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Preserving the Pueblos

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Justin Aguino, a member of the Ohkay Owingeh tribe, in front of his newly rehabilitated home in Owe'neh Bupingeh.

Multiple Classes | Think of the Native-American Southwest and you might envision its most famous settlement, located just outside the beautiful, artsy town of Taos, New Mexico. Marked by signature adobe structures that date back more than a thousand years, this old village looks much as it did when Spanish conquistadors arrived in the 16th century. In addition to its iconic mud-plastered homes—their thick walls supported by carved cedar *vigas*, or beams—its architectural and place-making features include central plazas with *ramadas*, or shaded pavilions; conical adobe *hornos* (outdoor ovens); and rough-hewn ladders that stretch upward to allow access into once-secret *kivas*, or religious chambers. Pristinely restored and now a World Heritage site, the Taos pueblo offers the complete tourist experience: guides, public festivals, and craftspeople selling their black-and-white pottery and copper jewelry.

But Taos is just one of 19 ancient pueblos that dot New Mexico—and it's hardly typical. Although the others offer similar culturally and historically significant features, they've long been abandoned and left to rot as their impoverished but ever-growing populations sprawled beyond the historic core and relocated to modern tract housing set up by the federal government. These original sites remain sacred to the Pueblo people, who return to them several times a year to celebrate various festivals. But on a day-to-day basis, the tribes have “grown accustomed to the buildings no longer working for them—there's no electricity, no running water,” according to architect Jamie Blosser C91 GAR'96, director of the Santa Fe office of Atkin Olshin Schade (AOS). “They can find it hard to see the true possibilities.”

Lately, however, several tribes have begun to revisit, literally and figuratively, the historic pueblos, examining ways to make them viable again.

“These tribes are all different and sovereign,” says Shawn Evans GAR'95, a historic-preservation architect with AOS. “But they're related ancestrally, and they're all facing the same challenges in the modern world. They're trying to steward their eternal places while being contemporary people.”

Through its eight-person Santa Fe practice (the firm also maintains a Philadelphia office), AOS is playing a key role in helping them navigate that journey. That's why this past March, AOS principal (and adjunct associate professor of architecture) Tony Atkin GAR'74, along with Laurie Olin, Practice Professor of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning (“Mr. Olin's Neighborhood,” Jul | Aug 2007), led about two dozen students enrolled in their interdisciplinary studio, The Pueblo World, through a 10-day tour of some of the pueblos. At Taos, these fledgling designers gained an understanding of the past and an appreciation for its architectural significance, but at Santo Domingo, one of the larger pueblos, they were confronted with the realities of modern tribe members—who, in Blosser's words, represent a “marginalized population dealing with huge overcrowding and considerable poverty.”

The pueblo has retained AOS to address the community's desperate housing and social needs, and the students will play a role in designing a new development that includes a school and manufacturing facilities. It wouldn't be surprising if, upon graduation, one or two of them even found their way back to this arid land of sparkling blue skies and brilliant yellow cottonwoods to continue the work.

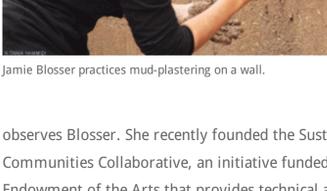
It's happened before. After Blosser completed a similar studio under Atkin's leadership at the Zuni pueblo, she realized that she wanted to make community building in New Mexico her life's work. More recently, Evans found himself increasingly leaving Philadelphia to pursue projects in the firm's Santa Fe office—and relocated his family to join the practice.

The two architects have received encouragement in the form of grants and fellowships to pursue their work with native populations. Blosser, whose specialty is public-interest design—an emerging discipline that aims to make architecture more community-centric—received a Rose Fellowship in 2000 (long before she joined AOS) that enabled her to help the Ohkay Owingeh tribe develop a low-income housing project. Evans used his 2010 Fitch Mid-Career Grant to research the attitudes of pueblo populations toward preservation.

“The combination of their talents and interests,” observes Atkin, “has formed something really unique.”

Evans returns the compliment: “The bridge is that Tony's work has always been about culture and its relationship to the built environment, whether it's in Japan or New Mexico. He instilled those values in us as young architects.”

