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from

Only In New Mexico: A History of Architecture of the University of New Mexico

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Foreward

Just as New Mexico and its culture can rightly be described as unique among the America's 50 states, so can the architecture and planning of the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque be considered unique among America's colleges and universities.

UNM's blend of Pueblo/Spanish style architecture with regionally sensitive modernist forms is a direct reflection of New Mexico's singular place in American culture. No other major college campus in this country is so deeply rooted in indigenous American and Hispanic history, nor so intimately tied to a long existing regional outlook and aesthetic.

While other campus planners and designers around the nation traditionally looked to Europe and used classical, Collegiate Georgian, Collegiate Gothic, Mediterranean, and International Style models, among others, UNM's leadership, for the better part of a century, wanted the state's flagship university to be a distinctly New Mexican place, what one wag called "a pueblo on the mesa."

New Mexico can unequivocally claim to be the heartland of both Native American Pueblo culture and the first indigenous Hispanic culture in North America. Kubler, George, *Religious Architecture of New Mexico*. Chicago: Rio Grande Press, Inc. 1962. p. 5. The 19 distinct Pueblo governments and cultural milieus in New Mexico, which have survived European contact largely in tact, express what the late Tewa anthropologist Alfonso Ortiz called a "clearly unbroken cultural continuity" over more than two millennium Ortiz, Alfonso, ed. *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 9. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1979. p. 3.. That unprecedented record of survival in the New World is mirrored by the tenacity of Hispanic culture which arrived in Pueblo territory 450 years ago. The isolation of New Mexican Hispanics from Spain and Mexico in the 18th and 19th centuries resulted in the evolution of a still thriving local Catholic culture with a community ethos devoted to service, and complete with its history of creating stone and adobe mission churches, first built with Pueblo labor and employing both European and Pueblo engineering practices and aesthetics.

Historian Marc Simmons puts in perspective the interaction of these two cultures with what he calls "alien" Anglo America society when he writes "Through principles supplied by the Declaration of Independence,...[Pueblos and Hispanics] have tried to win equality while remaining different and have sought liberty to pursue a time-honored way of life. That history also includes the long story of Anglo-America's adjustment to things that are uniquely and engagingly New Mexican." Simmons, Marc. *New Mexico: A History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1977. p.12.

The story of UNM's campus architecture and planning provides a perfect example of that mainstream American "adjustment" to Pueblo and Hispanic culture. As campus planning and design consultant Richard P. Dober has written "Perhaps more than any other regional architecture in North America,

the Pueblo Style gives clear clues as to its origins.” Dober, Richard P. AICP. Pueblo Style and Campus Image: Some Observations on the University of New Mexico Albuquerque Campus. 1988 draft of an “Appreciation,” p. 3. UNM’s sense of place is unmistakable.

The school’s elegantly eccentric regional style campus was pioneered by an a mainstream academic, UNM’s third president William George Tight, and an Anglo architect, E.B. Cristy, who both fell in love, as the expression goes, with New Mexico in the late 19th century. Their visionary appreciation of the social vitality and creative genius of Hispanic and Pueblo architects, artists and craftsmen helped to solidify the burgeoning regional style. Tight hired Cristy at the turn of the century to remodel UNM’s main building, the brick Richardson Romanesque Hodgin Hall, along patterns that both men had noticed in New Mexico mission churches, which they early considered blends of Pueblo and Hispanic building practices. Tight’s, advocacy of the Pueblo Style, as it’s sometimes called, has been described as “an inspired act of image-making.” Dober, p. 5.

In 1927, the Spanish Pueblo Revival style was mandated by the university’s regents as the school’s official architectural style. Between 1933 and 1962, Dober writes, “thirty-eight UNM buildings were constructed in the Pueblo style, almost all of them influenced, where not actually designed, by the inspired vision of one man, John Gaw Meem.” While Meem was not the creator of the style, known by numerous variations on the words Spanish and Pueblo, he was its greatest practitioner.

“If there is an architect, other than Meem, who has a greater legacy of executed college and university buildings, designed for one site, in a consistent style, his or her name has yet to surface in campus design histories. The Albuquerque campus,” Dober asserts, “is unique then, in two respects, design motifs and designer.” Dober, p.7.

