Texas Regionalism 1925–1950

An Elusive Sensibility

By Peter C. Papademetriou, AIA

Regionalism as a concept and a sensibility has provoked a continuing interest during the Modern period. It remains as a constant theme, reappearing at intervals as a kind of mediating force, or even a potential point of synthesis. Our moment in history is another time in which the notion of regionalism seeks definition, although the historical evidence seems to suggest that with each reappraisal the definition changes slightly, and perhaps will remain ever-elusive.

By the late 1950s, second-generation Modern architects already were open in their acknowledgment of regionalism as an influence on architectural form. James Stirling wrote of the reassessment of indigenous building and traditional methods and materials. And Paul Rudolph observed:

> The great architectural movements of the past have been precisely formulated in a given area, been adopted and spread to other regions, suiting themselves more or less to the particular way of life of the new area. . . . *Regionalism is one way toward that richness in Architecture which other movements enjoyed and which is so lacking today. . . .*

In 1948, the Museum of Modern Art held a symposium on "What is Happening to Modern Architecture?" at which it was observed that the early effects of regionalism on the International Style were being felt in England as the "New Empiricism" and in America as the "Bay Region Style." Henry-Russell Hitchcock, a participant in the MOMA symposium, could observe over a decade later:

> Certainly it is time, however, that the extreme insistence on a sort of modernism in architecture that should be in its every aspect as different as possible from earlier architectures has diminished. Architects today are less afraid of continuity and partial identity in theory, in materials and in emotional content with buildings of the past than in the twenties. But it chiefly creates confusion, I believe, to call these tendencies "post-modern," "anti-modern" or "neo-traditional," however badly some generic name for them has evidently come to be needed.

It further should be noted that a degree of precision in our use of terms is necessary. One glibly speaks of "mannerism" in architecture, but the specific phenomenon of Mannerism is limited to the period of the mid-1500s. Similarly, Regionalism was an actual historical movement, from the mid-1920s through the early 1930s. In Texas, it was this specific movement which created the sensibility remaining with us and is particularly key to an understanding of the transition of architecture into an altered Modernism. Texas Regionalism was a necessary historical bridge between late Revivalist Eclecticism and the Modernist esthetic represented initially by the International Style, which underwent its own transformation during the same period. Regionalism was at once a conservative formal tradition (in the true meaning of "conservation") and a sensibility in which the visual leap to a Modern building was not great.

Ideological Conservatism

The architectural vanguard in Texas generally has been ideologically conservative, reflecting a pragmatic tendency which has recognized the phenomenon of architecture-as-style. In the absence of a didactic tradition, seemingly opposing attitudes have been allowed to coexist. An obvious example is the practice of El Paso's Henry C. Trost. His catholicity in architectural form was such that, as Lloyd Engelbrecht observed:

> During the years in which Trost designed buildings which show an awareness and appreciation of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan, he also turned out a number of designs in what would have been described by many at the time, disapprovingly, as the "historic styles."

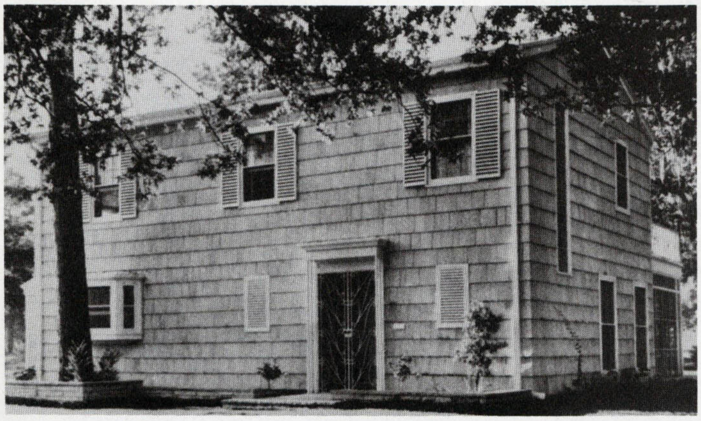
One may also turn to two houses of 1940 belonging to the two principal partners of the Houston firm MacKie and Kamrath to illustrate the continuity of a conservative tradition in consort, or at least parallel, with progressive formalism. MacKie's own house is a traditional, almost classic, box while Kamrath's represents the obvious reflection of Frank Lloyd Wright as well as a regional sensibility, particularly in its configuration and orientation. These two aspects—the willingness to acknowledge tradition and the generally conservative stance towards *avant-garde* ideologies—were conditions to which the ideas of Regionalism could attach themselves.

