

Pasatiempo

Art of Space

[Paul Weideman](#)

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Paul Weideman **A hint of piñon, a whiff of civic scent**

During the past month the Building That Cannot Be Named (aka the Santa Fe Conference Center or some variant of that moniker to be determined) has begun to look like a real Spanish-Pueblo Revival building. The wood portales are in place and most of the yellow, gypsum wall sheathing that covered the steel-frame structure

is now finished with stucco.

It was a big job that began with tearing down the old Sweeney High School gymnasium, more recently known as Sweeney Center; continuing with a detailed archaeological dig, conducted with tribal consultations; and then digging out an underground parking lot on the site that fronts on Marcy Street, Grant Avenue, and Federal Place.

Demolition of the old gym building began late in the winter of 2006. In a May 16, 2006, interview at Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, across Marcy Street from the site, Jackson marveled at the process. "It's been so organized," she said. "The workers put everything in piles to recycle. It was just amazing. It was beautiful. It looked like a ballet."

The 72,000-square-foot center is expected to earn a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification for eco-friendly design and construction. LEED points implemented here, besides recycling demolition materials, include low water use, using recycled and nontoxic materials, recycling construction waste, employing reflective roof surfaces and efficient heating and ventilation systems, and providing bicycle storage.

When the first event is held in the building this fall, it will be the climax of a four-year schedule that began with the onset of archaeological work on the site in October 2004. The excavations uncovered a wealth of artifacts and architectural features, some of which date back to the fifth century, according to Steve Post of the Office of Archaeological Studies.

Original plans for a pair of "archaeological dig areas" as permanent exhibits at the southeast corner of the site have been canceled. "It's sad," said architect Beverley Spears, "because there was a major civilization living here and we were excited about in some way showing the layering of cultures, but Tesuque Pueblo doesn't want anything revealed."

Her firm, Spears Architects, Santa Fe, is the local architect on the project. Fentress Architects, Denver, is the architect of record.

Once the archaeology and demolition work was finished, crews started the most intensive parts of the project: the huge excavation for a subterranean parking garage, construction of the garage, and installation of the support structure for the building. After construction reached street level, workers concentrated for the most part on getting the walls and roofs up — "building the envelope and getting it watertight," as Spears put it. And although the Marcy- and Grant-facing walls were essentially finished in mid-May, and the wooden ceiling for the ballroom and much of the interior woodwork were being installed, crews were still building the walls that face the post office.

The building boasts long, post-and-beam portales on three sides. "We wanted to do portales, windows, and doors at the street elevation to the greatest extent to enliven the streetscape for pedestrians," Spears said. The architects also wanted to create street activity, for example with a small café on Marcy Street, but that idea fell through.

Most people will enter the new civic center through a small courtyard and an arched doorway off Marcy Street.

Why an arch?

"I just liked it," Spears said. "It's wonderful because it marks and celebrates the main entry into the building, and it's a link to Spanish Colonial architecture elsewhere in the hemisphere."

When you pass under the arch, a *zaguán* passageway leads to doors to the lobby and ballroom on the left, and a courtyard on the right. Spears thinks of the courtyard as the heart of the civic center. "I feel like the courtyard should be a very beautiful space," she said.

Spears intended that it should be well-planted, but this is at odds with the city's plans for brick paving covering about two-thirds of the courtyard to accommodate vendors and other revenue-generating uses.

At the southeast corner of the site is the community building, the only part of the structure that will be two-story, except for a terrace wrapping around the courtyard. The 18,000-square-foot ballroom has a 24-foot ceiling, so it is another tall part of the building. Spears said the architects tried to design for as much natural light as possible, including the use of clerestory windows in the ballroom.

On the first floor of the community building will be a 2,500-square-foot art gallery. The space will be used for themed art shows by "artists who identify themselves with Santa Fe," according to the Web site of the City of Santa Fe Arts Commission, which is in charge of the space. The gallery will occasionally host demonstrations by artists, said the commission's director, Sabrina Pratt. "It will also have a significant community-outreach program, including technical assistance for artists," she said.

In an e-mail, the commission's senior planner, Debra Garcia y Griego, who is managing permanent art displays at the civic center, said many artists are preparing works for the facility. Among the artists featured are Roxanne Swentzell, who is creating a large clay relief for the main lobby, and Sam Leyba, a local muralist, who is making a Byzantine tile mosaic for a nicho designed by the architects.

One feature of the site and building design that will be handy for people who live or work in the area will be the covered portal extending along the building's east side. It provides a sheltered public walkway between Marcy Street and the post office.

The hallway (or what the architects call a "prefunction" space) along the east side of the ballroom also serves as a lobby for the ballroom. "In a building serving hundreds or thousands at one time, you need a lot of circulation space," Spears pointed out.

Toward the north end of the building, the hallway makes a right turn and extends eastward, with doors to meeting rooms on both sides. The rooms on the south side open onto the courtyard.

A row of administrative offices fronts on Grant Avenue, then a service hallway runs between the offices and the ballroom. This hallway, Spears explained, is one of the "back of house" areas, a term that also describes the building's three kitchens, various dressing rooms, and loading docks.

There is a pleasing variety in the building's masses. Some look

higher than the actual dimensions of the rooms due to tall roof parapets designed to hide rooftop heating and ventilation equipment. The fenestration pattern is not tightly symmetrical. "We tried to be pretty informal about window placement in the true, old, Santa Fe fashion, and also to be loose in our massing," Spears said.

Overall, it's a handsome, interesting building, although angularity and whimsy are not part of the formula. In response to criticism that it represents just one more example of the dominant paradigm in pseudo-adobe architecture in Santa Fe, Spears said, "First of all, this is the historic district, and it's a ragtag historic district. We don't have block after block of fine, old architecture here. What we do have is a wonderful urban plan.

"We have the heritage of Spanish Colonial architecture, but most of it's been destroyed. Most of what we have are not the authentic buildings; they're the revival buildings, like the New Mexico Museum of Art. Some of our best buildings are fake adobes. The Pueblo Revival style is a hundred years old, so it has an integrity in its own right, and, frankly, people love it and they expect it."

What about the idea that juxtaposing a modern structure might actually complement the city's historic fabric? Two examples of the success of this strategy are I.M. Pei's glass pyramid set amid the historic structures of the Louvre in Paris and Moshe Safdie's Jepson Center for the Arts in Savannah, Georgia.

"Our downtown historic area is so small and fragmented that we need to support it rather than play off of it," Spears responded. "Also this is a big, big building. A building of this scale, had it been contemporary, would have overpowered everything around it."

The specified exterior finish of the civic center is an earth-tone brown, but there will be touches of brighter hues.

"We will have some color," Spears said. "Along Marcy and Grant, there will be a painted wainscot under the portales that will be kind of a terra-cotta red, then in the pedestrian-walkway portal facing City Hall, there will be a blue wainscot."

A ribbon-cutting marking the end of construction is planned for Aug. 8. After that, the building will be furnished, in part with custom-made pieces by local woodworkers; and then there will be an airing-out period to allow the "new building smell" to fade before use by the general public. The first event in the new building is the Santa Fe International Conference on Creative Tourism, from Sept. 28 to Oct. 2.