



ON HER OWN TERMS

**At the Santa Clara pueblo in northern New Mexico,
Rina Swentzell surveys historic preservation from
an ancient point of view. BY JANE BROWN GILLETTE**

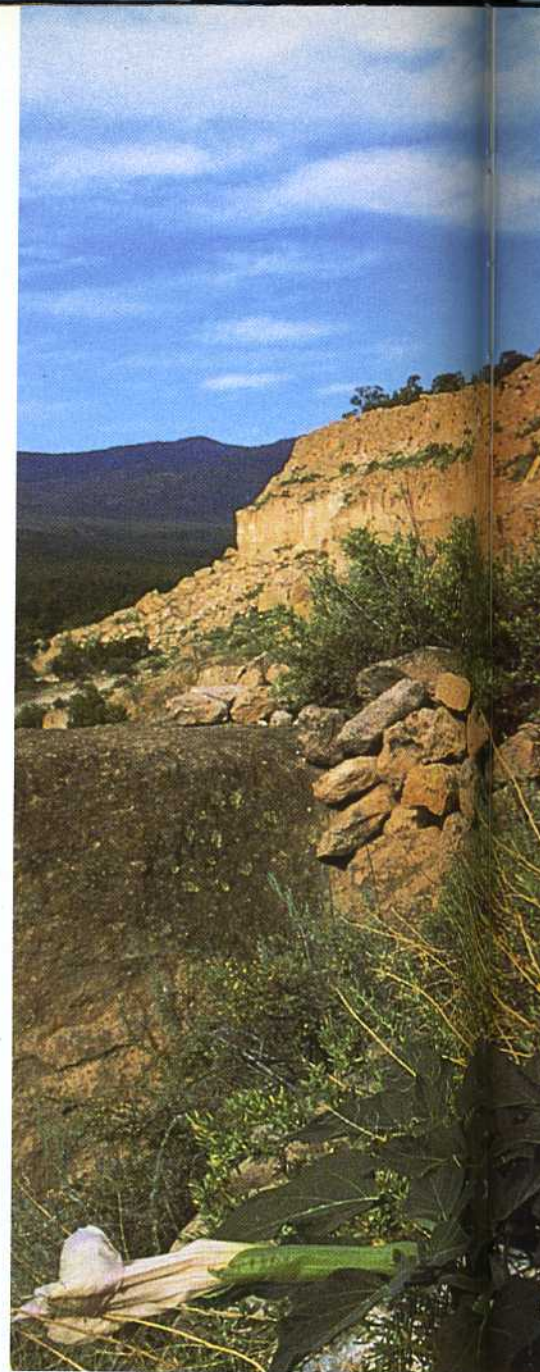
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT WARREN



“I feel so sorry for those places that are set up as exhibit places—those house museums,” says Rina Swentzell. “It’s like keeping people on machines—keeping them alive artificially for a longer time than they should be kept alive. Places should be allowed to die.” When you hear Swentzell, a National Trust advisor, say such a thing, it is difficult to believe that she is a preservationist. A small, soft-voiced woman, alternately impish and serene, Rina Swentzell sounds like an iconoclast. She is that—and a preservationist, too. Swentzell possesses a vision of historic preservation that is at once her own and representative of that of other Native Americans, for it is inextricably linked to Pueblo architecture, Pueblo belief systems, and Pueblo history. At a time when preservationists are concerned with incorporating ethnic diversity into mainstream historic preservation, Swentzell lends an eloquent voice to a different notion of preservation—a voice in which conventional preservationists may nevertheless hear the echoes of their own doubts and of their yearnings for a wider purview.