By the 1920s, during the isolationism following World War I, there emerged the concept of what Nancy Heller and Julia Williams termed ". . . an 'American Art,' an art that was not based on imported European styles, that was not centered in one or two major cities, and that was accessible and understandable to *all* Americans." This concept centered around Regionalism, which serviced as an understood catchall for the issues at hand, yet presented the difficulty of not being a comprehensive or intellectualized body of theory. As William Jordy observes, ". . . regionalism is a changing conception, assuming different meanings in different contexts." During this postwar period, significant social change was reflected in the arts; Regionalism is associated with a return to realism and may be viewed in part as the manifestation of the struggle to come to terms with a new cultural order.

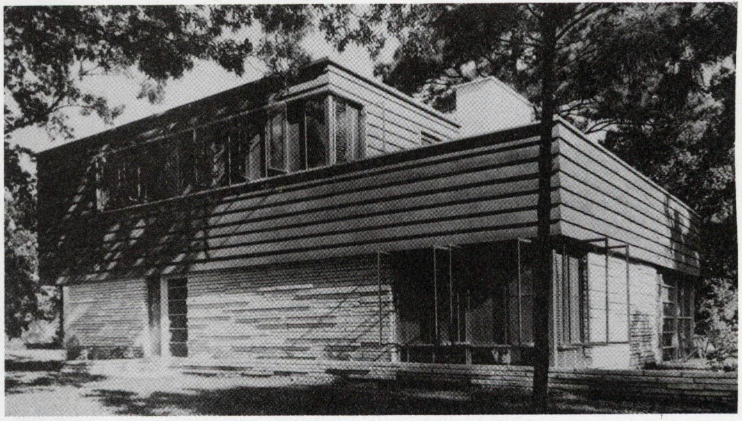
David Williams, O'Neil Ford

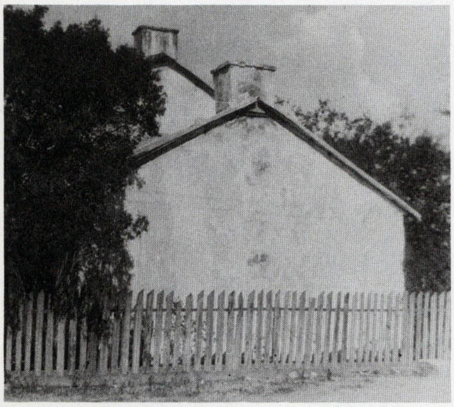
It is not surprising to learn, as Jordy notes, that those who identified the closest with the regionalist idea had ". . . themselves grown up on farms or had some intimate boyhood contact with . . . the indigenous world." Texas Regionalism centers around two such individuals, David R. Williams and O'Neil Ford. Both came from a rural background and de-

MacKie House: classic box.



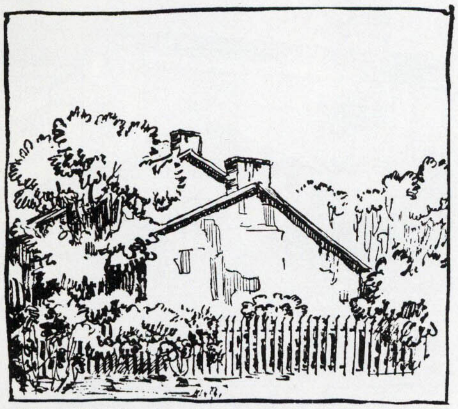
Kamrath House: Wrightian/regional.



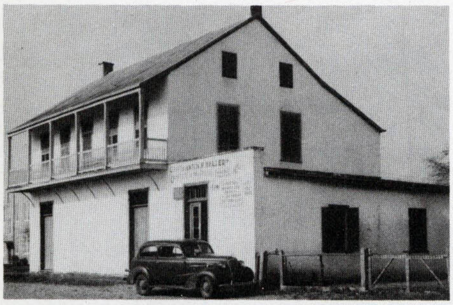


UT-Austin architecture archives

House in Castroville photographed by David Williams.



O'Neil Ford's sketch of same house as above.



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National Youth Administration photo (1940) of Joseph Carle House in Castroville. Reminiscent of Elbert Williams House in Dallas (page 39).

veloped their unique attitudes in architecture outside established patterns. Partially because of the personalities involved, the vicissitudes of careers and personal indifference to accurate documentation, it is often difficult to separate the mutual influences between Williams and Ford. However, there is no doubt of their close collaboration, or of the extent to which their intense interest in Texas vernacular architecture contributed to their association.

