

# From Spain to California. Measured drawings of Spanish Architecture. The sketches of North American travellers and their influence on residential architecture in Los Angeles.

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## Abstract

*After the well-known travels of European architects that had visited the South of our continent in the nineteenth century, fascinated by its historical architectures, there were also some North American travellers who, in the first decades of the twentieth century, toured Spain, drawing and analyzing the country's architecture. Beyond their indubitable artistic interest or their graphic virtuosity, these drawings of Spanish architecture could have influenced the coeval Californian architecture. Different architects projected housing complexes, mainly in Los Angeles, deeply marked by an idealistic and fused view of the Mediterranean architecture style and the Colonial style.*

Keywords: *Measured drawings, Andalucía travels, Spanish Revival*

## Sketches and travellers

After the well-known travels of European architects that had visited the South of our continent in the nineteenth century, fascinated by its historical architectures, through the classical routes of *Grand Tour*<sup>1</sup>, there were also some North American travellers who, in the first decades of the twentieth century, toured Spain, drawing and analyzing the country's architecture, possibly not so renowned as the antecedent ones, but in the same way, they produced great works of cataloging and analysis of architectural heritage.

The first American travelers who enjoyed a trip to Europe carried out the habitual routes across England, France and Italy, but in his preface to the Austin Whittlesey's book, *The Minor Ecclesiastical, Domestic and Garden Architecture of Southern Spain*, Bertrand Goodhue already remarked the importance of the 'discovery' of Andalucía by young American architects, because of the inability of classic tracks of the traditional *Grand Tour*, due to the First World War (Whittlesey 1917, 5)<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, Spain was one of the few European countries where the travel and study of the architecture was feasible, involving the loss of importance of the accustomed French and Italian routes of the time. Andalucía, in Spain, was the most attractive area, and was the point of intense analysis and visits<sup>3</sup>, on the one hand due to the importance, the number and stylistic variety of its architectural heritage that had remained unchanged, and also with the intention of setting a parallelism between the New World architecture from North American Southwest and the South Spain architecture<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, different travellers toured Spain and developed varied studies and publications about its architecture. American architects, as already mentioned Whittlesey, the British Matthew Digby Wyatt and Andrew Prentice, or the French Albert Laprade, produced excellent works. The main aim of these works would be focused on monumental architecture, with plenty of photographs, sketches and even measured and detailed drawings. However there was an increasing and parallel interest in domestic architectures or indeed the '*pintoresque*' components of those, such as fountains, ironwork, masonry, carpentry etc. Signs of these intentions are showed in publications as the annual of Boston Club of Ar-

chitecture of 1925, in which a series of drawings of different architects who travelled in Spain at the time were collected. In these drawings, a great variety of several elements (gardening, pavements, material assemblies etc.) are profusely described (Figure 1)<sup>5</sup> However, the work of Gerstle Mack<sup>6</sup> (1894-1983) and Thomas Gibson (1865-1941), who went all over Southern Spain in 1927, supposed a further step, compiling a careful and methodical study and repertoire of architectural details, from masonry or ironwork to carpentry, producing exceptional plates of drawings in their book *Architectural Details of Southern Spain. One hundred measured drawings. One hundred and thirteen photographs*, that had a second volume three years later: *Architectural Details of Northern and Central Spain*. (MACK, Gerstle and GIBSON, Thomas. 1930. *Architectural Details of Northern and Central Spain*. W. Helburn Inc. New York.)

The detailed graphic analysis of architectures in travels was not an original fact, and it was already present in previous publications of other architects. As opposed to the work of other travellers as Wyatt or Whittlesey, who focus their works in global views and landscape drawings, or evocative and picturesque reflections of Medieval or Moorish 'ancient' scenes, or Prentice (who developed a great number of measured drawings but only summarized in monumental buildings) (Figure 1), Mack and Gibson concentrated their work on cataloguing and making an accurate index of characteristic constructive elements of the traditional trades and domestic Spanish buildings. So *Architectural Details of Southern Spain* offers a tour in mainly domestic architectures, and it is so important to remark this fact, since the same authors emphasized this in his book preface, and underlined the fact that the details drawn from other building typologies are specific and only elected by their possible adaptation to a secular use: 'Public buildings and museums were drawn upon for certain details, and churches, monasteries, and hospitals furnished the rest; but only those ecclesiastical details were chosen which might conceivably be adapted to secular use' (Mack and Gibson 1928, 4). This remains the main difference in the work of Mack and Gibson in relation to other travelers: its exceptional collection, reflecting any interesting element in residential buildings of Southern Spain and searching for stylistic references for the Southwest North American architecture.