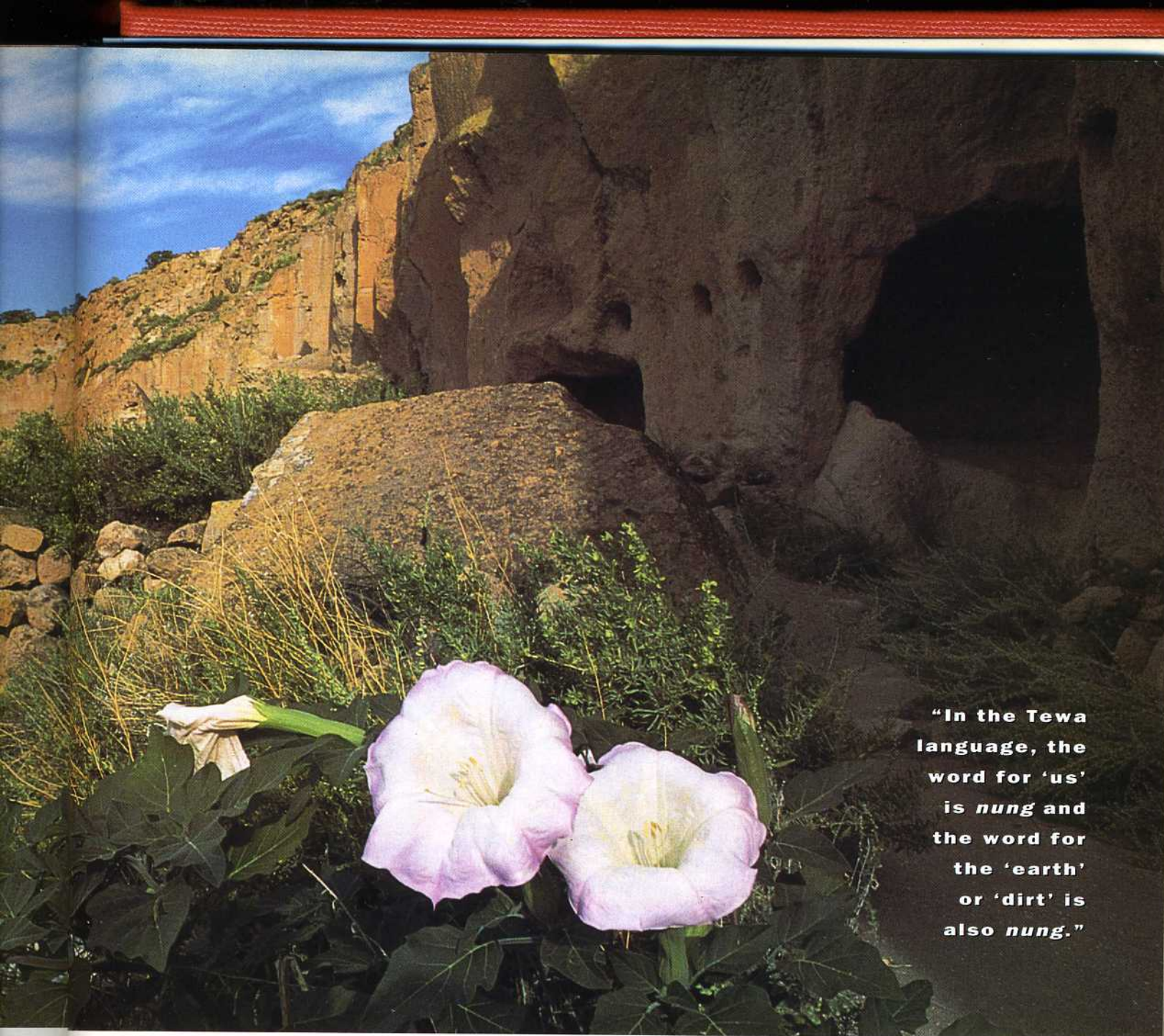
After graduating from New Mexico Highlands University in 1962, Swentzell taught elementary school in several of the pueblo communities that stretch along the Rio Grande River north of Santa Fe, New Mexico. The nineteen Pueblo communities in New Mexico share a belief system, but are differentiated by language and social and political organization; Tewa is the language shared by six of the northern Rio Grande pueblos, including Santa Clara, where Swentzell grew up and where many members of her family still live. The advent of HUD housing (subsidized by the Department of Housing and Urban Development) and the havoc that it wreaked in the communities inspired Swentzell to go back to school to study architecture. After receiving a master’s degree in architecture from the University of New Mexico in 1976, she went on to earn a doctorate in American Studies in 1982. Swentzell is involved in all aspects of Native American culture, not just architecture, and she serves, or has served, as a consultant to virtually every museum, institution, and program in the United States dealing with Native American culture. Teacher, potter, architect, writer, speaker, Swentzell ties together

The ruins of thirteenth-century Puyé, right, ten miles from Santa Clara, show adjoining rooms facing a plaza, below, as well as reconstructed talus housing, left, built out from caves in the cliffs.



her multiple careers and innumerable activities through her continuing attempt to “understand our philosophy, the Pueblo belief system. It’s not systematic. We don’t have a written language. We don’t have books. We don’t have texts or classes. It is not explicit. This generation, for the first time ever, is making it explicit.” It is, Swentzell acknowledges, “an incredible leap.”

In the last twenty-five years—concurrent with a general reawakening of interest in Native American spirituality—Native American intellectuals have stood back from their social and belief systems and analyzed them. The movement from belief to the intellectual analysis of belief



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systems follows a familiar pattern in the modern age—sometimes Rina Swentzell resembles no one so much as turn-of-the-century Bostonian Henry Adams—but familiarity makes the situation no less painful. To be on the edge—half in, half out of the unconscious beliefs of your forefathers—is an illuminating, but not necessarily a comfortable, place to be. And the emotional struggles that accompany this shift sometimes make for a certain inconsistency. Swentzell's articulate praise of unconsciousness and her up-to-date recording of the decay of tradition may seem contradictory. Yet she is, like many transitional thinkers before her, a person who thrives on the connective resonance

of metaphor; the patterns that governed unconscious belief still permeate conscious analysis and add a poetic lilt to even the driest discussion.

