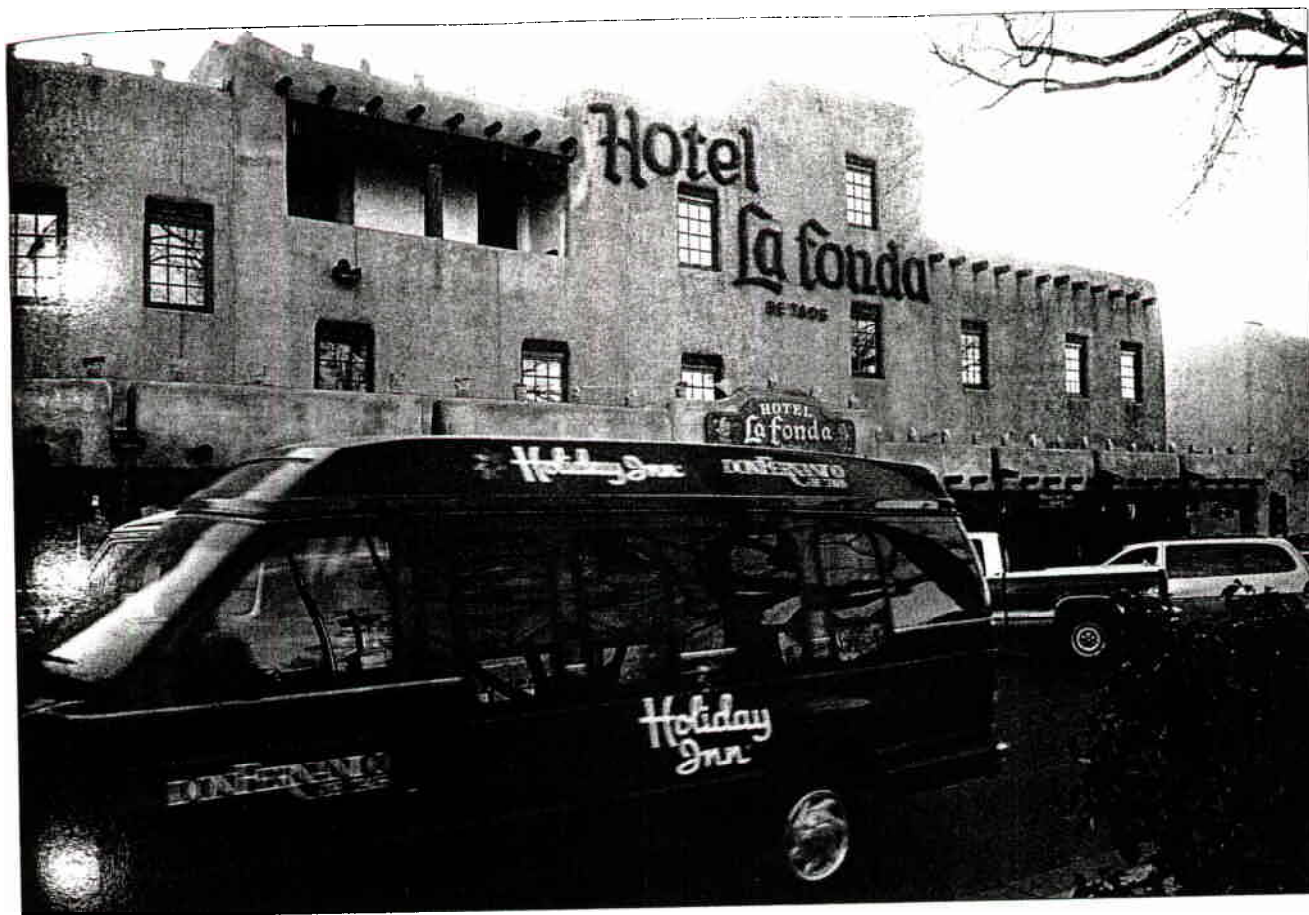


# La Nueva Resolana



Norteños find respite in new gathering places

Essay by Levi Romero • Photography by Megan Bowers



The Taos Plaza, once a gathering place for locals, now buzzes with tourist activity.

A few summers ago I shared a bench with three elderly gentlemen outside the Wal-Mart in Taos. Although I had come into their company as a complete stranger, they seemed oblivious to my presence and continued with their evocative insights and social commentary regarding their newly found gathering place. They made reference to the old town park in the Plaza and how they no longer care— their once-familiar hangout. I could not help listening to their remarks and observations as they shared a bag of popcorn. They spoke in Spanish, and the manner in which they openly discussed and engaged in conversation captivated my attention.

