



## Competing for Santa Fe's Identity

Did regionalism win or lose at the old railyard? BY KIM SORVIG

**S**anta Fe, New Mexico, lives off its cultural landscapes. By preserving and imitating regional places, it has become a world-class destination. Last spring, a design competition turned the city's attention to a neglected landscape: the Santa Fe Railyard. Fifty acres of warehouses, seldom-used tracks, and scruffy open space, the railyard is an anomaly amid adobe galleries and residences. Industrial

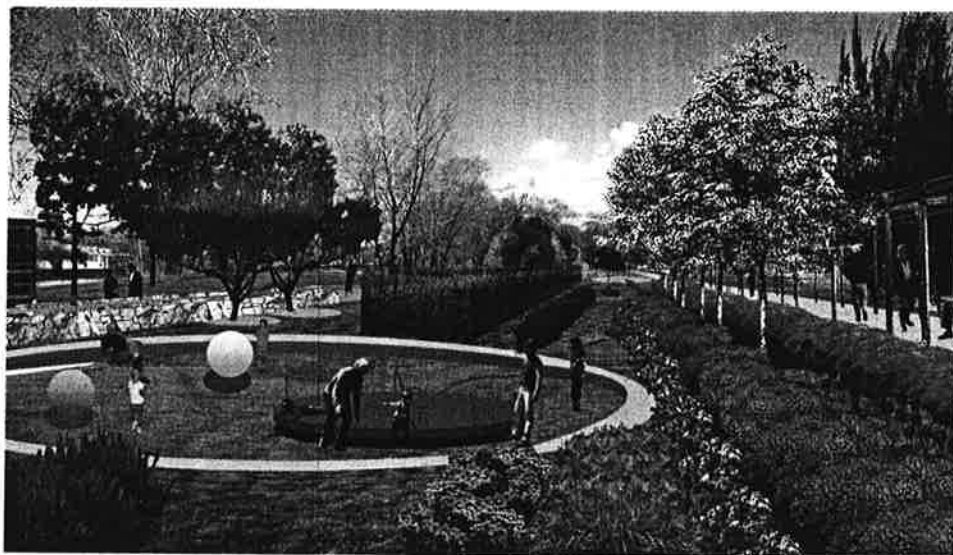
**The winning entry's graphics show proposed plaza *above*, multi-garden pastiche *right*. Despite historicist touches like the water tower, the proposal tidies away valued gritty character and creates large hot-paved areas. Graphic lushness (*right*) almost convinced jurors that plantings were locally unsuited.**

and decrepit, it is both a local hangout and a broken link to a wider world.