David Williams was born in a dugout near Childress in 1890, took an International Correspondence School course in drafting while working for the Fort Worth and Denver City Railroad and in 1912 enrolled at the University of Texas. In 1916 he left before graduating and went to work as a civil engineer in Tampico, Mexico. In 1922, he had married and went first to Fontainebleau and then the American Academy in Rome, returning to Dallas in 1924. In the decade after his return, Williams began to visit and document the architecture of early Texas buildings, which led to both written and design formulations of Regionalist architecture.

O'Neil Ford, born in Pink Hill in 1905, was the son of a railroad engineer whose death left Ford the head of his family at age 11. A bond of crafts talent held the family together. His mother was a weaver, as is his sister; his younger brother Lynn was a craftsman whose wood carvings have always been a part of Ford's work. Ford likewise had taken an International Correspondence School course in drafting and briefly attended the Normal School (now North Texas State University) in Denton, but left after less than two years and sought out David Williams in 1926.

The architectural issue in Texas Regionalism was to respond to contemporary functional requirements with what Stephen Fox has labeled "Regional cultural authenticity." As Williams himself observed, ". . . there is full proof that some of our grandfathers and most of our great-grandfathers possessed the refined taste and culture for which we have been searching abroad." These qualities were synthesized and given imagery through the surveys of Pioneer Texas buildings undertaken by Williams and Ford in a focus of some intensity from 1924 to 1928. Although both were talented draftsmen, Williams favored the camera and Ford the sketchpad. The images contained in Williams' photograph collections indicate less of a pure historicism than a process of observation which could lead to a more generalized borrowing. The photos often were worked over, with notes written directly on them; it is likely that they functioned as working sources. The images may also be seen as recurring themes, aspects looked at time and again. The translation from original sources to working model, not to mention the process of interaction between the two architects, may be observed in the fact that photographs by Williams bear sketches by Ford directly on the back, some Williams photographs were sketched by Ford, and once again translated by Williams into pen and ink.

The examples looked at centered around Fredericksburg and Castroville, as well as other towns such as Salado or Quili. What is relevant is that their visual attributes reflect what we might call a modern affinity toward simplicity —direct use of materials and a certain degree of abstraction in form. As Williams wrote in "An Indigenous Architecture," in 1928:

> Their forebears have left for them an architectural art as beautiful in its purpose as anything that has yet been built . . . beautiful because they were simple and natural. It is better to throw away our habit of supposing everything beautiful in

> Texas had a foreign origin, and to admit that these little houses are not French or Spanish or even English at all, but are natural, native Texas art suited to our climate and indigenous to our soil.

In a later article Williams declared:

> We are discovering our traditions, our legends, our folk songs—and our native architecture. . . . Their style is modern, for it satisfies all the requirements of modern design and construction. It can be developed in perfect harmony with what is being done in modern architecture. . . .

The first phase of giving form to this sensibility might be called *Formal Regionalism*. That is, a direct heuristic connection was made with the Pioneer precedents, in an equation which also gave the early Regionalist designs an instantaneous pedigree. This use of direct borrowing was also appropriate in a conservative esthetic climate, representing as it did a reappraisal of form rather than its wholesale abandonment. Jerry Bywaters, a regional painter and personal friend of Williams and Ford (who designed two houses for Bywaters), observed, ". . . architecture, like language, is a continuous development, and . . . to advocate an architecture entirely cut off from the past is equivalent to advocating that we abandon English for Esperanto."

Williams' McKie House in Corsicana (1929) embodies a certain classic refinement with both modern and Pioneer references—standing seam copper roof, screened porches, shutters, dormers and a modern emphasis of horizontality in projecting brick courses. The Warner Clark house in Dallas (1930) also combined old and new themes, particularly in its collection of details and handling of materials, while arcades facilitated cross ventilation. But it is with the Elbert Williams House in Dallas (1932) that Williams achieves the highest level of Formal Regionalism. Its visual antecedents are many, but the basic reference is Castroville, with the stone mass anchored by an opposing set of chimneys on the gable ends, specifically as in the Carle and Vance Houses. These are not simple quotations, but skilled reinterpretation to fit the specifics of a client. The Elbert Williams house also suggests an aspect of planning and orientation supportive of what might be called *Regionalist Functionalism*, as its dominant L-shape is oriented to catch the southeastern breezes and sited to pull these off the adjacent creek as a means of cooling.

