

OUTLOOK

BY NANCY ZIMMERMAN
PORTRAITS BY BILL CURRY

ARCHITECTURE PROGRESSED

A Taos visionary promotes a new dynamic among art, agriculture, and the built environment

In a place known for rolling up the sidewalks not long after the early-bird special expires, it was an unprecedented sight: people by the thousands strolling along Taos's main drag well into the night, enjoying a variety of outdoor installations and performance art that brought the electronic age smack up against the town's centuries-old aesthetic. It was the Paseo, an interactive festival that coincided with the 2014 Taos Fall Arts Festival, and it marked a new kind of art fair for this old art town.

Matt Thomas, mastermind and director of the event, rode his bike up and down the route, smiling broadly as he surveyed the throngs of people happily immersing themselves in the avant-garde scene. An architect by training and a humanitarian at heart, he had spearheaded the volunteer organization that brought national and international artists to town to share in the same creative vibe that has lured artists and seekers to Taos for hundreds of years, and he was gratified to see such an enthusiastic response.

"My original plan for the Paseo began with a question: How can we bring art to the people who don't usually go out to galleries and art openings?" says Thomas. "The Fall Arts Festival had lost its home at the convention center, so when I heard they were going to put it in five locations around town, I knew I had to help. The Paseo was intended to reinforce the idea of community, to link the different venues and introduce new forms of art to entice a more diverse audience to come out. Although we brought in artists from elsewhere, it was still about 50 percent local artists, and it's all about celebrating and sharing what we have here."



At work in his studio, Matt Thomas uses the tools of an architect—such as a T-square and X-Acto knife—to apply a pattern atop a prepared surface for his painting *PY001* (2015), reclaimed paper and paint.

That's what Thomas is all about too, and he uses his unique skills and experience to reinforce—and reinvent—the notion of community. Raised in Jefferson City, Missouri, he studied architecture at Kansas State University before settling in Taos some 12 years ago, which he says was a choice based on serendipitous invitations to visit there and a strong sense that this was where he was meant to be. He applied for a job with an architecture firm upon his arrival in town and was hired immediately, a promising start, and within five days had already met the man who would become his husband.

"But a few years later the Great Reces-

sion hit," he says, "and I needed to make a new plan. I enrolled in Columbia University's architecture and urban design program and got my MS degree, taught there for a while, then went to Beirut, Lebanon, where I taught architecture at the American University. My great-grandfather had emigrated to the U.S. from Lebanon, and I wanted to explore those roots."

It was there that Thomas experienced a kind of epiphany. "Living in the Middle East and traveling to places like Dubai, I had a little falling out with architecture," he explains. "Dubai, with its high rises and ultramodern buildings, is surreal, and our cities are striving to become more like

OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF MATT THOMAS



these artificial places. I thought, 'This isn't saving the world.' It's important to me to create something in the community, to help people come together and share in the pride and excitement of where they live."

With that in mind, he assigned his urban development students a project that would change their thinking about how a community and an economy can grow. "One unifying factor in any community is the food," he explains. "I worked with one of the only organic farmers markets in the Middle East outside of Israel, and they partnered with me on a design studio. We challenged the students to look at food as a mechanism for development, rather than real estate or oil. Food is the one thing that brings people together, so what if we used food as the design engine to create housing and community?"

It began with simple *fattoush*, the Levantine bread salad that is popular throughout the region. "People there take a lot of pride in their *fattoush*, with a whole sense of identity based on the food," says Thomas. "My students were furious to learn that the ingredients in their local specialty—cucumber, feta, tomato—were not produced locally. They responded by designing a community based on how things grow, the water needs, agriculture principles generally, so that residents could grow some of their own food and reinforce their identity."

Once back in Taos, he took that inspiration and established Studio Taos, a project-oriented endeavor committed to interdisciplinary design, research, and community. One of its projects, the Food & Shelter Lab, was inspired by Thomas's experiences in

the Middle East, and it explores the role of food and shelter in contemporary society to facilitate a built and grown environment that supports healthy communities. "We conduct research and seek out design innovations to build capacity for architects, planners, and agriculturists," he explains.

Thomas points out that in contemporary society a divide has developed between food and shelter, with agriculture removed from our built environment despite the fact that the core of any sustainable community is access to both food and shelter. "We're just getting started," he says of the two-year-old initiative. "I'm doing a podcast that looks

For the first Paseo event in 2014, Thomas organized students from the Projecting Particles workshop for a performance connecting iPads and projectors. Right: Sabrina Barrios's immersive 3D drawing for Paseo 2015, *How to Build a Portal for a Hidden Dimension*, will be displayed under a portal on the Plaza.

