

Santa Fe

Creative Capital of the U.S.

A SPECIAL REPORT BY PETER ZANDAN

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Los Angeles

has more film.

New York

has more art.

San Francisco

has more Michelin stars.

And **Nashville**

has more musicians.

So exactly what is
it that is so special
about **Santa Fe**?

“[The data] paints a picture of a place unlike any other where creativity is woven into the city’s fabric.”

Dear Reader,

I invite you to read this document, not as a report, but as an exploration of who we are. Santa Fe is a vibrant, creative place, yet it is not New York. It’s not Los Angeles or San Francisco. Here we try to understand what makes Santa Fe unique to help us see our shared identity more clearly. To strengthen our sense of place.

All of us who live and work here in Santa Fe—the people who teach our kids, build our homes, cook our food, care for our sick, make art, raise families—share this sense of place, whether you arrived last year or your roots go back generations.

I’ve had a home here for more than twenty-five years. By trade, I’m a data scientist. I’ve spent a career asking questions and letting the numbers point toward answers. I’ve conducted hundreds of quantitative studies and built data products that help people understand what the numbers are actually saying. For thirty years, I’ve run ongoing polling on quality of life, attitudes, and perceptions in Austin, Texas tracking how a city sees itself over time, what it values, what it worries about, how it changes.

That work shaped how I approached this project. But so did curiosity. When Owen Lipstein and Maggie Fine of *Santa Fe Magazine* first approached me, we discussed what we really wanted to know: What does the data actually say about Santa Fe? Does the evidence support what we sense about this place, or challenge it? A caveat. Data tells you something, not everything. This is one way to look at a city. There are others. I’ve tried to respect both: what can be measured and what resists measurement. The qualitative assessment looks at the anecdotal evidence and the intangibles. Together, they paint a picture of a place unlike any other where creativity is woven into the city’s fabric.

If you’re short on time, start with the Short Summary; or peruse the full special report if you want to go deeper. This is meant to start a conversation, not end one. Comments and additions are welcome. This is my gift to Santa Fe, its citizens, and *Santa Fe Magazine*. I hope you find something that expands how you see this place we share.

PETER ZANDAN, SANTA FE, FEBRUARY 2026

Santa Fe, The Creative Capital of America

Owen Lipstein and Maggie Fine of *Santa Fe Magazine* wanted to know: Is Santa Fe the creative capital of America? Everyone already knows the city is creative. The question is what makes it unique, and does that distinction hold up to scrutiny. Not as a slogan. Not as tourism marketing. The search began for an honest answer, grounded in evidence. For the people who actually live in Santa Fe. Santa Fe welcomes over two million overnight visitors each year. This special report is not for them. It is for residents, policymakers, artists, scientists, and anyone trying to understand how this place works and why the creative flame continues.

Creative Concentration

I did what I have done for forty years. I counted. I measured. I connected the dots. Old habits. I came here twenty-five years ago hoping to appreciate more and quantify less. It didn't take. What the data revealed surprised even me. If you measure creative capital by density, by per-capita concentration of people who are creatives, Santa Fe is the creative capital of America.

Creative capital, as used here, means more than galleries and painters. It includes the scientist who sees a problem sideways, the chef who rethinks a classic dish, the architect who builds an eco-friendly structure that works with the climate instead of against it. A creative capital is not only a place where creative people live. It is a place that makes people more creative for having lived there.

New York and Los Angeles are creative powerhouses with enormous achievements in absolute terms. They set global standards. This is not a competition with them. This is about density: If you measure creative output relative to population, if you ask where creativity is most concentrated in daily life, the data points to Santa Fe.

A word about the title. "Creative capital" as I use it here means concentration, not dominance. It does not mean Santa Fe sets the cultural agenda for the rest of the country. It does not mean we export more creative products than anyone else. New York does that. Los Angeles does that. Brooklyn alone has shaped more of what Americans listen to, watch, and wear than any single city its size. I have walked through Bushwick and Williamsburg, and the creative energy on those blocks is real, fast, and prolific. I have spent time in Oakland, where hip-hop producers, muralists, warehouse artists, and street culture created entire genres that the rest of the country adopted without always knowing where they came from. Those places radiate creative influence outward. Santa Fe does something different. It concentrates creative practice inward, into daily life, at a density the data can measure.

Creative Concentration

THREE INDEPENDENT RANKINGS CONFIRM HIGHEST PER-CAPITA CREATIVE DENSITY

<p>#1</p> <p>National Endowment for the Arts Highest concentration of architects, writers & fine artists combined among metro areas 2008</p>	<p>#1</p> <p>Western States Arts Federation First among small cities on the Creative Vitality Index 2020</p>	<p>#4</p> <p>SMU DataArts Fourth in America across <i>all city sizes</i> on the Arts Vibrancy Index 2026</p>
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SMU DataArts Arts Vibrancy Index — Top 10 (All City Sizes)

Published January 2026. Unified national ranking regardless of population.

1	Jackson, WY	Pop. ~11,000	
2	San Francisco, CA	Pop. ~808,000	
3	New York, NY	Pop. ~8,258,000	
4	Santa Fe, NM	Pop. ~89,000	
5	Washington, DC	Pop. ~678,000	
6	Boston, MA	Pop. ~653,000	
7	Los Angeles, CA	Pop. ~3,820,000	
8	New Orleans, LA	Pop. ~376,000	
9	Philadelphia, PA	Pop. ~1,550,000	
10	Minneapolis, MN	Pop. ~425,000	

Santa Fe (pop. 89,000) ranks ahead of Washington, Boston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, and Chicago — cities 5x to 90x its size. It is one of only 17 communities that has appeared in the SMU Arts Vibrancy Index every year since 2015.

“The Americans for the Arts 2022 study found Santa Fe generates more than nine times the national per capita arts economic activity.”

Concentration and radiation are different strengths. This paper is about concentration.

Three independent analyses have ranked Santa Fe first in the nation for creative concentration among cities our size:

The National Endowment for the Arts found in 2008 that the Santa Fe metropolitan area held the highest concentration nationally of architects, writers, and fine artists combined.

The Western States Arts Federation ranked Santa Fe first among small cities in 2020.

The Southern Methodist University (SMU) DataArts Arts-Vibrant Communities Index, published January 2026, went further. In a unified national ranking that includes cities of all sizes, Santa Fe placed fourth in America. Only Jackson, Wyoming (population 11,000), San Francisco, and New York ranked higher. We placed ahead of Washington, Boston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, and Chicago. Santa Fe is one of only seventeen communities that has appeared in the SMU Arts Vibrancy Index every year since 2015.

Creative Capital Means Economic Impact

The economic impact confirms the rankings. The Americans for the Arts 2022 study found Santa Fe generates more than nine times the national per capita arts economic activity: \$4,179 per resident versus \$456 nationally. These rankings matter. But they are not the final word. Every ranking reflects what it counts. While the SMU index measures thirteen indicators weighted toward nonprofit organizations, government grants, and institutional employment, it does not capture the diversity of Santa Fe's economy. It does not capture Santa Fe's commercial gallery economy with over 250 dealers, nor does it capture a thousand Native artists selling directly to collectors at Indian Market. It does not capture the weaver in Chimayó whose family has worked the same looms for generations. And no ranking organization asked: where does Cormac McCarthy, one of the greatest American novelists, spend forty years in conversation with physicists, and how do those conversations shape his final books? That happens here. This special report tells that story.

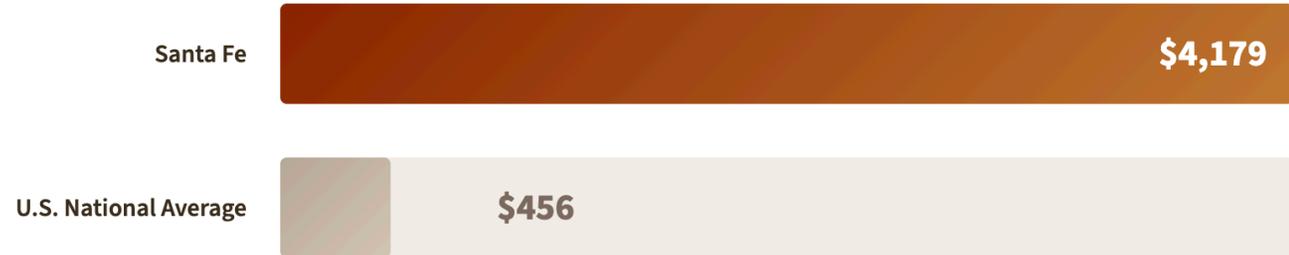
I'm not a neutral observer. I've had a home here for twenty-five years and I love the place. That's a bias. But I've also spent forty years learning how to read data carefully, and I can usually tell when I'm fooling myself. When an index built around nonprofit infrastructure still places Santa Fe fourth in America, competing against cities fifty to two hundred times our size, that's not my enthusiasm talking. That's the data.

Creative Diversity & History

“Creative” here means more than galleries and painters. Santa Fe's creative economy spans complexity scientists at the Santa Fe Institute, physicists commuting from Los Alamos, James Beard

Arts & Culture Activity Per Resident

SANTA FE VS. NATIONAL AVERAGE — NONPROFIT ARTS & CULTURE SECTOR, 2022



9.2×

Santa Fe generates over **nine times** the national per capita arts and culture economic activity — from a city of just 89,000 residents.