Williams went to Washington after 1932 to join the Library of Congress Committee on the Historic American Buildings Survey and over the next dozen years served in a variety of roles, being the director in 1936 of the Works Projects Division of the National Youth Administration. He remained in contact with O'Neil Ford, who after 1930 had his own practice. As an NYA director, Williams systematically revisited the sites of central Texas and had his beloved buildings documented. Fifty-five years old at the end of World War II, and slightly crippled from a war injury, Williams never resumed active practice, retiring to Louisiana.

It is in the work of his younger colleague, O'Neil Ford, that both the formal and functional aspects of Regionalism were developed, and because Ford was what Bywaters termed a "purist designer with modern inclinations," an eventual merging with modernism was made possible. The Stephen Kahn House in Dallas (1932) shows functional distinctions of orientation in squared-off massing to the north and sheltering eaves over an open balcony on the South.

John Staub

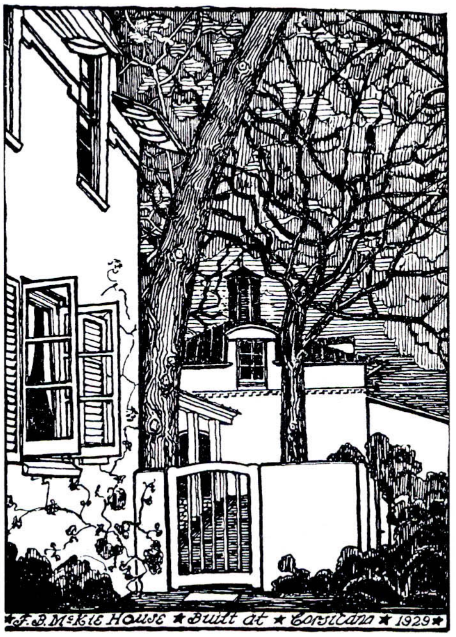
In passing, it should be noted that even the work of essentially eclectic architects such as Houston's John Staub recognized that history and historical style were implicit in an analysis of the architectural problem. David Williams had given Staub a collection of his photographs, as well as a personally inscribed reprint copy of his article "Toward a Southwestern Architecture." Staub himself had written:

> Is it not wiser for us to seek inspiration in the architecture developed in our own climate with materials at hand and adjust it to the tastes and requirements of our day, rather than to force the adaptation of types derived in foreign environments under different climatic conditions?

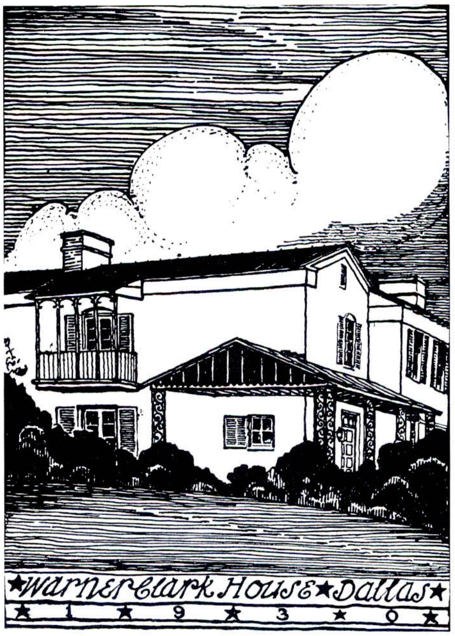
This interpretation illustrated that Texas should have no single architectural character, for the humid Gulf Coast suggested a form Staub called "Latin Colonial," derived from Louisiana sources and exemplified in Houston by his Junior League (now Brennan's Restaurant) building (1929) and the Bayou Club (1940), both of which also exhibit attributes of Regionalist Functionalism.

O'Neil Ford by the late 1930s had changed in his use of historical borrowing. When he was appointed project architect for the restoration of San Antonio La Villita in 1939, one of the first historic preservation projects in the United States, he wanted to avoid a sterile reconstruction and essentially failed to see the problem as one of historicism. In fact, Ford began to speak of

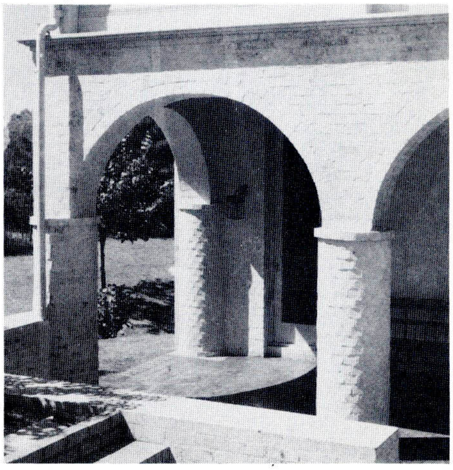
Williams' drawing of his McKie House in Corsicana, 1929.