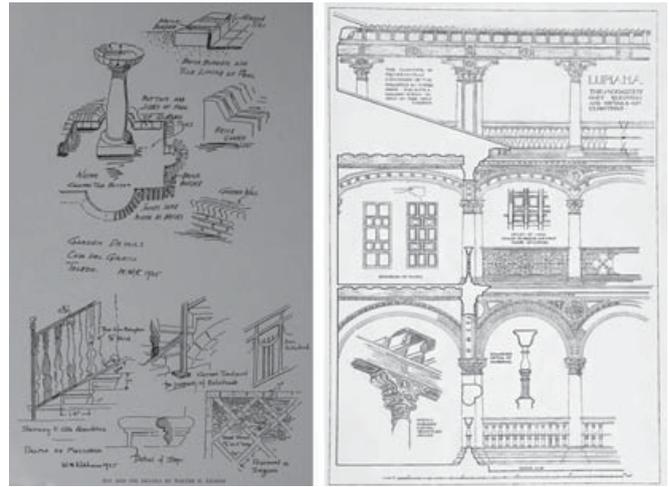


Figure 1

The specific purpose of this detailed graphic work is already described certainly in the beginning of the book: 'The details selected for presentation in this book were chosen primarily from the point of view of their utility to the architect who undertakes to design modern buildings based on Spanish prototypes.' (Mack and Gibson 1928, 3). They clearly emphasized the idea of collecting and cataloging architectures in order of their potential 'adaptation to modern requirements'. It is also interesting that Mack and Gibson, in opposition to the common (and predictable) disposition toward the Gothic and / or Moorish architecture from their peers and previous travelers, conducted prior discard focusing on the Renaissance, since 'neither the Moorish nor the magnificent Gothic architecture of Spain has, as yet, shown itself capable of graceful adaptation to modern use'» (Mack and Gibson 1928, 3). The obvious intention of making an useful catalog to other architects to project modern buildings with an attentive gaze to the Spanish models was showed again; and even more, according to Mack and Gibson, from the perspective of the similarity of the climatic and geographical characteristics of the American Southwest and the Southern Spanish areas.

*Architectural Details of Southern Spain* contains many photographs, accompanied by carefully drawn plates. A real condition of architecture is repeatedly shown, through photography or with appropriate details where the passing of time is patent. Defects and damage are reflected in the images and, in parallel, the aseptic accurate and objective drawings translate into measurements and proportions what it is shown in photography. The graphic analysis assumes

a separate abscission of every element, thoroughly describing its measures, material features and an ideal and initial condition, almost as a project fact. A vast of photographical catalogues were made, in which different samples of doors, handrail or fountains from south of Spain were collected, and an unusual attention to scale and precise description of more complex architectural elements (with a large number of dimensions, descriptions and details) appeared, and of course, always paying attention to *“for the convenience of the designer, all drawings are reproduced at true and commonly used architectural scales”* (Mack and Gibson 1928, 4). (Figures 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6).

