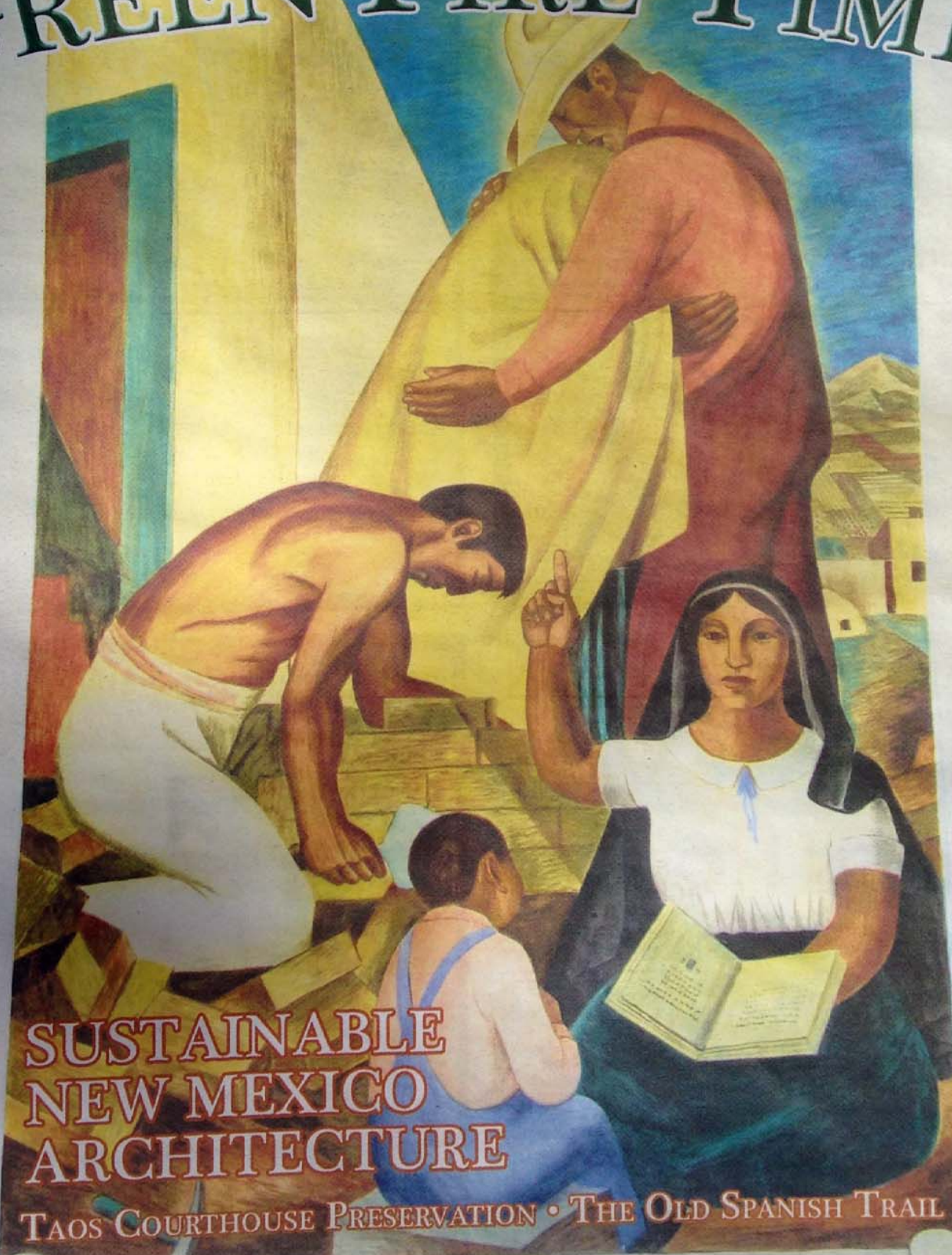


# GREEN FIRE TIMES



## SUSTAINABLE NEW MEXICO ARCHITECTURE

TAOS COURTHOUSE PRESERVATION • THE OLD SPANISH TRAIL

RECONCILIACION



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GREEN FIRE TIMES provides useful information for community members, business people, students and visitors—anyone interested in discovering the wealth of opportunities and resources in the Southwest. In support of a more sustainable planet, topics covered range from green businesses, jobs, products, services, entrepreneurship, investing, design, building and energy—to native perspectives on history, arts & culture, ecotourism, education, sustainable agriculture, regional cuisine, water issues and the healing arts. To our publisher, a more sustainable planet also means maximizing environmental as well as personal health by minimizing consumption of meat and alcohol.