\$353.8M

TOTAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITY
GENERATED BY SANTA FE'S
NONPROFIT ARTS & CULTURE
SECTOR

3.5M

ATTENDANCES AT NONPROFIT
ARTS EVENTS — 39 PER RESIDENT
ANNUALLY

26

AVERAGE ANNUAL ARTS
ATTENDANCES PER LOCAL
RESIDENT (⅓ OF TOTAL
ATTENDEES)

Source: Americans for the Arts, *Arts & Economic Prosperity 6: City of Santa Fe* (2023). National per capita figure represents the U.S. average across all participating communities.

Award-winning chefs, world class opera performances, and the nation's current Poet Laureate Arthur Sze. It also includes the lowrider craftsmen on Cerrillos Road who spend a hundred hours getting the paint right, the weavers in Chimayó working looms their grandparents used, and the plumber whose paintings you saw at a Railyard pop-up last month. Add Meow Wolf, which started in a Santa Fe warehouse and has now welcomed over 13 million visitors worldwide, and the Lensic, presenting 50 free concerts on the Plaza each summer. When all of it operates within a fifteen-minute drive, the combinations become unpredictable and productive.

Creative capital is not just about how many makers live here. It is about how creativity accumulates over time and becomes embedded in a place.

Pueblo communities were creating art in this region for thousands of years before there was a Santa Fe. Their pottery, weaving, textiles, jewelry, and ceremonial practice never stopped. These are not historical artifacts. They are living traditions sustained by sovereign nations whose artists anchor Santa Fe Indian Market each August, the largest and most prestigious Native art market in the world. Spanish Colonial settlers arriving from 1610 layered new forms onto this foundation: tin work, straw appliqué, retablos. When the railroad arrived in 1880, artists followed the light and landscape. By the 1920s, painter collectives like Los Cinco Pintores established a model where creative work, daily life, and economic survival were fully integrated, and their descendants are here continuing that creative life. Georgia O'Keeffe demonstrated that an artist could build a major career from New Mexico rather than New York. The Institute of American Indian Arts, founded in 1962, became the crucible where contemporary Native art emerged as a recognized category distinct from ethnographic artifact.

Each generation built on what came before. A city can attract artists with tax incentives and affordable rent. Santa Fe grew its creative economy over four hundred years of continuous practice across multiple cultures. That is structurally different, and much harder to replicate.

That layering story is also uncomfortable if you look at it honestly. I have heard the same story told about Bushwick, about West Oakland, about the Mission District in San Francisco. Communities of color build something creative and extraordinary over generations. The neighborhood becomes desirable. Wealthier newcomers arrive, drawn by the culture, and housing costs rise until the people who built the culture can no longer afford to stay. Santa Fe's own housing data, detailed later in this report, shows that pattern operating here right now. Pueblo and Hispanic families whose creative traditions span centuries increasingly compete for housing with remote workers and retirees who arrived with higher incomes. I am one of those arrivals. Any honest account of creative layering has to include this: the same accumulation of culture that makes a place special, also makes it expensive, and high costs threaten the people who created what made it special in the first place. Celebrating four centuries of layering without naming that tension would be a disservice.

“Creative collision rate is the frequency of unplanned encounters between people from different disciplines.”

Creative Collision

Owen Lipstein, the co-founder of *Santa Fe Magazine*, and I call this the creative collision rate: the frequency of unplanned encounters between people from different disciplines. It's what happens when a city is small enough that you can't avoid the other creative people, and diverse enough that they're not all doing the same thing. In larger cities, a painter in Brooklyn rarely crosses paths with a physicist. Here, they share the same trails, the same farmers market, and spread blankets next to each other at a free concert on the Plaza.

We bought our house without knowing who designed it. Months later, we learned it was Ed Mazria, the architect who went on to write the bible of passive solar design and receive the AIA Gold Medal. He designed our house before he was famous. Now he's a friend. That's the pattern here. In a city of 89,000, the people who do this work are your neighbors.

The Intangibles

The light at 7,200 feet changed how I see. Not metaphorically. Literally. Dry air, intense UV, colors saturating differently, shadows defining edges you would miss at lower elevations. I have lived in Austin and New Orleans, visited New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles many times. The light here is different. I still notice it every single day. You would think after all these years I could just enjoy a sunset without ranking it against last Tuesday's.

Nature is not an amenity here. It functions as cognitive infrastructure. The Dale Ball trails start minutes from downtown. Ski Santa Fe sits sixteen miles up the road. I have solved more problems at 8,000 feet than at my desk. Many Santa Fe residents draft ideas on a hike, refine them over lunch after a trail run, make final decisions at elevation where the air is thin and the thinking is clear. Research confirms what residents already know: time in natural environments restores attention and sharpens creative output. Here, that research is daily practice.

The institutional infrastructure is substantial. Santa Fe Indian Market convenes more than 1,000 juried artists from over 200 Tribal Nations. Canyon Road operates as the densest gallery corridor in the American Southwest. Museum Hill anchors four major institutions within walking distance, including the world's largest folk art museum. The Santa Fe Institute translates frontier research into free public lectures. All of this, compressed into 52 square miles. But none of it is guaranteed to persist. Santa Fe's cost of living runs 12% above the national average. Rents have increased more than 40% in five years. Many artists now live in casitas, shared housing, or surrounding communities. The city needs an estimated 5,000 additional affordable units. Artists who built what we have increasingly compete for housing with remote workers arriving with higher incomes.

The data makes a strong case that Santa Fe is the city with the highest concentration of creative density in America within its domains of strength. Whether “creative capital” is the right title

depends on what you think a capital does. If a capital must radiate influence outward, must set the national creative agenda, must export culture at scale, then Brooklyn and Los Angeles have stronger claims. If a capital is where creative practice is most densely woven into daily life, where centuries of accumulated work from multiple cultures have produced something that resists replication, then the data points here. I think concentration is the harder thing to build. Others will disagree. What is not debatable is that what exists in Santa Fe, per capita, is extraordinary and worth protecting. The question is whether the next generation gets to build on what we inherited, or whether we let it erode into something we merely remember.

Santa Fe's creative strength is real and widely recognized. At the same time, sustaining that strength over the long term will require greater generational balance. Census data shows that Santa Fe skews significantly older than the nation as a whole, a pattern that raises practical questions about workforce continuity, cultural transmission, and the city's future creative vitality. The full report documents the evidence in detail: four centuries of creative layering, the institutions that sustain it, the challenges that threaten it. What we do with that evidence is up to us. For those of us who value this creative capital and the serendipity of creative collision that Santa Fe uniquely offers, we know we need to protect it, make it more sustainable, and foster its accessibility. Each of us has a role to play.

The Creative Capital

Measured by density — per-capita concentration of creative people, institutions, and economic activity — no American city matches Santa Fe.

400+
YEARS OF CREATIVE PRACTICE

9.2×
NATIONAL AVG. ARTS SPENDING

#4
IN U.S. — ALL CITY SIZES

89K
POPULATION

<p>#1 NATIONALLY — METRO AREAS National Endowment for the Arts Highest concentration of architects, writers & fine artists 2008</p>	<p>#1 SMALL CITIES Western States Arts Federation First among small cities — Creative Vitality Index 2020</p>	<p>#4 ALL U.S. CITIES SMU DataArts Ahead of D.C., Boston, L.A., New Orleans, Philly, Chicago 2026</p>	<p>SMU ARTS VIBRANCY TOP 10</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Jackson, WY — 11K San Francisco — 808K New York — 8.3M Santa Fe — 89K Washington, DC — 678K Boston — 653K Los Angeles — 3.8M New Orleans — 378K Philadelphia — 16M Minneapolis — 425K
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9.2×
THE NATIONAL AVERAGE

Santa Fe: **\$4,179 per resident**
U.S. Average: **\$456**

Arts & culture economic activity per resident. Total: \$353.8M · 3.5M event attendances · 26 per local resident/year — Americans for the Arts, 2022

WHY IT WORKS

The Anatomy of Creative Density

- 250+** GALLERIES — **Compressed Distance**
Canyon Road, Museum Hill, the Opera, the Railyard, the Plaza — all within 52 square miles and a 15-minute drive.
- ~4K** L.A.N.L. SCIENTISTS FROM SF — **Cross-Disciplinary Collision**
Painters, physicists, chefs, weavers, and complexity scientists share the same trails, markets, and concerts.
- 85K** OPERA ATTENDEES / SUMMER — **World-Class Institutions**
Santa Fe Opera, Indian Market (1,000+ artists, 200 Tribal Nations), Santa Fe Institute, IAlA, four Museum Hill institutions.
- 7,200** FEET · 300+ SUN DAYS — **Nature as Cognitive Infrastructure**
Dale Ball trails minutes from downtown. Ski Santa Fe 16 miles away. Research confirms nature restores attention.
- 1st** U.S. UNESCO CITY — **Multi-Cultural Depth**
Puebloan pottery, Spanish Colonial retablos, Mexican lowrider craft, Anglo painter traditions — four centuries, not a monoculture.
- \$100M+** INDIAN MKT. WEEKEND — **Living Market System**
Indian Market, Folk Art Market (\$3.88M artist sales), Spanish Market, Portal Program — transparent, professional, generational.

