

'The Richest Source of Inspiration': The Spanish Revival,
Lilian Rice, and the Development of Rancho Santa Fe

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Although there have been many studies which have analyzed the various phases of the Hispanic Revival and of the architects associated with them, relatively little investigative work has been done on specific communities built in these styles. In the 1920s in southern California, numerous communities made or remade themselves in Hispanic-inspired period styles. Part nostalgia, part historical exploration, part status symbol, and part sales strategy, the use of the Spanish Revival style, as exemplified by the case study of Rancho Santa Fe, is an illuminating and often-ignored element of America's architectural and planning heritage. The aim of this paper is to elucidate the role of the Spanish (or, more broadly, Mediterranean) Revival of the 1920s by examining the conception of an design for Rancho Santa Fe, a planned community in northern San Diego County, California.

Rancho Santa Fe developed within the former boundaries of a land grant of over 8800 acres deeded between 1832 and 1845 by the Mexican government to Juan Maria Osuna, the first mayor of San Diego. Called Rancho San Dieguito after a nearby river, this land grant was confirmed by the American government in 1871. After Osuna's death, his heirs gradually sold off the land; in 1906, all but 374 acres of the original rancho grant were sold to the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company, a subsidiary of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway, for the sum of \$100,000. The land was used to grow eucalyptus trees, imported from Australia for use as railroad ties. By 1914, over 3000 acres had been planted with eucalyptus, but the next year the project was abandoned when

it was discovered that eucalyptus wood was not suitable for this intended purpose.

The Santa Fe Land Improvement Company then turned its attention to developing the land for horticultural and residential use. By 1918, the Lake Hodges Dam, built with Santa Fe financing, had been constructed on the San Dieguito River, thus making water available for irrigation and domestic purposes. In 1920, the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company hired L.G. Sinnard to survey the land, plan the roads, and lay out a preliminary subdivision on the Rancho San Dieguito land. Sinnard's proposal was made in a report of September 1921; it emphasized the Santa Fe's dual goal of creating both an "intensive, high-class horticultural development" and a correspondingly high-class residential subdivision, which would combine "suburban comforts with the freedom and attractiveness of rural life." The focal point of the project would be a small "Civic Center," which would provide "efficient community service," linked to the surrounding orchard and residential lots by a system of curved, winding roads that followed the natural terrain. Restrictions would be placed on the minimum cost and design of buildings, as well as on the "proper maintenance of orchard plantings and improvements," to ensure that an elite community of ranches and estates would be established.

The Santa Fe's interest in development of its Rancho San Dieguito land was part of a long tradition of railroad involvement with real estate in the American west. In California, as elsewhere, railroad expansion was often the first stimulus for extensive property development; for example, the arrival of the Santa Fe Railroad in San Diego in late 1885 began a regional land boom that generated numerous new coastal and inland towns, among them Oceanside, Encinitas, La Jolla, Pacific Beach, and Escondido. The railroads were also heavily involved with the promotion of

the myth of California's romantic colonial past. The success of this myth and the coincident population, real estate, and agricultural booms in California during the first decades of the 20th century were added incentives for the Santa Fe to develop fully its Rancho San Dieguito land.

In his proposals to the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company, Sinnard had not addressed the problem of architectural style, save to note that the Civic Center buildings "should harmonize architecturally." In early 1922, the San Diego architectural firm of Regua & Jackson were given the commission to develop the Civic Center site plans and buildings. Under its supervision Sinnard's vision of a small civic center situated among a rural enclave of ranches and orchards was transformed into a stylistic language that could then be understood by and sold to potential investors. By the early 1920s Richard Regua, the designing partner in the firm, was strongly committed to the development of a style inspired by the architecture of western Mediterranean countries, which could be adapted to the specifics of southern California living. His travels to Spain, the western Mediterranean, and former Spanish colonies in Latin America were subsequently documented in two books, Architectural Details in Spain and the Mediterranean (1926) and Old World Inspiration for American Architecture (1929). These volumes were photographic compilations of specific buildings, architectural details, and design elements which Regua hopes would be used as source material for the new "Southern California" style. "By study of the basic features contributing to the perfection of the Mediterranean type," Regua wrote, "American architects can gain much in inspiration, suggestions, and ideas useful in the development of styles suitable for this country, particularly in sections of similar climatic and topographical conditions">