Green Fire Times is widely distributed throughout north-central New Mexico. Feedback, announcements, event listings, advertising and article submissions to be considered for publication are welcome.

# GREEN FIRE TIMES

NEWS & VIEWS FROM THE SUSTAINABLE SOUTHWEST

WINNER OF THE SUSTAINABLE SANTA FE AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING EDUCATIONAL PROJECT

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## INTERSECTIONS OF ARCHEOLOGY, ARCHITECTURE, CULTURE AND PLACE

Much of the Sustainable New Mexico Architecture focus of this edition of *Green Fire Times* was written by Rachel Preston Prinz, an architectural researcher and preservationist. Rachel loves to share her passion for discovering the *genius loci*—the “Spirit of Place.” After having been a project manager in traditional architecture firms for more than 10 years, she founded the Albuquerque-based firm *Archinia*, in 2007, and its nonprofit offshoot, *Built for Life*, in 2012. Rachel has given multiple TEDx and Pecha Kucha talks on sustainability and historic preservation and is a well-regarded designer and architectural researcher. She served as a preservation commissioner in Taos and has led groundbreaking research into traditional and modern means of earth sheltering. In 2014, she launched a television project, *Built for Life*, to celebrate New Mexico's 1,000-year building tradition of no-tech sustainability.



COVER: **RECONCILIACION**  
A mural by Emil Bisttram in the Taos County Courthouse (See page 13)



# TAOS COUNTY COURTHOUSE PRESERVATION PLAN MOVES AHEAD

RACHEL PRESTON PRINZ

To preserve the historic Taos County Courthouse on Taos Plaza, the town of Taos and Taos County have come together to address long-standing issues regarding maintenance and use of the facility, which has been all but abandoned since municipal offices were moved from the building in the late 1960s. Since that time, the building has served various functions, including as a home base for some of the plaza's merchants. However, underutilization of the facility and the dwindling budgets that resulted left the building in need of some relatively serious upgrades in order to make it functional, financially viable and accessible to meet modern codes.

To address these concerns, Taos architect David Henry was contracted in 2014 to put together a team to prepare a preservation plan. The plan outline asked the team to consider the building's historic and current uses, determine structural and architectural stability and propose future phases for stabilization and rehabilitation, so that the structure could be put back into sustainable use.

## *The Spanish Pueblo Revival courthouse we see today is the third documented municipal structure on the site.*

Henry, historic structural engineer Jim Hands of Santa Fe and I used the architectural and art-history pieces of this report as a basis to determine the architectural chronology of the building. One of the greatest finds was locating the original architect's drawings on vellum and mylar at UNM's Center for Southwest Research at the Zimmerman Library in Albuquerque. This seemed like a miracle because many of the county's records were destroyed in the fire that claimed the courthouse's predecessor building, and many later records were lost in moves to other locations.

The 1932 Spanish Pueblo Revival courthouse we see today is the third documented iteration of a municipal structure on the site. The first dated to sometime between 1830 and 1842 and is identified on an 1847 map of the town square as a calabozo, or jail, in the Galician dialect from northern Spain. The building on that map appears to have been a small, one-room-deep building. We can safely presume that it was completed in Hispanic vernacular style with adobe construction and vigas serving as the structure for a flat earthen roof because other materials would have been prohibitively difficult to obtain in this far-removed northern outpost in the Mexican territory. We know that a second iteration of the courthouse was completed in the American Territorial period, sometime around 1880, once the Americans arrived and began the process of morphing New Mexico into a U.S. state. This Americanized courthouse was also one room deep, but it appears to have been somewhat wider at the façade than its predecessor. It was also most likely made of adobe but featured uniquely American details like wood trim at the doors and windows, which were introduced when the American government built the first wood mills to support the building of facilities like Fort Union. This second-generation courthouse had a detached jail behind the building, across a small yard that featured a hand-dug well. The structure was modernized several times, removing the high parapets and adding a pitched roof, then adding a gable to shed water away from the front door. This courthouse never had a portal.