Consider Swentzell's iconoclastic opinions about house museums in the context of an essay she wrote for *Native Peoples*, "Remembering Tewa Pueblo Houses and Spaces." As a child living in the Santa Clara pueblo, she passed an old house on her way to school. "One day," she writes, "I noticed a crack. . . . I asked my great-grandmother why the people who lived in that house were doing nothing about fixing the crack. She shook her finger at me and said that it was not my business to be concerned about whether the house fell

down or not: 'It has been a good house; it has been taken care of, fed, blessed, and healed many times during its life, and now it is time for it to go back into the earth.' Shortly afterward, the house collapsed and, in appropriate time, the same materials were reused to build a new structure in the same place. It was not always easy to tell if walls were going up or falling apart."

Thus were traditional houses treated like human beings. Like Pueblo Indians, they were blessed at birth; Swentzell writes, "Before the actual construction of a house, offerings were placed at its four corners. Later, during the house building, prayers would be said, and more offerings were placed within the walls and ceiling

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beams to bless and protect the completed whole. Thereafter, the structure was blessed and fed cornmeal during specific ceremonies.” Houses could also suffer illnesses, which, like those of their inhabitants, were cured by healing rituals performed by the medicine men. And traditional houses were allowed to die.

It is significant that the word “pueblo” can indicate the building, the village, the community or tribe, and—capitalized—the race. For this terminology we can give credit to the invading Spaniards’ fascination with buildings that were rumored to be made of gold but that they found, to their disappointment, were made of

adobe, mud mixed with glittering straw. In Tewa philosophy the metaphorical basis for the unity of house and human being is this disappointing mud from which pueblos are still primarily constructed—in bricks now made from forms. According to Pueblo origin myths, human beings—like houses—are made of mud, of the earth from which they emerge. Writes Swentzell, “In the Tewa language, the word for ‘us’ is *nung* and the word for the ‘earth’ or ‘dirt’ is also *nung*.” This homonymy signals a more encompassing Pueblo belief: Human beings are not separate from nature, as in the Judeo-Christian world where they have “fallen” from paradise; neither do they aspire to a spiritual

assumption into a heaven in the sky; rather, people are part of nature, all the forms of which emerged from the *nansipu*, or earth navel. The corn mothers, the highest deities of the Tewa world, still live in the earth beneath the sacred lake to which humans may return after death. Traditional multistory pueblos are said to echo the shapes of the clouds and the sacred mountains and hills in their terraced forms, but if so, they are clouds, mountains, and hills that hug the ground. Like the belief system of the people, the pueblo is ultimately oriented to the earth, not the sky.

When you visit the pueblo villages today, it still is not easy to tell if walls are “going up or falling apart.” The Pueblo do



know that people have lived in the northern Rio Grande rift for 11,000 years; from around 300 to 400 A.D. the northern Rio Grande Pueblo people, also called Anasazi, built houses, grew crops, and made pottery (the essential Pueblo traits). Anasazi groups from farther west (including, in all likelihood, such sites as Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde) moved into the Rio Grande valley within the last 700 to 800 years. The later, prehistoric Rio Grande people built planned communities with shared walls, kivas, and plazas.

Since contact with the Spaniards in the early sixteenth century, the Pueblo have been considered among the most settled of Native Americans—in part because of Spanish domination and the loss of their land—but their earlier history, especially the centuries between 1100 and 1300 A.D., was one of constant motion. During those two centuries many sites were inhabited for only twelve to twenty-five years before they were abandoned. For example, sometime around 1200 A.D., shortly after they began to live in the cliffs and mesa dwellings of Puyé, ten miles west of Santa Clara, groups of people began to descend to the present river site. Later, other groups arrived at Puyé, which was not completely abandoned until around 1580.