"Sabe usted que yo ya ni voy al parque. A mi mejor me gusta venir aquí. Aquí me siento en la resolana a ver la gente y a veces encuentro algún amigo y nos ponemos a platicar." ("You know, I don't ever go to the park any-

more. I'd rather come here. I sit here in the shade and watch the people go by, and sometimes I encounter an old friend and we'll just sit and talk.")

"Pues yo también. Ooh, ya hace tiempo que no voy a la plaza. Mientras que la vieja hace su shopping, aquí me siento, miro a la gente salir y entrar. Siempre encuentro algún conocido." ("Well, me too. Ooh, it's been some time since I went to the Plaza. While the old lady goes and does her shopping, I sit here, watch the people go in and out. I always see someone I recognize.")

"Sí está mejor aquí. El parque está lleno de turistas y aquí se topa uno con un pariente o vecino. De aquí, de esta tarima, se pasa el rato." ("Yes, it's better here. The park is full of tourists and here one runs into a relative or neighbor. From here, from this bench, time goes by.")

To them, the bench outside Wal-Mart had become a favorite gathering

place where they could simply sit in the comfort of *la resolana* and watch people come and go. It was where they encountered old friends, relatives and neighbors, and even formed new acquaintances. The old park, where they had once found *resolana*, was now for tourists. It was no longer a point of interest to them. I pondered this new setting and its significance to their sense of place and community:

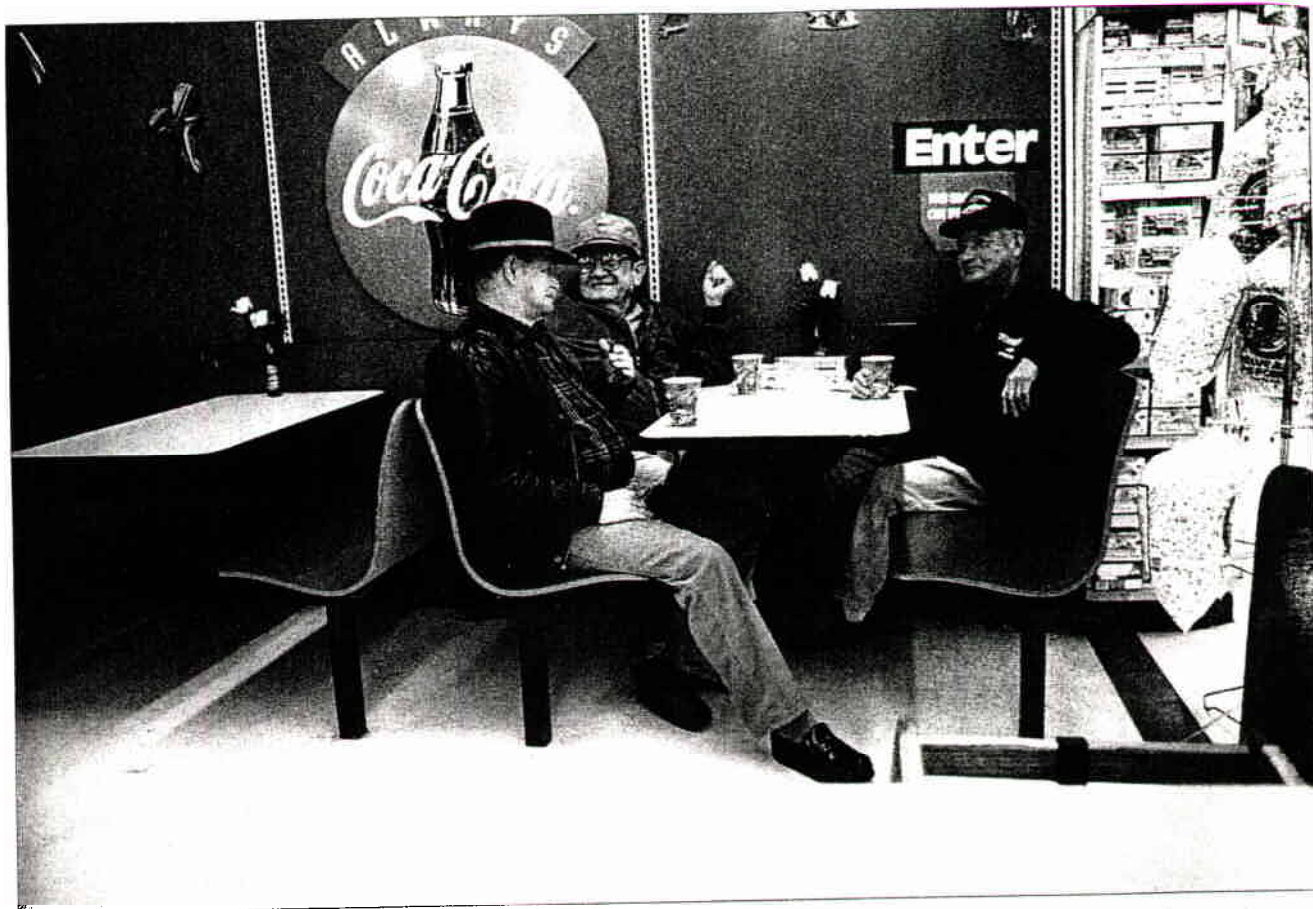
—A bench outside the entrance to a shopping center with a panoramic view of asphalt and traffic.