That the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company should choose as their architects a firm specializing in a Spanish-inspired "Southern California" style is not surprising. The popularity of architectural forms derived from what was seen as California's indigenous building types--the stucco-covered adobe missions, presidios, and pueblos erected during the days of Spanish and Mexican colonization--had prompted successive waves of Hispanic-inspired structures throughout the Southland. After the success of Bertram Goodhue's elaborate Spanish Colonial Revival buildings for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, the style became even more indelibly associated with the area's romanticized colonial past. Little wonder, then, that the developers of a property that traced its history to a Mexican land grant, who were interested in attracting wealthy homebuyers from the East and Midwest, opted for an architectural style that so clearly brought to mind popularly held notions of the California experience. One last factor solidified the decision to hire Requa & Jackson for the Rancho San Dieguito project. Requa's experience in the redevelopment of Ojai, a small town near Los Angeles that was remodeled in the Mission/Mediterranean style beginning in 1915, showed that he was comfortable in adapting the style to the more complex requirements of civic planning.

Soon after they received the commission for Rancho San Dieguito, Requa and Jackson turned over primary responsibility for the project to a young associate in their office, Lilian Jenette Rice. Born in National City, just south of San Diego, in 1889, Rice became, in 1910, one of the first women to graduate from the School of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, where she studied under John Galen Howard. When Rice returned to San Diego, she worked for a short period as a draftsman in the office of Hazel Waterman, who, like Requa and Jackson, had apprenticed under Irving Gill and who also worked within the

framework of the Spanish Revival. Rice had been working for Requa and Jackson for only several months when she was appointed resident architect at the newly-renamed Rancho Santa Fe in early 1922.

Rice's first task was to assist in the creation of a site plan for the Civic Center, the focal point of Sinnard's subdivision scheme for Rancho Santa Fe. The Civic Center concept was a standard Beaux-Arts and City Beautiful planning device which utilized landscaping, plazas, and parks to create a strongly-defined civic image. The final design for Rancho Santa Fe's Civic Center combined other hallmark City Beautiful elements--a formalized, axial plan featuring a main, landscaped boulevard (Paseo Delicias) and a major terminating focal point (La Morada, the guest house)--within a typically picturesque suburban layout of curvilinear roads and irregularly-shaped building and orchard lots.

This mixture of the City Beautiful and the picturesque within the site plan for Rancho Santa Fe and its Civic Center had already been conceived by Sinnard, albeit more awkwardly, in his first proposal for the project in 1921. Rice's contribution to the design of Rancho Santa Fe was her synthesis of a specific vocabulary of elements drawn from Spanish and Spanish colonial sources with the needs of the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company in order to create, in her words, "a community that would contain the simplicity and charm of a Spanish village."

Rice's principal source of inspiration was the architecture of the rural villages of southern Spain, especially Andalusia. Although she never traveled abroad, Rice was exposed to Spanish forms through Requa's photographs of vernacular structures that he later compiled into his books. The sources for numerous individual details Rice created at Rancho Santa Fe can be found in these volumes. "The modern

architect," she wrote, "gladly accepts California's early Spanish background as the richest source of inspiration."

Examination of Rice's drawings for the Civic Center buildings and original photographs of the area show how she used this inspiration in practice. The Civic Center site plan had divided the area into eight blocks: the guest house, two small parks, a school block, and office block, a garage quadrangle, and, the two largest reserved for residential and store buildings. In her drawings, as in the site plan, the structures on each block were placed in asymmetrical groupings, or set back at slight differences from the street or sidewalk, so that the area as a whole would have the appearance of having evolved over time, recalling the "simplicity and charm of a Spanish village."