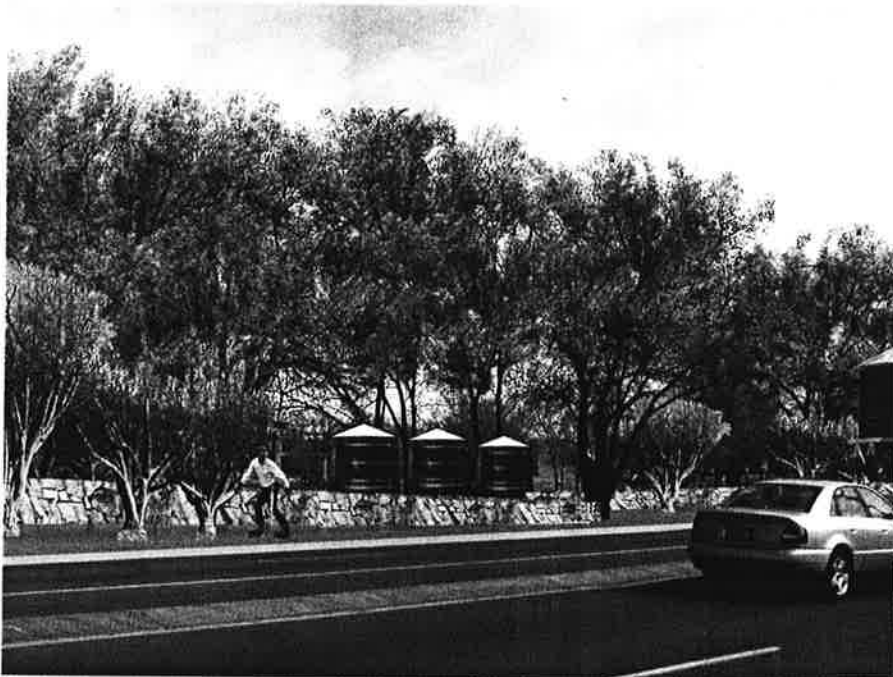
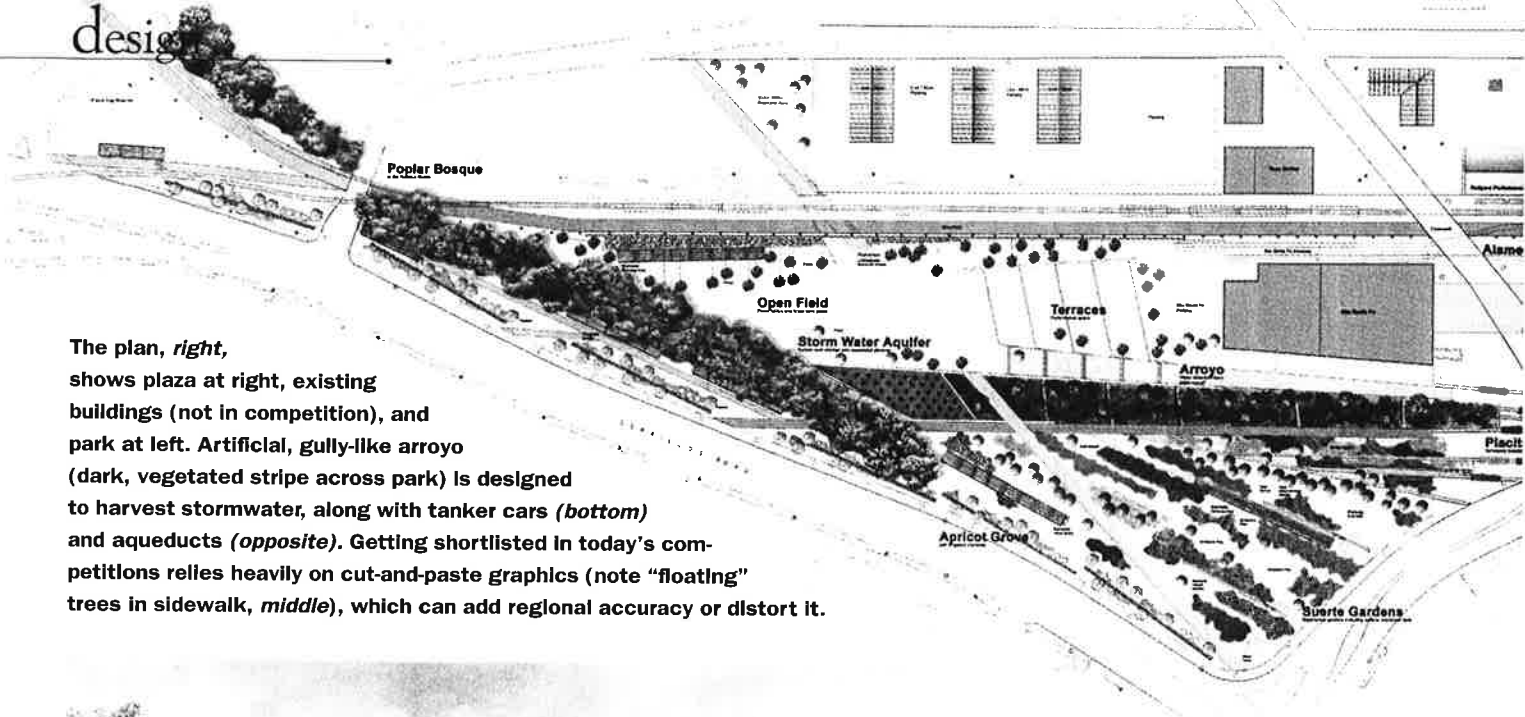
Although Santa Fe today is known for Pueblo/Spanish architecture and arts, it was the Atchison Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad (AT & SF) that first linked these elements into an international attraction. The AT & SF was the first and largest promot-

er of Southwestern tourism. The railyard is AT & SF's last physical relic in Santa Fe and, to some, a last ungentrified bastion in a fake-adobe world.