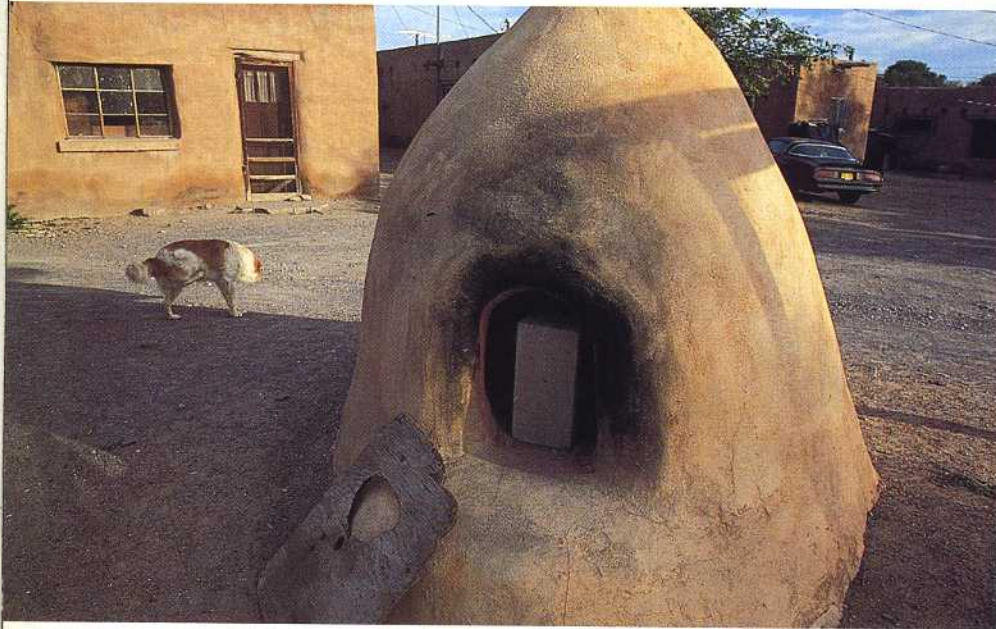
It is not surprising, then, that in Pueblo origin myths, once human beings emerge,

they begin to travel from place to place, even doubling back on themselves and never moving for any one particular reason. What is surprising are the architectural forms that the Pueblo have preserved in these as yet uncharted wanderings around northern New Mexico, eastern Arizona, and southern Colorado. In the origin myth, the stress of constant movement is counterbalanced to some degree by the nature of the world through which people move. The cosmos into which humans and animals emerged was conceived by the Pueblo to be formed like a clay pot covered by a basket, a soothing image of containment created, and recreated over and over again, in the architectural forms of the Pueblo villages. Pueblo rooms have low ceilings and no sharp corners; even after the addition of larger Western-style windows and door openings, the rooms are soothingly dark in the southwestern glare. They are warm in winter, cool in summer, and convey the security of enclosed, shared space. Swentzell writes: “The interconnectedness of the house structures creates a unity of the physical community form. It is one monolithic house that grows out of the earth itself.” The Pueblo cosmos also assumes visible form in the kiva, the place of worship—sometimes round, sometimes square—which is entered by climb-

not share the mainstream preservationist’s concern for the material fabric; it is, after all, part of themselves. As Swentzell writes, “Building for permanence was not a priority” in the pueblos. Yet even when the adobe is covered with concrete or intermingled with cinder-block and frame-and-stucco construction, the walls look old—indeed, far older than they are. Some may be 200, others only two or three, years old, but the sites on which they stand are the oldest continuously inhabited places in North America. In the words of archaeologist Stewart Peckham, “The Tewa world was a recognizable entity as early as A.D. 1325 and may be traceable back even further.” Archaeologists



At the thirteenth-century village of Tyuonyi in Bandelier National Monument, a cave in the cliff looks down on the adjoining rooms around a plaza, above left; a reconstructed kiva at Bandelier, above, provides tourists with a symbolic model of the Pueblo spiritual cosmos.

