

IN THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST The Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, N.M., reveals a rich history

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THE EXTERIOR OF THE PALACE ON THE NORTH END OF THE SANTA FE PLAZA INCLUDES A SHADY PORTAL WHERE NATIVE ARTISANS GATHER DAILY TO DISPLAY THEIR WARES.

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KNOWN FOR ITS CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND RENOWNED ART COMMUNITIES, New Mexico has a rich and dynamic history worthy of its state slogan, “Land of Enchantment.” Standing as a witness to the state’s history is the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, N.M.

Throughout its 400-year history, the Palace of the Governors has evolved with the region. Built in 1609, it is the nation’s oldest continuously occupied government building, and it has served as a museum for the past 101 years.

The adobe building and its surrounding plaza originally served as the home and administrative center for the governor. While it was built as the *Casas Reales*, or “royal house,” the governor in 1659 began referring to the property as a palace—and thus was born the name “Palace of the Governors.”

While the term palace suggests wealth and luxury, the palace was never opulent. Although

governors brought their finest household furnishings, the space itself was austere and serviceable. It was set up as a complex of living and administrative rooms, as well as store houses—with a military function added in the 18th century, according to Frances Levine, Ph.D., director of Palace of the Governors and the New Mexico History Museum.

Changes to the palace reveal the history of the territory. During the 19th century, New Mexico was the culmination of the Santa Fe Trail, where the frontier of the United States met the Northern Frontier of Mexico. While everything in the palace was handmade and hand-forged during the Spanish colonial period, U.S. traders coming down the Santa Fe Trail brought new types of hardware, locks and architectural details to the building as early as 1821. The arrival of the railroad in 1880 brought glass for windows and tin plates for the roofs at the palace.



“Over 400 years the building has changed in response to our changing trade patterns and our changing ideas of style,” Levine said.

Through the centuries, the palace has been under the control of a number of countries. Between 1609-1821, it belonged to Spain. In fact, it is considered one of the crown jewels of Colonial Spanish architecture in North America. Then, from 1821-1846 Santa Fe was the capital of the Mexican province before becoming a territory in the United States from 1846 to 1912. In 1909, the palace became the first museum of New Mexico and has served as a museum since then. It was designated as a Registered National Historic Landmark in 1960 and an American Treasure in 1999.

MUSEUM QUALITY

While the palace’s rich history makes it the perfect museum setting, its age is troublesome. Many artifacts cannot be safely displayed because it does not have the modern conservation requirements for climate control and light levels. Therefore, although scholars spent decades collecting and studying artifacts, maps, documents and photographs to educate and enlighten museum visitors, they could not be shared because of the structure’s limitations.

As a result, the New Mexico Museum of History was built, and it opened in May 2009. The 96,000-square-foot museum is a world-class cultural institution that now acts as the anchor of the museum campus that includes the Palace of the Governors, the Palace Press, the Fray Angelico Chavez History Library and Photo Archives.

“There was a lot of forethought and planning about how to make a modern building that speaks to the time in which it was built, and yet is sensitive to the historic neighborhood and its national historic landmark counterpart,” Levine said. “The museum and palace each speak to their time and their history. There is a very elegant connection between the two buildings.”

Despite the new museum, the palace remains central to this historic and cultural district.



The east end of the palace houses its core exhibitions, such as a magnificent collection of 18th and 19th century New Mexican devotional art called *Tesoros de Devocion*. The west end is the changing exhibition gallery, which changes every 12 to 18 months. At the center of the palace is a portrait gallery and a room devoted to the architectural history of the building. The palace is planning an exhibit that will explore New Mexico and statehood for the state’s centennial in 2012.

Making changes to the palace’s exhibits is notably hard on the building. Therefore, protecting the historic fabric of the building is a top priority. Levine said they ensure the changes they make are not permanent to the building. Another challenge in maintaining the palace is funding. Levine said the building needs a new roof, preservation work on the windows and a replacement gas heat system.

“There is ongoing maintenance, and upkeep is always a challenge,” he said. “So I try to leverage every penny.”

As both a historic artifact and a museum in its own right, the palace represents how history lives on.

“We live in the presence of the past,” Levine said. “When you look at the Palace of the Governors, you understand that American history has an enormous time depth.” ■

THE PALACE PRINT SHOP, RECENTLY RENOVATED, INCLUDES A RECREATION OF FAMED ARTIST GUSTAVE BAUMANN’S PRINTING STUDIO.

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