400 YEARS OF CREATIVE LAYERING

Each Generation Built on What Came Before

- 1000s+** — **Puebloan Origins** — Pottery, weaving, rock art, architecture. Living traditions sustained by sovereign nations to this day.
- 1610** — **Spanish Colonial** — Tin work, straw appliqué, retablos layered onto Puebloan foundation. Spanish Market continues today.
- 1880s** — **Railroad & Artists** — National visibility. O’Keeffe, Ansel Adams, Los Cinco Pintores follow the light.
- 1920s** — **Collective Practice** — Los Cinco Pintores model creative work, daily life, and economic survival as one. Zozobra born (1924).
- 1943–62** — **Science Meets Art** — Los Alamos scientists settle the region. IAlA founded 1962, transforms contemporary Native art.
- 1984–97** — **Institutional Growth** — Santa Fe Institute (1984), SITE Santa Fe (1995), O’Keeffe Museum (1997), Lannan Foundation arrives.
- 2005–26** — **Global Recognition** — UNESCO Creative City (2005), Meow Wolf: warehouse → 1,000 employees, 13M+ visitors. U.S. Poet Laureate Arthur Sze (2025). SMU #4 (2026).

THE CREATIVE COLLISION RATE

“The plumber who remodels your bathroom might be the painter whose work you saw at a Railyard pop-up. The retired Los Alamos technician has a furniture waitlist.”

The Evidence

The Short Summary tells you the argument. Now for the evidence. Walking the Dale Ball trails several times a week, I notice how time in nature clears the mind. Thirty minutes in, the day's frustrations fade along with that unsolved issue at work, family tensions, world events. On the way back, solutions appear. Fresh perspectives emerge, right there, at 7,200 feet. These moments are part of daily life in Santa Fe, and they shape our city's creative energy in ways that resist quantification but show up in the work people make here. What follows is the detailed case: how creative density developed across centuries, how it functions today, what threatens it, and why it matters. The data confirms what residents already sense. Santa Fe's creative identity is not marketing. It is infrastructure, built over four hundred years by people who stayed and made things of enduring quality.

Centuries of Creative Layering

Authenticity & Tradition vs Tourism

Santa Fe's creative strength is built on centuries of diverse practices. Ancestral Puebloan communities left rock art, clay pottery designs and architectural traditions which provides us with a unique SW indigenous aesthetic, sustained by living Pueblo communities. The annual cycle of ceremonial dances at the Pueblos surrounding Santa Fe represents a creative tradition that predates European contact by centuries. Feast days, corn dances, deer dances, buffalo dances: these are not performances staged for visitors. They are spiritual practices, expressions of community identity, and aesthetic achievements that challenge Western assumptions about the separation of art, religion, and daily life. The regalia, the movement vocabulary, the relationship between dancers and observers all operate according to principles distinct from concert dance or gallery exhibition. Visitors who witness these dances, when invited to do so, encounter creative expressions that cannot be purchased, collected, or reproduced.

Spanish Colonial settlers, from 1610 onward, fused new techniques and materials. Tin work. Straw appliqué. Retablos. These forms created a visual identity that continues to evolve through Spanish Market and active studio work.

The city's southwest quadrant along Airport Road sustains a distinct Mexican and Chicano creative culture that operates largely outside the gallery and market system. Norteno music plays from auto shops and the open windows of lowriders cruising Cerrillos Road on summer evenings. Pickup trucks

“Ancestral Puebloan communities left rock art, clay pottery designs and architectural traditions which provides us with a unique SW indigenous aesthetic, sustained by living Pueblo communities.”

display custom finery that took someone a hundred hours to get right. Ostrich-skin boots, elaborately decorated Virgin de Guadalupe shrines, quinceañera dresses in storefront windows: these represent aesthetic choices as deliberate as anything on Canyon Road. The cuisine here, from taquerias to panaderias, reflects a different relationship to tradition than the Compound or Geronimo. This is not folk art preserved for visitors. It is living culture sustained by working families, and it deserves recognition as part of Santa Fe’s creative fabric, not separate from it. The lowrider itself is a creative form: a working-class art practice combining mechanical skill, paint technique, upholstery craft, and performance. Lowrider culture originated in the Southwest, and Santa Fe’s practitioners sustain traditions dating back decades. The aesthetic principles are rigorous even when the results look nothing like Museum Hill.

The railroad’s arrival in 1880 brought national visibility and a first wave of artists fascinated by Santa Fe’s light and landscape. By the 1920s and 1930s, Santa Fe became a nationally significant art center through intentional collaboration. ‘Los Cinco Pintores’, five painters who lived and worked near one another on Camino del Monte Sol, established a model of collective practice that still defines the city. Fremont Ellis, Willard Nash, Walter Mruk, Jozef Bakos, and Will Shuster shared studios, critiqued each other’s work daily, and sold paintings cooperatively. Their approach drew from the Indigenous and American art scene along with the Taos Society of Artists’ success to the north while creating something distinct: an artist community where creative work, daily life, and economic survival were fully integrated. In 1924, Will Shuster created Zozobra, a towering effigy whose annual burning now draws over 60,000 people to Fort Marcy Park each Labor Day weekend, predating the Burning Man festival by more than six decades and continuing as one of the oldest public art rituals in America.

[1] Georgia O’Keeffe began visiting in 1929, moved permanently in 1949, and worked here until her passing in 1986. [2] Her presence attracted serious attention from collectors, curators, and other artists. But what mattered most was the precedent: she demonstrated that an artist could build a major career from New Mexico rather than New York. That inspired generations of artists who took Santa Fe seriously as a place to create, not just visit for inspiration.

After World War II, the city’s creative economy deepened and diversified, as a new stream was added. Los Alamos scientists settled in the region, and an unusual pattern emerged: scientists, artists, makers, and writers living and working together, sharing schools, markets, and collaborative energy. The post-war period also brought a shift from romantic landscape painting to modernism and abstraction. Santa Fe’s art scene became intellectually rigorous, in addition to commercially viable.

The founding of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), in 1962, fundamentally changed contemporary Native art. IAIA became a crucible where contemporary Native art developed as a recognized category distinct from ethnographic artifact. Artists like Fritz Scholder and T. C. Cannon

Four Centuries of Creative Layering

A TIMELINE OF SANTA FE'S CREATIVE CAPITAL

- ANCESTRAL & COLONIAL FOUNDATIONS**
- 1000s+ ● Ancestral Puebloan communities create rock art, pottery, weaving & architectural traditions
- 1610 ● Spanish Colonial settlers arrive — tin work, straw appliqué, retablos begin
- ARTISTS FOLLOW THE LIGHT**
- 1873 ● Timothy O'Sullivan photographs Santa Fe during geological survey expeditions
- 1880 ● Railroad arrives — national visibility draws first wave of artists; Lew Wallace finishes *Ben-Hur*
- 1920s ● Los Cinco Pintores establish collective practice on Camino del Monte Sol
- 1922 ● Santa Fe Playhouse founded — continuous operation for over a century
- 1924 ● Will Shuster creates Zozobra — predating Burning Man by six decades
- 1929 ● Georgia O'Keeffe begins visiting; moves permanently in 1949
- SCIENCE MEETS ART**
- 1943 ● Los Alamos laboratory established — scientists begin settling the region
- 1946 ● Eliot Porter settles in Tesuque; post-war creative economy deepens
- 1957 ● Historic Districts Ordinance protects Santa Fe's built environment
- 1962 ● Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) founded — transforms contemporary Native art
- INSTITUTIONAL GROWTH**
- 1984 ● Santa Fe Institute founded — complexity science enters the creative ecosystem
- 1990 ● Santa Fe Workshops begins; Photo-eye relocates from Austin
- 1995 ● SITE Santa Fe opens as the city's first major contemporary art space
- 1997 ● Georgia O'Keeffe Museum opens; Lannan Foundation relocates from Los Angeles
- 21ST-CENTURY RECOGNITION**
- 2005 ● UNESCO designates Santa Fe a Creative City — first U.S. city for Crafts & Folk Art
- 2008 ● NEA ranks Santa Fe #1 for creative concentration; Meow Wolf founded
- 2016 ● Meow Wolf's House of Eternal Return opens — 135 local artists, 13M+ visitors to date
- 2020 ● WESTAF ranks Santa Fe #1 among small creative cities
- 2025 ● Arthur Sze named 25th U.S. Poet Laureate — first Asian American to hold the position
- 2026 ● SMU DataArts ranks Santa Fe 4th in America across all city sizes

Sources: NEA (2008), WESTAF (2020), SMU DataArts (2026), UNESCO Creative Cities Network, institutional records. See full references in report.

broke decisively with romanticized “Indian art” stereotypes that had dominated Santa Fe’s tourist market. They painted Native life as lived experience: complex, contemporary, political, and unapologetic. Their work challenged collectors, galleries, and institutions to stop treating Native art as ethnographic artifact and start treating it as serious contemporary practice. IAIA graduates now include many of the most significant Native American artists, writers, and filmmakers working today. ^[3]

Canyon Road evolved from working artist studios in the 1920s to the primary gallery corridor in the Southwest. That transformation reveals how Santa Fe’s art economy actually functions. Artists still live and work on Canyon Road and in surrounding neighborhoods; they themselves are present. Galleries operate year-round with committed collector bases, not just summer tourism visitors. The economic model here allows mid-career artists to sustain studio practice through direct sales, commissions, and teaching, creating viable pathways that don’t require New York or Los Angeles representation.

