



RANDOM THOUGHTS . . . concerning the practice of architecture in new mexico . . . John Reed, AIA

In my opinion the architects who are practicing in New Mexico are a fortunate group. There are more characteristics conducive to a meaningful practice in this area than in almost any other area. Our basic problem is to recognize these characteristics and capitalize upon them.

The natural features of our area are perhaps the most important influences. How many of us really make a conscientious effort to approach our projects from the viewpoint of creating something truly regional? By regional I do not mean the use of contemporary materials and methods to create a "pueblo" atmosphere. The Indians built as they did because they had to, it was the only way they knew. I like to think we have advanced since that time. We should certainly maintain the "living" characteristics of our area's architectural heritage. A good regional expression can be created in a strictly contemporary manner. The natural characteristics which make this possible are — the sun, shadows and shade, even the wind, snow and cold, the mountains, mesas, trees, rocks, cacti, and many others. Everywhere we look there are reasons why we should develop a contemporary-regional architecture. We seem to take all this for granted and assume we have considered them automatically. Looking about us, however, we know this is not true.

We can be most creative perhaps in the aspect of form. The natural forms in the New Mexico area seem to be pleading with us to express them in our buildings. These forms — soft rolling hills, craggy mountains, magnificent mesas, and winding rivers, are a few which give us a right to be "sculptural" in our work. Thus we have no excuse for architecture that is not

plastic, fluid, and exciting in form. This approach naturally brings about more original and meaningful spatial qualities.

Color is another important characteristic of our area which seldom is given the serious consideration it deserves. Our state is rich in color. We should use it much more than merely application to "walls" after a space is created. Why not use color in our designs much as we do building materials. We should build with color in order to create psychologically pleasant, relaxed spaces which help counteract the fast, nervous pace of the business world. The landscape about us is colorfully restful, and this gives us reason to create this atmosphere in our architecture.

I firmly believe that we owe it to our clients, our area, and ourselves to seriously try to develop a truly indigenous architecture.

The remainder of this article deals with personal observations of our practice of architecture which concern me greatly. These observations concern weaknesses which should be corrected.

1. Why are architects so quick to be destructively critical of each other? Very seldom have I talked with another architect in New Mexico who has genuine praise for another or the work of another. Why does this petty professional jealousy exist?

Good, honest competition helps us all. We should be congratulatory when one of our competitors lands a nice project, or provides us with a successful, meaningful addition to our environment. We must begin to "pull together" — to erase all the "pulling apart" that has gone before.

2. The foregoing brings about thoughts concerning our AIA Chapter. We are seemingly defeating the purpose of the AIA in this area — just when we need it most. The national organization is doing a tremendous job, and if we do not take advantage of the many opportunities provided by the AIA, we can only blame ourselves.

It concerns me that two or three architects, whom I consider very good practitioners, are not members of the AIA. Perhaps I touched upon the reason above. The younger architects will eventually make our state chapter the success it should be — with the help of the more experienced ones who sincerely believe in ethical practice. It is a shame that the most serious violators of the AIA ethical standards in the past have been prominent AIA members.

3. I believe that 6% should be the standard minimum fee for architectural services — with increasing and decreasing percentages depending upon the size and complexity of the project. We should post a proposed fee schedule in our offices. If each firm held to the same schedule, most of our problems would be solved.

Typical of why I feel this way is the situation that has existed in Albuquerque for many years — the straight 5% fee for public school work. According to AIA research, on a 6% fee basis, the architect should realize a profit of approximately 15% of the fee. You will agree that any business must maintain a similar profit margin to be successful. If you discard 1/6 of the fee — you have lost any chance for profit. Is it fair to charge a private client 6% and receive only 5% from a public body?

Where do we reduce our services in order to make up for the missing profit possibility? The most important phase of our services suffers — design. The success or failure of a project is determined at this stage. Our few successful schools have been carefully planned at the beginning — they didn't just "happen." Who suffers? The architect, in effect, makes a generous donation to the city — but he certainly doesn't get to write it off tax-wise. The client suffers — and when you analyse it, our children are the clients. They are being deprived of good design — because the school system, through precedent, has decided that this must be "donated" by the architect.

4. This last item deals with the types of architectural practices in New Mexico. Some practices are businesses and not professions — and good design is not a major concern to this type organization. This group takes "the easy way out" — easy to build, easy to detail, easy to please the client in that everything is non-arbitrary. The primary concern of this group is that of getting something done, getting the fee, and forgetting it.

Some practices approach problems in the design stage with the idea that each project must be "different" — trying to top that which has gone before, employing all the cliches available. This unstable approach brings about many disappointments. In a short while everyone (client and architect included) gets "tired" of the final solution. This certainly doesn't bring about "lasting" architecture.

In conclusion — I believe that we can all achieve "lasting" and "inspiring" solutions if we diligently try to develop a meaningful contemporary — regional architecture.
—John Reed

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Recommended by Laura Hersloff and double checked.