Recognizing the railyard's importance, the Trust for Public Land (TPL) helped the city buy the site, then sponsored an international competition to design a 13-acre



The plan, right, shows plaza at right, existing buildings (not in competition), and park at left. Artificial, gully-like arroyo (dark, vegetated stripe across park) is designed to harvest stormwater, along with tanker cars (bottom) and aqueducts (opposite). Getting shortlisted in today's competitions relies heavily on cut-and-paste graphics (note "floating" trees in sidewalk, middle), which can add regional accuracy or distort it.



railyard park ([www.railyardpark.org](http://www.railyardpark.org)). A detailed program called for the park to

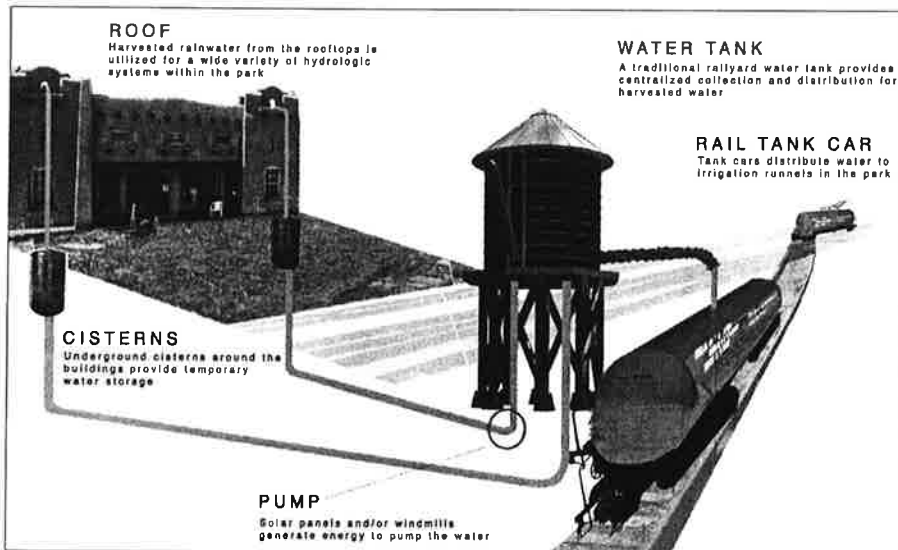
- demonstrate arid-region sustainability,
- serve locals in this tourist mecca, and
- respect regional identity.

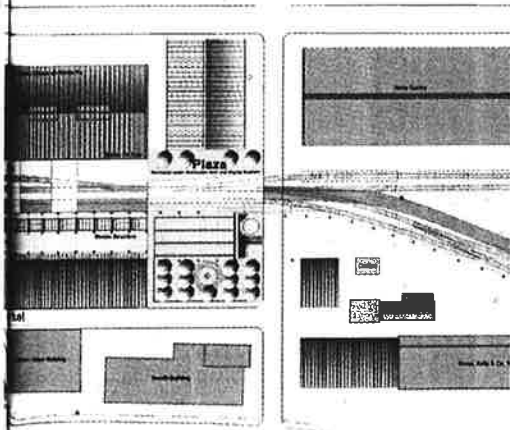
No effort was spared to treat the railyard as a treasure. Yet some residents and jurors have criticized the resulting designs as "mainstreaming" Santa Fe, exactly what the sponsors tried diligently to avoid. The designs all had many positive aspects, including creative approaches to sustainability. Yet the other goals (to serve locals and respect regional identity) seem unresolved.

How can strong regional places link to globalizing culture? What happens to regional identity when it becomes famous like the Santa Fe style? Such questions were thrown into sharp relief by this competition.

