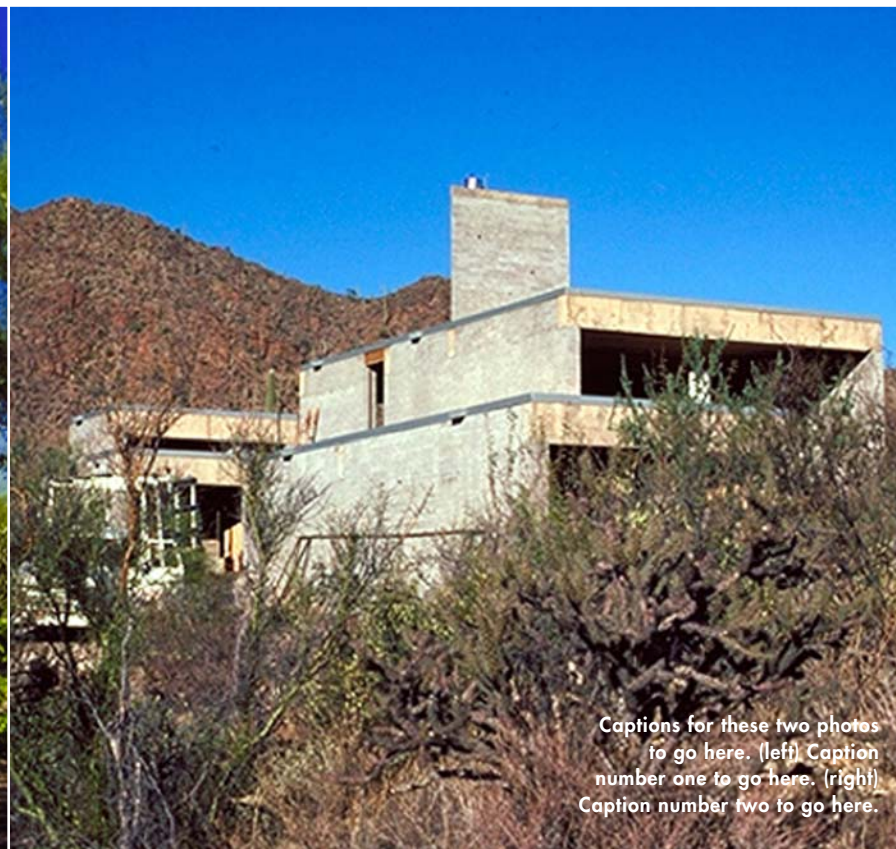


ARCHITECTS of Influence

BY R. BROOKS JEFFERY



JUDITH
CHAFEE



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“The trees are beautiful, they crowd over the road and touch above. I think I will drown in the green muck. I think I will lose myself, my purpose, if I can’t see something beautifully naked and clear, if I don’t see the edge or space—the horizon. I go...and find the space of the desert.”
~Judith Chafee

Taken from her 1982 essay “The Region of the Mindful Heart,” here, in essence, is Judith Chafee: architect, poet, and lover of the desert. An enigma to many, Chafee’s personality often dominates any discussion of her work as one of the few Tucson architects to have gained not just national, but international acclaim. Like her buildings, she was generous, loving, and intimate to those she allowed to step inside, though she often conveyed a bold, harsh, and principled personality to the outside world. But it was her principles that drove her designs, drawn from a background of liberal education and encounters with some of the best minds of her time.

Judith Chafee was born in Chicago in 1932 and moved to Tucson at the age of three, where she grew up in a home in a constant state of construction. Her delight in, and respect for, the desert can be attributed to her living in an adobe house

and learning firsthand about natural light, shade, and seasonal accommodations for warmth and coolness. From her mother, who was trained in anthropology and directed the modern furnishings department in a Chicago department store, she learned to respect the indigenous wisdom of desert cultures as well as developing a keen sense of design. Because of her mother’s prominence, she also had the opportunity to meet some of the leading intellectuals of her time, including Margaret Sanger—a Tucson resident at the time and later founder of Planned Parenthood—who, in turn, introduced her to Eleanor Roosevelt and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Chafee’s formal education took her back to Chicago, and then New England, where she earned a master’s degree from Yale’s Graduate School of Art and Architecture as the only woman in her class. Upon her graduation in 1960, Chafee worked for

a veritable who’s who in mid-20th-century modern American architecture: Paul Rudolph, Walter Gropius’ The Architects Collaborative, Eero Saarinen, and Edward Larabee Barnes. As her essay expressed, she soon longed for the stark beauty of the desert and returned permanently to Tucson in 1970, where she opened a small atelier doing primarily residential work until her death in 1998. She traveled extensively throughout her career, taught at The University of Arizona, and in 1983 [she] was the first Arizona woman to be invested in the American Institute of Architects College of Fellows—one of the profession’s highest honors.

Her work, though not prolific, was profound. Chafee’s complete body of work reveals her intuitive understanding

of desert building but never incorporates the styles of the past. Her first house in Tucson was for her mother, built in 1974 and located in the Tucson Mountains. Reflecting her evolving architectural aesthetic, the house is defined by its contrasting use of concrete and glass. The exterior form rises three levels with north-facing clerestory windows running the entire length of the facade, capturing the natural light her mother craved, even in her earlier adobe home.

The most published house of her career was the 1975 Ramada House, so named for the 26-foot-tall shade structure that refers to the traditional Native American shade structure. The home's positioning filters the light falling on the southern entry facade and responds to seasonal changes in the position of the sun, providing protection from the high summer heat and welcoming in the rays of the low winter sun. The Ramada House, now on the National Register of Historic Places, is considered an international exemplar of critical regionalism, combining the principles of modernism with what she referred to as the "underlying wisdom that comes from living there."



CHAFEE'S PERSONALITY OFTEN DOMINATES ANY DISCUSSION OF HER WORK.

Her most controversial work, the Blackwell House, was built in 1979 and demolished by Pima County in 1998 due to the perception that its bold modern forms and materials "marred" the otherwise pristine desert landscape of its Gates Pass location. This was my favorite of Chafee's work, because even as a ruin, it projected, ironically, a power of belonging to the landscape by mastering its natural elements—providing sun and shade at appropriate seasons, channeling ventilation through a thermal chimney system, distributing light evenly throughout the house, and composing framed views of the landscape's raw beauty.

By defining this desert place as the "region of the mindful heart," Chafee also defined her place in it, not as a female architect nor a regionalist architect nor any other qualifying label that might otherwise delimit her legitimacy, but simply as an architect whose principles respected the time and place in which she practiced.

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