



Santa Fe

FREESTYLE

What happens when a master of adobe preservation designs her own 21st-century home? Welcome to the Beverley Spears house.

BY *ELAINE RITCHEL*

PHOTOS BY *KIRK GITTINGS*



Facing page: Architect Beverley Spears, an accomplished watercolorist, painted this image of Acoma Pueblo's church. *This page:* Falling water softens her home's angular edges, as does one of two vaulted ceilings, designed to harmonize with the nearby foothills.



A barrel vault ceiling adds a playful curve to the roofline, while its clerestory window lends a monastic effect. *Facing page:* Sunlight warms the living room, which shares a gas fireplace with the library.

WHEN I THINK ABOUT MY VISIT to Santa Fe architect Beverley Spears' home, the space that stands out isn't the living room, with its impressive barrel vault ceiling—arguably the *pièce de résistance* of the house. Instead, it's a closet near her home office. She paused in front of the unassuming door, swung it open into a small, dark room, and flicked on a light, revealing shelves and shelves of neatly folded, gemstone-hued fabrics.

"These are my textiles," Spears said, matter-of-factly. "They're Guatemalan and Mexican."

"What do you do with them?" I blurted, surprised by the homespun textures and vibrant colors in Spears' otherwise sleek, monochrome home.

"I wear them. I look at them," she responded with a smile.

I arched an eyebrow, delighted by the image of Spears draped in energetic patterns of red, blue, yellow, and green. On the day we met, she wore a taupe-and-cream structured cardigan with black slacks. A multi-strand fetish necklace hung delicately around her neck. The soft palette mirrored that of her home, as did the stylistic pairing of contemporary lines offset by subtle Southwestern details.

One of New Mexico's best-known architects, Spears made her name in part through her expertise in pre-

serving historic adobe buildings, such as the Mary Cabot Wheelwright house in Alcalde. But she's also become adept at introducing ultra-contemporary elements and eco-technology to the classic forms familiar to desert dwellers.

While the vigas and kiva fireplaces that have come to exemplify Santa Fe-style architecture are absent from Spears' house, certain features nod to regional tradition: the flat roof and canales that guide water off it, the whitewashed portico that adds visual interest to the façade. The barrel vault is common to Spanish Colonial churches throughout Mexico, and the thick walls emulate adobe. Large windows and ample patio space connect the indoors with the surrounding landscape. Together, these features illustrate the values that drive Spears' approach to design: elegance and simplicity, together with an affinity for subtle drama, unexpected views, and aesthetic discoveries like the textile cave of wonders.

Spears' foray into Southwestern architecture began in 1974, when she relocated from Houston to Santa Fe. The relatively unaltered terrain immediately struck her. "It's the first place I've lived where there is a natural landscape," she says. "In Indianapolis, Houston, Philadelphia, you don't really have that. You have cornfields and pastures, but here the surrounding land was in more or less its natural state. I loved that. I fell in love with it pretty quickly." »





Modern fixtures abound in a bathroom with a poured-concrete floor and vaulted ceiling, accented with folk art touches like the Tunisian rug.

Spears received her architecture license just prior to the move, and her career unfolded as she dove into New Mexico history, culture, and architectural methods such as adobe masonry and green building. Solar energy, Spears remembers, was a hot new topic in the 1970s. It made sense to her as an effective complement to adobe construction and New Mexico's climate, so the first residence she ever designed, for archaeologist Stewart Peckham and his wife, Barbara, utilized a heat-soaking Trombe wall to make it an efficient passive solar home.

In 1981, Spears established her own firm, now Spears Horn Architects. Among other notable projects, she designed the Santa Fe Plaza bandstand, modeling it after a Mexican gazebo; the Santa Fe Public Schools administration building; and, together with Fentress Architects, the Santa Fe Community Convention Center. Whether she's designing a residential, commercial, or educational building or tackling a historic preservation project, her focus lies in creating environments and problem-solving around the principles of design.

"Architecture is like music: The composition is everything," she says. "There are rules, but the rules are meant to be broken. Repetition is important, but you can have too much repetition. Symmetry is important, but you can have too much symmetry." In other words, you have to know the rules of the trade, but also possess a feel for design, an almost intuitive grasp of what works and what doesn't.

You'd think that designing one's own space would be a dream project for an architect, but in fact, Spears found the process challenging. For her, collaboration is key, and working with clients helps to rein in the possibilities. While her husband, mediator Philip Crump, did have some requests—functional features like a large, well-lit garage and carpeting in the bedroom—it was mostly up to Spears to devise their ideal home. It took her about a year to complete the designs, and another year for local builder Tierra Concepts Inc. to bring them to reality. In the end, both Spears and her husband are happy with their home—and the living room, she says as she settles into a sofa facing the fireplace, is her favorite spot.

Overhead, one of the home's two barrel vaults soar. White-stained clear-pine slats clad its arc; between them, a soft gray fabric peeks through and diffuses sound. Sunlight pours in through south-facing windows, one of the home's passive solar features. Despite the chill outside, we enjoy a balmy 78 degrees as we gaze at the expansive desert landscape. When the fountain just outside is running, Spears explains, sunlight bounces off the water and onto the walls, adding to the room's theatricality.

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"I think architecture—and I'm talking about houses in particular—should have a variety of experiences," she says. "Some spaces need to be more cozy and dark and intimate, other spaces should be filled with light, with higher ceilings. The views should be different, so when you walk through a house it's a series of wonderful experiences."

We move from the living room into the library, where lower ceilings create a feeling of warmth and comfort. From there, we wander into a hallway gallery that showcases a selection of Haitian *drapo*—sequin-covered Vodou flags—from Spears' folk art collection, and then into an airy, sun-filled sitting area, a spot perfect for a catnap or a cup of tea. Finally, we enter the bedroom, where another barrel vault lends an air of drama.

All the while, as we drift through the house, the landscape appears through the south-facing windows. While functional—they contribute to the passive solar design—they also acknowledge the surrounding environment. A landscape architect as well, Spears is acutely aware of the relationship between interior and exterior space. Her home simultaneously looks out at the terrain and is a part of it. She placed a Zen garden, for example, below the home's west portal, because of the tableau it creates. It's a neutral bridge to the middle ground of juniper and piñon and the distant mountains. As you look back at the house, its low profile blends into the scenery, and the barrel vaults mimic the rolling Sangre de Cristos beyond.

Contemporary leanings and all, this is a home that finds a place within the landscape, one that integrates indoor and outdoor living, that is both functional and warm, and that creates space for unexpected magic. ■

Elaine Ritchel is featured in "Storytellers," p. 8.