

NEW CONSTRUCTION

# STRENGTH, TRADITION *Harmony*

THE BUFFALO THUNDER RESORT &amp; CASINO

BY KRISTA REINER

At the foot of the breathtaking Sangre de Cristo Mountains in northern New Mexico lies the state's newest and largest entertainment destination, the Buffalo Thunder Resort & Casino. Owned and operated through a joint venture between the Pueblo of Pojoaque and the Hilton Hotels Corporation, the property offers an all-inclusive escape into one of America's most eclectic and historic cities.





In August, the \$280 million project opened its doors, offering guests plenty of casino action in its 80,000 square-foot casino, complete with 1,200 slot machines, 22 table games, and a 10-table poker room. The property also includes a five-story hotel tower with 390 rooms and suites, plus 81 Homewood casitas; a 36-hole Towa Golf Course designed by Hale Irwin and Bill Phillips; a full-service spa and fitness center; indoor and outdoor pools; seven restaurants including Turquoise Trail Bar & Grill, the Painted Parrot Buffet and famed chef Mark Miller's Red Sage; 66,000 square feet of meeting and convention space; and thrilling nightlife and headline entertainment.

The people of the Pueblo of Pojoaque have a storied and unique culture, and because the resort resides on their ancestral lands, the lead Architect for the project, Barry Thalden of Thalden-Boyd-Emery Architects, made a conscious effort to preserve the site and the historic nature of Pueblo architecture. "The property integrates the organic nature of the Pueblo style of building with many design elements that have influenced what is now known as the Santa Fe Style," Thalden says. "This is a place where nature, art, architecture, and history all come together, and this project has enabled the Pueblo to share their history and still build for the future."

Although Thalden-Boyd-Emery Architects led the design team, the process was one of teamwork between the architect, owner and contractor. "George Rivera, governor of the Pueblo, and an internationally known sculptor in his own right, participated in all of the design decisions," Thalden notes. "Through a process our office has defined as 'Integrated Project Development,' the Buffalo Thunder team not only met but exceeded expectations in terms of design, while delivering the completed project under budget and three months ahead of schedule."

As the team began planning the project's expansive design, they discovered many obstacles within the 180-acre site. "The natural slope of the land resulted in a 20-foot drop from back to front," Thalden recalls. "The solution was to step the resort down the hillside on three different levels. The site also had unique challenges. At one point the entire building had to be rethought when a previously unknown earthquake fault was discovered running thru the site."

Another critical part of the citing process was the preservation and conservation of the surrounding water. "Water is not only a scarce resource but is sacred to the Pojoaque people," Thalden says. "Pojoaque means the watering place. As a solution, the resort reuses all of the 'grey water' from the hotel to water the golf course and the landscaping. This saves about 40 percent of the normal water usage."

Not only does the design's conservation of water reflect the close ties the tribe has to water, it was also brought in to the design aesthetics. "Historically the tribe provided water to the surrounding pueblos during times of extreme drought. The free-form shape of the swimming pool reflects this essence. In fact, water is an ever present image, from the fountains and pools, to the abstraction in the custom floor mosaic in the lobby."

Understanding both the site and the historic character of Pueblo Architecture was critical when designing the elements of both the interior and exterior of Buffalo Thunder, and the design team faced specific challenges trying to synthesize the modern standards of a luxury Hilton Resort while keeping the Pueblo style. "Each of the 384 guestrooms and suites, and 81 Homewood casitas feature custom-designed furniture incorporating the traditional Pojoaque design symbols of earth, air, fire and water," Thalden says. "Most of the guestrooms open onto balconies that capture the magnificent views of the mountains and the dramatic sunrises and sunsets for which New Mexico is famous."

Many guestrooms also incorporate the historic Kiva fireplace, adding to the intimate experience. Pottery patterns, viga logs and adobe construction are reflected in Buffalo Thunder's contemporary southwest design. "The organic shapes of the landscape are reflected in the intensely detailed forms of the casino and retail corridor ceilings using a variety of shapes, heights, colors and surfaces," Thalden adds. "Although traditional art forms were incorporated into the property, they were organized to function efficiently as required in a full-service upscale resort."

It was definitely a challenge to incorporate the traditional cultural elements of the Pueblo while at the same time using contemporary materials, but the design team managed to create a truly unique resort in



light of the challenges. "For instance, chimney pots and luminaries gave the team new opportunities to experiment with specialty construction techniques," Thalden says. "Many test samples of fiberglass and resin were explored to provide the appropriate materials to withstand the hot summer sun and sometimes freezing winter conditions. The result is an amazing replica of these elements."

Synthesizing the desired hand-built adobe construction look with a modern energy efficient exterior also proved to be a challenge. "The conventional method of smooth finish was abandoned in favor of a more 'hand-crafted' look," Thalden explains. "The state-of-the-art exterior construction was supplemented with mud plaster having imperfections found in authentic adobe construction."

Inside the hotel and abstracted in the casino, guests will find the traditional wood viga and latilla ceilings common to the Pueblo but with a conventional twist. "The organic shapes of the landscape are reflected in the intensely detailed forms of the ceiling," Thalden describes. "The two-story lobby space is supported by massive red sandstone columns with wood ceiling poles radiating off of them. Elements such as these and the stone columns and fire bowls at the pool stand as symbols of the Pueblo tradition of earth, fire and water, the basic ingredients of Pojoaque pottery for thousands of years."

Thalden also noted that traditionally, the Pueblo style utilized local and ingenious materials and so when creating this modern resort the design team respected that philosophy. "Native rock was used extensively for retaining walls on the site in lieu of concrete and, to reduce shipping costs for this remote site, a concrete batch plant was erected on the site," Thalden explains. "Windows were selected from a manufacturer that utilizes 100-percent sustainable wood. All insulation in exterior walls and roofs exceed normal standards."

With over 700 pieces of original Pueblo art, including pottery, basket sculptures and paintings strategically placed throughout the property, the interior and exterior combine to create one harmonious piece of art that is the Buffalo Thunder Resort & Casino.

**Photos courtesy of Cornell & Company.**

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THE BUFFALO THUNDER RESORT & CASINO

## Key Players

OWNER:

**The Pueblo of Pojoaque**

OPERATORS:

**The Pueblo of Pojoaque and Hilton Hotels Corporation**

ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN:

**Thalden-Boyd-Emery Architects**

CONTRACTORS:

**Balfour Beatty Construction**

### **KRISTA REINER**

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# CONGRATULATIONS!

to the Pueblo of Pojoaque on the Grand Opening  
of Buffalo Thunder Resort & Casino



From your friends at



**Thalden•Boyd•Emery**  
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