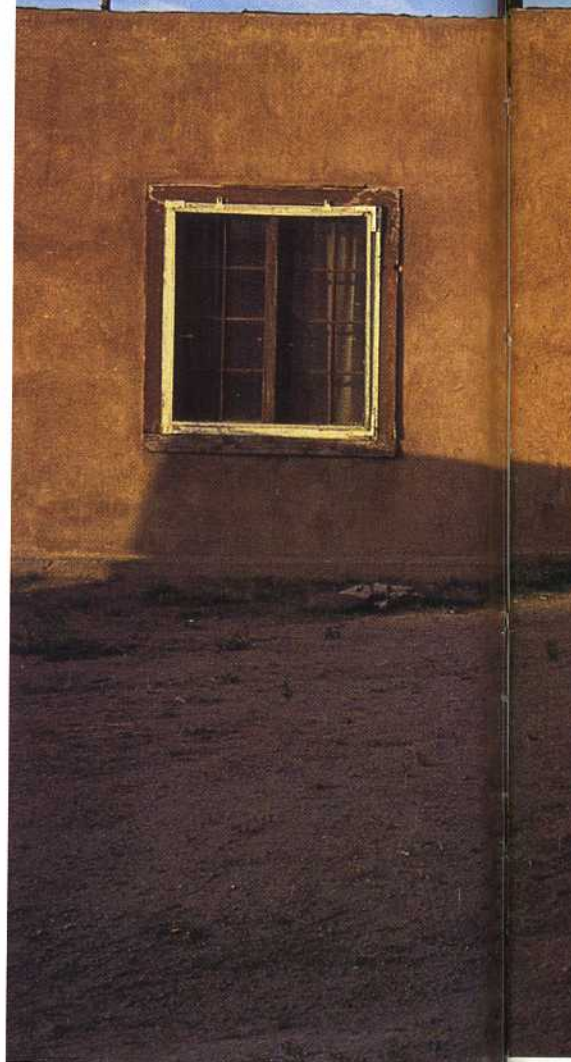


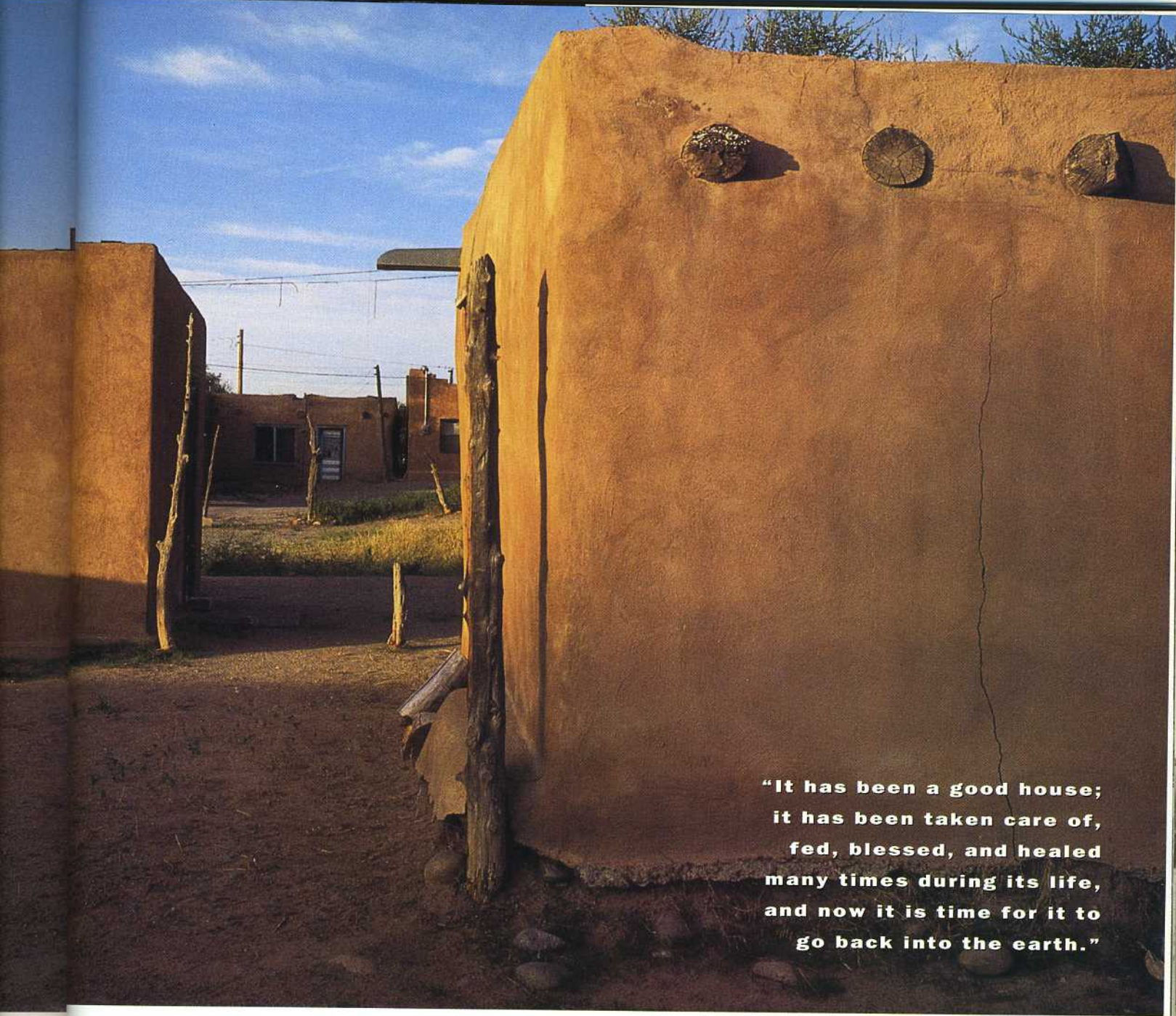
ing down a ladder. The kiva features a hole in the floor, an emergence shrine that symbolizes the *nansipu*. Most important, the containment is expressed in the exterior space, the plaza. This space—created by the joining together of the rooms and houses—is oriented so that it lies in the center of the sacred mountains and the hills of the Pueblo cosmos, and it, too, contains a *nansipu*.