★F.B.McKie House ★ Built at ★ Corsicana ★ 1929★

Williams' drawing of his Clark House in Dallas. 1930.

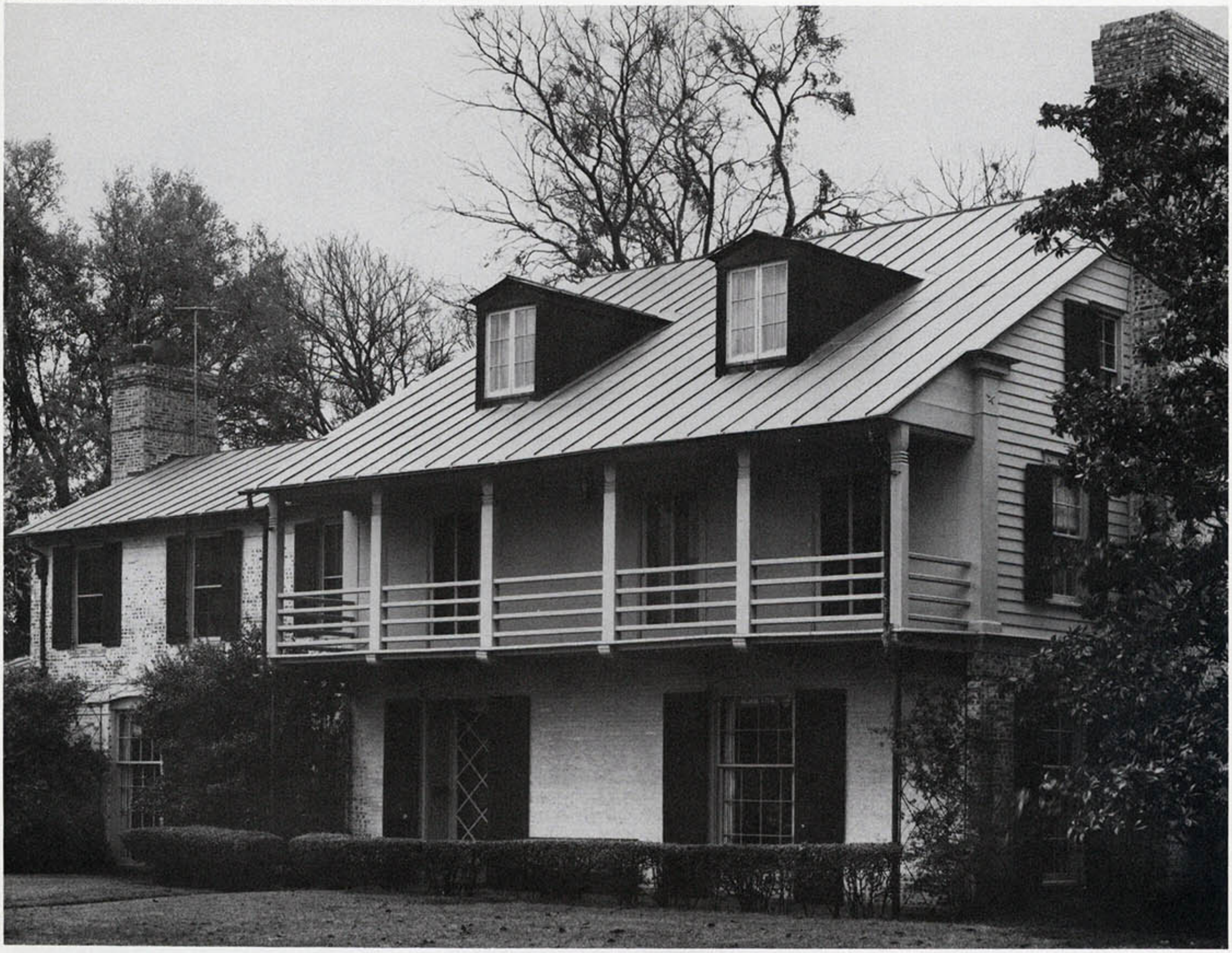


Detail, Clark House.



