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The Survey of the Homeland and the Production of Regionalist Modernism. Switzerland and the USA 1930–1950

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Abstract

By the turn of the 20th century images of the rustic houses of the Engadin in Switzerland and the adobe constructions of the indigenous Pueblos of New Mexico in the USA both became transformed into distinct architectural styles representing romantic notions of these remote regions. It was not until the 1930s, when these regions' earthbound vernacular architecture became the basis of a new tradition of regionalist modernism, synthesizing the qualities of simple traditional construction and material use and modern ideals of informal living comfort.

The paper looks on shared and divergent features and the hidden lines of transatlantic interdependency in the respective rationalistic production of regional tradition. The simultaneous change in notion and reception can be linked to parallel nation-wide surveys institutionalised as make-work programmes in response to the Great Depression. Each survey resulted in highly formalised drawings and standardised records, which facilitated the comprehensive dissemination of the extensive findings, but also resulted in a constricted modernising perspective. In the result, the new and more thorough understanding of these regions vernacular heritage and their integration into topical architectural thinking eased the way for a modern adaptation of its architectural and constructive principles beyond formal attributes. This is clearly illustrated by the architectural work of John Gaw Meem, but also by the designs of Myrtle & Wilfried Stedman in New Mexico. Similarly, in the Engadin, the anewed understanding gained in the 1930s was the basis for the modern regionalism of Iachen Ulrich Könz or Rudolf Olgiati.



Above: Wilfried Stedman, sketch for an adobe house with parking space, 1936.

Below: Iachen U. Könz: house for the painter Turo Pedretti in Crasta (Celerina), Graubünden. 1951. Detail of the entrance.