For over a decade, Santa Fe has debated the railyard's future. Planning abounds: a city-commissioned master plan, an AIA Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team, a conservation easement, and 18 months of citizen input meetings. TPL's steering committee based competition requirements on these documents and hired California architect Bill Liskamm as competition adviser.

By February 2002, TPL received 56 entries from 13 U.S. cities and 9 countries, as far away as Croatia and India. Each team was required to have at least one New Mexico member; seven teams were locally





led. Four finalists selected by the steering committee received \$20,000 apiece to produce concept-design presentations. The invited jury split equally between nationally known landscape/urban professionals and local experts on culture, planning, and the arts. The winning team (abbreviated "SSM" for Smith, Schwartz, & Miss) was led by Ken Smith Landscape Architect of New York.

The program's demand for sustainability, says juror Galen Cranz, author of *The Politics of Park Design*, reflects a national shift from simple "open space." In response, SSM's design harvests water both from land surfaces and roofs, pumping it into a historicist water tower and distributing it to plantings via rail tankers. (Even Santa Fe's 10 inches

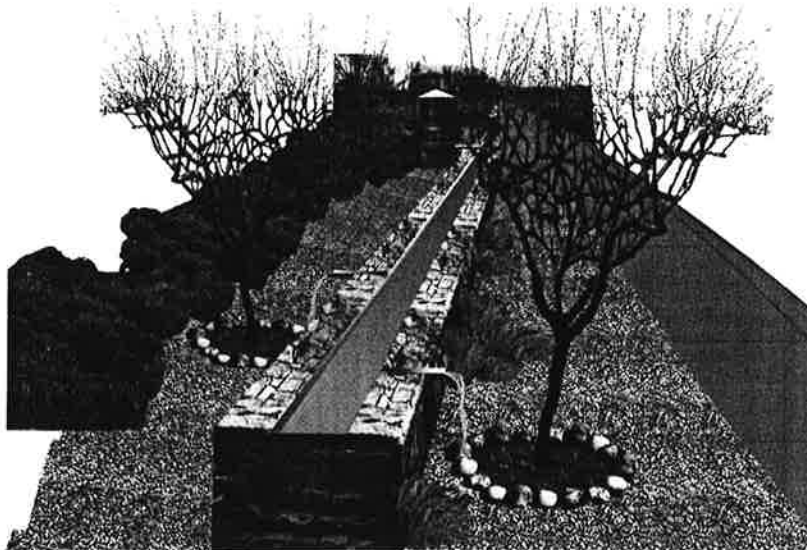
of annual rainfall will fill 48 tank cars, risking practical or liability problems.) Finalists envisioned railcars as movable classrooms, theaters, artist-in-residence housing, even "rolling ambassadors" to bring Santa Fe to other cities.

Events for locals were decisive in picking finalists; apparently there was an unspoken ban on anything tourists or the "arts elite" might favor. The public wish-list included dozens of items as specific as "snow sculpting," "apricot orchards," and "curandera gardens" (medicinal plants). Several jurors commented that the finalists "went to great lengths to include everything," and one finalist admitted being afraid to leave anything out.

To varying degrees, each finalist design seems to have many legitimate New Mexico elements in search of real connections. Many, such as the curandera/herbalist garden, have no relation to the railroad's presence. Others, like Mary Miss's proposed blue wall, relate only to the artist, not the place. SSM's cut-and-paste multi-garden pastiche struck some jurors as too lush for the region and seeming at odds with the gritty industrial character of the railyard, which the community explicitly wanted preserved.

The railyard park will undergo more public input during design development, according (*Continued on Page 83*)

**The graphic below accurately conveys the color and sparseness of regional plantings, but the stone aqueducts are at odds with local tradition, which distributed water in "acequia" ditches. The Acequia Madre (main historic ditch) still exists on site.**



## International Design & Local Landscapes

**G**iven that the public, the TPL, and adviser Bill Liskamm worked so hard to create a genuine community-oriented railyard, how could the results convince some critics that, as one put it, "gentrification won?" A number of issues are worth considering.

