

Lilian Jenette Rice: Evolution of an Architectural Style

By: Keith Behner, Senior Planner
Rancho Santa Fe Association

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Lilian Jenette Rice was born in National City in 1888. Her father, Julius Rice, was a leading educator in National City and San Diego. Her mother had varied artistic talents and was an accomplished painter. Rice grew up in a multi-gabled Victorian house at 740 E. Second Street. Her father encouraged her education and her mother her artistic sensibilities. She enrolled at UC Berkley and became one of the first women to graduate from its newly established School of Architecture in 1910. Rice studied at Berkeley under an impressive group of architects associated with the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Their impact of ideas upon her was great, as was the then-developing "Bay Area" style of rustic wood architecture beginning to predominate in the San Francisco area as well as the Pacific Northwest.

Rice's commitment to architecture subordinated to the landscape, the use of natural building materials, design based on simplicity of line and form all grew out of her exposure to these trends which were being expressed by the regional architecture of the Bay Area.

In San Diego, Rice had grown up steeped in the heritage of a land rich in the culture and traditions of Spain and Mexico. There was much romanticism associated with the Spanish and Mexican periods of rule and colonization. Hispanic influence on architecture had been eclipsed by the Victorian style imposed by the American ascendancy, but by the early 1900's, Hispanic architecture was becoming widespread and was gaining in popular favor. California's old missions, left for many years in neglect and disrepair, were restored and a new interest and pride in California's Hispanic heritage was rekindled.

This revival of Hispanic architecture was solidified by the 1915 Panama California Exposition. Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue had been hired by the city to design the buildings for the Exposition at Balboa Park. Goodhue designed and built ornate and spectacular baroque Spanish Colonial buildings which flanked a beautifully landscaped Prado area. "The buildings in the Exposition reflected the heritage of Spain and its colonial past. These buildings, along with Mission Revival structures such as the Santa Fe Depot left a permanent impression on the city. From the arrival of Horton, until this time, San Diego had architecturally been a Victorian town, with a few classical buildings thrown in.

From this point on, the Hispanic origins of San Diego would be firmly established and Hispanic architecture would be a major feature of the city. It would help to give the unique flavor and identity to San Diego that would distinguish it from other cities in the nation of the same size." ¹ The 1915 Exposition resulted in an explosion of homes and buildings in either the Mission or Spanish Colonial Revival styles and often a mixture of both.

It was directly under the influence of this Hispanic renaissance that Lilian Rice worked as a young designer and draftsman for the architectural firm of Regua and Jackson.

Lucinda Liggett Eddy, in her "Lilian Jenette Rice: Search For a Regional Ideal", states that, "Through Richard Regua, Lilian again found the ideal of an original architecture, while the wooded Berkeley hills and scenic bay provided the impetus for the development of the Bay Region style, California's Spanish-Colonial heritage acted as the cohesive element in the formation of a regional architecture to the south. A well-established romantic tradition built around California's mission days and the vast ranchos that spread across a sun-drenched land, provided a colorful historical backdrop for an architectural idiom that captured the flavor of a by-gone era. Even the landscape seemed to echo the plains and gently rolling hills of Spain. Regua's extensive travels throughout Spain reinforced his belief in an architectural ideal based on the Spanish style. His intention was not to merely reproduce the buildings of Spain, but to adopt in an original manner those features most suitable to the southern California landscape."

In 1922, Regua and Jackson were commissioned to design and construct the planned community of Rancho Santa Fe. While the opportunity to design from "scratch" a new community in the California-Hispanic tradition was attractive, the project promised only modest financial incentives and the distance from San Diego to Rancho Santa Fe was not insignificant. Regua and Jackson therefore placed Rice in charge of their operation in Rancho Santa Fe. Rice's task was to develop a fourteen square mile tract of Eucalyptus-covered rolling hills into a series of small "gentleman's ranchos" anchored by a mixed use, commercial/residential Civic Center which would be designed as a picturesque "Spanish" village.

When Rice arrived in Rancho Santa Fe there were few buildings beyond a couple of real estate offices and a few residences. There was however, a conceptual plan developed by the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company for orchards and country estates to be built to reflect the romantic cultural and architectural traditions of the old California ranchos.

Rice's impact on the architectural style and development of Rancho Santa Fe was, and remains profound. Rice was given a blank canvas to work with and she used the opportunity to synthesize her past education and experience into a unique adaptation of the Spanish Colonial Revival style and make it her own.

1. San Diego - A Pictorial History - Raymond Starr

Rice's unique synthesis of Hispanic architecture was molded around her abiding respect for the natural landscape of the environment. From her exposure to "Bay Area" architecture and her experience at Berkeley, she was committed to architecture subordinated to the land. While elements of Mission Revival and baroque Spanish Colonial Revival architecture found some limited application in her style, she eschewed the overly ornate and intricate formality of baroque Spanish Colonial Revival and Churrigueresque architecture. She found the traditional application of Mission Revival, as it was being mass produced in San Diego, with its standard arched windows and red tile roof overly trite and restrictive. She was however, deeply attracted to Spanish Colonial Revival styles as represented by traditional Spanish country houses and villages. She had studied this style and the individual design components of the genre under the tutorage of Regua. Regua had traveled throughout Spain and had carefully documented the traditional Spanish Colonial style in which he found much favor. Characterized by simplicity of line and form, with understated and restrained decorative features, Rice felt that this genre was best suited to the landscape of Rancho Santa Fe. The Spanish Colonial style was evocative of Rancho Santa Fe's Hispanic traditions and provided a design framework adaptable to individual sites and flexible enough to provide diversity.

