R. M. Schindler in New Mexico
— 1915
by David Gebhard

As a visual experience the Southwest has always produced a deep and lasting effect on visitors and newcomers to the area. Even in the early years of this century it was one of the few sections of the country which still revealed a unified and still vital organic life — a close rapport between nature, the works of man in the form of his architecture, and his economic, social and religious life. In some instances the impact of this folk environment has been such that it has overpowered even the creative individual and has seemingly destroyed his ability to seek out and discover new and meaningful syntheses. The list of architects, painters and writers who have utilized this environment as a mechanism of retreat into the past is
disturbingly great. But there have also been those who have found in this world a stimulus to their own activities. One of these was R. M. Schindler (1887-1953), a pioneer figure in the development of modern architecture in this country. The records of Schindler's trip to New Mexico in 1915 — his note book, photographs of the region, his drawings of its architecture, and finally the effect it produced on his own work — form a fascinating chapter in his own life and work, and equally an interesting episode within the history of New Mexico.

Perhaps one reason for the positive effect of the Southwestern scene on Schindler was that he saw and experienced these forms through the eyes — not of a provincial easterner, but through the eyes of a highly educated European. He was a graduate of both the Austrian Technical Institute (in architecture) and the Vienna Academy of Arts (in painting). He had worked in Vienna for several years as a draftsman before coming to this country in 1914 to accept a position with a Chicago architectural firm. In the summer of the following year he set out on a long tour which took him first to San Francisco, later to San Diego and on his way back through Santa Fe and Taos. He stayed several weeks in the Taos area visiting the Pueblos, making sketches and photographing many of the older buildings, and also drawing up preliminary plans for a summer house for a client whom he had met in Chicago, Dr. T. P. Martin.

His light agitated pencil drawings of the older examples of adobe architecture (similar in both spirit and technique to the work of such Viennese painters as Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele) caught the plastic sculptural qualities of the buildings of the region. Relying exclusively on a rapidly delineated line he was able to convey the character of irregular bulk and mass of the plastered adobe walls, and to reveal the close organic relationship between the building and its site.
Photographs taken by R. M. Schindler during his New Mexico visit in 1915
The same sensitivity is to be seen in his photographs of the adobe buildings of Taos and its vicinity. These photographs are technically that of an amateur, but like the drawings they indicate what interested Schindler in this architecture — not its picturesque quality, but the sympathetic way in which materials had been used, and the cave-like space which had been created within these buildings.

The projected Martin house, to have been built in Taos, discloses how Schindler sought to apply his concept of the new architecture to a regional architectural scene. If one were to glance only at the floor plans of this house one would come away with a general feeling that it made very few concession to local traditions. The layout was rigidly symmetrical; on the surface even more academic in this sense than the symmetry of Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie houses, which to a considerable extent inspired Schindler's plans. But this devotion to bilateral symmetry on Schindler's part did not really create a form which seemed to be in basic opposition to its surroundings. The reason for this is that Schindler understood the underlying nature of his materials — adobe walls and wood vega roofs — and he forcefully expressed these qualities in his design. The basic thickness of the adobe walls are felt in the deep reveals of the infrequently placed windows, the almost tunnel-like form of the exterior entrances into the dining room and the billiard room, and the exterior mud-like glob of the living room fireplace. The ease with which adobe may be modeled, its lack of rectangular precision is beautifully realized in the irregularity of wall surfaces, of the windows and door openings and in the projecting bay windows.

With the exception of the interior court, the plan of course has little to do with the traditional layout of a New Mexico house. The main interior space of the house, which contains the centrally placed living room with the dining room
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to one side and the billiard room to the other, is a highly complex realization of Wright's open plan of the early 1900's. The large reflecting pool situated in front of the living room was another non-traditional feature which was also inspired by Wright's work. Only Schindler's design of the pool, partially surrounded by a low adobe wall, would have created a visual feeling similar to the way in which Islamic-Persian architects realized the architectural potential of water. Schindler's design for the Martin house was by no means a complete success. In it he attempted to blend together a sculptural approach to architecture (with which he was not fully in sympathy), with a more open volumetric concern with space as the major expressive element. As Schindler wrote in 1921 "The aim of all (past) architectural effort was to subjugate structural masses . . . the form was exclusively concerned for a plastic structural materials," whereas the prime concern of the contemporary architect was to concern himself with the " . . . forms of space." ¹ In the Martin house he ended up with a piece of sculpture situated in the landscape, which had very little to do with the space which he created within. It was really not until the later designs for his own house in Los Angeles (1922) and the plan for the Pueblo Ribera Apartments La Jolla (1923) that he fully absorbed the lessons which he had learned from the traditional architecture of New Mexico. In these two buildings space truly became the dominant theme, realized in part through surface forms which were certainly inspired by these older structures. They were sculptural, but not through the media of mass, but through a complex interlocking of horizontal and vertical planes.

—David Gebhard

¹ Notes from a lecture "About Architecture," written by Schindler in January, 1921.


The Martin house was published in the Western Architect, vol. 25, April, 1917; the plans for the house were shown at the 12th annual Chicago Architectural Club Exhibition in 1917.
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