Specific details taken from the Spanish architecture photographed by Requa helped to add to this impression. For example, Rice borrowed different ornamental forms, such as iron window grilles or heavy wooden doorways, that were common in Andalusian architecture. Perhaps her most significant borrowing from the images Requa had compiled was her transformation of the familiar form of the village well into the most modern of appliances, a gasoline pump.

In design and as built, the gasoline pump was the focal point of the garage block. Because there was no form of public transportation to Rancho Santa Fe, and the nearest train station was five miles away, cars were the only means of reaching the project area. Thus, the provision of a garage and service station, where gas could be purchased and automobile maintenance and repairs serviced, was of great importance to the developers. In her designs for the garage quadrangle, Rice hid the unsightly functions of the service yard by concealing the area in an interior courtyard; the remaining buildings, despite their functions as storage and

service areas, were designed to resemble residential structures. The two street corners facing Paseo Delicias were left unbuilt, with buildings grouped around the open spaces, giving the impression of private patios. The garage block as a whole, but especially the gasoline pump, is the best metaphor for the project's emphasis on modern facilities and equipment sheathed in traditional architectural forms, which Requa called "an adaptation of old mores to new manners." Rice's synthesis of the contemporary and traditional here is instructive, for it illuminates the ways in which the Spanish Revival allowed architects and designers to incorporate modern technologies within traditional architectural forms. Like the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company, clients throughout California demanded both history and the comfort that modern conveniences and services brought. As Sinnard wrote in the introduction to a promotional booklet soon after the project opened, Rancho Santa Fe was "a Plan linking the romance and inspiration of Yesterday with the fulfillment of Today."

For Rice, the Spanish influence upon her designs for Rancho Santa Fe was more than a specific series of borrowings of specific details or structures. Rather, she took from her sources an approach to architecture, the lesson that a limited vocabulary of design elements, when combined and transformed in interesting ways, could achieve endless variety. Hence the tiled slopes of Andalusian roofs, which often incorporated a dizzyingly different number of angles and projections, demonstrable evidence of the gradual addition of rooms and wings over centuries, became for Rice an element of diversity, a way of articulating the different buildings within the small Civic Center area. Spanish architecture also taught her a sense of juxtaposition, minimalism, and subtlety: how the combination of wooden and wrought iron decorative work with pale stucco walls and red tile roofs,

and the green of the surrounding landscape, could create a strong and pleasing composition.

Despite her reliance on Spanish and Spanish Colonial architecture for design inspiration, Rice's approach to architecture was a functionalist one, in which the interior use of the building generally determined its outward appearance. Thus, the three office buildings used as the headquarters of the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company were articulated with a more formal exterior arrangement than any other structures in the Civic Center, through the application of symmetrically placed openings, large windows, and classical architectural elements--quatrefoil, quoins, Tuscan columns, dome-like structures, and an arcade. Although there was a common general character here, each building was given a distinctly different design, so that the variety of architectural form enlivened the street composition, while retaining the dignified outline suggested by the building's function.

Rice's primary goal was that the buildings harmonize with the surrounding landscape. "With the thought early implanted in my mind that true beauty lies in simplicity rather than in ornateness," Rice wrote later, "I found real joy at Rancho Santa Fe. Every environment there calls for simplicity and beauty--the gorgeous natural landscapes, the gently broken topography, the nearby mountains. No one with a sense of fitness, it seems to me, could violate these natural factors by creating anything that lacked simplicity in line and form and color."

One of the basic tenets of the Spanish Revival style was the notion that the incorporation of landscape elements into the plan of individual structures, through the use of interior courtyards, patios, and gardens, which was fundamental to Spanish and Mediterranean architecture, was equally

applicable in California. Rice made this principle the hallmark of her style at Rancho Santa Fe. For the guest house, La Morada, a rambling, modified U-shaped structure, a variety of indoor and outdoor spaces were incorporated into the design. The focal point of the building was its central section, a large guest lounge with a high, vaulted ceiling, which opened through large archways to either the dining room or the guest room wings. French doors led to a landscaped patio in the rear, where guests could stroll and admire the beauty of their surroundings. Adjoining the dining room was a terrace and open verandah with a pergola above, intended for use as an outdoor lounge. In front of the building, a more formally landscaped area led down to Paseo Delicias and the Civic Center.