Courtesy of Mrs. David R. Williams

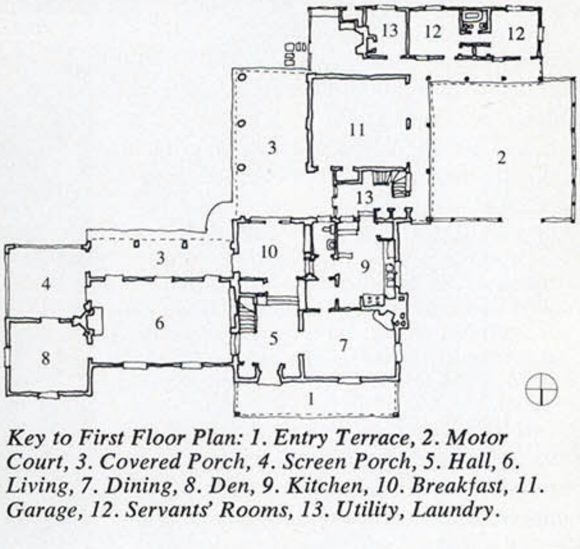
Elbert Williams House, Dallas, 1932, by David Williams.



Doug Tomlinson

Bill Cox

Rear view, Elbert Williams House. L-shape catches breezes from adjacent creek.



Key to First Floor Plan: 1. Entry Terrace, 2. Motor Court, 3. Covered Porch, 4. Screen Porch, 5. Hall, 6. Living, 7. Dining, 8. Den, 9. Kitchen, 10. Breakfast, 11. Garage, 12. Servants' Rooms, 13. Utility, Laundry.

*Note: Sketches and drawings by O'Neil Ford and Dave Williams courtesy of SMU Press (*Southwest Review*), which next year will publish a Williams biography by Muriel Quest McCarthy.*

a *new* indigenous architecture.

The problem inherent in Formal Regionalism was observed by others as well. Buford Pickens of Tulane warned of "superficiality on the one hand, or sentimental fascination with archaeological forms on the other," maintaining that the architectural problem is "a contemporary and continuous one." Roscoe DeWitt of Dallas wrote in 1931:

> But it is possible that the very principles which made this native architecture sound and suitable now threaten its capacity to endure. New conditions have intervened . . . imagine an office-building in early Texas.

O'Neil Ford himself contended:

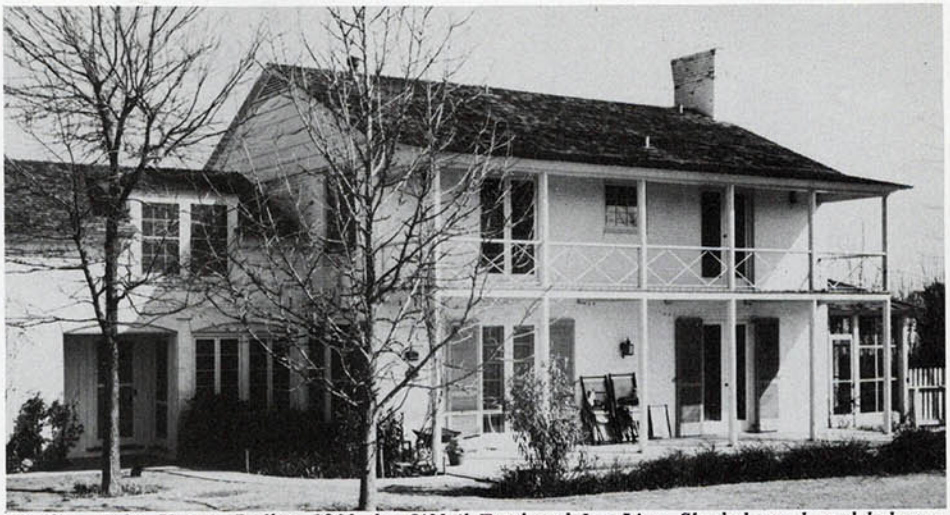
> The functionalist ideal is building that serves basic human purposes permanently . . . this is what we wanted to show Texans—that these houses were as modern when they were built as a skyscraper is today, as purposeful as a piston in a motor—machines to live in. . . . A new style will be formulated by meeting the needs of today with the scientific developments of today.

By the end of the 1930s, Ford was moving his version of Regionalism away from the allusions of earlier work to a synthesis with modern architecture through Regionalist Functionalism. The Frank Murchison House in San Antonio of 1937 reflects such considerations as single-room-depth plans, orientation, control of openings, sun control and prevailing breezes. However, the use of lattices and triple-hung windows, and the handling of the entry door, are details in the manner of a Fredericksburg precedent of the 1850s.