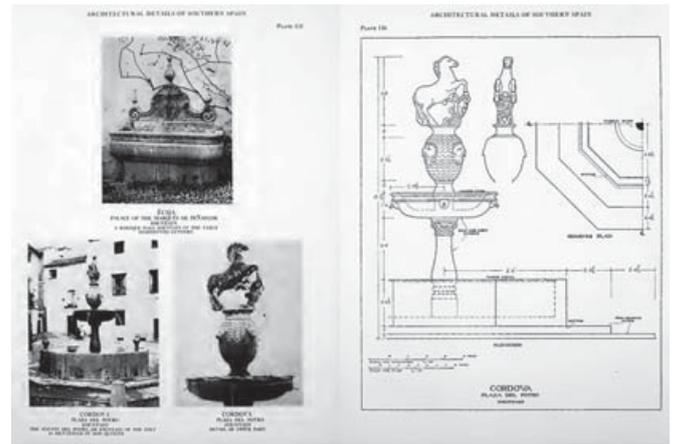


Figure 5

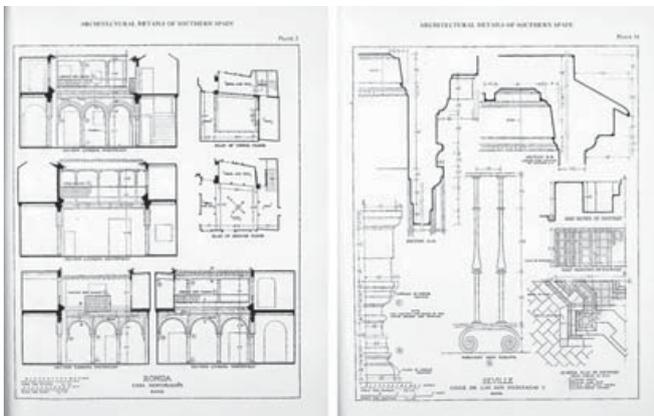


Figure 2

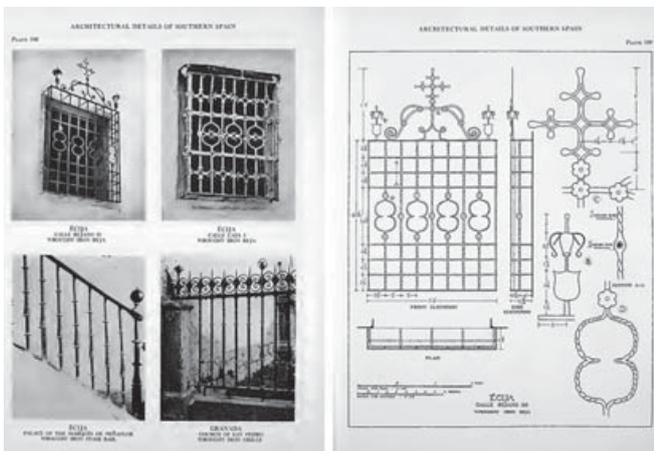


Figure 3

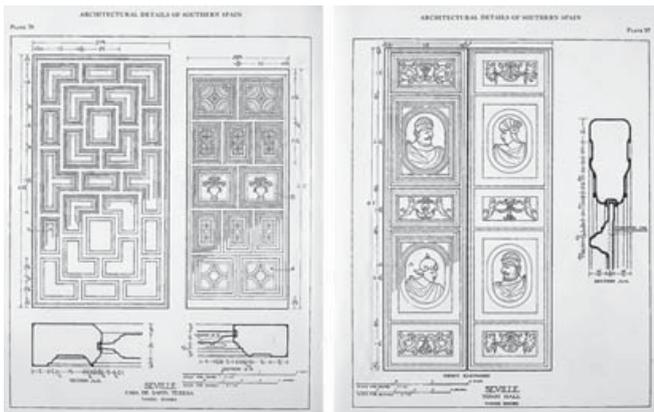


Figure 4

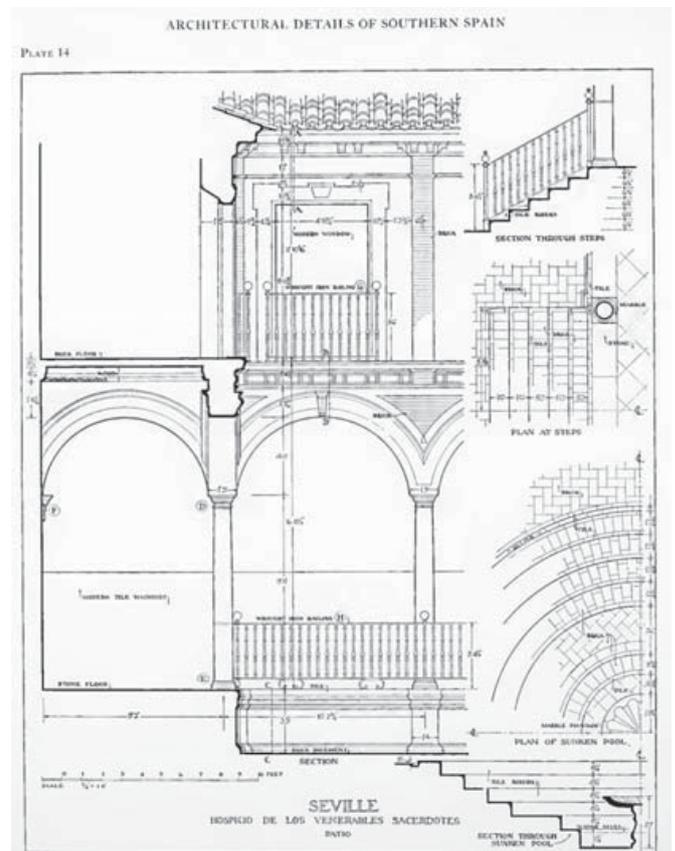


Figure 6

### Drawings and erected architectures

Beyond their indubitable artistic interest or their graphic virtuosity, these drawings of Spanish architecture influenced the conception of coeval Californian architecture. As previously mentioned, the search of stylistic references for the Southwest architecture in the US was self-evident. The historic architectures of the area (California, New Mexico, Texas) were deeply marked for the ancient Spanish presence.