—A place barren of the usual elements common to public outdoor sitting areas: shade trees, lawns, water fountains, gardens and birds fluttering across the way.

Here, in this unassuming location, these men and others like them had transplanted their *resolana* as it had been before *en el parque viejo, el parque de los turistas* (in the old park, the park

**Opposite page**—Locals still hang out on the sunny side of Atencio's grocery store in Dixon, which once housed the U.S. Post Office. The store is owned by Peter and Cabrina Atencio.





Taos locals, from left, Frank Ortega, Gilbert Vargas and Moises Ortega, get together at Wal-Mart every morning at 9 to catch up on the community news and gossip.

they now associated with tourists).

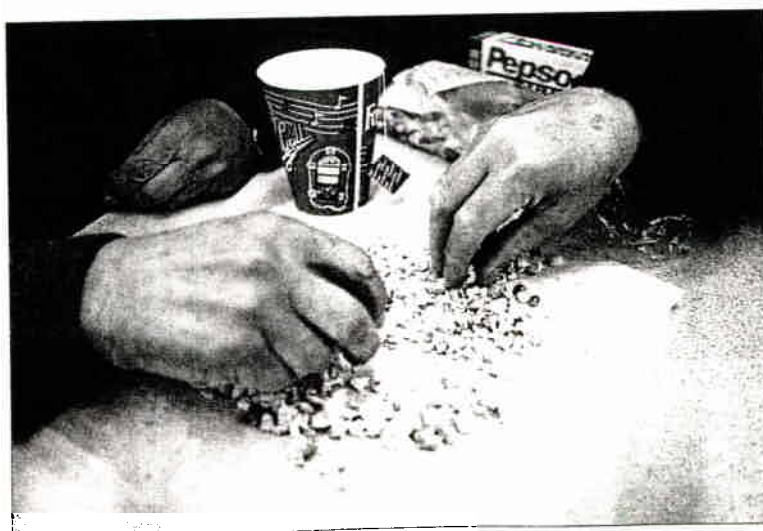
By definition, *resolana* is a sunny spot in an exterior setting, usually along a south-facing wall or building. In the *manito* traditions of northern New Mexico, *resolana* became synonymous with men gathering in the warmth of the sun to discuss and observe the current events and latest gossip, and to partake in simple conversation. *Resolana* has traditionally served as a communal discourse for the acquisition and dissemination of information and knowledge. While the oral story tradition may form an artful backdrop for the exchange of ideas and opinions, it's also been a means by which collective memory, language and cultural tra-

dition has sustained the spiritual essence of village life.

My mother still talks about *la resolana* and the fondness that my grandfather and the men of his time

shared for their village gathering place. She speaks of how the men would break at midsentence, bowing their heads to listen to the Chili Line's train whistle blowing miles away as

they converged at Duran's corral or over at *la fragua*, the local blacksmith shop, to play a hand of poker or enjoy an afternoon's game of dice. My *tio* Celestino spoke of how the men circled the walls of Medina's general store, following the warmth of the winter sun, or congregated along the north wall to shelter themselves from the summer heat. My cousin Willie shared his stories as well of the small fires they built to gather around at night in the *plazita*,



Popcorn and drinks help get the Taos locals through their morning ritual at Wal-Mart.



Lucas Martinez of El Prado put his cousin Daniel Valdez to work dusting his car. The two spend many hours caring for the sleek Honda.

the sunlight gleaming off their slicked-back pompadours as they stood about in the resolana joking and listening to early rock 'n' roll.

I have my own stories of the place we called the "car wash," where we hung out as young lowriders manicuring our cars along the banks of the Río Embudo. The stories and memories I recalled about the wonders of a social activity that embraced the idea of human relationships on a public and daily basis compelled me to regard resolana as an essential but missing pastime in today's hurry-up, catch-up and throw-it-world.

