

THE HOME ISSUE

INSIDE THE ULTIMATE CANYON ROAD COMPOUND

SANTA FEAN

OCTOBER 2005

Great Spaces

by Architect
Beverley Spears

Stylish (and easy)
courtyard ideas

New takes on tile

www.santafean.com

\$4.95



BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY

Built To Last

ARCHITECT BEVERLEY SPEARS MIXES BOLD IDEAS WITH CLASSIC DESIGN TO CREATE GREAT, LIVABLE SPACES

Only natural: This cast-pumice house on Old Santa Fe Trail pairs contemporary lines with traditional elements, plus, the elegant and eco-friendly hallway provides passive solar gain.



1912 FINNEY - NEVER IN THE CITY

SANTA FE 25



HOMES: DEKA BLUMENFELD; PORTRAIT: NATALIE BROWN BACA

Beverly Spears was not impressed with her first view of Santa Fe. It was high noon in July 1974 and she was riding Shuttlejack, coming into town on Cerrillos Road. Expecting something like Santa Barbara, California, where she'd been living—cool white stucco, lovely wrought iron, mounds of flowers, and cascading fountains—from her bus window she saw instead a motley, sun-blasted stretch of stores and houses with nary a charm in sight.

But Spears, at 29, was up for adventure and not easily put off. She tucked her judgment away and spent her first week walking around downtown. The dullness of her initial impression quickly dissolved. In its place, she found "exotic" adobe buildings that seemed imbued with a spirit of history and place. She encountered native plants that were new to her—things like snakeweed, Indian rice grass, and yucca, which were completely foreign to a child of the Midwest who'd lived in New Orleans and Philadelphia. Yet she understood, perhaps intuitively at first, that Santa Fe was a place where her love of landscape, aesthetics, a relaxed atmosphere, and a rich sense of architecture could happily intersect.

She was right. In the 30-plus years since that first bus ride, Spears has become one

Top and right, the Tesuque House includes a steel roof that blends with the environment and a grand portal with accordion French doors. Left, Spears at one of her projects.





of New Mexico's most respected architects, heading what is now a nine-person firm with more than 40 institutional projects (her company landed the contract for Santa Fe's new civic center) and dozens of homes in its portfolio. Since its inception in 1981, Spears Architects has earned numerous accolades, including a Merit Award from the Western Mountain Region of the American Institute of Architects (for the Fondell-Picascia House). It's been showered with at least a dozen awards from the AIA's New Mexico and Santa Fe chapters. And in a competition sponsored by the AIA and *Sunset* magazine, the group took home a 1999–2000 Western Homes Merit Award for best design in homes throughout the West (for the Pedregal House).

"She's very sensitive to the needs of the client,"

says Donna Quasthoff, a retired architect from Santa Fe and former New Mexico state architect. "She's also been very active in historic building and preservation." Quasthoff thinks so highly of Spears that in 2002 she nominated her for membership in the prestigious AIA College of Fellows. Each year, about 75 new architects nationwide are voted into the honorary organization, which counts John Gaw Meem as one of its members. Submitting an extensive portfolio, Spears was accepted in the Design category, taking her place among about 10 AIA fellows in the state—of whom only two are women.

Left, the bold portal of a local building, where canales are part of the water catchment system; right top and bottom, the Lamy Bluff House, with a vaulted ceiling made of hemlock strips and acoustical insulation.





Built to Last

"The great thing about [the AIA fellowship] is that once you've got it, you've got it—you don't have to continue to prove yourself," Spears says, relaxing in a contemporary steel rocking chair in her company's office, a small remodeled adobe house on Pacheco Street, beside the train tracks. "I've enjoyed it tremendously. It's a great feeling to have that acknowledgment from my colleagues."

With weathered, wide-board floors and deep-set windows framing fruit trees, the office itself reflects key elements in her company's avowed design approach: Create welcoming spaces composed of simple, regionally inspired forms, enlivened by natural light, providing strong connections with the surrounding landscape, and built of environmentally friendly materials designed to last—then build on those concepts and, most important, have a good time doing it. This last proviso can be deduced from the colorful wooden toy train and blocks on a shelf in the entry/conference room. "Yes, we play with them sometimes," the 60-year-old architect admits with a wide grin.

Growing up in Indianapolis the daughter of an aeronautical engineer and a mother who'd studied fashion design, Spears was a quiet child who loved to draw. But, she quickly adds, "I was never one of those kids always drawing floor plans. I drew horses and people." Still, a nascent interest in architecture was "floating around." She spent her junior year of college in Paris, where this interest began to grow. "Being in Europe and studying the art and architecture really inspired me," she says in her warm, straightforward manner. "They have an attitude about the built environment there, of building for centuries, of building something beautiful and solid and uncompromised."

Back at Tulane University, in Louisiana, where Spears was majoring in philosophy—and not looking for an M.R.S. degree—it was time to choose a career. She'd narrowed it down to computer programming or architecture. Computers almost won.

Built to Last

Spears's first inquiry into graduate architecture programs was to Princeton. She received a quick response: The school did not accept women. She was shocked, and not for the last time. She enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania, only to encounter male professors who sometimes took condescending attitudes toward the female architecture students. At the same time, going from provincial New Orleans to the Northeast during the radical late 1960s was a simultaneous culture shock. "It was a struggle. It was a hard program," Spears says of her graduate studies in Philadelphia. "I didn't immediately fall in love with it."

