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A Sense of Place

Christopher Mead

Sense of place and its correlate, regionalism, have preoccupied New Mexican architects since the turn of this century. Led by John Gaw Meem, local architects have formulated a stylistic idiom whose “flat topped rectangular masses devoid of ornament”¹ supposedly evoke the surrounding landscape by mimicking the adobe forms of traditional Pueblo and Spanish buildings. Last summer, this picturesque but limited interpretation of regional place was enlarged when Jose de Prada, a Spanish architect from Madrid, came to New Mexico to participate along with four other artists in a project called Siteworks Southwest. At a site near Inscription Rock in western New Mexico, each artist was to create a work that responded to the landscape and its southwestern context. Jose de Prada’s piece, called *The River of the Desert*, captured the character of its site without resorting to the regionally orthodox, picturesque solution.

The River of the Desert is a 900-foot-long tunnel constructed out of curved rebar, polythelene sheeting, wire, and rope. Its title, and its meaning, was inspired by a fifteenth-century Spanish poem by Gorge Manrique that reads in part,

Our lives are rivers gliding free
To that unfathomed, boundless
sea,

The silent grave:
Thither all earthly pomp and
boast
Roll to be swallowed up and lost
In one dark wave.

. . . .

This world is but the rugged road
Which leads us to the bright
abode

Of peace above;
So let us chose that narrow way
Which leads no traveller’s foot
astray

From realms of love.²

Past and present thus merge through Jose de Prada’s translation of this poem into his contemporary experience with building tensile, lightweight structures in Spain. Though he used a poem they might have known, he did not build his tunnel out of adobe like the sixteenth-century Spaniards who preceded him. At the same time, Jose de Prada carefully studied and interpreted his site. The tunnel, aligned with the prevailing wind, points down a valley toward a cleft between two cliffs. Arched over one rut of a cow path, it runs alongside a barbed wire fence. Its scale is equal to the landscape, and as it shimmers in the changing light, one comes indeed to look upon it as a river, but one through which man, not water, flows down its single-file path. Forced to walk alone, in a silence broken only by erratic gusts of wind, one discovers the temporal extension of a place: the landscape that shifts by outside the polythelene-vaulted space takes on a luminous intensity as one paces the tunnel’s sun-heated length.

The River of the Desert movingly defines Jose de Prada’s sense of place because he interpreted the site according to his cultural heritage as

a Spaniard and his training as an architect. He responded to the landscape, both natural and cultural, in which he built, but he did so by ignoring the restrictive criteria of New Mexican regionalism. How one responds should depend on the specific landscape one has chosen, because the landscape changes; it should depend upon one’s cultural heritage, one’s architectural training, and one’s age, because those also change. Sense of place, like Jose de Prada’s *River of the Desert*, is a dynamic quality that must transform itself repeatedly as individuals, cultures, and places themselves change.

NOTES

- 1 John Gaw Meem, “Old Forms for New Buildings,” *American Architect* (November 1934), pp. 10–21.
- 2 Gorge Manrique, “Coplas por la Muerte de Su Padre,” in Eleanor L. Turnbill, ed., *Ten Centuries of Spanish Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955), pp. 81–83.