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Change Rolls In to Santa Fe

Commercial flights and a new rail link trigger debate over a city's image

By [CANDACE JACKSON](#)

SANTA FE, N.M. -- Santa Fe's distinctive adobe architecture is getting an infusion of corrugated metal and loft-style galleries. A flurry of development here has set off a debate about how best to reinvigorate a city that is deeply associated with its 400-year history and distinctive Southwestern architecture.

Santa Fe's travel infrastructure is poised for a major upgrade. Train service with Albuquerque is slated to begin in December. And at least one commercial airline is seeking approval to fly direct into Santa Fe's small airport; most visitors now have to fly to Albuquerque, then make the one-hour drive.

The planned upgrades already have led to new development. Two high-end resorts opened in August, unusual for a city with hardly any new luxury hotels in 15 years. Last weekend, a crowd of thousands attended a day of performances, tai chi and outdoor cinema to mark the opening of Santa Fe's new Railyard district. The renovated train depot is home now to a 10-acre park and several art galleries, and eventually will offer several blocks' worth of upscale shopping and dining plus an Imax movie theater.

The \$125 million development, with its buildings of corrugated metal and brick, is a striking departure from Santa Fe's ubiquitous adobe. And it is quickly becoming the city's hub for contemporary art. A number of nonprofit art and performance spaces have located here, and stores like Moss Outdoor, a showroom for high-end patio and

garden furnishings, has opened. The twice-weekly farmers market attracts thousands of shoppers, and a bike path runs along the railroad tracks. Condo and town-home developments are cropping up in bordering neighborhoods still made up mostly of small adobe homes.

A makeover is difficult in a town with some of the nation's strictest building codes and preservation ordinances. Even storefront signs touting discounts require a permit. The Railyard district's 20-year rehabilitation was slowed by debates about the project's size and focus. The new eco-certified convention center, set to open next week near historic Santa Fe Plaza, has been in the works for about 10 years.

In the heart of the Railyard district is Site Santa Fe, a nonprofit art space in a former beer warehouse. Its biennial exhibit, running until Jan. 4, features edgy installations by about 25 visiting artists. One artist made a piece requiring viewers to sign a waiver before jumping almost six feet down onto a pile of black mats. Another artist melted down a bronze statue of a Navajo on a horse and recast it to create an alien abduction scene.

The changes have rekindled a debate among locals over tourism and the city's image. Some insist that preserving Spanish and pueblo influences is critical to preserving its appeal. Others call the touristy parts of town "Santa Fake" and say the manufactured look appeals to only some visitors. "People might come to see that once, but why would they ever come back if it's static?" says Laura Steward Heon, director of Site Santa Fe. "It should just be put under a glass snow globe."

Every year, millions of tourists come to buy or admire artwork, dine on elk tenderloin at white-tablecloth restaurants like Geronimo and visit Santa Fe Plaza. There, Native American craftsmen sell turquoise and beaded jewelry in front of the restored 17th-century Palace of the Governors. Regulars say the scene has remained remarkably the same over the years.

The train is likely to bring change. By December, the New Mexico Rail Runner is expected to be making eight roundtrips to Albuquerque a day, carrying up to 600 passengers each way. Terminating in the Santa Fe Railyard, it is a potentially powerful link between two cities that are only 65 miles apart. "That kind of capacity is what ends up linking regional economies," says Robert Lang, professor of planning

and international affairs at Virginia Tech. "It will pull Santa Fe closer into Albuquerque's orbit."

"I think it's going to change us in ways we can hardly foresee now," Santa Fe's mayor, David Coss, says of the new rail connection. Already, strip malls and housing developments from each city are gradually sprawling toward the middle, with a big but shrinking swath of empty desert between them. Traffic on the connecting I-25 highway is expected to double in 20 years.

High-design urban housing is springing up near Santa Fe's rail stations. A short walk from the Railyard are the Pacheco Street Lofts, 15 stucco condo units centered around courtyards in a new-urbanist style. Neighborhood activists complained after the lofts were built that they were out of place amid Santa Fe's brown adobe. A city councilwoman has proposed a "neighborhood conservation district" to effectively limit similar projects in the future. "Our work isn't modern just to be modern," says architect Chris Calott. "Something other than pueblo or adobe can be done well and responsibly and contextually and the sky won't fall."

The proposed arrival of commercial jet service from Dallas and Los Angeles also is stirring up controversy (Santa Fe's small airport is currently serviced by only private planes and charters). In the works for almost two years, plans have been held up by the concerns of local historic-preservation groups. At one point, a Native American pueblo raised questions about whether flight paths would interfere with sacred ceremonies.

At the moment, with the busy summer festival season over, change seems far away. Days are warm and bright, nights are cool. The city is walkable, with most tourist attractions clustered around the historic central plaza. Around lunchtime in the plaza's park, you can buy \$4 chicken fajitas from a pink-and-turquoise cart; arched entryways lead to tree-shaded courtyards and upscale alfresco dining. Tourists wander in and out of shops with names like Yippee Yi Yo that sell silver and turquoise belts, fringed vests and snakeskin cowboy boots. Dozens of single-story adobe art galleries with bright-colored doors line Canyon Road, some with bronze statues of horses and children out front. Inside, many of them sell hand-woven baskets and oil paintings of Western prairie scenes, with prices from hundreds to tens of thousands of dollars.

Southwestern-themed jewelry and folk art are what most people associate with Santa Fe's 200 galleries. But contemporary and avant garde artwork is at the center of the city's makeover. "I think there's an image by and large of Santa Fe being a cowboys and Indian town and the contemporary art scene is largely unknown," says Keith Toler, executive director of the city's convention and visitor's bureau. "We want to change that perception."

Contemporary art galleries have multiplied in recent years. Among the oldest is the 35-year-old LewAllen Contemporary, a block from the Plaza. The gallery just opened a second branch at the city's new Encantado Resort this week, and plans to open a third in the Railyard district next year. The gallery currently is exhibiting works by Beverly McIver, an African-American painter whose provocative self-portraits depict her in blackface. Co-owner Robert Gardner says his goal is "to bring to Santa Fe a place with the same kind of art experience you'd find in New York or Chicago."

Santa Fe tourism began about a century ago, when trains brought visitors to Indian pueblos and the plaza's shady park. City planners fostered a uniform style of architecture to create an exotic ambiance for tourists, says Chris Wilson, author of "The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition." Strict rules put in place in the 1950s made sure new construction fit the aesthetic.

Tourism flourished as people bought second homes here in the 1980s and '90s; recently, growth has slowed. Though Santa Fe real estate hasn't taken as big a hit as in Phoenix and Las Vegas, home prices have fallen some 20% from two or three years ago, says Bob Chernock, an agent with Santa Fe Realty Partners. Some retailers and gallery directors say summer sales were soft, as high gas prices, air-travel headaches and shaky financial markets dampened art purchasing. At Coady Contemporary gallery, sales are down about 30% from last year, says Judy Coady, the gallery director. "People still come," she says, "but they treat galleries more like museums."

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