el siglo diez y ocho, es una de las mas finas que se hallan en Nuevo México."

This new highway marker is the first to be lettered in both Spanish and English, and it is expected that it will be the first of many. The Cultural Properties Review Committee is responsible for the text on all state highway historic markers. Dr. Jenkins and J. Richard Salazar prepared both the English and Spanish text for the Las Trampas sign.

Following the dedication of the highway markers, Archbishop Sanchez celebrated Mass in the packed, candle-lighted San José Gracia.

A photograph of the village of Las Trampas taken between 1910 and 1930. Except for a paved road and the invasion by some six or seven mobile homes within the past few years, the village looks much the same as when this photograph was taken.





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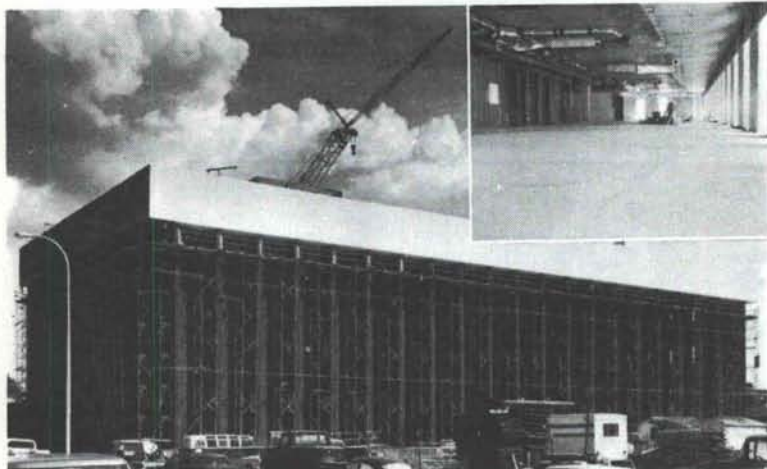
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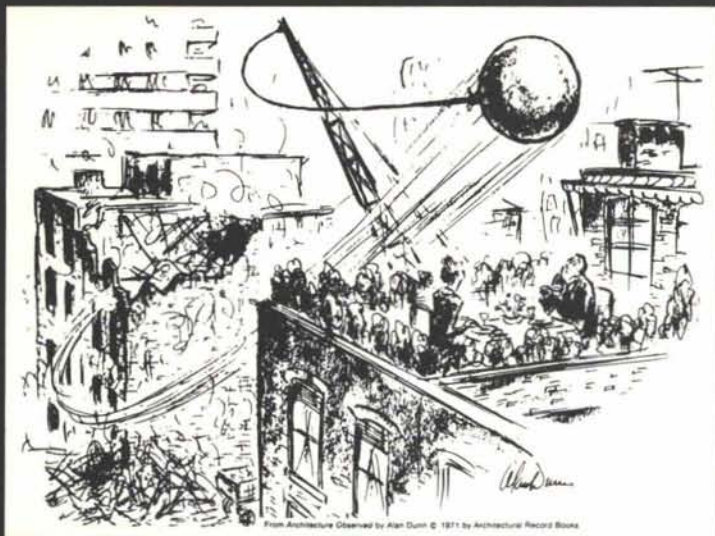
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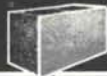
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