Missions or ranchos existed as main vestiges: residential buildings (linked to religious or labour communities) characterized by the constructive typological heritage, due to the similar climates of South Spain and Southwest US (Crowley 2005). This interest in colonial architecture is not only reflected in the search of references in Spain, but in the intense work in cataloging and drawing the remaining buildings in the South of the US. Architects as Rexford Newcomb graphically analyzed all kind of architectures and elements, from churches and missions to furniture, attending the multiplicity of scales (domestic to urban scale) in his book *'Spanish-Colonial Architecture in the United States'* (Figure 7).

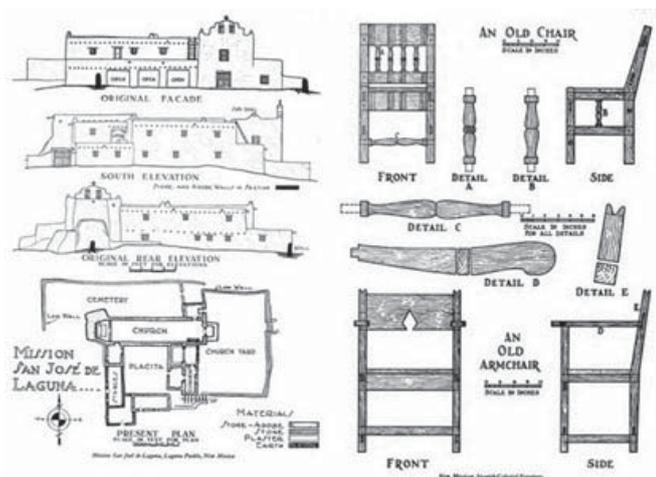


Figure 7

In the real-estate boom in the area of Los Angeles, closely linked to the rise of the film industry, residential typologies related to the Spanish colonial past were sought in the absence of established architectural tradition that would satisfy housing demand for a growing middle class, and a cultured way-referenced new construction was looked for to connect with the historical background of the city and the

area. The main developed typology supposed a courtyard complex (based on traditional patterns of domestic central courtyard Spanish), with apartments organized around a central, landscape outdoor area and mixed with common uses, in contrast to traditional expansion of single-family housing, with a rear garden. The variety of outdoor-indoor and public-private intermediate projected areas was remarkable, always using typical Mediterranean references (patios, gardens, balconies, porches, verandas etc.). Thus, an eclectic and free view of the physiognomy of architectures in Southern Spain was generated; a *'Spanish Revival Architecture'*, a kind of myth that, compared to these Spanish roots, supposed an appropriate mean of cultural expression and a product of marketing for real-estate developments dedicated to aspiring middle classes of the moment (Polyzoides et al. 1982, 20). On the other side, complementing a typological imitation of courtyard houses, *cortijos* and other traditional Southern Spain types, an architectural language characterized by the use of typical *'Mediterranean'* elements was used, in order to provide the full set of global image according to the intention of the revival. Thus, this *'Spanish Revival Architecture'* was a response to programmatic conditions, the social demands of architectural representation of the real-estate product and climatological context. The original Spanish architectures, represented in multiple travel publications were decomposed into specific elements, outside their global context, but with meaning within a new environment, becoming new starting conditions to achieve new aesthetic effects. This new *style* would be developed based on a building elements hodgepodge, extracted from the catalogs of travelers, in order to create a global structure embedded to satisfy new domestic needs, but remote in its programmatic operations from both colonial missions or ranchos, as also distant from ancient Spanish houses or mansions. This created an outer shell style applied to an interior that is not affected by the outside. So, in late 1920, the Spanish Colonial Revival had risen to become *'the'* architectural style of Southern California, with many examples and reviews of Hispanic heritage inherited in the US, and even the toponymy was related to the Hispanic influence: Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Palos Verdes, San Clemente among others. (Gebhard 1967)