In “Healing Spaces in the Tewa Pueblo World,” an essay Swentzell wrote with her brother Tito Naranjo for the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, she emphasizes the importance of the *nansipu*: “It is where the people emerged from the underworld; it is the symbolic point through which contact with the corn mothers who remain under the lake can be made. It is also the place in the physical environment

In spite of HUD housing, below left, the traditional dwellings of the Santa Clara pueblo, right, survive. The horno oven, above, was a Spanish import. The design elements—if not the spirit—of Pueblo architecture have become pervasive, as in the Santa Fe gas station and convenience store, below right.

[that] shows the Pueblo preference for the feminine principles of connectedness, inclusiveness, and flowingness. The *nansipu* is the symbolic opening of mother earth.” In the plaza the *nansipu* is marked by an inconspicuous stone or group of stones; “as architectural statements they are practically nonexistent,” writes Swentzell. Because human beings and nature are unified, she adds, the sacred point does not require the degree of statement that a Western religious site would demand.





**“It has been a good house;
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At the same time, it is in the plaza, at this point of connection, that the Pueblo perform the dances that they believe establish the ritual unity of the cosmos. Certainly, in an environment as harsh as the American Southwest, to a people who have been pursued by drought and famine for thousands of years, the unity of human beings and nature must be a matter of wishful thinking rather than an established fact—a matter that requires keen attention. Although not separate from nature, like fallen humanity in Western belief, the community nevertheless must work for “a state of harmony between the human and natural environments” in their

ceremonies. To Swentzell the dances also perform the metaphysical task of unifying dichotomies: She writes, “The Pueblo people recognize that they live in a world of polarities—life and death, man and woman, weak and strong, black and white, and winter and summer—which create unity.” It is in the symbolic center, at the point of emergence, the plaza, that polarities are united—like pot and basket.

Non-Indians are banned from kivas in the pueblos, but can see the reconstructed versions, as well as the plazas and the foundations of connected rooms, at such nearby archaeological sites as the village of Tyuonyi in Bandelier National Monu-

ment or Puyé on the Santa Clara reservation. These sites, which date from 1100 to 1300 A.D., have both talus houses—rooms built out from caves in the cliffs—and blocks of adjoining rooms facing a plaza. Both sorts of dwellings were made from blocks of tufa stone, not adobe. The two sites may also offer a telling example of the differing visions of preservation. On the one hand, the National Park Service, which manages Bandelier, has provided handrails, steps, interpretive literature, and many warnings to the tourist not to stand on, climb over, or otherwise disturb the ruins, which might be destroyed by the onslaught of *(Continued on Page 84)*

THE TRAVELER

(Continued from Page 19) basis until 1923, when it found a permanent owner in the State of Michigan.

Today Fort Wilkins offers a historic view of a frontier fort, its detailing courtesy of the military's penchant for documentation. Along with the horseshoe-shaped garrison, park manager Don Plescher points out the latest addition to the complex, a blacksmith shop currently being rebuilt on the foundations of the original. Huge timbers have been raised and are waiting for chinking. Most of the other structures are original, restored by Works Progress Administration crews in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The exhibits of garrison life present a drab picture of life along the frontier; included are items considered required equipment for making it

through the brutal Keeweenaw winters: snowshoes, ice skates, and liquor bottles.

On the way back to Calumet, all that denotes the virtual ghost town of Mandan is a single rough-hewn sign at the side of Highway 41. In its heyday Mandan was home to a school, a syrup factory, and some twenty to thirty small miners' homes. Only three remain, one of which the Keeweenaw Historical Society is trying to save from the ravages of winter and neglect. It's a simple vernacular frame house, a two-story dwelling now hemmed in by the forest.

The Keeweenaw Historical Society would like to turn this little house into a museum of Mandan history. "You hear a lot about the mining industry, but not much about the miner," laments Richard Dana, president of the society. "Well, this is where he lived."

Dana knows it is no Smithsonian, but

he also is keenly aware of its importance. All across Copper Country there were scores of Mandans, tiny towns the skeletons of which now lie sleeping beneath the forest. Had it not been for mining, Dana says, this area might still be relatively unsettled. Here, in a place where the past has only recently been seen as something to save, he and other preservationists are trying to hold the line on the loss of history. "You just don't let history go because you don't have all the resources," Dana says. "We are the appointed guardians of whatever we can get our hands on of whatever is left. In a place like this, you have to practice the preservation of possibility."

And in just such a place, the traveler must do a little digging of his own to ferret out the history that sleeps beneath the trees. But on the Keeweenaw Peninsula such mining still pays healthy dividends. ▼

ON HER OWN TERMS

(Continued from Page 33) attention. Puyé, on the other hand, is run by the Santa Clarans. Aside from the aid offered by a paved entrance walk, tourists are left pretty much to their own devices, to interpret willy-nilly and to climb, walk on, fall off of, and no doubt wear down and—eventually—destroy the material remains of Puyé. Until that happens, however, the tourists are free to experience the joy and vision, as well as the sense of security, that cliff dwelling afforded.

