

Nat Kaplan: A Designer/Builder in Harmony with Nature

Los Ranchos Historical Society

Workmanship is so much nicer when it's done with hands and if it's done with loving hands, it goes back into the building." These words were the philosophy of designer, artist and well respected and beloved builder Nat Kaplan. The unique adobe homes he built in Los Ranchos and the Southwest never fought with or tried to conquer nature, but rather co-existed, arose from, and reflected the beauty of the southwestern landscape.

Nat P. Kaplan was born in New York City in 1912. Before moving to New Mexico, Nat was a graduate student at Oklahoma A&M in Stillwater, Oklahoma and had worked as a civil engineer. During the depression, he came to Northern New Mexico to help a friend run what is now the Philmont Boys Camp where he fell in love with the Rocky Mountains and "found Taos too beautiful to leave."

"I'd rather starve in Taos than be wealthy in Oklahoma," he said. Nat, a watercolorist and skilled woodcarver, found kindred spirits in the Taos artists.

During the depression, when jobs were scarce, Nat taught in Gallup for the WPA projects. He taught furniture making, watercolor art, and worked on projects to drain and divert water to prevent the washing out of foundations on the Navajo Reservation. He also worked as a surveyor and was handy with tools, which helped to make ends meet. Nat was inspired by the Native adobes in the Southwest and the by the WPA adobe buildings built for the National Park Service in New Mexico.

In the mid to late 1940s, after a 3-year stint in the army, Nat, Mildred, and their daughter Susan moved to Los Ranchos where they lived in a trailer while he built their house. He loved combining mud, wood, and tile to create a living space "that lifts the spirits." Nat fell in love with New Mexican architecture, which he viewed as "soft and living, and it makes you want to touch it," he said.

Susan Kaplan Lentz said her father Nat felt the adobes he built "should seem as though they are almost a part of nature, part



Clockwise, from upper left: rounded adobe tower in the Village allows sunlight to penetrate; Nat Kaplan; wooden gate with spindles and corbel; Dark adobe with rounded curves in northern New Mexico

of the land, like it belonged there. It should match the color of the dirt. The wood should kind of sympathize with the trees and the wood around it. It should take advantage of the angles of the sun and how the light and shadow fall on the walls. It shouldn't show off and it shouldn't fight with the neighbors," Susan said.

Nat often wondered why you would build a Cape Cod house in the desert and, conversely, why build an adobe in Cape Cod or Pennsylvania if it doesn't match the environment? "Father was very sensitive to the environment. He hand-dug the roots of old Cottonwood trees to be sure the foundation for the houses he built did not harm the trees."

Nat carved wooden doors, corbels, spice racks and shelves, and collaborated with a local potter to create lights from her pottery. Before he built a house, he observed the light and shadows which determined where he would place the windows and more.

You can recognize a Kaplan home by the unusual detailed and sometimes ornate chimneys he created. Nat Kaplan's houses beautifully matched the landscape.

This article was inspired by numerous oral interviews we did with Sue Kaplan Lentz. Sue generously shared stories, articles, correspondence, pictures and over 500 slides that Nat Kaplan took of the detailed interior and exterior features of the houses he designed and built. There are at least 40 of them in the Village. The Los Ranchos Historical Society is converting his slides into digital photographs to preserve and archive them.

More Information at www.LosRanchosHistoricalSociety.org