With the support of travel publications, collages of various architectural elements were used as scenic fragments in the searching for a recognizable image as 'Spanish', 'Colonial' or 'Mediterranean'. Every outstanding architectural firm had available travel books, drawings and photographs. Thus, the projection in a 'Spanish Style' entailed to transfer the perspectives, images and measured drawings to the suitable plans and sections of the project. Among the most representative Spanish revival architects are the Arthur and Nina Zwebell<sup>7</sup> marriage, who projected various residential complexes, deeply marked by the Mediterranean style: Andalusia Apartments (1926, included in the Los Angeles National Register of Historic Places), Casa Laguna (1928) or Patio del Moro (1925). As stated in an interview with Harold Bissner (collaborator on the firm): *'The book was all photographs, single plates like these. You could take them out, put them on your drafting board [...] Put all your details together and pretty soon you have a nice house. That's the way Spanish houses were designed'* (Polyzoides et al. 1982, 202). The Andalusia Apartments<sup>8</sup> reflected this project methodology: there were projected in 1926 and supposed the more paradigmatic work in this aspect. With a completely contemporary scheme of nine apartments, involving a Mediterranean style central courtyard (in fact, the Andalusia Apartments reflects its architectural sources in its own name) and specific areas for cars (a truly novelty at that time), it was developed a building that includes all the characteristic repertoire of revival details: exterior wooden balcony, fireplaces and balconies (Figures 8 and 9). The Zwebells helped to perfect the vocabulary of the romantic Mediterranean hybrid that is often claimed by Southern California as its one indigenous style.

The free interpretation of the physiognomy of Southern Spanish buildings generated potent eclectic images that established the so-called Spanish style as the dominant local architectural language. Spanish Revival Architecture in Southern California can be constructed as a series of semantic inventions applied to the stable body of imported Mediterranean typological models (Polyzoides et al 1982), based, among others, in the great number of books and references made by the travellers and their drawings.

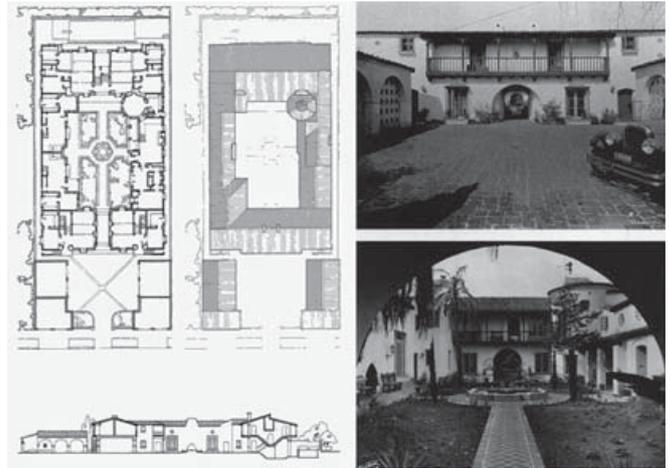


Figure 8



Figure 9

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- 3 The American fascination about Romantic and Orientalist facts had already begun with the travel and stay of the writer Washington Irving, and his book 'Tales of the Alhambra' (1832).
- 4 Theorists sought architectural stylistic antecedents for historic buildings in the South western US, in the same manner the architectural precedents of the Atlantic Seaboard had been set in Georgian England. (Whittlesey 1917, 6)
- 5 In this publication, in the many final pages devoted to advertising, along with listings of plumbing companies, elevators, heating technologies and valves, it was included ads of 'Spanish style' tiles: '*Decorative faience fountain Treatment for walls and floor in attractive Spanish tile'- Galassi Mosaic & Tile Company*.
- 6 Gerstle Mack, who drew the plates, born in San Francisco, CA, in 1894, and died in New York, NY at 90 years old, received his Bachelor's Degree in Architecture in 1916, attending the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Before the First World War he worked as a draftsman in New York and San Francisco, and left to serve in the war. After it, he came back to San Francisco, where he also was employed in some architectural firms until 1926. In that year, he travelled to Spain with Thomas Gibson elaborating a wide study about architecture on Southern Spain in 1928. Two years later, a second book about architecture on northern Spain also appeared. These two works were the only ones produced about architecture, as later, Gestle mainly dedicated to investigate about biographies of French artist as Toulouse-Lautrec and Coubert, being the earliest full-length biographer of Cézanne in English
- 7 Arthur Bernard Zwebell (1891-1973) and Nina Louise Zwebell (1895-1976) were a husband-and-wife architectural team that worked intensely in the design of several courtyard apartments in Southern California. After the 1929 crisis, they gave up the architectural works and dedicated to movie scene design for the Los Angeles film industry.
- 8 The importance of the new architectural typologies for the burgeoning film industry shows that residents in Andalusia Apartments (promoted by Cecil B. De Mille) were, among others, Marlon Brando, Jean Hagenor Cesar Romero.

## Notes

- 1 The *Grand Tour* could be called as the antecedent of modern tourism. It was very popular in the British high class society. The educational tour included mainly France and Italy.
- 2 Even the book related the difficulties to reach Spain, through war zones, dodging mines, submarines and very 'susceptible' border soldiers. (Whittlesey 1917, 5)

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