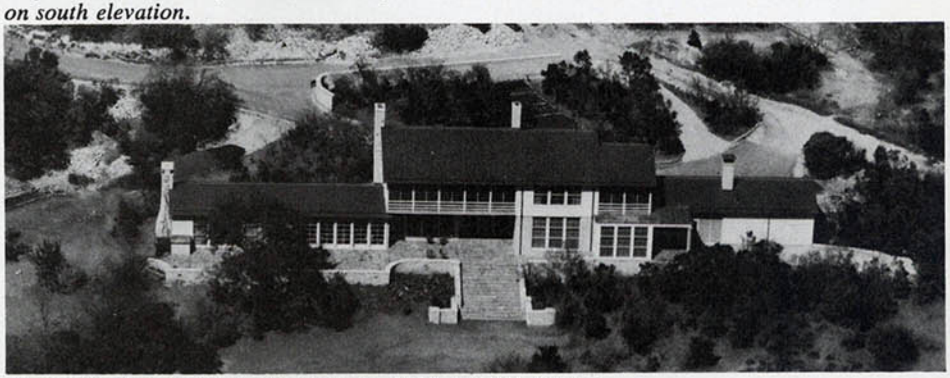
The extent of borrowing was sometimes conditioned by program, as in the "Little Chapel in the Woods" at Texas Woman's University in Denton (1939), which was designed to be built by the National Youth Administration. A critic in the *Southwestern Review* characterized the chapel as:

> an original, native style of building that is sometimes a little self-consciously "indigenous," an architecture which indeed takes into account the history and mode of life in the region, but owes a great deal to the modern stress on function . . . avoiding the mannerisms of the "modern" school.

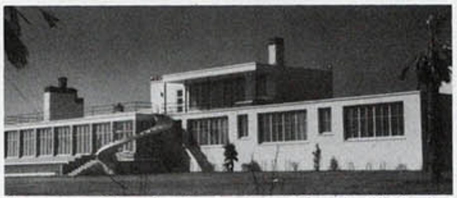
San Jose Ranch on St. Joseph Island (1938) was designed as a low-lying box because of hurricanes and therefore exhibits closer affinities to the International Style. Lynn Ford actually constructed the house and was responsible for many of its details, such as louver screens—allowing through-ventilation of the bedrooms—reputed to be fabricated from driftwood found at the site.



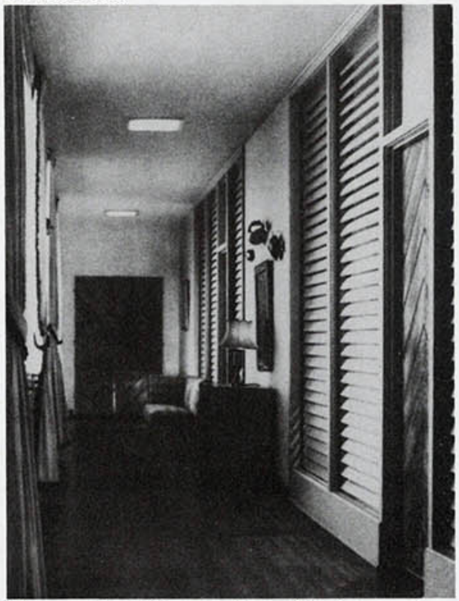
Stephen Kahn House, Dallas, 1932, by O'Neil Ford and Joe Linz. Shaded porch and balcony on south elevation.



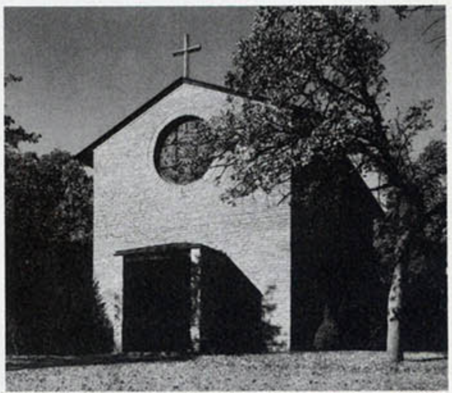
Frank Murchison House, San Antonio, 1937, by O'Neil Ford.



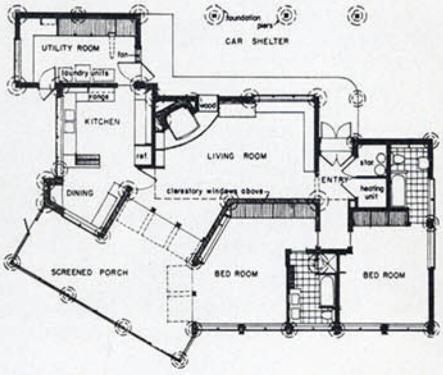
San Jose Ranch, St. Joseph Island, 1938, by O'Neil Ford.



