

Brian D. Vallo is giving yet one more private tour of the Sky City Cultural Center and Haak'u Museum. "We'll be here till midnight," he says as he points to the many workers who are putting finishing touches on the \$10.4 million building that opened last weekend.

Vallo, the director of the center and museum, has left behind his take-out lunch on his desk in his office on the second floor to show some of the detail of the 40,000-square-foot building that replaces a modest cultural center that burned down six years ago. Everywhere he points he notes another detail that is specific to the Acoma people.



For example, seven different patterns of stacked stone in the walls of the gift shop represent the tribe's roots in Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde. Elsewhere, adobe represents the influence of the Spanish. The stone and adobe are just two of the many details meant to evoke Acoma's past and tie the new building into the culture of the oldest continuously inhabited city (since 1100 A.D.) in what is now the United States.

Walking down a corridor toward the center's theatre, Vallo shows floor tiles with ancestral pottery patterns. In a nearby niche, he shows tiles painted by the children of the pueblo specifically for display in the center. A window that runs the length of the corridor contains an Acoma pottery pattern.

There are doors and murals meant to reflect San Esteban del Rey Mission in Sky City. The reception area was designed to re-create the reverential quietude of the mission. The only detail missing is a dirt floor. Some windows are made not of glass, but of mica, which tourists will see again on the mesa.

When tourists enter the new building, they come into a great room and up to a reception desk decorated with an Acoma textile pattern. The tourists can see Sky City on the 370-foot-high mesa behind the building through the large window behind the desk. Immediately, they are pulled into the culture, even before going into the courtyard at the rear of the building to board buses for their tour. While waiting for their bus, tourists can see exhibits in the Haak'u Museum, eat in the Yaaká (corn) Café or shop in the Gaitsi (beautiful) Gift Shop.

As Vallo continues the tour, he keeps saying “they” did a nice job with this detail or “they” did a nice job with that detail.

He is referring to the architects—Barbara Felix and Sara and Tom Easterson-Bond, all of Santa Fe—who designed the facility as a joint venture between their firms, Barbara Felix and WoodMetalConcrete. When they talk about their work, they say their inspiration came from Vallo and the original request for proposals that the Acoma Business Board, acting under the authority of the Acoma Tribal Council, issued in December 2001. The five-page r.f.p. advised architects that the new building had to reflect the people and the place. It couldn’t just be another building.



Determined to design a building that could be viewed on many levels, the three architects started from a base of earth, mica, corn, pottery, stone and wood and found a way to incorporate them all. All of these elements are important to the Acoma people.

“Acoma architecture is definitely distinctive from other pueblo architecture,”

Sara Easterson-Bond says. Although born in Arizona, she comes from a long line of New Mexico residents and her father, Frank Bond, an attorney, lives in Santa Fe. She graduated from Santa Fe Preparatory School in 1985.

Barbara Felix says the three wanted to convey a sense of journey, both for the visitors who are journeying from another culture and for members of the tribe, who, upon seeing the building, will feel they are on a journey home. The business council envisioned a building for preservation, repatriation (of cultural artifacts) and education. The architects incorporated those concepts into their design.

“The Acoma culture,” Felix says, “is not locked in time. It is a living, growing culture, a living growing people. They are not interested in being put in a box.”

The center, Tom Easterson-Bond says, “represents the Indians and informs the public.”

The building is like a multi-layered novel with parallel story lines that a person doesn’t have to completely understand to appreciate. For example, a typical tourist might be satisfied to be told that something represented an Acoma textile pattern. A member of the tribe might know the history of the pattern, perhaps even the name of its creator.

“We wanted to create a building that will bring people back because there’s a continuous set of layers,” Felix says.

In order to get the colors right, the architects collected dirt samples through the pueblo and turned them into the variety of colors in the stucco. “There’s a huge range of color in the valley,” Sara Easterson-Bond says. Felix adds: “There’s even purple in the rock.” The color range is visible inside and out.

And something else people might not notice is that when they look down on the building from the mesa they will not see mechanical equipment, such as air-conditioning units and vents. “The building was designed to be seen from Sky City,” Tom Easterson-Bond says. In fact, the tour on the mesa ends in an area where tourists can see the museum top down.

The conversation shifts to the opening exhibits, one of which is pottery, and Felix offers the perfect transition. “I’m not sure you’ll meet anyone who’s more passionate about Acoma pottery than David,” she says.



David is David Rasch, who is in charge of historic preservation for the city of Santa Fe, and who has provided the Haak’u Museum with most of his 250-item collection for the opening.

The pottery exhibit is called “The Matriarchs.” It contains the work of four master potters—Lucy M. Lewis, Marie Z. Chino, Jessie Garcia and Juana Leno—who are credited with the revival of Acoma pottery, and the work of their daughters and, in some instances, granddaughters. Rasch says that the four matriarchs, all deceased, brought pottery from a utilitarian/ceremonial use to a point where it is now highly collectible fine art.

The 22-case pottery exhibit is separated into five areas that cover the breadth and depth of Acoma pottery, including white pottery designs derived from Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde, and even owl figurines that were made for tourists. For those who have walked around the center before seeing the exhibit, some of the patterns will be familiar. And when they go on the mesa they will see the patterns again.

Rasch started collecting in 1996, when he bought a pot by Rose Chino at Indian Market. He’s made it a point never to miss San Esteban Feast Day at Acoma and has gotten to know members of the pueblo.

He offered his collection to Acoma because he realized that no one could appreciate it stacked in his 1000-square-foot house. Rasch hopes that when the exhibit ends at Acoma in about two years, it will go on an international tour for at least half a decade. He knows from listening to

tourists at Acoma that Japanese, Germans and French are especially interested.

Another exhibit, Sibuuuk'a Maasitra (the Cotton Girls) contains a rare collection of 19th-century Acoma textiles that have never been displayed in public before. Some are on loan from the National Museum of the American Indian, the Smithsonian Institution, the School of American Research in Santa Fe, and the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico.

And even though the building is open, more work must still be done. Outside, color work continues. Inside, a research library needs to be stocked and other finishing touches will be completed one by one. Somehow that fits with the purpose of a building meant to represent a journey for everyone.

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