MOVING INTO THE NEW COURT HOUSE

By Regina Cook

The second Territorial generation of the Taos County Courthouse, along with most of the buildings on the north side of the plaza, burned nearly to the ground on May 9, 1932. The several fires that destroyed Taos Plaza in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were most likely due to a combination of the Americanization of the plaza, which covered the historic adobe structures with wood façades, along with the introduction of less-than-ideally designed and installed electrical systems. Between 1912–1918 the east side of the plaza burned. The Columbia Hotel, predecessor to the La Fonda Hotel we see today on the south side of the plaza, burned in 1928. The west side of the plaza burned down in 1931. The courthouse and north side burning down in 1932 was the final blow. Thankfully, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the residents had moved away from the plaza, so, while businesses sustained major losses, loss of life was minimized. Because of these fires, most buildings on the plaza had been replaced, so much of the “truly historic” ambience of our past was lost. Original 30-inch adobe walls from the old plaza buildings still exist, embedded in walls on the outer edges of the area,

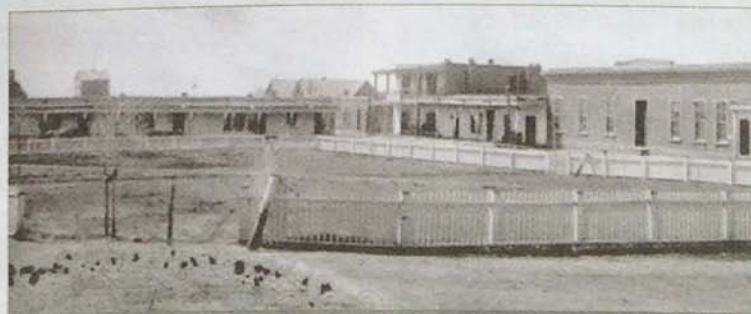
offering our only tangible glimpses into the plaza that once was.

When the second iteration of the courthouse burned in 1932, it was decided to rebuild the courthouse in its same location but with a greatly expanded footprint to allow more of the county's services to be accessible in one place. Along with the rest of the buildings that were replaced on the plaza, the new building would be built in the new Spanish Pueblo Revival style that John Gaw Meem and others were utilizing to “modernize” Albuquerque and Santa Fe. Louis Hesselden, an Albuquerque architect, was called in to design the new structure. Hesselden was the son of a renowned Albuquerque designer and mason and would ultimately become one of Albuquerque's most prolific architects, designing the famous Nob Hill Business Center—the first automobile shopping center in the world—as well as the Excelsior Laundry Building, College of St. Joseph Campus (University of Albuquerque), St.

Paul's Lutheran Church, First Methodist Church, Albuquerque Country Club, some of the structures of the New Mexico State Fair, countless residences and, eventually, the Bernalillo County Courthouse and Hall of Justice that would replace the one his own



Taos Plaza 1880



Taos Plaza 1902

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14



father had built. He was a vanguard of the new architecture of the time and perfectly suited for designing a municipal facility. His characteristic design style was noted to have several common characteristics: the use of cementitious stucco, brick and cast stone as decorative detailing (evoking Spanish Colonial Revival and Territorial Revival styles) and details influenced by Mediterranean and California Mission Revival styles. This helps to explain the interesting mission detailing at the Taos County Courthouse.

The 1932 courthouse was built with partial funding from the Public Works Administration and partly financed by a loan from a local bank. Construction was started in 1932 by contractor L. H. Bovos. The courthouse was completed and inhabited by January 1934. The facility included offices for county staff, including the sheriff, county clerk and assessor, commissioner, treasurer, two vaults and jail on the first floor, and the agriculture agent, superintendent of schools, district judge, justice of the peace, district attorney and the court and jury rooms on the second floor. The move into the courthouse was facilitated by "trucks, vans, lorries and wagons," according to a report by 23-year veteran *Taos News* arts editor Regina Tatum Cooke, who crafted a wood-block print of the move-in for the front page of the paper on the day the facility opened.

The character-defining features of the historic Taos County Courthouse remain intact:

- Its location on Taos Plaza, serving as a courthouse square, which reflects the enduring Spanish influence of town planning;
- The two-story flat-roofed, stuccoed adobe building with its curvilinear parapet, exposed vigas and punched windows, characteristic of Spanish Pueblo Revival style;
- Original windows in some places;
- The portal extends across the entire south façade and is detailed with exposed round vigas and wood decking, 10-inch-by-10-inch wood support beams, 12-inch-diameter round posts and carved-wood corbels. The portal originally terminated on the east and west ends with massive stucco rooms that led to open alleyways on the east and west sides of the building but is otherwise intact;
- The original central hallway plan with the primary entrance centered on the south façade;
- The interior, with simple, unadorned finishes in all rooms but the main stair, which features geometric railings typical of the period, and the courtroom, now known as the Mural Room, features 10 original WPA-era murals by four of the members of Taos' famous Society of Artists.