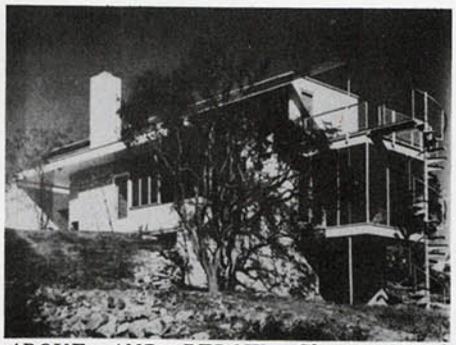
Louvered walk in corridor of bedroom-wing, San Jose Ranch.



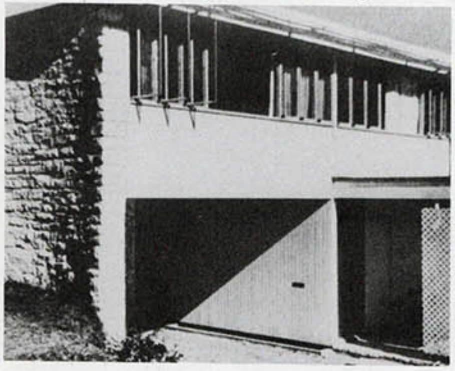
Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, 1939, by O'Neil Ford and Arch Swank.



Plan, McNeel House, San Antonio, 1946, by Ford and Rogers.



ABOVE AND BELOW: Chester Nagel House, Austin, 1941, by Chester Nagel.



With the merging of the allusions of Formal Regionalism into the pragmatics of Regionalist Functionalism, the path to a modified International Style was all but complete. The International Style itself was undergoing change after 1930, characterized by William Jordy as an "... adaptation of the Style to normative needs and desires rather than the forging of an *avant-garde* image. ..." He observes that historical values and traditions endowed modern architectural form with "denser meanings," recognizing the importance of traditional materials and regional traditions, but also warns of "... those who would 'humanize' modern architecture by redwood and barbecue pits." Regionalism could become a reversion to nostalgia which would "... denigrate a heroic tradition." Therefore he calls for a sensibility "... not edged with residual prettiness and sentimentality" but derived from a "tougher vision."

Chester Nagel

The narrow gap between Regionalism and a transformed Modernism may be seen in the design of Chester Nagel, a student of Gropius, for his own house in Austin (1941), which evidences both the principles of his teacher and the degree to which they already had been altered in the American context. The house is organized on its site and in plan according to the best sensibilities of Regionalist Functionalism; overhangs dominate the southern orientation, while the north face is rendered as a clipped-off box. Its detail expression includes both the shapes of the International Style and references to the Texas vernacular. By 1941, however, this seemed a logical synthesis and Nagel evidenced this philosophical integration when he wrote, "Beauty was sought in its true and natural forms, not borrowed, not imposed."

O'Neil Ford spent World War II in the United States Army Air Force, but resumed practice upon his return. A work of 1946, the William D. McNeel House in San Antonio by Ford and Rogers, represents the extent to which Ford's design work had adopted Modern trends while translating these in the sensibility of Regionalist Functionalism. Like Williams, Ford recalled "the old German towns near San Antonio" but maintained that "few architects have made any effort to move toward a comparably progressive architecture of and for today. ... Instead, there has arisen a new tradition that is generally characterized by 'peanut-brittle rockwork.' ..." To this end, a trivialization of Regionalism may have been a contributing factor.

Reversion to nostalgia, misinterpretation through trivialization and reduction to the *kitsch* object were inherent problems with Formal Regionalism. The principles of Regionalist Functionalism, moreover, were often more elusive to codification and recognition as new type solutions. The use of obvious references was unable to sustain itself, and Regionalism became a transitional phase of formal evolution whose issues remain as yet to be successfully reconciled. The period of Texas Regionalism from 1925 to 1945 was inevitably backward-looking and somewhat reactionary, reflecting, according to Jordy, "... the confrontation between a dying rurality of the individual family farm and the small isolated village and emergent technological and institutional change. ..." In the best work, however, the historic borrowings of Regionalism served as a decisive element, through an interest in "first principles," which provided the necessary cultural resonance and ideological conservatism to facilitate Modern Architecture's ultimate acceptance in the Texas context. It is both this appeal and this dilemma which remain with us.

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