Although English has replaced Spanish as a second language and there are fears about sustaining Tewa in the next generation, modern-day Santa Clara has managed to keep its language alive—perhaps the *sine qua non* of cultural preservation. The building forms that shaped the Tewa world are, however, disappearing fast. The Santa Clara pueblo today is surrounded by HUD-financed, standardized Western housing placed on a grid. And the traditional houses have changed along with customs; since food is purchased at the store, there is no need for the ramadas where food was dried, the second-story terraces where it was prepared, and the interior rooms where it was stored. Gables have replaced flat roofs. Western doors and windows, metal chimneys, and drainpipes are ubiquitous. There is no livestock, hence no need for the corals, which have been allowed to collapse. The *hornos* beehive ovens that the Indians borrowed from the Spanish are still used to bake bread, and the kivas are still

there. But many of the adjoined houses have separated into units, and instead of one unified plaza there are now four.

This last development is the outcome of a continuing late-nineteenth-century quarrel between conservatives and progressives at Santa Clara that in the old days before contact with the West would probably have inspired a migration and the creation of a new pueblo. With no place to go, Santa Clara in essence fragmented. If this is a tragedy, it is also history, and the effects of history on the pueblo architecture and space have been documented by Swentzell in her master's thesis, "An Architectural History of Santa Clara Pueblo." If Swentzell does not sound like a conventional preservationist it is to some degree because she is a historian, and if she is not happy with the events that have transformed the Santa Clara pueblo, she intelligently celebrates the movement of time that has effected such change and hopes that it will in turn bring changes that will save the culture.

"The kind of thinking that I'm about in trying to figure out culture and society and change and all that is a very non-Pueblo thing," says Swentzell in an article in *El Palacio*, "The Butterfly Effect": "I am a different person than my mother, than my grandmother, than her mother was before her. Sometimes I have to stop and shake my head and ask, 'What's going on here? What's happening?' But it seems that . . . one of the primary things about that world is change. That's why the emphasis on *po-wa-ha*. Flow, continual flow, continual change, continual transformation. Transformation is a very positive part of life, but

it has to be transformation in terms of continuing." *Po-wa-ha* literally means water-wind-breath. "It is that energy that flows from everybody, everything. . . . To breathe that *po-wa-ha* makes you the most of who you are." To link yourself to the energy, "to have that kind of alignment, to have that kind of connection, is basically what the Pueblo world is about."

In *The Tewa World: Space, Time, Being, and Becoming in a Pueblo Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1969), Alfonso Ortiz brilliantly documents and explains the Pueblo preference for the dual organization of religious and social systems. Chief among these dualities is the complementary social division of the tribe into the winter and summer moieties, which originally reflected the seasonal differences in making a living: hunting and agriculture. Now the old ways are gone, disrupted by the modern world, but in listening to Swentzell you can understand how dualities still serve a useful purpose as an intellectual tool, allowing the Pueblo—as Ortiz explains—both to emphasize contrast and to permit inclusion and resolution.

Swentzell's favorite duality is female/male. If the Pueblo world, for Swentzell, is feminine, unconscious, inclusive, relative, and active, the Western world is male, conscious, exclusive, absolute, and static. And to Swentzell, an important energy that has been disregarded in the Western world is feminine in its characteristics. She explains: "I think that women understand really deep that sense of connectedness, acceptance, that men have traditionally had difficulty with and that institutions destroy. The only source of power is where

people ignore it, in that unconscious level that I think is crucial. Our consciousness is not going to save us. . . . But underneath it all are these qualities that all human beings have, the unconscious qualities. I think the power is there. We are always looking for the balance."

Swentzell emphasizes the symbolic nature of this dualism. "The Pueblo culture is a very feminine culture. I really want to say that it's possible to structure a way of living, building, everything, that considers feminine qualities. Not that women are better. These are qualities that everyone has access to: cooperation, connectedness to everyone else, inclusiveness, relativity—there's no absolute, everything is relative, and has to be understood in context—and the use of intuition, that I can feel things I don't have to say." Swentzell points out that the emergence myth, the corn mothers, the pot-and-basket vision of the cosmos, all are feminine in this sense. So, too, are the traditional building practices of the Pueblo.

"In the whole Western world the creation of shelter is a male activity," she says. "If we think about the Pueblo world, in their process of building everybody participates, old people, women, children, everybody used to participate. In the maintenance everybody participated. Look at the materials. Mud. Any child can put the mud up. Anybody can do it. It's organic. It can grow. Part of it can fall off, and you can put it up again. The mud comes out of the earth herself, but also the forms: We get rounded corners and nonstructured space." Above all, the pueblo emphasizes interconnectedness: "What you've got in a pueblo is a whole community of interconnected houses around community space so that you have a real community."

