

Santa Fe's Renovation by Kurt Faust

The story of renovation in Santa Fe is the story of the systematic removal of most of the city's historic architectural heritage and has always been a subject of intense discussion and controversy. Many of Santa Fe's most prominent buildings in the historic district have been renovated into what is loosely called Santa Fe style. In 1879 the railroad decided to go to Bernalillo instead of Santa Fe, which led to an economic decline in the Capital. This was a major catalyst for the civic leaders and artists of the day to call for a "new" old Santa Fe style.

The ancient streets and old buildings were seen as some of the City's greatest assets and the first attempt at an architectural-styles code came in 1912 during the renovation of the Palace of the Governors. The push to establish the historic preservation codes was led by the coalition of civic & business leaders, anthropologists, artists and writers involved in the Palace renovation.

One of the first renovations of this time was the old San Miguel mission, which dates back as early as 1610. By 1887 the old mission was in a serious state of disrepair, the bell tower having collapsed sometime earlier. It was renovated with a new tower having a hip roof and other Romanesque features in complete disregard to the original three-tiered tower.

The Palace, which also dated back to 1610, had features from several different eras including square Territorial-type posts and a Victorian bric-a-brac cornice around the roof line of the portal. These were removed and replaced with the heavy round posts and rounded parapet in keeping with the romantic notion of what old Santa Fe could have or should have been.

Even though the architectural code proposed in 1912 was not adopted, the movement gained momentum and the Old Santa Fe Association was founded in 1926 to encourage the preservation of the city's architectural and cultural heritage. A competition to redesign the Plaza was held in 1930 with John Gaw Meem winning with a plan to add portals to the facades and to re-create them into adobe and Territorial-style buildings. By the mid-1950's the Plaza had had an extreme makeover. Comparing old photos show the extent to which many of these buildings have been changed.

On the northeast corner of the Plaza is the Catron building built in 1891, which has been covered over, and a Territorial-style portal added to both streetscapes. Next to the Catron building on the East side of the Plaza was the old First National Bank building. The new building was built in the Greek-Revival style with four large Corinthian columns across the facade. The columns were removed and Pueblo-style stucco and portals added. On the South side of the Plaza, on San Francisco Street, in 1881 and 1882 the Spiegelberg brothers built two Italianate brick buildings with metal cornices and windows they could order and receive by rail. These have had the cornices removed, a long portal added and everything covered with stucco.

There have been many heated debates since the introduction of the first proposal to legislate

Santa Fe style. At issue is the legitimacy of an architectural style based mostly on a restricted interpretation of the old Pueblos and Missions, which severely limits expression and authenticity, versus the need to preserve what makes Santa Fe different and keep it from being diluted with a hodgepodge of styles having no relationship to the regional context.

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