COURTESY OF MATT THOMAS (2)

at the collisions of food and shelter historically, through time. How did we get so distant from where our food comes from? It's my geeky hobby of exploring different times from our past, seeing what's changed and what's impacted our approach to food and shelter. We need some form of resilience, so that's what the local movement is all about."

In keeping with his commitment to the idea of community, Thomas, along with his husband, Richard Spera, created the Pecha Kucha Night Taos to facilitate the sharing of artistic output and ideas. Started in Japan by architects Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham in 2003 and now taking place in locations around the world, Pecha Kucha lets participants present 20 slides of their work or ideas and gives them 20 seconds to discuss each slide, a format

that prevents people from running on too long and which allows large numbers of people to share their creative output with one another. Now in its fourth year, Pecha Kucha has become a much-anticipated fixture on Taos's arts calendar.

Another of Studio Taos's initiatives is the ToolBox, a maker space that organizers hope to equip with computers, 3-D printers, electronic work areas, sewing machines, a metal fabrication and machine shop, woodworking tools, and workbenches. "People were asking me about collaborating on creating a maker space, and the ToolBox is what we came up with," says Thomas. "My role is to rally the local stakeholders and supply the strategic planning to get this thing going. We'll be offering classes, workshops, and training on the equipment, and the Tool-

Box Gallery will exhibit work produced by our members." They're also planning to add a cafe, which will function as a meeting place. It will have a large window so that the public can see the maker space, and it will serve simple, healthy food. Proceeds will help to support the operations of the ToolBox.

"All of these projects are about sharing, collaboration, leading by example," he continues. "We want to bring together education, agriculture, economic development, the creative economy. Art matters, creativity matters."

Thomas also keeps busy with his business, Matt's Bakery, which specializes in gluten-free cookies made with quinoa and other natural ingredients. "I have a staff of three people," he says, "and we use the community kitchen through the business



incubator to make cookies two days a week. We have three flavors and distribute to 30 locations around New Mexico, and I just shipped my first order to a cafe in New York City. It's going well."

He hasn't abandoned architecture entirely, however, although he rarely takes on large projects anymore. Working with the firm LDG Architects (the initials stand for Living Designs Group), he designs smaller structures like guesthouses or does remodels that reflect his and the group's commitment to sustainability and natural materials. "I like to keep my hand in, and I have to earn a living," he says. "These other projects are mostly volunteer efforts, so I still need a job."

When he's not baking, organizing festivals, teaching classes, exploring food and shelter ideas, designing houses, or overseeing the ToolBox, Thomas likes to create his own art. His geometric paintings on reclaimed paper are mesmerizing studies of texture and shape whose dynamic

contours appear to shift with the changing light, their architectural quality consistent with his overarching worldview. "I'm obsessed with geometries and patterns, so my work is a collision of material and texture because I'm an architect," he says. "I like to build up my canvases with different materials like paper and found objects. That way I create a new surface for the canvas, and then I use knives and rulers and scales and put on a highly structured pattern."

"I really do see the world architecturally, whether I'm building a painting or a business, a cake or a festival," he continues. "Everything I learned in architecture school comes to life. There are ways you can impact people's lives through good architecture using space and light. Taking that skill set, I've given myself permission to explore. I see structure everywhere, and I see people and business in that context."

Busy as he is, Thomas still finds time to relax at home with his husband. Spera is a

Matt Thomas with his husband, innkeeper Richard Spera, by the acequia that runs near their home. Opposite: Patterns found in quilting, Arabic design, and sacred geometry inspire Thomas's sketches.

transplanted New Yorker who studied hospitality management at Cornell University and now runs Casa Gallina, a charming inn in a rustic setting near the couple's home. Thomas worked with him to refurbish and redesign the five fully equipped casitas, although the vision and labor were Spera's, and the management duties are exclusively his. "Richard is the heart of the inn," says Thomas.

As he continues his efforts to build a sustainable community at a variety of levels, Thomas is optimistic about his town's prospects. "If you have a great community with interaction and communication, like we have here in Taos, that's the most important. I want to create something that will help people come together and feel pride and excitement in knowing that they live here." ❁