From the 1970s to 1990s, contemporary infrastructure flourished: SITE Santa Fe opened in 1995 as the city’s first major contemporary art space, major markets matured into professional economic systems, and the Railyard became a hub of innovation. These developments were not accidental. Layered, multi-generational creative practice across cultures, access to varied landscapes, focused civic planning, and intentional support for artists built Santa Fe’s density. The city’s creative history is not a romantic past. It is the active infrastructure that shapes innovation here now.

That history explains why creative capital accumulates here. The next question is why it functions differently than in other larger cities.

Per Capita Creativity: Why Scale Matters Differently

Per capita, our creative density outpaces larger markets. That is not a boast. It is a structural feature with specific causes and observable effects. New York and Los Angeles set global standards: galleries, investors, theaters, film studios, immense creative economies. No argument there. Yet their size comes at a cost. Long commutes: New York averages 33.5 minutes one-way, Los Angeles 31 minutes.^[4] High rents. Professional silos and less density of creative people means fewer opportunities for serendipitous encounters where painters meet physicists. Proximity across disciplines suffers because of scale.

A fair objection: per-capita comparisons between a city of 89,000 and a borough of 2.7 million are structurally friendly to the smaller city. Draw a boundary around Bushwick, Williamsburg, and DUMBO, call it a city of 89,000, and the per-capita creative numbers might match or beat ours. I have thought about that. The difference is that Santa Fe is not a neighborhood. It is a self-governing city

“Breakthrough work emerges from unexpected connections, not just established centers of practice.”

with its own tax base, its own zoning, its own cultural policy, and its own institutional infrastructure. Neighborhoods inside larger metros benefit from the surrounding city’s airports, universities, media markets, and capital flows. Santa Fe produces these numbers with a regional airport, one community college, and a state capital’s resources. When a place this small, this remote, and this independent shows up fourth on a national index that includes cities fifty to two hundred times its size, the per-capita framing is not a trick. It is the only honest way to compare.

In Santa Fe, proximity and time are on our side. Our population of about 89,000 is distributed across 52 square miles. I routinely encounter collaborators on the trails, at museum events, in galleries, or simply walking to get coffee. Last month I ran into a climate scientist at Iconik, a ceramicist at the co-op, and a documentary filmmaker on the Atalaya trail, all in the same week. The plumber who remodels your bathroom might be the guy whose paintings you saw at a Railyard pop-up last month. These collisions spark ideas and partnerships that would require months of scheduling in a larger city.

Santa Fe ranks first for creative concentration among cities our size. ^[5] ^[6] ^[7] As mentioned in the Short Summary, this is supported by the rankings: National Endowment for the Arts, Western States Arts Federation, SMU DataArts. Three independent methodologies, same conclusion. But rankings only confirm what daily life already demonstrates. When a diverse mix of inputs operates in close proximity, the outputs change. Whether you are a novelist, designer, engineer, or chef, you find yourself surrounded by other disciplines and the opportunity for a cross-pollination of ideas. Breakthrough work emerges from unexpected connections, not just established centers of practice.

The Railyard: A Model of Compressed Distance

The Railyard District illustrates the value of compact civic planning. A 50-acre revitalization rooted in an 1880 railhead, expanded during the 1990s, now clusters cultural anchors within walking distance: SITE Santa Fe, the weekly market, museums, galleries, dining, and commuter rail. The Santa Fe Rail Runner Express connects us directly to Albuquerque, making the region a single creative and economic system.

Weekends offer the chance to buy chile at the Market, explore new media at Vladem Contemporary, and join a gallery opening, all within a few blocks and a few hours. This proximity translates directly into output, opportunity, and learning through exposure to local cuisine, visual stimuli, and new ideas. The Sky Railway links Santa Fe and Lamy, functioning as a moving stage for live music, themed rides, and immersive storytelling. This transit transformed into a venue, where regional history and present-day creativity meet.

Art, Markets, Museums, and Economic Systems

Accessible Contemporary Art

Contemporary art is accessible. Many of Santa Fe's museums offer limited free access making it possible for residents and visitors alike to experience the city's collections. SITE Santa Fe offers free admission and direct education. Vladem Contemporary, IAIA's Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, the New Mexico Museum of Art on the Plaza which has its own fascinating origin story blending art, architecture, and professional ties to established institutions on the East Coast, and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum provide depth with admission barriers kept low through free days and community programs.^[8]

The Economics of Access Matter

SITE Santa Fe maintains free admission year-round through a funding model that prioritizes public access over gate revenue. The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum offers free admission for New Mexico residents on Fridays. IAIA's Museum of Contemporary Native Arts provides free admission the first Saturday of each month and maintains student rates at \$5. Vladem Contemporary operates with free admission as core policy. According to Museum Industry 411, comparable contemporary art museums in major cities charge \$20 to \$30 for general admission. Over a year, that difference determines whether a high school student can visit regularly or never at all.

Educational programming runs deeper than occasional public tours. SITE Santa Fe's education department works directly with Santa Fe Public Schools, providing curriculum-connected visits, artist workshops, and teacher training. Students engage with working artists in gallery spaces, learn exhibition design and curation, and participate in creating new work. The O'Keeffe Museum's programs bring thousands of New Mexico students annually to both the Santa Fe museum and O'Keeffe's homes in Abiquiú and Ghost Ranch. These are more than just field trips. They are structured learning experiences where students study primary source material, examine artistic process, and connect visual art to literature, history, and science curricula.

Youth access to professional creative work shapes career possibilities. When a fifteen-year-old can walk into SITE Santa Fe after school, see internationally recognized contemporary art, attend an artist talk, and return the next week with questions, the barrier between "art world" and "my world" collapses. That collapse matters for who decides to pursue creative work professionally. The city's combination of free access, quality programming, and physical proximity creates an environment where engagement with serious art is normal rather than exceptional.

Museum Hill and Institutional Depth

Santa Fe supports a concentration of museums unusual for a city of 89,000. Museum Hill, a campus two miles southeast of the Plaza, anchors four major institutions within walking distance of one another. That density would be unusual in a city of 890,000. In a city of 89,000, it offers an abundance of riches.

The Museum of International Folk Art is one of the largest folk art museums in the world. Visitors walk in expecting Southwestern crafts and walk out three hours later having traveled through Indonesian textiles, Ukrainian Easter eggs, and Japanese toys without leaving the building. The Museum of Indian Arts and Culture traces Puebloan history from ancestral communities to present-day practice. The Wheelwright Museum, founded in 1937, runs a trading post that doubles as a gallery for emerging Native artists. You can buy serious work there at more favorable prices than in New York.^[9]

Downtown adds more depth. The New Mexico Museum of Art occupies a 1917 Pueblo Revival building on the Plaza. The Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, opened in 1997, draws visitors who arrive for O’Keeffe and discover the broader creative community endemic to the area. ^[10]

Museums Impact Communities

What matters is not the museum count. It’s what these institutions do beyond exhibitions. They employ curators, conservators, educators, and registrars year-round, providing stable creative-sector jobs that don’t depend on gallery sales or summer tourism. They purchase work from living artists. They run education programs that reach schoolchildren. For working artists, a museum show confers legitimacy that translates to gallery representation and collector attention. The institutional density here exceeds most American cities ten times our size.

Markets as Professional Economic Systems

Walk through Indian Market on a Saturday morning in August and you will see more than 1,000 juried artists from over 200 Tribal Nations. ^[11] This is not a craft fair. It is the largest and most prestigious Native art market in the world, with SWAIA maintaining standards that date back decades.

The International Folk Art Market operates at a different scale but similar seriousness with \$3.88 million in artist sales at the 2025 market alone. ^[12] ^[13] Traditional Spanish Market enforces exacting standards for retablos, embroidery, tinwork, and woodcarving, preserving techniques dating to the Spanish Colonial era.^[14] The Palace Portal Program enables hundreds of Native artisans to sell directly under the Portal of the Palace of the Governors, with authenticity requirements defined in state administrative code.^[5]

“Santa Fe’s creative economy is unusually well-documented because it runs through galleries, markets, and nonprofits that report data.”

What makes these markets unusual is their transparency. Portfolio reviews happen in public. Business skills are learned in real markets or through direct mentorship. Young artists watch established masters price work, negotiate with collectors, and close sales. Creative production here is public, economic, and generational.