The plan for the "Civic Center", as agreed to by the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company, the architectural firm of Regua and Jackson and their project architect Lilian Rice, was aimed at creating a picturesque Spanish village which would be the anchor and focal point for Rancho Santa Fe. The "village" would set the architectural tone and standard for all future development in the Ranch. Collaboration between Regua and Rice produced a charming collection of unique Spanish Colonial Revival commercial structures. Regua's influence can be seen in such features as embedded towers, flattened domes, quoins and quatrefoils. Rice's influence is felt in the restrained use of these ornamentations, the overall simplicity of line and the "human" scale of these structures. While the overall theme of the "Civic Center" was one of a rural village built in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, diversity within the genre was designed into the architectural plan. This diversity was shown in commercial structures which range from buildings which are relatively residential in appearance and character to others which embody and evoke a more formalized commercial ambiance. The "Civic Center" plan created a visual harmony and interest which remains to this day.

All the commercial structures maintain pedestrian orientation and interest through the use of such features as arcades, colonnades, courtyards, recessed entries, iron and wood grillwork as ornamental elements and subtle set-back variations. That Paseo Delicias is to this day an eminently "walkable" street, whose buildings invite pedestrian interaction and involvement is a tribute to the success of the original design and designers.

Several of Rice's early structures in the Civic Center were constructed of plastered adobe. Having worked with these original materials, Rice understood the design effects achieved by traditional adobe construction. Other structures constructed in the Civic Center by Rice were of frame and stucco design. Rice used construction techniques, materials and design components which gave these structures the appearance of having been constructed of

adobe. Rice accomplished this goal through the use of rounded corners, recessed windows and doorways, plaster moldings and textured walls which all gave the structures the appearance of thick rounded walls and soft lines which typify adobe construction. Restrained ornamentation through the use of carved wooden or wrought iron grillwork, red tiled roofs and eaves, mexican pavers, carved brackets and corbels, balconies, natural woods and decorative tile all reinforced and solidified the Spanish Colonial Revival appearance of these frame and stucco structures. Subtle earth tones predominated in her color schemes.

These highly successful and innovative frame and stucco construction techniques were used extensively and predominantly in Rice's residential designs. Rice's residential structures evoke the solidity, simplicity, gracefulness and soft rounded lines created by adobe construction. Rice achieved, through the use of natural materials other than adobe, design solutions which were true to the basic tenets of traditional Spanish Colonial Revival design.

Rice never developed a "cookie cutter" prototype of her interpretation of Spanish Colonial Revival, rather she adapted each structure to the "lay" of the land and landscaping of each individual site. Her Civic Center rowhouses are masterpieces of Hispanic residential design within a semi-urban setting. She oriented the interior of the houses towards walled interior patios, lushly landscaped and protected from the bustle of outside commercial activity. The rowhouses provided charm and interest from the exterior through design features which integrated the structures into the whole of the Civic Center area. Subtly textured walls, rounded edges and corners, low pitched tile roofs, restrained yet exquisite ornamental design accessories and subtle facade variations all aided in the creation of uniquely effective and charming urban residential homes.

While each structure she built was unique unto itself, and was developed according to the dictates of the topography and landscape of the individual site, the design techniques and components of her "style" were all born of common goals and objectives.

All Rice's structures emphasized horizontal rather than vertical lines. Her homes were often long and rambling or terraced or broken into several uneven levels when more than one story was utilized. Her main goal was always to blend the structure into the landscape. Rice felt that structures should never dominate or overpower the individual topographical features and landscape of a site. Her structures were informal over formal, simple of line and form over ornate or monumental, horizontal over vertical, natural over synthetic and traditional over modern. Her emphasis on the integration and transition of the exterior landscaping into the interior of her structures has been much imitated and admired by modern architects.

Rice drew much of her inspiration from traditional Spanish Colonial Revival architecture. Rice adapted and modified this genre to the climate, ambiance, culture and most importantly the landforms and landscape of Rancho Santa Fe.

Ultimately, Rice's subtle modification and adaptation of the Spanish Colonial Revival genre revealed an identifiable style which belonged to her alone. Rice achieved her distinctive imprint and

unique interpretation of the Spanish Colonial Revival style through subtraction rather than addition. Simplicity and understatement are the predominant design statements achieved by Rice. This is not to intimate that her designs were plain or boring. Rice was a master of using subtle design components such as variations in window size, roof variations, facade setbacks, natural woods and tiles, the restrained and understated use of decorative tile, carved brackets and corbels, clausterwork, arches, verandas, string courses and other design features which never dominated the overall design but rather served to accentuate the simplicity of line and form and created an understated elegance. By emphasizing long horizontal lines, low pitched roofs and the avoidance of sharp lines, Rice insured that the surrounding landforms and landscape dominated the eye. Her structures appear as natural extensions and complimentary organic components of the physical totality of the land. Even today, Rice's architectural imprint and style define and give substance to Rancho Santa Fe. It is a community steeped in the tradition and ambiance of the California ranchos, dedicated to the primacy of the land and the symbiotic harmony between the land and its structures.