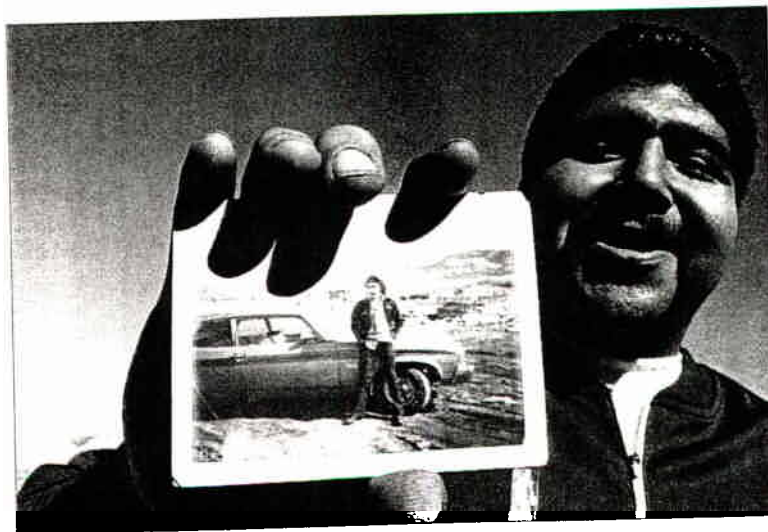
In addition to my eavesdropping experience at Wal-Mart, I was reminded of another event that had fascinated me with its insight into resolana. The old post office in the small

town where I grew up had always entertained social activity common to a small town. It was there where the locals gathered outside along the south-facing entrance to discuss issues

of relevance to their world and their community: a hotter than usual summer, a mild winter, a good harvest, a hard frost, a short supply of water in the acequias, a recent death, a new

birth, the influx of outsiders. The exchange of information and commentary, or just a cordial greeting in passing, had transpired at the old post office.

Many years ago the old post office building was closed down. A newer and more modern building was built not far from the previous location. The programmatic functions of the old post office were successfully upgraded. It soon



Martinez shows off a photograph of his father, Bonnie, and his 1967 Nova hotrod. The elder Martinez used to wash his car in the Río Lucero in El Prado because they had no running water at home.



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## La Nueva

became evident, however, that the old post office's social character had not experienced the same successful transition. From the onset, the informal community gatherings common at the old site were no longer a part of the daily post-office experience. I made this observation to a local villager.

*"En la estafeta vieja siempre había gente platicando, pero en la estafeta nueva no se mira que la vecindad tome el tiempo para platicar y discutir asuntos de la comunidad."* ("At the old post office there were always people standing around talking to one another, but at the new post office it seems that people don't make the time to stop and talk.")

*"Pues, mataron la resolana," me dijo el señor. "Si te fijas, la orientación de la estafeta nueva es diferente a la de la vieja."* ("Well, they killed the resolana," he said to me. "If you notice, the new post office's orientation is different than that of the old one.")

The old post office's entrance was oriented south. As people came in and out of the building, the warm southern exposure was an inviting element that encouraged people to congregate against the wall. The new post office's northern exposure violated one of the basic aspects of la resolana. The architects of the new post office, without any awareness, understanding or probable concern for anything more than the post office's primary functions, failed to address its social relevance to the community. How many other times, how many other towns have suffered the loss of their resolana while on a blind course toward progress and modernity?

As I made further inquiries into the contemporary community gathering place, I began to take note of another popular social mecca that seemed to be flourishing with evidence of la nueva (new) resolana. A close friend of mine, whose father had retired from the New Mexico Highway and Transportation Department, commented that his parents were spending a lot of time at the casinos. "My father likes to go," he said, "because he runs into many of the friends he made while working throughout New Mexico, and my

## Resolana


mother enjoys spending time again with their wives after so many years. They don't even gamble. They go there so they can reminisce about the old times or talk about the grandchildren."

I am constantly informed by friends that they have recently run into someone familiar at Wal-Mart or at one of the casinos.

"Do you remember Betty from junior high? Well, I ran into her at Wal-Mart." Although neither place seems conducive to the concept of a community gathering place, both create a social context nurtured by the possibility of chance encounter and gratify the need for direct human interaction.

Architects and planners all too often rely on formal design criteria for aid in creating sensible, functional and aesthetically pleasing gathering spaces. Yet if one takes notice of the social landscape about towns and cities, it becomes apparent that areas that are neither designed nor designated for social activity tend to be places that are most often used for congregating, while neighborhood miniparks and in-fill beautification projects remain void of the human inhabitants they were intended for.

I have been captivated by the social, physical, cultural and psychological properties of resolana and its inherent hierarchy of spatial arrangements, progressions, and natural environment and aesthetic regard as an informal community gathering place. I have been intrigued by the natural form in which it occurs and how its social patterning can be integrated into architecture that is sensitive and responsive to creating an environment that encourages social interaction and inspires the sense of a community-place setting.

Resolana as a traditional and contemporary community gathering place provides a look into the details that can help us recompose and embrace rather than displace a vital and nurturing nueva resolana. 

Levi Romero is a poet and architect born and raised in the northern New Mexico village of San Antonio del Embudo.

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