Other buildings Rice designed for the Civic Center also showed the merger of outdoor and indoor spaces and the open plan that were first evidenced at La Morada. In the group of four small townhouses Rice designed in 1926 on Paseo Delicias, over fifty percent of the property space of each unit was occupied by at least one patio or garden in both the rear and the front of the lots. The blueprints for the townhouses, designed in consultation with the owners, were based on a modified open plan; the rooms were relatively large, given the small scale of the house, and were separated by open archways and varied floor levels, rather than doors, to give the impression of spaciousness. The asymmetrical arrangement of rooms allowed Rice to wrap the buildings around the landscape, in the form of the gardens and patios, which were themselves enclosed within a surrounding garden wall. The use of the open plan, and the importance of access to the landscape, were concerns Rice shared with many other contemporary architects. It can again be noted that the Spanish Revival style was a vehicle through which Rice felt free to explore modern design issues of comfort and access while retaining the essence of a traditional style.

Generally, the Civic Center buildings were only one story high, in order to facilitate the interaction between outdoor and indoor living spaces. When Rice did design two-story structures, however, she incorporated balconies, and use exterior stairs to link the two floors, so that the association between the landscape and man-made space would not be lost.

Outside the Civic Center, in the houses she designed for private clients in Rancho Santa Fe, Rice again showed the influence of Spanish architecture with the siting of her structures. Placed overlooking canyons or on top of hills to take advantage of views and warm breezes, situated among orchards or eucalyptus groves, the houses opened themselves up to the surrounding landscape. Like the Civic Center buildings, these private homes were generally one-story structures, with multiple patios and gardens, all designed in Rice's Spanish Revival mode.

By 1927, over two-thirds of available lots in Rancho Santa Fe had been sold. Property buyers were generally older, financially stable individuals, who purchased for investments purposes or as the site of a future retirement home. The most important early investors were, without question, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, which purchased over 800 acres in October 1926. Then at the height of their popularity, Fairbanks and Pickford gave a cachet and legitimacy to owning property in Rancho Santa Fe that few other purchasers could have accomplished. In 1927, the residents of Rancho Santa Fe enacted a protective covenant, which perpetuated that architectural, horticultural, and land-use restrictions of the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company, to be enforced by the Rancho Santa Fe Association and Art Jury. Like its chosen architectural style, Rancho Santa Fe's protective covenant associated the village with

other successful elite southern California planned communities of the 1920s: Santa Barbara, Palos Verdes Estates, and San Clemente. The prosperity of these communities demonstrated the dual appeal of both the Spanish Revival style and protective architectural and land-use restrictions to the wealthy landowners who now made California their home.

To what factors can the success of the Spanish or Mediterranean Revival style used in communities like Rancho Santa Fe be attributed? At the most basic level, the climatic and topographical similarities between Spain, the Mediterranean and southern California were often explained as the justification for the borrowings from Spanish and Mediterranean architecture practiced by such southern California architects as Requa or Rice. As endless architectural journals, newspapers, and popular magazines asserted, the Spanish Revival was the only historically and climatically appropriate architectural style for the region. In addition to these environmental advantages, the style perpetuated and championed the most accessible and salable myth of California--the illusion of its romantic, haunting Spanish past, while simultaneously incorporating the most modern conveniences and technologies. Finally, and perhaps most subtly, the adaptation of Spanish and Mediterranean architectural forms conferred a legitimacy and prestige upon California design at a time when the region was coming into its own as an important population, cultural, and design center. This social validation was codified by protective covenants like the one enacted at Rancho Santa Fe and reinforced by the very affluence of the communities and their continued sanction of the Spanish or Mediterranean Revival style. The consistent use of this style through the present day speaks to its success, not only in architectural terms, but as an integral part of modern California's history, mythology, and self-image.