

People



Street Caffe



Photos by Liz Lopez/ATM

Susan Henderson, p. 88, is working to make the city more pedestrian-friendly.



SUSAN Henderson

Architect/Urban Planner

This Albuquerque urban planner helped communities across the South rebuild after the recent devastating hurricanes, heading up a team in the largest community planning effort in U.S. history. Now she's using her ideas to help the Southwest.

There's something local architect Susan Henderson is passionate about. It's called New Urbanism. She has a few things to say about how it fits into the big picture of responsible planning.

It's a passion that runs deep, a conviction grown from her first exposure as a child to traditional urbanism, says the 44-year-old Albuquerque resident.

"I was a budding modernist with only a childhood in a small Southern town to give me an intuition about good urbanism," she explains, referring to a discipline of planning which espouses a return to the pre-1940 pedestrian-friendly towns that were common before the end of World War II.

As a principal of PlaceMakers, a national planning and coding firm, Henderson finds herself at the forefront of New Urban planning through her collaboration with DPZ (Duany, Plater-Zyberk & Co.), a cutting-edge Miami-based planning firm whose principals helped found the Congress of the New Urbanism. Henderson spends a third of her year on the road, meeting with city planners, mayors, and developers who have similar visions for the future. In fact, Henderson recently headed up a Congress of New Urbanism and DPZ-sponsored team of architects who traveled at the behest of Mississippi governor, Haley Barbour, to the hurricane-decimated Gulf region to help towns across Mississippi and Louisiana.

Says Andres Duany, principal of DPZ, "Susan was the leader of the architectural team for the eleven Mississippi charrettes [planning sessions]. She knows what she's doing, and she's



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very persuasive; besides, people like her. I trust her to get it done, whatever it is that needs to be done."

One result of those meetings was the creation of the Katrina Cottage, an affordable alternative to FEMA's portable trailers now provided to hurricane victims. The Federal Government recently approved \$1.2 billion to fund 40,000 cottages for displaced residents in the South.



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— Susan Henderson



How does the philosophy apply to Albuquerque? Henderson is passionate about the topic.

"There are so many issues with urban sprawl," Henderson explains. "Especially here in the Southwest, where there's a scarcity of water. People who live here are already moderately decent environmentalists. We've chosen purposely not to live in places like L.A. But then we buy houses in suburban developments and end up with all this land to cover. The bigger the lot, the more grass we use. This lifestyle isn't sustainable; we're using our resources irresponsibly."

Henderson says she fell in love with the High Desert landscape after seeking advice from her friend and xeric landscaping guru, Judith Phillips. "She taught me to respect the land, to only plant those things that belong here," Henderson explains. Henderson's

passion for the New Mexico landscape is shared with her husband of nine years, a man she describes as her perfect mate. Right now, they're building a courtyard home with magnificent views of the Sandias, and planning a new xeric garden.

"New Urbanism uses a connected system of mixed-use neighborhoods," Henderson says, explaining that, currently, cities are designed around the concept of cars. But with pedestrian-friendly design, "We can walk to our schools, to our places of business, to the grocery store, even to the local pub, which would greatly reduce DWI. And when we do choose to drive, the streets aren't so crowded, so the commute isn't so long. This reduces emissions, increases our health through more activity and better air quality, and reduces traffic. But the most noticeable benefit to the average citizen is the difference in appearance: the outdoor spaces become as important and enjoyable as indoors."

She talks about Albuquerque's first cautious steps into New Urbanism with Mesa del Sol's planned community. "Mesa del Sol had to be proposed as a master development. Each hearing and approval is expensive. With a Smart Code, everything is streamlined, making the process faster and encouraging compact development, which saves the city on infrastructure costs," she says. "The communities adopt a personalized Smart Code that does not replace their traditional zoning codes but instead offers an incentivized alternative to developers."

Three of the six principals in Susan's company, PlaceMakers, are siblings. Says Hazel Borys, managing principal, "Susan is my colleague, sister, and one of my best friends. Working with her is rewarding on so many levels. She understands how to fit inspired architecture into good, traditional urbanism."

Borys adds that the two work on opposite ends of the business—Borys in marketing and finance, Henderson as director of design. "There's enough distance for me to be able to see her work in perspective. Not only is she an exceptional architect and urban planner, she's also a rare find in the design world. Susan is one of a group of individuals who is changing the world as we know it—reviving the best from the past in a forward-thinking way."

And if Henderson has her way, that forward thinking vision will have a large impact here in the Southwest. Ask her about it sometime. She'll be glad to bend your ear.

—By Lisa Abeyta

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