



To Preserve and Maintain...

For 80 years, OSFA has fought to keep Santa Fe old

How's this for an alternative vision of Santa Fe?

* In the east-side foothills, about where St. John's College is located, tall adobe walls surround many acres, on which a charming *faux*-Southwestern-style summer colony hosts an array of speakers and performers each year, and wealthy out-of-towners spend the season there, before going home and leaving the site virtually vacant each September.

* Along the route of Guadalupe Street downtown, a major six-lane U.S. highway zips tens of thousands of cars, SUVs, semi-trailers and other vehicles through town all day and night. The Santuario de Guadalupe and dozens of other old buildings were knocked down long ago to make way for its construction. Several high overhead walkways enable pedestrians to get across the busy thoroughfare, which is lined on both sides by familiar big-box chain stores and fast-food restaurants.

* Along East De Vargas Street downtown, in the area where the Community Playhouse and numerous old houses now stand, nothing but big, square, multi-story state office buildings rise, surrounded by acres of parking lots.

* Two or three blocks on all sides of the Plaza have carefully been preserved to create a tourist-attraction theme park called "Santa Fe Old Town," surrounded by high-rise chain-owned luxury hotels and department stores, all brightly illuminated by neon. Similarly preserved along Canyon Road is a strip officially designated the "Old Artistic Zone." But long gone from it are the graceful El Zagan, the old Borrego House and several other buildings, which have been replaced with more modern, efficient and profitable structures, with adobe façades, of course.

I could go on word-painting this striking image of a different Santa Fe, but you get the idea. And my point is this: Without the efforts of one local organization, Santa Fe likely would have turned out that way. That organization is the Old Santa Fe Association, and it turns 80 this year.

For the sake of full disclosure, let me note that I am a member of the OSFA board, and have been for two or three years. I am proud to serve, to tap into OSFA's heritage, following the trail blazed by many illustrious Santa Feans.

One of them was famed architect John Gaw Meem, who was present at the creation of OSFA in 1926. In that year the City Council offered to give or sell city-owned land east of the old Sunmount Sanatorium to a group of 3,000 rich Texas women who wanted to establish a Chautauqua-style resort. Santa Fe had a population of just 11,000 then, and this project would have profoundly altered its character.

At a packed meeting called to oppose the plan, OSFA was formed, and its purpose was spelled out: *"To preserve and maintain the ancient landmarks, historical structures and traditions of Old Santa Fe, to guide its growth and development in such ways as to sacrifice as little as possible of that unique charm, born of age, tradition and environment, which are the priceless assets and heritage of Old Santa Fe."* In other words, it sought to keep Santa Fe authentic--and real. Presented with a petition from OSFA, the council withdrew its offer to the Texas women.

In 1946, the state Highway Department proposed a major route through downtown Santa Fe. Alarmed that the road would cut the city in half, OSFA opposed it and enlisted the Catholic archbishop in the cause. The plan was dropped.

In 1948 OSFA helped draft the city's first Master Plan, and in 1957 OSFA was instrumental in establishing the Historical Styles Ordinance, which defined a large and old part of the city in which visible architecture had to conform to traditional guidelines. It was the second such law in the country. The first was in Santa Barbara, Calif.

Since its inception the Historical Styles Ordinance has been controversial, with some developers and homeowners protesting that it infringes on the rights of private property, and other critics saying it stifles creativity. But it has withstood court tests, and it has without a

doubt blocked wholesale change in much of Santa Fe. The ordinance has been extended to parts of the city beyond its original downtown and east-side origin, but even now it covers just a fifth of town, leaving 80 percent open for apartment complexes, Cerrillos Road commercialization, whatever. And yet this ordinance has preserved Santa Fe's heart and soul and essence.

When in the mid-1950s the state wanted to raze the old houses and other structures along East De Vargas Street and extend the big, boxy government complex onto the property, things looked bad for OSFA, because the state was not bound by any of Santa Fe's local historic rules. But in the end, OSFA trumped the state by getting the *Barrio de Analco*, as the area is called, placed on the National Registry of Historic Places. Then the state could no longer touch it.

The list of OSFA victories goes on, but also in the mix are some notable defeats. Despite OSFA's efforts, for example, the elegant old Nusbaum House on Washington Avenue was knocked down in 1961 to make room for a parking lot, at the urging of Plaza merchants. OSFA lost its fight to make the big, institutional downtown post office reflect Santa Fe style. The massive Eldorado Hotel was built over OSFA objections. The so-called "Ugly Building" at Washington and Marcy wiped out an old string of one-story shops.

By no means does OSFA win every struggle it enters. Nor should it. Neither this nor any other interest group deserves absolute say over the architectural course of the city. But time and time again, now for 80 years, OSFA has worked diligently to preserve Santa Fe's historical integrity. Even when it loses, OSFA often wins a partial victory, by causing projects to be altered or scaled back to a version more in keeping with the city's character.

And although after eight decades OSFA is perhaps taken for granted in some quarters, it is still very much on the job, as demonstrated by some quite recent headlines. In one case, the Catholic Archdiocese of Santa Fe withdrew its plans to erect buildings taller than Historical Styles Ordinance height restrictions on six acres it owns behind the downtown cathedral. In another, expansion plans for the Inn at Loretto were downsized and changed in order to be more compatible with traditional considerations. OSFA helped influence both outcomes.

So if you love Santa Fe the way it has turned out, flaws and all, pause and give thanks to OSFA. Without it, we'd surely be living in a very different town.