The building was not perfect in its original design, and some modifications were required to address issues in the original construction. We know that part of the back wall was built of adobe, but it was located in-grade, meaning that the elevation of the ground at the north side of the building is nearly a story above that at the south. The original walls at this location needed to be reinforced with concrete to address issues from retaining this massive wall of earth. Structural loading on the floors of the courthouse and the rest of the second floor led to issues of sound transmission to the floors below. Carpet and dropped ceilings were added to attempt to dampen the sound. These approaches were not entirely successful and will likely need to be addressed in the future.

## *The character-defining features of the historic courthouse remain intact*

The only major changes to the exterior of the building over its 80-plus years of existence are the infill of the east and west alleys on either side of the main structure and the removal and replacement of the massive adobe "bookends" on the portal, both of which appear to have been done within a few years of the original construction. The replacement of the double-hung windows with single-pane fixed windows and the replacement of the original wooden entrance door, transom and sidelights are somewhat major changes to the character of the building that might need to be reconsidered. Other changes have shifted uses of spaces and wall locations on the interior but, for the most part, are benign and easy to work around in a revised use plan.



Taos County Courthouse, 2010

After the building was vacated by Taos County government in 1970, minimal funds and maintenance were provided by the county. Reports of roof leaks, damaged adobe, ruined plaster, cracking and chipping of the ceilings and walls and damage from break-ins became more common, until the facility was finally stabilized and the roof repaired in the 1990s. Those repairs are more than 20 years old now and, because of a lack of maintenance funding, many of these issues need to be readdressed.



South façade of courthouse, Dec. 1941

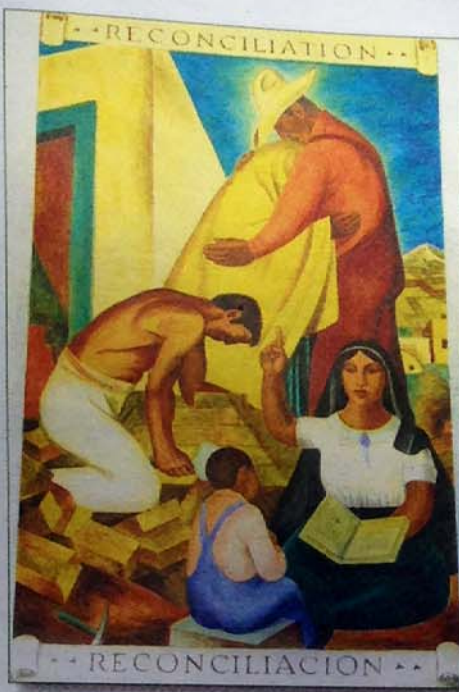
In 2010, the town of Taos received a \$125,000 federal grant through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to upgrade the mechanical systems in the building. The funds were used to design and install a modern gas-fired, hot-water, radiant-heating system to replace the aging and failing steam boiler and radiator system. So, while the building remains largely empty, it has "good bones."

Most of the building's current issues revolve around its underutilization; addressing deferred maintenance—which threatens the portal, roof and adobe walls; and addressing the less-than-ideally detailed infills at the east and west alley additions, which have caused structural damage and eliminated access to natural light and ventilation. Other major factors in restoring the courthouse to full use include the building's current state, which does not meet code for fire protection, egress, or restroom facilities, and it does not provide equal access under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). To achieve these ends, a sprinkler system must be installed, fire-protecting materials should be added at the corridors, restrooms should be added, and a handicapped-accessible lift or elevator should be installed to allow visitors of every ability to visit the historic mural room.

