Competing for Santa Fe’s Identity

Did regionalism win or lose at the old railyard? **By Kim Sorvig**

Santa 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 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 promoter 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 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.
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). 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 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
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 multigarden pastiche struck some jurors as too lush for the region and seeming at odds with the gritty industrial character of the rail yard, which the community explicitly wanted preserved.

The rail yard will undergo more public input during design development, according (Continued on Page 83)

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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.
Design

(C)ontinued from Page 33) to Ken Smith. God 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 is connected to Santa Fe to the world. LA

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

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

JUROR LIST

Competition adviser: William Lisk- arm, San Rafael, CA.

Design professionals: Anita Ber- rizbeitia, 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


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.