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" supposedly evoke the surrounding landscape by mimicking the adobe forms of traditional Puebloo 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 Steworks 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, polyethylene sheathing, 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 unathomed, 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.

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 polyethylene-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 its cultural heritage as
a Spaniard and his training as an
architect. He responded to the landscape, both natural and cul-
tural, in which he built, but he did
so by ignoring the restrictive
criteria of New Mexican regional-
ism. 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 trans-
form itself repeatedly as individuals,
cultures, and places themselves
change.

Notes:
1 John Gaw Meem, “Old Forms for New
2 Gorge Manrique, “Coplas por la Muerte de St Padre,” in Eleanor L. Tumbull, ed.,
Ten Centuries of Spanish Poetry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University