

JOHN GAW MEEM SOUTHWESTERN ARCHITECT BAINBRIDGE BUNTING

Foreword by Paul Horgan, University of New Mexico Press (A School of American Research Book), 1983, 178 pp., illus., \$29.95.

Reviewed by John P. Conron

This book details the long and prolific career of Santa Fe's most prominent architect. It is hard to fault, but then it was researched by Bainbridge Bunting, and written in his competent and always readable prose.

Like so many other citizens of New Mexico, the young John Meem was brought by tuberculosis to the Sunmount Sanatorium, where he fell under the spell of old Santa Fe. Trained at Virginia Military Institute as a civil engineer, his interest, during the long months of recovery, turned toward architecture. Encouraged by his doctor, Frank Mera, he began his career in architecture while still a resident at Sunmount, producing the designs for the renovation and enlargement of a small Santa Fe house for fellow-patient Hubert Galt. By 1959, when he retired from the firm of Meem, Holien and Buckley, some 650 projects had been listed in the office files.

The revival of the Spanish/Pueblo and the Territorial styles began at the University of New Mexico in 1905-1906, and was spurred by the so-called restoration of the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe (1909-1914). John Meem became the most eminent practitioner and defender of the revival, and only rarely in his long career did he step outside its vocabulary. One of those rare instances is the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center (completed in 1936), which, Bunting and I agree, is Meem's most outstanding building. The exposed concrete-walled structure is certainly Meem's boldest and most modern-styled building, as Bunting says, it

is "an expression of technical expertise and functionalism." Bunting also points out that the building, in its massing and in "its sense of tranquility and equilibrium," has roots in classical forms. The interior "is also one of restrained Classicism, though the ornamental vocabulary is clearly Art Deco." One wonders what would have happened to John Meem as a designer, if he had grown from this work instead of returning to the battered walled romance of New Mexico's past. Even as late as 1951 and 1953, when new ecclesiastical forms were being explored and dramatic new churches built, throughout the nation, Meem chose historic styles for churches built, in Albuquerque and Gallup—Gothic for Albuquerque, a simplified Lombard Romanesque for Gallup.

Meem was well aware of the Modern Movement in the 1920s and 1930s, and felt that functionalism, combined with the traditional forms of the Southwest, would produce architecture compatible with the times. In the favorable economic conditions before World War II, these traditional forms could be achieved by modulated facades and massive battered walls. As construction became increasingly expensive after the war, Meem relied upon the application of Indian and Spanish symbols to his buildings to evoke the past.

Bunting emphasizes Meem's work as a preservationist. To be sure, John Meem was a leading force on the Committee for the Preservation and Renovation of New Mexico Mission Churches in the 1920s and 1930s, before preservation was popular. The committee was responsible for repairs on ancient and significant New Mexico churches, and for the purchase (for donation to the archdiocese of Santa Fe) of the historic Santuario de Nuestro Señor de Esquipula

near Chimayo in northern New Mexico. (Although popularly called the Santuario at Chimayo, even by Bunting, the Santuario is actually located in El Potrero, one mile south of Chimayo.) In later years John Meem and his wife, Faith, made possible the saving of important Territorial period buildings in Santa Fe, which are now owned by the Historic Santa Fe Foundation. However, Meem's preservation efforts focused on the Spanish/Pueblo and Territorial-style historic buildings. Other styles of the late Victorian era and early 20th century he happily destroyed by covering them in Santa Fe-style stucco, and adding fake vigas or corbels.

I find a few petty flaws in the book, which Bunting might have corrected if he had lived to review the galley proofs. Paul Horgan in his foreword lists "brick copings of roof lines" and "the importance of ample fenestration" as details of the Spanish Colonial style. They are not, of course. Brick coping is an Anglo and therefore Territorial style detail, while "ample fenestration" was unheard of in Colonial days. Latias are defined in the book as "small beams"; that does not sound like Bunting. Latias are wood saplings which are laid atop the roof beams to support the roof covering—dirt in the early days, insulation and rolled roofing today. A bit misleading are Bunting's occasional references to Meem's work on the La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe, which suggest that Meem designed the hotel. For example, Bunting describes him as "planning an even more splendid tourist attraction for the same railroad [the AT & SF] in the form of La Fonda Hotel." Not until much later does the reader discover that Meem planned only the first major addition; the hotel itself had been built in 1920 from designs by Rapp, Rapp and Hendrickson.

I take issue with such statements as the one on the dust jacket (for-

tunately not attributed to Bunting) that Meem "is unquestionably the most important architect ever to have worked in New Mexico." Meem entered the New Mexico architectural scene not to innovate, but to continue forces already in motion. Archaeologists such as Edgar Lee Hewett, architects such as Rapp and Rapp, and the many artists working in Santa Fe in the first decades of the 20th century gave him the vocabulary he used so fluently. Certainly his designs are generally graceful and friendly, while in the hands of others the revival styles could become coarse, even dull.

I was surprised to learn that the elaborate mill work used in residential and public buildings, particularly in the early work, was

not done by New Mexico craftsmen. Rather it was executed by Colorado firms and shipped to the New Mexico building site. Bunting tells us of one occasion when New Mexico Indians happened, by coincidence, to be in the employ of the Pueblo, Colorado, firm producing the mill work for the Zimmerman Library at the University of New Mexico.

When one reads of the length of time taken for the design of the Colorado Fine Arts Center, or of the completion of the Zimmerman Library being delayed for three months to await the delivery of specially sized, adzed boards to conceal concrete beams, it is apparent the John Meem lived in a state of architectural luxury enjoyed, even then, by few other ar-

chitects.

The book is profusely illustrated with sketches, plans, and photographs — many taken shortly after completion of the buildings by such prominent photographers as Tyler Dingee, Laura Gilpin, and Ansel Adams. However, the quality of the photographic reproduction is poor, which is truly unfortunate in so important a book.

Bunting takes the reader on a detailed tour of many of Meem's outstanding buildings, public and private; he catalogs a significant career, and reminds us of the generosity and humanity of this architect. *JPC*

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