The market system works differently for Native artists and for those who arrived more recently. For artists like Virgil Ortiz, a Cochiti Pueblo ceramicist whose work commands international attention, what outsiders call “creative industry” is inseparable from ceremony, survival, and identity. His family has been making pottery here for thousands of years. Rose B. Simpson, a Santa Clara Pueblo artist whose sculpture and performance work now shows in major museums, represents a different but related sensibility: an artist making work about the future as much as the past, refusing the limiting label of “Native artist” even while drawing on ancestral knowledge. These voices remind us that Santa Fe’s creative identity includes practitioners for whom art and life have never been separate categories. [16]

The Economic Impact of Arts and Culture

The economic impact is measurable. According to the Americans for the Arts 2022 study, Santa Fe’s nonprofit arts and culture sector generated \$353.8 million in economic activity, equal to \$4,179 per resident (the national per capita figure is \$456.) Santa Fe generates more than nine times the national average of per capita revenue in the arts and culture sector. The same study counted 3.5 million attendances at nonprofit arts events in a city of 89,000. That works out to 39 attendances for every resident. Two-thirds were locals, averaging 26 attendances per resident per year. One-third were visitors who came specifically for the arts. Other cities support the arts. Santa Fe runs on them.[59]

Those numbers deserve a second look. A fair question is how much of that \$4,179 per resident represents creative production by working artists and how much represents creative consumption by affluent residents and visitors buying gallery art, attending the concerts, and dining at high-end restaurants. The honest answer is both. Santa Fe’s economy includes serious working artists making and selling things, and it includes a well-off population that spends heavily on what those artists make. In cities like Oakland and Brooklyn, much of the creative output is informal, commercial, and never counted by nonprofit-focused indices. The kid producing beats in a bedroom in East Oakland, the designer running a one-person streetwear label out of a Bed-Stuy apartment, the comedian writing material while bartending in Williamsburg: none of that shows up in an Americans for the Arts study. Santa Fe’s creative economy is unusually well-documented because it runs through galleries, markets, and nonprofits that report data. Cities with more underground or commercially informal creative cultures may produce comparable work that simply never gets measured. I’m a data scientist. I know the numbers I rely on here are shaped by what gets counted. That matters.

“Canyon Road and downtown now support more dedicated photography venues than most cities ten times our size.”

Concentration Within Specific Domains

Honesty requires saying what Santa Fe does not do well, or does not do at all. Santa Fe has no significant popular music production ecosystem. Nobody is cutting hip-hop records here that change listening habits in the rest of the country. Oakland does that. Atlanta does that. Nashville does that for country. We have a weak independent film production infrastructure of our own. The studios, the sound stages, the crew base for major productions: regionally, that is Albuquerque. We have a small fashion design industry. No major presence in digital media, gaming, graphic design, or the tech-adjacent creative work that fills entire neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the San Francisco Bay Area. Santa Fe’s creative portfolio is deep in specific domains: visual arts, traditional craft, literary work, opera and chamber music, culinary arts, and cross-disciplinary science. It is not broad across the full spectrum of American creative output. The “creative capital” claim rests on extraordinary concentration within those domains, not coverage of all of them. If your definition of creative capital requires leadership across every category, Brooklyn wins and the conversation is over. If your definition values depth, density, and centuries of accumulated practice within a set of disciplines, then read on.

Photography as a Major Creative Pillar

Canyon Road and downtown now support more dedicated photography venues than most cities ten times our size.

Timothy O’Sullivan photographed the city in 1873 during geological survey expeditions. Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Paul Strand all worked in New Mexico during the early twentieth century, drawn by the same light and landscape that attracted painters. Adams’s “Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico” (1941) remains among the most reproduced photographs in history. Eliot Porter settled in nearby Tesuque in 1946. Laura Gilpin moved to Santa Fe and spent three decades photographing Southwestern landscapes and Native American communities; her 1968 book “The Enduring Navaho” established new standards for documentary photography. In 1974, Gilpin became one of the inaugural recipients of New Mexico’s Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts, alongside Georgia O’Keeffe, Maria Martinez, and John Gaw Meem. ^[17] ^[18]

That historical legacy explains why photography still matters here. Santa Fe Workshops has trained more than 20,000 photographers since 1990. Photo-eye, which moved from Austin in 1991, has grown into one of the world’s foremost galleries and bookstores devoted to contemporary photography. CENTER runs Review Santa Fe, bringing 100 selected photographers together with reviewers from *The New York Times*, Harvard Art Museums, and the Smithsonian. The Portfolio Walk draws thousands. ^[19] ^[20] ^[21] ^[22]

Visual Arts Galleries and the Canyon Road District

The total gallery count across Santa Fe represents a concentration that would be notable in a city ten times its size. [24] Canyon Road operates as the densest gallery corridor in the American Southwest. Dozens of galleries occupy a half-mile stretch, representing painting, sculpture, ceramics, jewelry, textiles, and mixed media. The street functions year-round, not just during summer tourist season, with serious collector traffic in spring and fall. [23] The gallery model here differs from coastal markets. Many Canyon Road galleries represent regional artists exclusively, maintaining long-term relationships rather than rotating rosters. Artists price work to sell, not to signal status. A collector can acquire serious contemporary Native ceramics, Southwest landscape painting, or abstract sculpture at price points inaccessible in New York or Los Angeles. That accessibility creates entry points for new collectors and sustains mid-career artists who might otherwise struggle between emerging and blue-chip status.

Beyond Canyon Road, the Railyard Arts District clusters contemporary galleries within walking distance of SITE Santa Fe. Downtown galleries around the Plaza serve tourist traffic while maintaining quality standards. The plaza's commercial mix itself reflects creative diversity. Palestinian, Israeli, and Turkish shopowners operate alongside Native artisans under the Portal, their textiles, ceramics, and jewelry presenting aesthetic traditions that contrast with Indigenous work and with each other. Walk around the plaza on any afternoon and you encounter design traditions from three continents before you've bought a cup of coffee.

Food, Music, and Performance.**The Culinary Landscape**

Santa Fe's food culture runs deeper than green chile marketing. The culinary scene operates as a working creative economy with professional standards, clear mentorship pipelines, and consistent national recognition.

The James Beard Foundation keeps noticing. Fernando Olea of Sazón won Best Chef Southwest in 2022. Mark Kiffin of The Compound won the same category in 2005 with multiple nominations across his career. Martín Rios of Restaurant Martín received multiple Best Chef Southwest nominations over the years.[25] Fernando Ruiz of Escondido beat Bobby Flay on national television, then kept cooking in Santa Fe rather than chasing a bigger market. These are not chefs who came here for a restaurant launch and left. They built careers in Santa Fe because the ingredients, the clientele, and the community made it possible to do serious work.

“The opera is a partially open-air theater carved into a hillside north of town, drawing 85,000 attendees each summer, recognized as “Festival of the Year” at the 2022 International Opera Awards.”

The Santa Fe Farmers Market operates year-round with more than 150 vendors representing farms, ranches, and food artisans within a hundred-mile radius. Chefs arrive before dawn on Saturdays to buy directly from growers. I have watched Fernando Ruiz selecting peppers at 7 a.m., asking the farmer about soil conditions and harvest timing. That proximity between production and preparation shows up on the plate.

Music and Performance

Start with the Opera. A partially open-air theater carved into a hillside north of town, drawing 85,000 attendees each summer, recognized as “Festival of the Year” at the 2022 International Opera Awards. The company employed 599 artists, technicians, and staff in 2024. When added to the numbers of others working on performances and in theaters that’s nearly 1% of the total population employed in the performing arts. Those are serious numbers. But what matters more is where those people go after curtain call. They eat at local restaurants. They hike local trails. They stay through the fall and some of them never leave.^[26]

The Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival runs one of the most respected programs in the country, consistently commissioning new work. The Lensic presents touring acts year-round and sponsors more than 50 free outdoor concerts on the Plaza each summer through its Lensic 360 program. Opera seats are expensive. Summer Plaza concerts are free. The two worlds overlap more than they separate.^[27]

Theater and Dance

Santa Fe Playhouse has operated continuously since 1922. A century of community theater in a city that was barely a city when they started. Theater Grottesco, founded in 1983, creates original physical theater and has toured internationally while keeping Santa Fe as home base. Aspen Santa Fe Ballet commissions new work from contemporary choreographers and splits its season between two mountain towns.

But the story that matters most involves kids. NDI New Mexico, an affiliate of the National Dance Institute, provides free dance education to thousands of students annually, reaching rural and underserved communities across the state. Their home base, the Dance Barns, has become the place where children from across northern New Mexico discover what their bodies can do. That pipeline from childhood to professional possibility is what keeps a creative community from aging out. ^[28]

Science and Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration

Most cities, through accidents of geography, separate their thinkers by discipline. Physicists in one

neighborhood, artists in another, writers somewhere else entirely. Santa Fe collapsed those distances decades ago.

The Santa Fe Institute treats community lectures as core institutional work. Research in complexity science, economics, evolutionary dynamics, network theory, emergence, and collective behavior gets translated into accessible language and presented on downtown stages. Artists, entrepreneurs, teachers, students, and curious locals attend for free. I have watched a sculptor take notes at a talk on emergent behavior in ant colonies. She used the research in her next installation.

The School for Advanced Research rotates resident scholars and Native artist fellows through public programs treating anthropology, archaeology, and arts practice as connected living subjects. St. John's College runs its Santa Fe campus on the Great Books curriculum: all discussion, no lectures, faculty as facilitators rather than experts. The reading list spans 3,000 years of philosophy, literature, mathematics, science, music, and history. The curriculum is demanding, but the college opens its doors. The Dean's Lecture Series brings scholars to public stages on Friday evenings. Summer Classics, now in its 35th year, offers weeklong seminars where anyone can study great books alongside the tutors. In a city this size, the students and faculty show up at the same Saturday market, the same trails, the same opera. The intellectual infrastructure seeps into the general population.^[29] ^[30]

Los Alamos National Laboratory employs roughly 16,000 to 17,000 people, among the highest concentrations of PhDs in the country, working on national security science, climate modeling, and high-performance computing. ^[31] According to LANL's recent economic impact data, roughly one-quarter of the workforce, about 4,000 employees, commute from Santa Fe County.^[32]

These scientists and engineers show up at the same concerts, markets, gallery openings, readings, and trail runs as painters, writers, fabricators, chefs, and dancers. That proximity matters directly. The possibilities for the cross-pollination of creative ideas is realized through chance encounters. A casual conversation about quantum computing over morning coffee becomes a collaboration on an immersive installation. A materials scientist's observation at Indian Market about natural mineral pigments leads to new approaches to sustainable dyes. A climate modeler's trail run conversation with a documentary filmmaker produces a more effective way to visualize data for public understanding.

