

Facing Southwest: The Life and Houses of John Gaw Meem. By Chris Wilson, photographs by Robert Reck. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001. 178 pp. 100 color plates, 100 halftones, notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00 cloth, ISBN 0-393-73067-0.)

The work of New Mexican architect John Gaw Meem is synonymous with the popularization of the Santa Fe style of architecture in the Southwest. Long before the current trend of rambling adobe houses with corner fireplaces and protruding wooden vigas, Meem was the purveyor of a regionalized expression of architecture. He was blessed, throughout his thirty-year career, with clients who allowed his experimentation with regionalist architecture to flourish.

Chris Wilson's *Facing Southwest: The Life and Houses of John Gaw Meem* orients the reader to the particular context in which Meem was working and that subsequently informed his unique regional expression. Unlike previous books written about Meem soon after his death in 1983, Wilson's work on the Southwest's most notable architect has the perspective of time that allows a deeper understanding of his role in contributing to the larger issues of cultural identity in the Southwest. By concentrating solely on Meem's residential designs, the book provides an intimate portrayal of Meem's unique relationships to his clients, who gave him the freedom to experiment with this marriage of the design vocabulary of current stylistic trends to an aesthetic reflective of the region in which they resided.

Facing Southwest, as a monograph about an architect, is also a unique precedent in its organization and presentation of information in three parts. Part 1, entitled "Facing Southwest," is a concise biography that interprets the complex context that defined Meem's influential architectural career. An early childhood in Brazil, schooling at the Virginia Military Institute, engineering experience in New York City, service in World War I, and his contraction of tuberculosis, diagnosed when he was nineteen, set the stage for Meem's relocation to Santa Fe in 1920 and his quick rise to become the preeminent architect in an increasingly elite region of the United States. Throughout his early career, Meem struggled to synthesize his aborted architectural training, which emphasized a formal "Beaux-Arts" tradition, with the picturesque Pueblo architecture to which he was now exposed while recovering in the Sunmount Sanatorium. In his observation and documentation of New Mexican vernacular architecture, Wilson links Meem to the late-nineteenth-century Romantic aspirations to seek inspiration from and

connection to the sublime qualities of nature seen later in Meem's flowing, asymmetrical plans and picturesque building forms. His career also defines the development of regionalism as the underlying syntax for what Wilson describes as Meem's design "idioms."

Meem, who felt compelled to stay current with popular stylistic expressions, modified his designs as his career passed from the period revivals of the 1920s and 1930s to post-World War II modernism. His attempt to marry the modern movement within a regionalist vocabulary was the most experimental but least successful period of Meem's career. By this later period, he had established a reputation that led his client base to expect designs in his earlier, more romantic idioms. His effort to create a regional modernism was characterized by a fundamental desire for authenticity. Meem remained faithful to the perceptual and spatial characteristics of the regional vernacular without creating a stage set of superficial elements, and to the honest expression of materials as a tenet of the modern movement. However, enduring conflict between regionalism and modernism and his failure to successfully resolve it ultimately led to Meem's retirement in 1959. He dedicated the next twenty-four years of his life to community service and the preservation of a regional ethic in a New Mexico increasingly influenced by a modernist aesthetic.

Part 2 of Wilson's book, "Design Patterns," takes its cue from two highly influential books: Rexford Newcomb's *The Spanish House for America* (1927) and Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language* (1977). Wilson applies his analytical skills to define and illustrate the recurrent design elements that define Meem's residential works. This valuable analysis allows the reader to view Meem's work outside the more typical chronological lens. The analytical structure also reflects the way Meem himself broke down a building into complementary parts including floor plans, paths, *salas*, window seats, fireplaces, ceilings, doors, *portales*, and terraces, each with its own vocabulary of elements and spatial relationships. Indeed, Newcomb's seminal book was among a handful of reference sources that Meem used in the development and articulation of his own derivative design vocabulary. The section of design patterns in *Facing Southwest*, an exceptionally rich resource for contemporary designers, uses text and illustrations to demystify the Santa Fe style in a way that parallels popular architectural "style" books currently occupying many coffee tables in the Southwest.

Part 3, "Design Idioms," expands on the earlier biographical introduction to Meem's three distinct design expressions: Spanish-Pueblo Revival,

Territorial Revival, and Contemporary Southwest. In this section, Wilson illustrates each idiom with one characteristic residence, interpreting the stylistic nuances within the context of Meem's relationships with clients. Wilson concludes with the development of Meem's own Santa Fe residence in 1937. Here, Meem's attempts to reconcile his desire for the use of a regional expression within the emerging stylistic trends is portrayed in richly illustrated snapshots of an evolving career.

Throughout the book, author Chris Wilson draws from numerous archival sources and blends a casual writing style and rigorous scholarship that allow this book to be read on a variety of levels. Both the rich mixture of media illustrating Wilson's text and the expert design enhance the readability of *Facing Southwest*. Original architectural drawings from the Meem Collection at the University of New Mexico are balanced with prolific documentation and analytical drawings by Albuquerque architect George Clayton Pearl. Pearl's comparative drawings include a series of plan configurations of each of the design elements and a composite map of Meem's Santa Fe residences illustrating orientation strategies. Pearl's illustrations visually convey a deeper understanding of Wilson's analysis than could any other media. The photography in *Facing Southwest* represents the best of western photographers: Ansel Adams, Laura Gilpin, and Robert Reck, the latter contributing contemporary color photography. In a graphically enticing manner, the omission of color photography from Part 1, Meem's biography, provides a distinction between Meem's past and the houses in the subsequent two parts used to illustrate contemporary applications of Meem's design vocabulary.

The story of John Gaw Meem is as mythical and picturesque as the Santa Fe style he popularized. In *Facing Southwest*, Chris Wilson has used his skills as a cultural historian to interpret Meem within the context that created him and has demythologized his architectural language by providing the reader a clear and concise vocabulary from which Meem's Santa Fe style was derived. Wilson also tells the story of regionalism and how it survived various permutations, and frames this book in a light that parallels our refocused attention to create a regional design vocabulary, most recently in the name of New Urbanism. The study of Meem's work is as valuable today as it has ever been, and *Facing Southwest* is an exceptional tool to understand it.

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