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WHAT REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE MEANS TO ME

Phillippe Register

Undoubtedly regional architecture means different things to different people. That is why, in the title of this article, I have been careful to state "what regional architecture means to me."

Let us go back to the basic concept of architecture as shelter; shelter is defined as protection from the elements. Therefore, the design for shelter which we build for ourselves in New Mexico should be predicated on the weather conditions with which we are faced. What are the weather conditions in New Mexico? They are basically quite varied, depending upon which part of the state one lives in. In northern New Mexico, for example, the weather is quite cold and often unpleasant from November until May; on the other hand, in the area around Las Cruces, warm weather prevails with the exception of three or four months from December through March. In spite of the climatic differences, the sections of New Mexico have several characteristics in common; these are a strong sun, and a persistent, prevailing wind.

To my way of thinking, the elements of climate, sun, and wind should be the determining factors in the design of our structures. Good regional designing is cognizant of these elements. The fact that these buildings may or may not resemble the architectural styles of the past has relatively little to do with their regional characteristics.

Some of the buildings which were constructed centuries ago, such as the Acoma Pueblo and church, the Taos Pueblo, and the stone church at Quarai, are truly regional in that they have thick walls and heavy roofs as protection from the intense sun in the summertime and the cold and wind in the wintertime. All openings such as doors and windows are small as further protection from the elements. The general appearance of these buildings is the result of the labor and materials which were available during those periods.

What then would be considered good regional architecture today? In my opinion, judgment of good regional architecture should be based on the same premise, namely how well the building or buildings are designed with respect to sun, wind and climate. If the regional architecture of today is to be contemporary, the choice of materials should be consistent with the technological advances of the mid-twentieth century.

How can we design our buildings of today to adequately protect us from the sun, wind, and climate? It is no longer economically possible to build adobe walls three feet thick, and thin adobe walls do not provide good insulation. Our technology however does permit us to create

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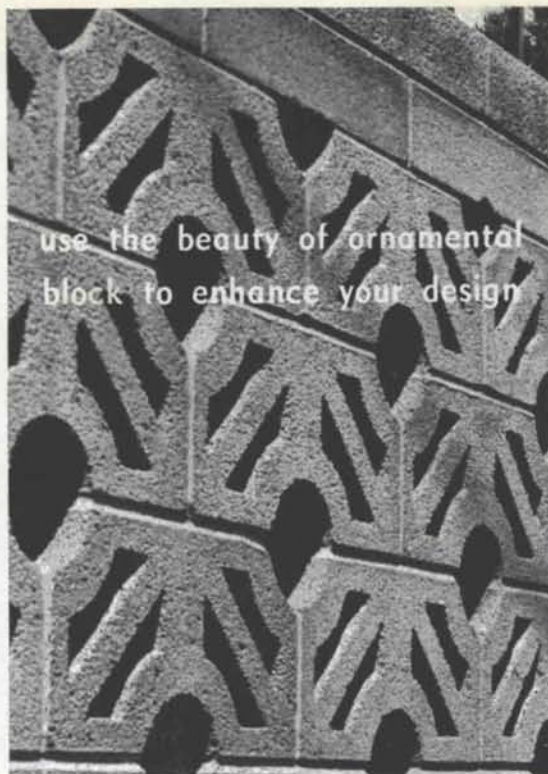
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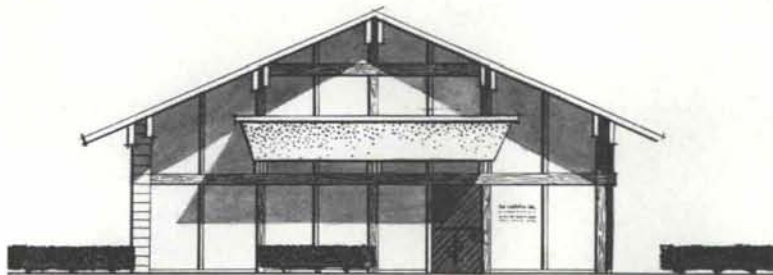
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large roof areas and spans quite economically. By allowing our roofs to extend quite far out beyond the walls, either through the use of portals or simple cantilevers, we can protect our walls from the direct sun and in this way keep our structures cool in the summer. By proper placement of sheltering wing walls near entrances we can minimize the effect of the prevailing winds. We have a perfect opportunity in New Mexico to take advantage of the winter sun when it is desirable and to shut it out in the summer when it is too hot. By orienting buildings with the glass to the south, coupled with the use of a properly determined overhang, we can let in the winter sun and eliminate the summer sun. Due to the dryness and altitude of our state, we are sensitive to radiant heat. Standing by an undraped north window in wintertime we usually feel cold. Why not then keep openings in north walls to a minimum, or eliminate them completely?

To review briefly, our climatic conditions in New Mexico call for large overhanging roof areas, protective wing walls, the opening up of our structures to the south winter sun, and the closing them off against the north exposure.

What are we faced with concerning materials for the Southwest? Maintenance costs of a building are very important, especially to public institutions; thus maintenance free materials are desirable in this climate. The sun in New Mexico has a devastating effect on wood unless the wood can be painted with dedicated regularity. However, if the wood can be kept protected from sun and water through the use of generous overhangs, it will retain its original qualities for a long time with little or no maintenance. Most other exterior wall materials will stand up well in this climate. These can be divided into two main categories. The first includes concrete masonry and stucco. Concrete masonry is usually painted, and will need periodic repainting, although not as often as wood. Stucco is usually applied with integral color. After a few years of direct exposure to the sun, wind and rain, stucco will develop hair line cracks and some color fading, which will require patching and painting. In the second category are the denser materials which require little or no finish. These include face brick, glazed brick, stone, precast stone, terra cotta, baked enamel, ceramic tile, marble and the like. These materials will stand up indefinitely to the weather but their initial cost is considerably more than masonry units or stucco.

All true forms of regional architecture reflect the climate of the area. In France and England, the steep roofs indicate a region of heavy rainfall. In Italy the flat heavy roofs indicate the prevalence of a dry, warm climate. I predict that in New Mexico we will see regionalism in architecture making itself felt in more extensive roof structures, set-back (protected) walls, limited glass on the north, protected glass on the south, and use of dense impervious materials where walls are exposed to the weather.



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