**Defining "regional character" is no easy task for community or competitors.** For example, regional adobe architecture, beloved of rich immigrants and tourists, is anathema to some Santa Feans (and banned in the Railyard Master Plan). For many locals, adobe—both real and fake—represents what has been lost to gentrification and inflated property values, while architects, especially Modernists and the avant-garde, view all regional or climate-specific styles with contempt.

**Extensive prior master planning can hamper the creativity that competitions supposedly foster, especially if "planning" spills over into detailed physical design decisions that the competitors cannot challenge.**

**Professional competition advisers are all architects, notes Liskamm.** He advised the Fresh Kills competition (see "Fresh Ideas?" *Landscape Architecture*, June 2002) and says "the landscape mentality and jargon were fairly new to me." For park competitions, an adviser trained in landscape architecture could add insight. Landscape architects, and ASLA specifically, should be questioning whether there are, in fact, no landscape architecture-trained advisers. If not, why not?

**Sponsors' backgrounds affect outcomes.** In Santa Fe, the steering committee was unable to attract any landscape architects (all wanted to enter the competition!) For simplicity and economy, this committee chose the finalists from which the jury—carefully selected for landscape/park/urban expertise—had to pick.

**How to require local representation is tricky.** For the railyard, any resident of New Mexico qualified as "local." Despite one in eight teams being Santa Fe led, no such team was short-listed. New York and California firms led all finalists; only one had more local than nonlocal members. In effect, not all "local" team members were local, and on some teams their role was primarily token.

**Use of web sites and e-mail for competition administration is simultaneously expanding and shrinking the entrant pool.** For example, all Fresh Kills entrants were informed about the railyard competition by e-mail; two Santa Fe finalists were Fresh Kills finalists. Though not necessarily unfair, this affects diversity of entries.

**Precisely because it was so thoughtfully run, the Santa Fe competition suggests that, as currently conceived, open competitions for landscape design have unintended local and regional consequences.**

## Design

(Continued from Page 33) to Ken Smith. Good concepts for sustainability and activities will certainly be enhanced during that time. Perhaps tweaking this landscape can also integrate its long list of symbolic elements to express how this specific place once connected Santa Fe to the world. **LA**

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*A resident of Santa Fe, Kim Sorvig won the 2002 Bradford Williams Medal for landscape writing.*

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*A longer analysis of the SF Railyard competition, with illustrations of all finalist designs, appears in Competitions magazine, Fall 2002 ([www.competitions.org](http://www.competitions.org), 502-451-3623). Juror biographies and a list of the finalists are at [www.railyardpark.org](http://www.railyardpark.org).*

### JUROR LIST

**Competition adviser:** William Liskarm, San Rafael, CA.

**Design professionals:** Anita Berizbeitia: assistant professor of landscape architecture, University of Pennsylvania; Galen Cranz, Ph.D.: professor of architecture, University of California, Berkeley; Richard Haag, FASLA: landscape architect, Seattle; Donlyn Lyndon: professor of architecture, University of California, Berkeley, editor, *Places*.

**Local Jurors:** Edward Archuleta: director, 1000 Friends of New Mexico; Santa Fe; Lucy Lippard: curator, activist, author of *The Lure of the Local*, Galisteo, NM; Richard Gaddes: director, Santa Fe Opera; member, several national architecture boards; Carmella Padilla: author and journalist, Santa Fe.

### WINNING TEAM

**SSM:** Ken Smith Landscape Architect, Frederic Schwartz Architects & Mary Miss, New York.

**Team members:** Ken Smith Landscape Architect, New York; Frederic Schwartz Architects, New York; Mary Miss, artist, New York; Mary Steuver, ecologist, Placitas, NM; Emily Shillingburg, anthropologist, Washington, D.C.; Morey Walker, engineer, Santa Fe; Arup, engineers, New York/Los Angeles/Houston; Pentagram, graphic design, Austin/San Francisco/New York; Sam Schwartz Co., transportation planning, New York; Allee King Rosen & Fleming, environmental planning, New York.