Santa Fe Community College adds another layer, with about 3,500 credit students and more than 13,000 continuing education students providing workforce training that connects to the broader creative economy.

This is not planned collaboration through formal programs. It happens when creative and technical workers live in the same small city, send their kids to the same schools, shop at the same markets, and use the same trail systems. The collision rate stays high because physical and social distance stays low. The most striking example of this collision involves Cormac McCarthy, the author of *Blood Meridian*, No

“Creative cross-pollination in Santa Fe is not reserved for prize winners. It is woven into the ordinary texture of daily life.”

Country for Old Men, and *The Road*. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 2007. He also hated talking to other writers. In 1981, he met Murray Gell-Mann, the physicist who discovered the quark. When Gell-Mann co-founded the Santa Fe Institute three years later, he brought McCarthy with him. McCarthy moved to Tesuque, kept an office at the Institute, and wrote down the hall from physicists for nearly forty years.

What came out of it? His last two novels, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, are dense with quantum theory and debates about the nature of mind. McCarthy also copy-edited physics books for colleagues at the Institute, tightening their prose. That’s what a creative collaboration looks like when it runs for forty years. ^[57] ^[58]

But that example comes from the top of the pyramid. The same pattern operates at every level. The plumber who remodels your bathroom might be the painter whose work you saw at a Railyard pop-up last month. The hospice nurse takes a ceramics class and ends up showing at Spanish Market five years later. The retired Los Alamos technician starts building furniture and now has a waitlist. The woman who does your taxes paints santos on the weekends. The guy who runs the auto body shop on Cerrillos Road has been building custom lowriders for thirty years and his work belongs in a museum, though he might laugh if you said so. Creative cross-pollination in Santa Fe is not reserved for prize winners. It is woven into the ordinary texture of daily life.

Literary Infrastructure and Writers’ Community

Santa Fe’s literary tradition stretches back well over a century. Territorial Governor Lew Wallace completed *Ben-Hur* in 1880 while living at the Palace of the Governors, working by lamplight shortly after a tense meeting with Billy the Kid. The novel became one of the best-selling books of the nineteenth century, outsold only by the Bible. The Palace still stands on the Plaza.^[33]

Willa Cather visited in 1925 and 1926 to research *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. She later called it her best book. The Cathedral still draws visitors who arrive with copies in hand.^[34] D.H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley spent time in nearby Taos in the 1920s; both drew on the landscape in later work. The Lannan Foundation relocated from Los Angeles to Santa Fe in 1997. For over two decades, its Readings & Conversations series at the Lensic brought major writers to public stages: Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie, Alice Walker, Joy Harjo, Cormac McCarthy. The foundation is spending out its assets by 2032, but its archive of more than 1,350 writers remains accessible online.^[35]

The Institute of American Indian Arts anchors Native creative writing through its Low Residency MFA, accredited in 2013. Faculty have included Joy Harjo, Tommy Orange, and N. Scott Momaday, the

first Indigenous author to win a Pulitzer for fiction. Arthur Sze, IAIA professor emeritus and Santa Fe's first poet laureate, taught at the Institute for decades.^[36] In September 2025, Sze was named the 25th United States Poet Laureate, the first Asian American to hold the position. His appointment brought national attention to the city's literary community.^[37]

The Santa Fe International Literary Festival, launched in 2022, has grown into one of the most significant literary gatherings in the Southwest. Recent lineups have included Percival Everett, Amy Tan, Isabel Wilkerson, George Saunders, Christina Rivera Garza and Ocean Vuong. The festival reserves 1,500 complimentary tickets for New Mexico students, teachers, and librarians.^[38]

George R. R. Martin's Jean Cocteau Cinema operates as both repertory film venue and literary gathering space. Martin, a Santa Fe resident since 1979, hosts author readings and book signings at the venue two to three times a week.^[39] Collected Works Bookstore, the city's oldest independent bookstore, has served the community for 47 years and hosts free author events weekly. While Op. Cit. Books and Garcia Street Books provide additional venues where writers meet readers.

Working authors across genres call Santa Fe home: Hampton Sides writing narrative nonfiction, Anne Hillerman continuing her father's Leaphorn & Chee mysteries, Douglas Preston co-authoring the Pendergast thrillers. These are not celebrity writers with second homes. They are working professionals producing books on deadline, choosing to do that work here.^[40]

The collision rate applies to literary work too. A novelist encounters a climate scientist at a Santa Fe Institute lecture and spends six months researching a book informed by that conversation. A journalist covering Indian Market decides to write a book about contemporary Native art after three years of direct observation. These collaborations happen because writers, artists, and scientists share physical space in ways impossible in larger cities.

Film, Immersive Entertainment, and Design

Film Production Infrastructure

According to *MovieMaker* Magazine, both Albuquerque and Santa Fe top their lists of "the Best Places to Live and Work as a Moviemaker" in 2025. That position reflects decades of deliberate infrastructure development, not just tax incentives. The state's refundable film production tax credit starts at 25% with uplifts reaching 40%, but the credit alone does not explain the industry's scale. What makes New Mexico competitive is purpose-built production infrastructure in Albuquerque and a deep regional crew base that draws heavily from Santa Fe.^[41]

“What distinguished it was not just scale or spectacle. It was the integration of narrative structure, interactive technology, original music, theatrical lighting, and environmental design into a coherent experience that demanded repeat visits.”

The numbers are substantial. Albuquerque Studios operates 11 sound stages totaling over 300,000 square feet. NBCUniversal runs a 330-acre production facility with eight sound stages. These facilities support major productions year-round: *Breaking Bad*, *Better Call Saul*, *No Country for Old Men*, *Sicario*, *Oppenheimer*, *Stranger Things*, *The Harder They Fall*, and *Vince Gilligan’s Pluribus*.

Santa Fe supplies a significant portion of the regional crew. Set designers, costume fabricators, location scouts, prop masters, and sound technicians either commute to Albuquerque for studio shoots or work on Santa Fe-based location projects. Many trained at the Santa Fe University of Art and Design before its closure in 2018 and stayed in the region. Current training happens through Film New Mexico apprenticeship programs, community college courses, and on-set mentorship.

What matters for the creative economy is cross-training. A sound designer might work at Santa Fe Opera in summer, film production in fall, museum installations in winter, and Meow Wolf projects in spring. That versatility makes individual careers more resilient and the regional creative economy more capable. When one sector slows, another absorbs the talent.

Case Study

Meow Wolf: From Local Experiment to National Model

Meow Wolf is a success story that surprises people when they hear it for the first time.

Meow Wolf was founded in Santa Fe in 2008 by a collective of local artists working in warehouse spaces and temporary venues. Their early projects demonstrated that immersive, narrative-driven installation art could attract audiences beyond traditional museum visitors, but the work remained temporary and financially precarious.

George R. R. Martin changed that. His \$2.7 million investment in 2015 to purchase and renovate a former bowling alley gave the collective its first permanent venue. The House of Eternal Return opened in March 2016 with work by 135 Santa Fe-based artists, designers, fabricators, and technicians. What distinguished it was not just scale or spectacle. It was the integration of narrative structure, interactive technology, original music, theatrical lighting, and environmental design into a coherent experience that demanded repeat visits. The Santa Fe installation’s success validated a new category of cultural experience. Meow Wolf has since expanded to five permanent locations across the country and welcomed over 13 million cumulative visitors.^[42]

Santa Fe remains the company’s creative and fabrication center. Show control programmers, interactive technology developers, sound designers, narrative writers, sculptors, painters, and installation specialists work from Santa Fe on projects across all locations. That concentration creates spillover effects. Former Meow Wolf fabricators now work on museum exhibitions, stage productions,

themed entertainment, and film sets. Sound designers move between Meow Wolf, Santa Fe Opera, film production, and gallery installations. A company that started in a warehouse now employs approximately 1,000 people and exports Santa Fe-developed creative talent across the country.

The Next Generation

Creative capitals must nurture emerging talent, not only celebrate established names. IAIA graduates enter the field with MFA credentials and connections to both traditional practice and contemporary art markets. Meow Wolf alumni, the fabricators, designers, and programmers who built immersive installations, now take those skills to film production, museum work, and independent projects. Younger artists working from converted garages, shared studios, and live-work spaces represent the next generation of Santa Fe makers. Whether they can afford to stay will determine what Santa Fe looks like in twenty years. Housing is more affordable outside of the city. Many of these towns feed into the creative lifeblood for Santa Fe.

Youth Pathways: K-12 Arts Education

The pipeline begins early. Santa Fe Public Schools maintains arts programming though funding pressures affect consistency. Santa Fe Prep integrates visual and performing arts throughout its curriculum and sends graduates to conservatories nationally.