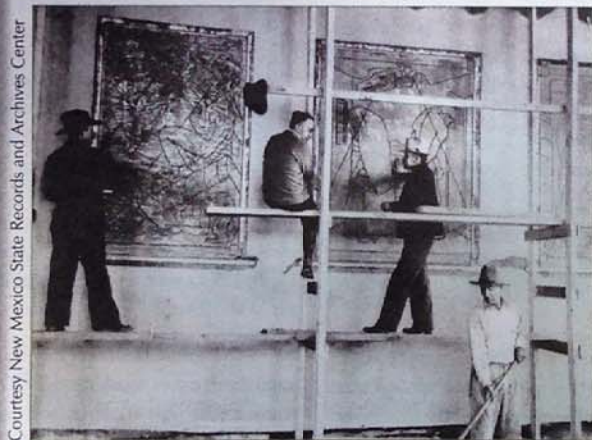
At recent public meetings to generate interest in the project, it was shared that the approximate cost of addressing all of these issues and getting the building completely ready for its next iteration will be around \$2.5 million. A first phase of updating the interior first-floor spaces, providing an elevator and adding restrooms, has been estimated at a little over \$800,000. The remainder of the upgrades and repairs has been estimated at approximately \$1.5 million. The county, town and interested organizations are currently enlisting public support for the project, as well as looking into ways of creatively and collaboratively funding the restoration of this important piece of Taos' history. Future public meetings and design charrettes will explore the potential uses of the space.

David Henry notes that "The Historic Taos County Courthouse served its constituents well for the 35+ years of its public life. Unfortunately, as Taos County grew (and continues to grow) the staff, agencies and the public needed more space and more parking. The decision to relocate the courthouse off of the plaza in +/-1970 had far-reaching and unforeseen ramifications. Once the public functions were taken out of the historic building, daily life on the historic Taos Plaza was changed forever. Citizens no longer linger in the shade of the plaza portal after they have filed their marriage license or paid their property taxes. Now these activities take place in a much larger facility with modern paved parking, air-conditioned hallways, and pass-code-way the historic plaza structure was used back in the day will never be reproduced at the modern park-like setting of the historic plaza and the ability to undertake civic activities, social hour, and lunch with friends, all within the walkable and comfortable confines of the plaza."

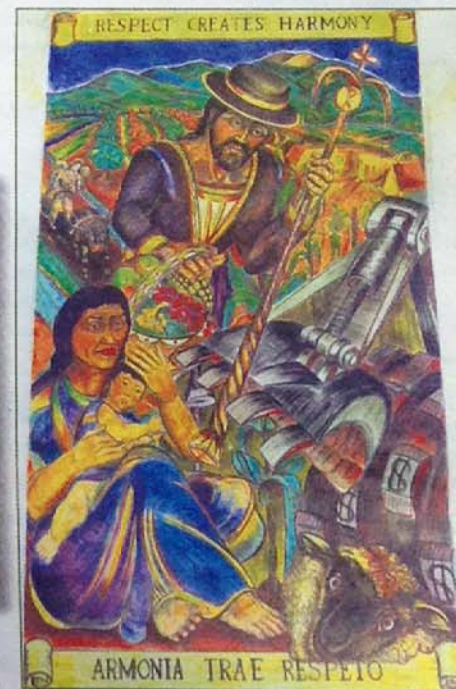




Top (l-r): Emil Bisttram's *Reconciliation/Reconciliación*, Bert Phillips' *The Shadow of Crime/La Sombra del Crimen*, Ward Lockwood's *Sufficient Law Protects/Ley Suficiente Protege*; Center: Ward Lockwood's *Justice Begets Content/Justicia Causa Felicidad*, Frederico Vigil's *Respect Creates Harmony/Armonia Trae Respeto*; Bottom: Victor Higgins's *Moses the Law Giver/Moises El Legislador*



Above: Taos Court House frescoes under construction. L-R: Ward Lockwood with his *Superfluous Laws Oppress*; Public Works of Art Project regional coordinator Gustave Baumann; Bert Phillips with his *The Shadow of Crime*; and assistant Amarante Maes. 1934.



## TAOS COUNTY COURTHOUSE MURALS

When the new Taos County Courthouse was completed in January 1934, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Public Works of Art Project commissioned four of Taos's premier artists to paint 10 murals in the facility. The project was managed by Santa Fe artist Gustave Baumann. The four artists engaged in the effort were Emil Bisttram, Ward Lockwood, Bert Phillips and Victor Higgins. They became known as the "Taos Fresco Quartet." An 11<sup>th</sup> mural was completed in 1994 by renowned New Mexican fresco artist Frederico Vigil following his conservation of the original murals. ☒