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and the FRED HARVEY HOUSES

by: Dr. David Gebhard
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For well over a half a century a traveler's first impression of the American Southwest was through one of the many Atkinson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad stations and the associated hotel and restaurant operated by the Fred Harvey organization. Here the eastern or midwestern traveler was drawn into the romantic world of the Spanish conquistador and equally unfamiliar world of the Pueblo and Navajo Indians. On alighting on the platform the visitor encountered not the usual neo-Roman or neo-Renaissance station so characteristic then of the eastern sections of the country, but instead he was faced with a low two or three story structure, almost domestic in character. He encountered no overpowering piers and columns, no dentils and wreaths, no putti or cupids, but rather he found before him a simple unpretentious stucco covered building, often enclosing small intimate gardens and court yards, with shaded loggias, textured brick and tile floors, broad fireplaces and wood beamed ceilings.

These structures seemed to fit so naturally and unstentatiously into their Southwestern environment that little conscious thought was given to them as rather remarkable examples of architecture—examples which not only personify our age, but which in many ways have made a notable contribution to the American architectural scene. With a certain degree of historical perspective now available it is possible to look again at these station-hotels and in the process discover that a good number of them entail an unusual synthesis and expression of architectural ideas. At first one tends to think of them as characteristic examples of Spanish Colonial eclecticism, yet a second glance well establishes that such is hardly the case. In truth they may be thought of as instances of Neo-Rationalism—the same architectural vocabulary arrived at by such early twentieth century architects as the Europeans Adolf Loos and Josef Hoffman, or as the California architect, Irving Gill. Traditional features—occasional projecting vegas, heavily articulated walls, reminiscent of adobe construction, arched porches and passage ways—are often to be found, but these are grouped together and assembled in a highly original fashion. Coupled with these elements are features obviously derived from Bungalow and Craftsman traditions of the West Coast.
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EL NAVAJO HOTEL, Gallup, N. M., 1916-17, now demolished.

E. A. Harrison, architect.

View from train platform
Writing Room
The first two decades of this century (1900 to 1920) is finally written the modern movement in American architecture.

The most outstanding examples of Atchinson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad-Harvey Houses were those constructed during the first two decades of this century at Lamy, Albuquerque, Las Vegas (New Mex.) Vaughn and Gallup. In some cases the Railroad Company engaged its own personnel to design the building—an example of this being the El Navajo Hotel at Gallup, which was designed in 1916-17 by E. A. Harrison, the railroad's chief draftsman. There are a number of instances though where outside architects were commissioned to design the station-hotels—Myron H. Church of Chicago produced the plan of the Las Chavez Hotel at Vaughn in 1908-09, and Louis Curtiss of Kansas City was the architect for El Ortiz at Lamy.

The El Ortiz Hotel at Lamy is unquestionably the most romantic and in certain ways the most eclectic with its false vega ceiling, its portal and completely enclosed court yard. The El Navajo Hotel at Gallup entails the most vigorous modern statement. In the latter building one discovers horizontal and vertical groupings of windows, "cubistic" handling of walls and projecting balconies, the three tasseled pair of lights attached to the main block of the building, all of which were design motifs which had become the vocabulary of the early modern movements in European and American architecture.

In the end though the real fascination of either the El Ortiz or the El Navajo, or for that matter the Alvarado in Albuquerque, is the impression one comes away with that these buildings are neither fully committed to an eclectic or modern point of view. Instead the governing features seem to have been a concern for human-oriented scale, a deep feeling for natural textures and materials, and a desire organically to integrate the building to its natural and historical environment; features which are all too often missing in our present architectural scene.

An excellent example of one of the Harvey Houses which expresses what we could call an architectural middle ground is the Las Chavez Hotel at Vaughn. Like many of these buildings the one at Vaughn has unfortunately been long abandoned. The change from coal to oil burning train engines has eliminated the importance of the town as a railroad repair center, and added to this is the fact that the community has never developed, as was originally planned, as a major center for the shipment of livestock.

Still, even in its rather ruinous condition, with fallen stucco, broken roof tiles and boarded windows, the hotel stands out as a vigorous architectural statement. A close and more detailed examination of the building reveals an intriguing synthesis of stylistic ideas which were current during the first two decades of the century. The basic form of the structure with its plain rough stucco surfaces and its almost complete elimination of mouldings around doors and windows is highly reminiscent of the Neo-Rationalism of the California Architect Irving Gill or of the work of the Austrian architect Adolf Loos. On the other hand the low pitched gable roofs with their extensive overhangs, projecting beam ends and exposed rafters are similar in spirit to the bungalow houses of the brothers Charles and Henry Greene of California. The few purely historical details such as the row of arched openings of the veranda, the brackets which support the small balcony on the northeastern side, the three cast stone ornaments on the same side and the stepped parapets are lightly submerged into the overall mass of the building, and in no way do they dominate the design. This same straightforward approach to design also occurs in the interior, where a few stained glass windows form the only significant non-structural embellishment.

From an historical point of view the Las Chavez Hotel represents a significant and at the same time a rather unknown aspect of early twentieth-century architecture. It aptly demonstrates that the "Progressive" designs of Frank Lloyd Wright, Irving Gill, Bernard Maybeck and the Greene brothers were not as unique as we have come to think of them. For it is slowly coming apparent that during its first years the early modern movement in American architecture had come very close to establishing itself as an accepted vernacular tradition. When a history of the architecture of these decades (1900 to 1920) is finally written the Harvey Houses of the Southwest will unquestionably occupy an important place.

—David Gebhard
This is the first in a series of three articles on the architecture of the Fred Harvey Houses in New Mexico. The next article will be concerned with a detailed presentation of the El Ortiz Hotel at Lamy, designed by Louis Curtiss. All of the illustrations plus the factual information relating to the Harvey Houses was made available through the kindness of the Fred Harvey System and the Atchinson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. The author is particularly indebted to the help of Mr. Stuart Harvey, Mr. T. A. Blair, Mr. Ralph W. Ater and Mr. Tom Menaugh. The photos of the El Ortiz Hotel and the exterior of the El Navajo Hotel were taken by Edward H. Kemp, and the photograph of the interior of the El Navajo was taken by Edward J. Davison.
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