She earned her degree, then headed to Santa Barbara, where a friend lived. Yet with the economy in a slump, her struggles weren't over. "I went through every architect in the phone book and didn't find a job. I went through every landscape architect in the book—no job," she recounts. So she decided to get hands-on experience in construction while waiting for an opening. She applied for a permit to become an electrician's apprentice and was turned down—for being a woman. "We don't think you're serious," she was told.

When she rolled into Santa Fe a few years later, one of the first places Spears looked for work was with architect Philippe Register. "I wasn't smart enough to hire her," Register remembers with a chuckle. Of present-day Spears, he says, "I admire her work. 'Good taste' is a phrase that comes to mind. She designs spaces that are comfortable to the eye." This, for Spears, is an intentional effect, and comes in part from her use of simplified regional architectural elements given a slight contemporary twist.

The Pedregal House, for example, won praise for the architect's "subtle melding of old and new New Mexico." In particular, the judges pointed to the home's deep north portal—with its floor of randomly placed red and black bricks, the low railing to retain views at chair level, subtly notched posts, and large end fireplace—as an exceptional outdoor living space with regional authenticity.



Part of history: The Plaza stage, with its subdued, weathered copper roof.

"We want our homes to read with a clean, simple, almost minimalist feeling, yet we want the historical richness of things like hand-plastered walls and wooden floors, to make reference to the place the building is in," Spears observes. "So it's fun to think of architecture as incorporating both of those aspects. I think it makes the houses feel very comfortable to be in; it makes them welcoming and serene and beautiful."

Working with a client who speaks the same aesthetic language is a special treat for Spears, who singles out the award-winning Old Santa Fe Trail House as an example of this kind of relationship. (To protect the privacy of her clients, Spears often refers to projects by their general location.) At the time, Spears was interested in the Islamic-inspired, decorated *artesonado* ceilings sometimes seen in Mexico. She proposed painted boards between the beams in some rooms, creating ceilings with chevron or zigzag patterns. The clients loved the idea; one of them, an artist, did the painting herself.

Other aspects of the Old Santa Fe Trail House highlight important design elements for Spears. Visual interest and spatial richness are reflected in varying ceiling heights, slightly different levels within the house, and rooms not uniformly proportioned. And as always, Spears finds ways to connect the inside with the outside, through windows, portals, doors into courtyards and garden spaces, and garden walls with openings—all working together to provide links between the home and the vista beyond. (Being a registered landscape architect helps.)

Built to Last

Spears also makes every effort to create buildings that are as environmentally friendly as possible. Her firm is a member of the U.S. Green Building Council, which designs according to Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) principles. Water catchment and reuse systems, energy conservation provisions, and sustainable materials such as adobe, straw bale, and Rastra (a structural block made of recycled Styrofoam and concrete) are incorporated to make as gentle an environmental impact as possible.

In what she calls the Tesuque House, green building elements include two-foot-thick walls of "unamended" adobe, a pure-mud mixture that contains no asphalt emulsion, a common additive that reduces adobe's natural "breathing" qualities. In this case, both the interior and exterior walls were also finished with a pure mud plaster; a stone base and wide roof overhangs protect the exterior walls.

Yet the home posed a challenge that was solved by distinctly modern technology. The client wanted a pitched-roof house tucked as unobtrusively as possible against a piñon-covered hill. In the search for a nonshiny roofing material, wood shingles were ruled out because of fire danger. Instead Spears chose Corten self-weathering, corrugated steel. As this roof ages, the rust, rather than flaking off like most steel, forms a stable, protective coating. "One of the great things about architecture is that it's always changing—materials change, styles change, codes change—so you're always learning," Spears acknowledges.

Much of what is at the heart of Spears's design philosophy can be found in her conception of Santa Fe's new downtown civic center. In April, Spears Architects, along with Fentress Bradburn Architects, of Denver, won the contract to design the new facility. The two companies will work together on every stage of the process, with Fentress Bradburn bringing its expertise in numerous civic-center projects and underground parking structures. As a longtime Santa Fean, Spears emphasizes the need to develop a space that will suit the city well in every

respect. The 72,000-square-foot center, to be built on the same site as the Sweeney Convention Center, will incorporate natural light in virtually all its public rooms, a courtyard, five fireplaces, and roof decks. Look for the new building to be completed in late spring 2007.

On a smaller scale, Spears has already made a significant contribution to the community's public life through her design of the Plaza stage, officially unveiled July 4, 2004. With its large performance space and narrow, dark steel columns, designed to blend in with the surrounding trees, it's a project she is especially pleased with, as are the Santa Fe Historic Design Review Board and the private citizens who funded it.

In fact, every building Spears and her firm designs, whether public or private, can be thought of as a performance space as well as a work of art. "Architecture should be a backdrop for life, for people's furnishings and activities, so in some ways it's almost like a stage. It needs to be simple to best accommodate whatever is put into it," she muses. "I do think architecture is a very important art form. It's an art you can enter and be surrounded by—and hopefully it's going to last decades, if not centuries." **SF**

Santa Fe writer Gussie Fauntleroy covers art and other subjects for national, regional, and local publications. Her latest book, Shelter from the Storm: The Photography of Kirk Gittings, tells the story of an Albuquerque-based architectural and landscape photographer.