The office has met with nearly all of the New Mexico tribes, sometimes to discuss the restoration of their historic pueblos, sometimes concerning the design of new, affordable housing.



Jamie Blosser practices mud-plastering on a wall.

“What's traditionally happened is that government HUD money went toward building single-family, detached houses on the outskirts of the pueblos—there was no investment in the historic plazas and buildings, and they began to deteriorate,”

observes Blosser. She recently founded the Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative, an initiative funded by the National Endowment of the Arts that provides technical and design assistance to tribes looking to preserve their cultural heritage while exploring new and modern housing. “We try to focus on what's really important to them—their culture—and use it as a way to help them understand form,” Blosser continues. “Our work is a way of looking at what the story is, of establishing a narrative.”

The firm's most complete such effort to date has been the Owe'neh Bupingeh Preservation Project, restoring the historic pueblo of the Ohkay Owingeh, whose name means “place of the strong people.” When AOS first arrived on the scene in 2005, only about 60 original homes remained in the core. About half of them were occupied but dilapidated; the others were abandoned. Following a preservation plan crafted by AOS, local contractors have rehabilitated and modernized about 25 of the old homes, and built four new ones.

The goal, says Tomasita Duran, director of the tribe's housing authority, has always been “100 percent occupancy of the core. We want to bring our center back to life.” As families start moving back—leaving their modern, spacious, air-conditioned A-frame HUD homes—the target looks reachable.

“No one believed this could be a working village,” says Blosser, sitting in the corner cubicle of the office's expansive, light-filled loft space. “Until now, the choice for these old centers seemed to be either to turn into a perfect setting frozen in time, like Taos, or collapse to total ruin.” Instead, the project has won a handful of awards, including from the state historic-preservation office and the Santa Fe and Philadelphia chapters of the American Institute of Architects. It's also seen as a model by other interested villages, such as Santo Domingo.



Shawn Evans (standing, center) tries his hand at plastering.

“It was an exciting project for me personally,” Evans says. “I had to take everything I'd learned and leave it in a box at the office.”

The site is among those listed in the National Register of Historic Places, but in the tribes' view, “preservation is a lot more about language and culture and art than buildings,” explains Evans. His time living on Elfreth's Alley in Philadelphia helped him understand how places can have muscle memory.

Since the project was funded in part by government monies—altogether, the tribe has received \$7 million in grants from HUD, the National Trust, the National Park Service, and others—the architects had to balance the tribe's beliefs with federal preservation requirements.

“We were the middlemen,” Evans says, “translating tribal values into something that would meet the regulations, and interpreting federal standards in a way that the tribe would accept. Everyone had to bend a little.”

Purist notions of using adobe for new buildings or additions, for example, were abandoned in favor of less expensive and more practical wood-frame construction.

“The standards for historic properties can be inappropriate,” Evans points out. “They often have to do with monumental buildings designed by architects—not organic, vernacular ones in a village that is changing and always has been changing. We're not building a museum—we're trying to help address a very desperate housing shortage.”

Walking around the 25-acre historic pueblo today is a very different experience than it was a few years ago, according to Duran, who's worked at Owe'neh Bupingeh for 15 years.

“It used to be really sad,” she says. “You could feel it dying.” Now, as she and Evans tour the grounds, they can see the tangible signs of life—cars, basketball hoops, folding chairs, even a rabbit hutch—while the somnolent afternoon is punctuated by the occasional yelp of dogs romping and kids playing.

Though the team at AOS has shored up all of the buildings to prevent further deterioration, their work is by no means done. Next to the freshly rehabbed houses, others still betray many years of neglect: smashed windows, sawed-off *vigas*, and peeling stucco. Until further funding is secured, says Evans, the work won't proceed.

Still, “it's exciting to see other tribes opening up their imaginations once again about their old pueblos,” he says. “They want to figure out how to make their community resilient, so it works for them—not for the state, not for the federal government, and not for some consultants.”

—JoAnn Greco



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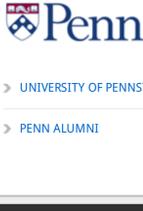
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