New Mexico School for the Arts, a public high school with conservatory-level expectations, trains in visual arts, music, theater, dance, literary arts, and film, graduating students with portfolios and performance experience. Many get into top art schools or go straight into professional work. In a state that struggles with education funding, producing artists who can compete nationally is notable. Youth arts organizations fill gaps that school budgets cannot cover, while developing the next generation of talent. Warehouse 21, which provides studio space for young artists, the O'Keeffe Museum's youth programs, and the Santa Fe Youth Symphony create pathways from childhood interest to professional possibility.^[43]

Design and Craft as Visible Practice

Design here starts with materials, climate, and a specific aesthetic tradition evolved over centuries. Pueblo Revival architecture and Santa Fe Style translate directly into contemporary interiors, furniture, lighting, apparel, jewelry, letterpress work, and brand systems used nationally and internationally.

Santa Fe is a national leader in Western design: belt buckles, cowboy boots, and cowboy hats produced here set standards copied elsewhere. This work spans the spectrum from sophisticated to

“New construction and renovation within designated zones, mandate compatibility with Pueblo Revival and Territorial architectural styles.”

kitsch, and the line between them often depends on who’s looking. An elaborate silver belt buckle might be high craft to a local designer and tourist souvenir to an East Coast visitor. That tension, between refinement and populism, runs through Santa Fe’s entire design economy.

Craft is visible and standards are enforced publicly. The Portal Program operates under state statute. The Spanish Market maintains century-old technical standards. Indian Market’s jury process turns away work that doesn’t meet established criteria. Buyers know what they’re getting. Artists receive fair compensation for skilled work. Students and apprentices watch the entire transaction in real time rather than hidden behind gallery walls or online storefronts.

Architecture and Historic Preservation

Santa Fe’s visual identity is not accidental. The 1957 Historic Districts Ordinance established a design review for new construction and renovation within designated zones, mandating compatibility with Pueblo Revival and Territorial architectural styles. The ordinance has been updated multiple times, most recently strengthening protections while allowing contemporary interpretation within traditional forms.^[44]

This regulatory framework shapes every building permit. Flat roofs, earth-tone stucco, wooden portals, and enclosed courtyards are not aesthetic preferences. They are code requirements enforced by the Historic Districts Review Board. The result is a cohesive built environment unlike any other American city, where a building constructed in 2024 must visually harmonize with structures from 1924 or 1724.

The architecture community includes practitioners who work within these constraints creatively and respectfully. Ed Mazria’s passive solar work emerged from Santa Fe. Local firms and dozens of smaller practices demonstrate that regional style and contemporary innovation coexist. The Santa Fe Area Home Builders Association and local preservation organizations maintain ongoing dialogue about balancing historic character with housing needs and sustainability goals.

Nature as Cognitive Infrastructure

Trails, mountains, ski fields, and open spaces are core to daily life. The Dale Ball trail system offers nearly 25 miles of linked trails minutes from downtown. Ski Santa Fe sits 16 miles up the road. These are not amenities. They are production infrastructure.

Time in natural environments measurably restores attention and improves cognitive function. Research by Rachel and Stephen Kaplan established that exposure to nature produces significant improvement on cognitive tasks.^[45] I don’t need studies to tell me this. I see it works from personal

“The dry air and immediate access to vertical terrain are measurable environmental conditions that improve cognitive function, creative output, and daily quality of life.”

experience. I've solved more problems at 8,000 feet than at my desk. Many Santa Fe residents make critical decisions on a hike, draft outlines on a chairlift, and refine concepts over lunch after a trail run. The climate provides over 300 sunny days per year. The 7,200-foot elevation produces intense sunlight. The dry air and immediate access to vertical terrain are measurable environmental conditions that improve cognitive function, creative output, and daily quality of life.

Wellness as Creative Infrastructure

Santa Fe has developed wellness infrastructure that helps working artists maintain the sustained practice their work requires. The density of integrative health practitioners here includes a concentration of therapists, bodyworkers, and contemplative practitioners; and data shows 117 licensed acupuncturists within a twelve-mile radius of downtown.^[46] Ten Thousand Waves, an outdoor Japanese spa; Upaya Zen Center; and other traditional Hispanic healing practices, including the work of curanderas, have enduring traditions in northern New Mexico.^{[47][48]} The yoga and meditation community rivals cities many times Santa Fe's size. Creative people need maintenance. Santa Fe provides it.

The Intangibles: What Twenty-Five Years Taught Me

I've spent my career measuring things, building analytics companies, advising research institutions on methodology, serving on boards where decisions require evidence. It's what I do. It's probably a character flaw. So when I tell you some of Santa Fe's most important creative advantages resist measurement, that admission doesn't come easily.

The light changed how I see. Not metaphorically. Literally. At 7,200 feet with dry air and intense UV, colors saturate differently. Shadows define edges you'd miss at lower elevations. I've lived in Austin and New Orleans, visited New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles many times. The light here is different. I still notice it every single day.

Here's how Santa Fe works. We bought our house without knowing who designed it. Months later, we learned it was Ed Mazria. If you don't know that name, you should. Mazria is an architect, author, researcher, and educator. He was a basketball star at Pratt Institute, good enough to be drafted by the New York Knicks in 1962. He chose architecture instead. He wrote *The Passive Solar Energy Book*

in 1979, which became what the American Institute of Architects calls “the Bible of solar design.” In 2002, he founded Architecture 2030, the nonprofit that convinced The American Institute of Architects (AIA), the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National Governors Association, and the entire architecture profession to commit to carbon-neutral buildings. His 2030 Challenge was written into federal law. In 2021, he received the AIA Gold Medal, the highest honor in American architecture.

In most cities, Ed Mazria would be someone you read about but never meet. In Santa Fe, we invited him to dinner. Ed and his wife Asenath came to our house, the house he designed decades ago before he was famous, and we spent the evening talking about architecture, climate, and the city we all love. Now we run into Ed almost weekly at the Marcy Park Recreation Center, where he keeps his basketball skills sharp through local pickup games. He is a friend.

That’s what I mean by creative collision rate. In a city of 89,000, the man who reshaped how the world builds, who could have played professional basketball but chose to change building codes instead, lives here, walks the same streets, plays pickup at the rec center, and comes to dinner when you ask. The people who make things that matter are accessible. They’re not hidden behind publicists or institutional walls. They are your neighbors.

Robert Oppenheimer first came to New Mexico in 1922, seeking health and respite. When he later selected Los Alamos for the Manhattan Project, he argued for the site’s vast views toward the Sangre de Cristo mountains, telling General Groves the scientists would be inspired by the landscape.

That pattern continues. I walk past the Palace of the Governors, built in 1610, to get my morning coffee. Native artisans selling under that portal descend from families who occupied this land centuries before that building existed. O’Keeffe’s studio sits an hour north. Los Alamos sits thirty-five miles up the road, still doing frontier physics. I’m not studying history. I walk through it every day, and it reminds me that the decisions we make now will either matter in a hundred years or they won’t.

The quantifiable advantages anchor the case throughout this special report, but some of what makes Santa Fe work can’t be captured in datasets; it is qualitative. After all this time walking these trails, shopping at that Market, and watching how this place shapes the people who live here, I know the intangibles matter as much as the numbers. Maybe more.

Policy, Capital Status, and Regional System

Why Being the Capital Matters

Being the state capital shortens the path from idea to funded program. The New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, the state’s Arts Division, and multiple state museums operate from Santa Fe.

Program officers and museum directors attend gallery openings, markets, performances, and community meetings. They meet artists, nonprofit and creative professionals face-to-face. That means informal conversations shape funding priorities, policy decisions get tested against practitioner feedback, and good ideas move from concept to pilot faster than in places where cultural agencies are isolated far from creative work. The State Capitol even has an art museum as part of the building. Local philanthropic infrastructure reinforces the public sector: the Santa Fe Community Foundation has supported arts and culture for decades, and Creative Santa Fe works to connect, promote, and advocate for the creative community.

The Regional Hub-and-Spoke Network

The region functions as a tight hub-and-spoke network. Albuquerque, less than an hour's drive from Santa Fe, connects by Interstate 25 and the Rail Runner commuter rail. Albuquerque provides a larger metro's commercial airport, the University of New Mexico's research capacity, architecture and design school, medical school, and regional specialty healthcare. The Rail Runner makes that connection accessible without requiring a car.

Los Alamos keeps thousands of high-end science and engineering jobs within manageable commuting distance. Pueblos lead cultural practice and anchor major annual markets. Eight Northern Pueblos maintain sovereignty, traditional governance, and active cultural practice including feast days, dances, and ceremonies that shape the regional calendar. Taos, 70 miles north, supports its own gallery scene, the Taos Pueblo (continuously inhabited for over 1,000 years), and summer music and literary programs.

Beyond Taos, a constellation of smaller art communities orbits Santa Fe. Galisteo, thirty minutes south, supports a community of artists and writers including Lucy Lippard, one of the most influential art critics of the past half-century. Her books on conceptual art, feminism, and the politics of place shaped how a generation of artists and critics understood their work. Abiquiú, an hour north, draws visitors to O'Keeffe's home and studio while sustaining its own community of working artists. Chimayo maintains weaving traditions spanning generations, with families operating looms in studios attached to their homes. These communities are not suburbs. They are independent creative nodes connected to Santa Fe by geography and professional networks, extending the region's creative density well beyond city limits. Short spokes mean lower overhead costs. More of each project budget flows directly to creative work: the gallery wall, the stage, the screen, the page, the prototype, the kitchen. Less consumed by logistics, shipping, and coordination across distant locations.