Meem was a transplanted New Mexican and modernist architect with a profound respect for indigenous cultures. He worked in the avant-garde tradition, drawing from so called “primitive” and vernacular imagery, not unlike Picasso and others. Meem was adamant that the Pueblo/Spanish Style was not merely cosmetic, or what we might call today Disneyesque.

He wrote that “Some old forms are so honest, so completely logical and native to the environment that one finds—to one’s delight and surprise—that modern problems can be solved, and are best solved by use of forms based on tradition.” Meem, John Gaw. “Old Forms for New Buildings,” *Mass:Journal of the School of Architecture and Planning, University of New Mexico* (Spring 1983), p. 8.

He continued by saying that “the value of this use may be questioned by some; but to me, it seems to add a richness and actually to enhance a series of values. In a world tending more and more to inevitable standardization—welcomed from the practical point of view, but spiritually repugnant to us—it is truly refreshing to feel that in our contemporary architectural movement [there] is still an opportunity for the expression of ancient values.” Meem, p.8.

One of New Mexico’s premier architects, George Clayton Pearl FAIA, has written that UNM’s “collection of buildings and grounds provides one of the most moving built environments in the country.” Pearl, a designer of many contemporary UNM buildings, believes that the school managed to emerge from the “cataclysmic expansion” the campus underwent from the 1960s to the 1980s with “its character not only intact but also enlivened and enriched” primarily because of the respectful sensitivity and management genius of University Architect Van Dorn Hooker, the author of this book. Pearl,

George Clayton. "Buildings of Context: Van Dorn Hooker at UNM," *Century: A Southwest Journal of Observation and Opinion* (October 1, 1980), pp.14-15.

"The essential values of the campus," Pearl wrote, "the intense feeling of knowing exactly where you are in the world and where you are in the continuum of time, the architectural unity with no sacrifice of vitality or individuality, the temporal texture—these are intuitively perceived. One need not be aware of that complete history of a regional style which is more visible here than anywhere else, from its earliest stirrings in the remodeled Hodgin Hall through its classical peak in the buildings of John Gaw Meem, to the post-internationalism of the past two decades, when archaeology is abandoned but context is celebrated." Pearl, p.15.

Hooker managed to reconcile at UNM a regional style grounded in vernacular architecture with functionalist concerns by guiding the architects UNM commissioned in the 1960s and beyond to allow modernist geometric forms to reflect the New Mexico cultural milieu. This he achieved largely through the use of earth colors, modularization, and evocative shapes that did not confront or offend the functionalist abhorrence of decoration.

The result is a campus that not only alludes to the full cultural atmosphere and texture of New Mexico, but also demonstrates how building technology and philosophy of late 20th century American architecture can adapt itself to local needs, conditions, and meanings.

Many American universities, UNM included, can pride themselves in having a coherent campus environment, enlightened by a singular architectural style. Aesthetically unified campuses such as the University of Washington, University of Virginia, and Stanford University are the most obvious examples. But no flagship university in the nation, other than UNM, has had an indigenous architectural tradition to draw from, even though California Mission style buildings have contributed to the regional flavor of many universities in the west.

The "exotic harmony" Kubler, p.143. in New Mexico mission churches that architectural historian George Kubler described in his "Religious Architecture of New Mexico," was translated into the Spanish/Pueblo style and given an extended life at UNM. The vigor sensitivity of this style to its immediate surroundings brings to the campus an originality and grandeur that mirrors the New Mexico landscape itself. In an epigraph in his book, Kubler quotes Sheldon Cheney and Martha Candler's views on unique place of New Mexican architecture in American life. They wrote in 1935, "It is not amiss to say...that we waited too long to acknowledge the unique and very great heritage we had in the early New Mexican missions. We now see them as one of the country's painfully few genuine creative achievements...." Chaney, S. and Candler, M. "Santos," *Parnassus*, Vol. VII (1935), pp.22-24.

The cultural hybrid vigor of those buildings transported into an academic setting have made the University of New Mexico's central campus, in my judgment, an architectural homage to one of the few places in the New World that Europeans and indigenous people worked out a cultural symbiosis in which native and European world views interacted with each other but preserved their independence and integrity. That makes the "exotic harmony" of UNM's campus symbolic of the possibilities for not only cooperation between cultures but even empathetic and self-respecting collaboration.