

SANTA FE

TREND

HOME DESIGN SOURCE WINTER/SPRING 2001 VOLUME 1 ISSUE 2

**“VERNACULAR ANONYMITY”
AND THE MOTHER SHIP**

James Polshek and the New Santa Fe Opera

THE FEMININE CASE An Eye on Five Architects

FROM OBELISK TO NEW URBANISM

Chris Wilson Deconstructs Santa Fe





the feminine case: AN EYE ON FIVE ARCHITECTS

BY KATE WINSLOW

From John Gaw Meem to Ricardo Legorreta, architecture in Santa Fe has been the domain of men. Oh, wait, that's another Santa Fe myth. In actuality, this city is full of female architects who are helping to construct its face—and backbone. We spoke with five of them about their work, their treatment as women in the profession, the particular challenges they face in this town, and, of course, Santa Fe style.

BEVERLEY SPEARS

Beverley Spears started her own practice nearly 20 years ago and today must be considered among the deans of Santa Fe architects. “For me, getting started was slow because the economy wasn’t very good,” she recalls. “You have to build a reputation, which tends to take some time. I freelanced for a number of years before I hired anyone else. It takes a certain courage just to wing it.” As is so often the case, with courage came great success. Spears’s office, which has grown to six full-time employees, has won five design awards from the American Institute of Architects in the last six years and is currently working on projects for the prestigious Lannan Foundation, Open Hands, Inc., Santa Fe Prep, and St. John’s United Methodist Church.

Spears’s fascination with the urban design and architecture of Europe, and architecture in general, was sparked during her studies in Paris, where she spent her junior year as a student at Tulane University. When she returned to New Orleans for her final year, she was the only woman enrolled in an architectural history survey course. On first meeting, the professor assigned Sigfried Giedion’s landmark study, *Space, Time and Architecture*, but told Spears not to bother buying it because she would use it only to press flowers.

Things improved somewhat when she went to the University of Pennsylvania for graduate school: Out of a class of 34 students, four were women. Her time there was marked by the characteristic liberalism of most large universities, but one incident stands out in her mind. The class had been assigned to design a new bridge to replace an old one. Remembering the critique, Spears says, “I had taken the railing off the old bridge, an elaborate wrought-iron railing, and had used it in a different way on the new bridge. And I’d painted it cadmium yellow. One of the visiting critics made a negative comment about it and said something like, ‘How typical of a woman.’ Everybody at the crit hissed him.”

Spears has found a hospitable home for her career in Santa Fe: “It’s probably easier to be a woman architect in this town than in others because, I think, Santa Fe is pretty open-minded.” She adds, “But I do think a woman has to work harder to prove herself than a man does, but that’s probably true anywhere. I’ve never had any trouble on a job site. I’ve always been treated with courtesy and respect—but who knows what they say about me behind my back.”

Spears describes her office’s typical designs as a blend of regional and contemporary sensibilities, relying not on the clichéd Santa Fe style but rather on a Spanish colonial prototype. “The designs we do tend to be extremely simple. They rely on form and surface and light, not so much on detail.” Spears, who is also a licensed landscape architect, says that roughly half of her firm’s work involves designing custom houses; the other half is made up of historic preservation, commercial work, and other projects—which is how she likes it. “I love it all,” she says. “I wouldn’t want a steady diet of any one thing.” (Spears’s book, *American Adobes*, was published in 1986.)



OPPOSITE: The Morin House in Galisteo, by Spears Architects, AIA, is a composition of four small buildings—two flat roofed and two gable roofed. Construction by Valdez Builders. ABOVE: Beverley Spears