Santa Fe’s cost of living runs 12% above the national average, with housing costs roughly 46% higher. Rents have increased more than 40% over the past five years while vacancy rates remain below 3% for the third consecutive year.”

External Validation

The rankings presented in the Short Summary at the beginning of this special report are not isolated findings. They represent a consistent pattern across independent methodologies spanning two decades: NEA (2008), WESTAF (2020), SMU DataArts (2024)^[49] ^[50] ^[51] UNESCO designated Santa Fe a Creative City in 2005 for Crafts and Folk Art, the first U.S. city in that category.^[52] Different organizations, different years, different metrics. Same conclusion.

Challenges to Sustainability

Santa Fe’s creative advantages are not guaranteed to persist. Several observable trends warrant attention.

Santa Fe’s cost of living runs 12% above the national average, with housing costs roughly 46% higher. Rents have increased more than 40% over the past five years while vacancy rates remain below 3% for the third consecutive year. Average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is approximately \$1,750 per month. At the national median artist income of \$42,000, the standard 30% affordability threshold allows only \$1,050.^[53] Many artists live in casitas, guest houses, shared arrangements, or surrounding communities. The short-term rental market adds pressure. Santa Fe ranks twelfth nationally in Airbnb listings per capita. Six percent of the population left in the past two years, replaced by seven percent new arrivals with higher incomes. The city needs an estimated 5,000 additional affordable units. Siler Yard, Santa Fe’s first dedicated artist live-work housing, opened in 2022 with 65 units.

Policy responses are emerging. The City of Santa Fe adopted an Affordable Housing Plan in 2022 targeting workforce housing development. The Homewise organization has built affordable homes and provided homebuyer education for over 35 years. Some developers have incorporated artist live-work units into mixed-use projects. The Santa Fe Community Housing Trust maintains affordable rental units. The city recently passed a millionaire tax on home sales whose proceeds go to affordable housing. While state legislation enabling accessory dwelling units creates incremental supply, these efforts have not matched the problem’s scale. The gap between artist income and housing cost remains the most significant threat to Santa Fe’s creative sustainability.^[54]

The creative economy has seasonal concentration. Indian Market weekend generates an estimated \$100 million or more in economic impact, compressed into 72 hours. The COVID-19 pandemic

demonstrated how quickly visitor-dependent revenue can collapse. Opera, Chamber Music Festival, and summer markets drive significant activity, but year-round creative employment remains thinner. A resilient creative economy requires diversification: export-oriented businesses like Meow Wolf that generate revenue nationally, institutional employers that operate independent of tourism cycles, and digital channels that reach collectors who never visit.

Gallery economics present structural challenges. Standard gallery commission runs 50 percent. Booth fees at major markets range from several hundred to several thousand dollars. Materials, studio rent, healthcare, and retirement fall entirely on individual makers. High-profile sales figures at Indian Market or International Folk Art Market do not necessarily translate to sustainable annual income for participating artists.

The post-2020 migration of remote workers has changed Santa Fe's composition. New residents arrive with technology salaries, location flexibility, and no prior connection to local creative traditions. This influx increases housing competition and shifts neighborhood demographics. It also brings potential audiences, collaborators, and customers who might otherwise never encounter Santa Fe's creative community. Some remote workers become collectors, patrons, or eventually makers themselves. Others remain disconnected from the galleries and markets around them. The long-term effect on Santa Fe's creative identity, whether this wave strengthens, dilutes, or simply coexists with existing practice, remains an open question that will answer itself over the next decade.

These observations are not criticisms of Santa Fe's creative identity. They are conditions that require ongoing attention if that identity is to remain a living reality rather than a historical artifact.

Data and Context

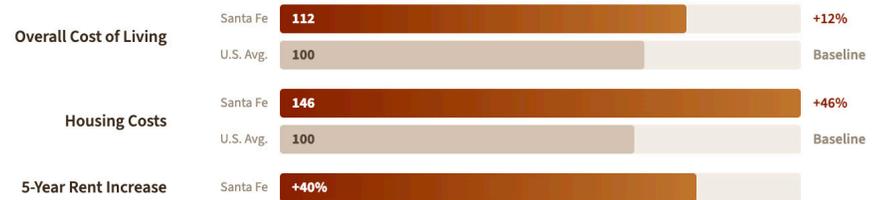
One of the most visible structural challenges facing Santa Fe's creative life is generational balance. Census data shows that Santa Fe's median age is about 46, compared with roughly 39 nationwide. More than 30 percent of residents are 60 or older, while the share of residents under 35 is notably smaller than in many growing creative cities.

This imbalance is not abstract to me. After spending many years in Santa Fe, it's something I notice repeatedly in everyday life. At gallery openings, public talks, performances, and community events, the audiences tend to skew older. When I speak with local employers, educators, artists, and nonprofit leaders, I often hear the same concern about how difficult it is to attract and retain younger workers, creators, and families who can imagine a long-term future here. Service roles change hands frequently, and stable career paths can feel harder to sustain.

This is not a critique of Santa Fe's older residents, who bring deep experience, mentorship, and cultural stewardship, but rather an honest reflection of a pattern that many people who live here

The Cost of Creative Capital

SANTA FE'S COST OF LIVING VS. NATIONAL AVERAGE — THE AFFORDABILITY CHALLENGE



The Artist Housing Gap



<3%

VACANCY RATE FOR 3 CONSECUTIVE YEARS

5,000

ESTIMATED ADDITIONAL AFFORDABLE UNITS NEEDED

#12

NATIONAL RANK IN AIRBNB LISTINGS PER CAPITA

6%

OF POPULATION LEFT IN PAST 2 YEARS

7%

NEW ARRIVALS — WITH HIGHER INCOMES

65

ARTIST LIVE-WORK UNITS AT SILER YARD (OPENED 2022)

Sources: CZER Cost of Living Index (2024); City of Santa Fe Affordable Housing Plan (2022); Census Bureau; Homewise; report data. Index values use national average = 100 baseline. Artist income threshold based on 30% of national median artist income (\$42,000/yr).

“The question is whether the next generation gets to build on what we inherited, or whether we let it erode into something we merely remember.”

recognize. Creative ecosystems remain healthy when knowledge and leadership move naturally from one generation to the next. Without enough younger residents putting down roots, even a vibrant creative culture can begin to feel more preserved than evolving.

Some will read this document and think we’re describing a city that no longer exists, or exists only for those who arrived early enough to buy in. That’s a fair challenge. The data I’ve cited is recent, but data lags reality. If we’re honest, the next version of this paper, written ten years from now, might tell a different story. That’s exactly why the policy choices we make now matter.

Conclusion: Why This Matters Now

Santa Fe’s creative capital status was built across four centuries by people who stayed and made things. Pueblo communities, Spanish Colonial settlers, railroad-era artists, Los Alamos scientists, each generation layering on what came before. The rankings confirm what this history produced: per-capita creative density that no American city of comparable size matches. This creative density is responsible for an environment conducive to creative encounters, collaborations, and innovative approaches.

Santa Fe’s creative energy is measurable in numbers and directly experienced in daily life. Every time I step onto a trail or walk through the Plaza, I’m reminded that creative capital here is not abstract. It’s a daily advantage for every resident, student, visitor, and maker.

The question is no longer whether Santa Fe is the Creative Capital of America. The data settles that. The question is whether the next generation gets to build on what we inherited, or whether we let it erode into something we merely remember.

The data is clear. What we do with it is up to us.

Gratitude

We acknowledge the valuable support of *Santa Fe Magazine* in helping bring this special report to the public. Special thanks to Alonet Zarum Zandan for research assistance and editorial review. All research, analysis, and conclusions are independently and objectively produced for the benefit of the community. Also we appreciate the help from Keith Leslie, Gloria Abella Ballen, Ron Duncan Hart, Melissa Garza, and Hannah Onstad for their review, edits and insights. Finally, we'd like to thank all of the creators and those who came before us in shaping Santa Fe's unique history.

Disclaimer

This report serves as a snapshot in time of creative contributions from a wide spectrum of this community. I have probably left out someone's favorite gallery, overlooked an important collaboration, or undersold a creative sector that deserves more attention. That is on me. This document reflects decades of observation, but Santa Fe's creative community is deeper and more complex than any single person can capture.

A Note on Data and Sources

This analysis draws on publicly available data from federal agencies (NEA, Census Bureau), independent research organizations (SMU DataArts, WESTAF), institutional reports (Santa Fe Opera, LANL, Meow Wolf), and direct observation over 25 years of Santa Fe residence. Some baseline studies date from earlier periods; where noted, these establish historical context rather than current conditions. All claims are intended to be independently verifiable. Subsequent NEA research has extended the Artists in the Workforce series, including state-level estimates for 2015-2019 and updated national profiles of artists and other cultural workers. These newer products focus on national and state trends rather than replicating the 2000 metro-ranking tables used here for historical context.[55][56]

Readers seeking to update specific data points should consult the original sources listed in the references.

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