In Swentzell's scheme of things, Westernized housing is, by contrast, male in its characteristics. Western houses are not treated as if they were people; they are not born and blessed, but constructed primarily by males who specialize in separate parts of the process—plumbers, bricklayers, and so forth. The forms of Westernized housing are linear and promote the standardization of materials—for example two-by-fours. Says Swentzell, "We use wood, but it is round in the vigas. Treated by men, wood is milled and made rectangular and efficient to use, standardized." Codes and regulations, in turn, assure standardization, and such rules require institutions to maintain them. Soon, only specialists can build houses, and they only know how to build them one way.

In Western houses—and increasingly in

traditional houses that come under Western influences—areas that were once multipurpose become segregated by activity: sleeping, eating, living. They cater to individuals who need privacy. Above all, Western housing in the form of the single-family home isolates one set of individuals from the rest of the community.

Whether she is talking about housing or energy, Swentzell uses the female/male duality symbolically, but there is a certain sociological basis beneath her metaphorical thinking: "The women in these communities are really strong because they still are part of the home, and the home has really never disintegrated in the communities. It is still a vital center of activity. The mother, the grandmother, the great aunt, all of these people are still milling around their places, making their pots, watching the kids. They are in context. Meanwhile the men have really been uprooted from the fields, from the mountains, from that whole thing that gave them meaning thirty years ago." Now they go into Los Alamos or Santa Fe and work at low-paying jobs connected with atomic energy or tourism, two specific creations of the Western world.

Santa Clara, Swentzell points out, has a historic preservation group—which is about to change its name and venue to cultural preservation. "It comes from the desire by tribal people to begin to deal with their sense of loss," explains Swentzell. "The first and easiest impulse is to get money from a formal program. Somebody gives you money and says, 'Why don't you think about what you want to do?' and you say 'Oh sure.'" In this case Santa Clara's funding came from the National Park Service. "It's been a very interesting struggle because it's really having to think about what do we mean by saving the old, what does that mean? And it's very obviously not about saving buildings. But more: 'That song is getting lost. Or they used to do this activity, and they don't do it anymore. Who remembers it in this community? Let's find who remembers this and at least get it recorded. Who knows about it?' The program is much more concerned about the activity than about the specific object." Santa Clarans, like many Native Americans, find conventional historic preservation too visually focused and too object-oriented; better to celebrate the activity, to get in touch with the *po-wa-ha*. (This widespread, although far from universal, trend has been admirably documented by Patricia L. Parker of the National Park Service in *Keepers of the Treasures: Protecting Historic Properties*

and Cultural Traditions on Indian Lands, published by the United States Department of the Interior in 1990.)

From the viewpoint of cultural preservation, the built environment of the Santa Clara pueblo is not in such dire straits as it seems, for everybody still knows how to build traditional dwellings. The knowledge of house building still survives—Swentzell, her mother, her daughter, her brothers, and sisters have built versions of the traditional house—but the people have to want to build them. And Santa Clara is in many ways no longer a traditional society that enjoys living in traditional houses.

Not everyone in the community agrees with Swentzell about the undesirability of HUD housing. "Please be assured," laughs Swentzell, "not everyone agrees." Unlike many highly opinionated personalities, Swentzell alludes to the relativity that she sees as a fundamental part of Pueblo thought: "How do I know I'm right! What is the best? How do I know the best? I don't know," she laughs. This demurral to the majority opinion is the "way you're supposed to act. If most of the group agrees to do it, then you all have to do it. I think that one of the really incredible philosophical notions that the Pueblo have that the rest of the world has forgotten is that we are all interconnected. What affects you affects me."

In fact it would seem that the majority of Santa Clarans are, if not pleased, accepting. They have not yet been galvanized into opposition against HUD or into a renewal of traditional building. They may, however, be waiting for a sign. There is, Swentzell emphasizes, "a typical Pueblo way of doing things." She recounts how, several years ago, the Santa Clarans began to have ceremonies for the public up on the mesa at Puyé and invited vendors to come sell souvenirs to the tourists. "A number of people felt very uncomfortable about it, and everybody was saying, 'If it's not right, something will happen.' And so it went on for a few years. Sure enough, one day while they were having the ceremonies up there, out of a clear blue sky a cloud comes over. Lightning strikes and kills two people. And that was the end of that. And then everybody kind of sat back in relief and said, 'Ah, this is the way it's supposed to be.'

"If it's not supposed to be, something will happen. We don't have the power to do it, but the energies that we're a part of have the power to do it. It will happen."

Perhaps they are only waiting for a sign. ▼