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Cliff May and the California Ranch House

“A ranch house, because of its name alone, borrows friendliness, implicitly, informality, and gaiety from the men and women who, in the past, found those pleasures in ranch-house living.” –Cliff May 1946¹

It is no secret that the weather in California is one of the most sought after in the United States. When the Rose Bowl is televised throughout the United States on New Year's Day, inquires by potential homebuyers from out of state increase dramatically. Thus it comes as no surprise why Cliff May created the modern California ranch house that was made specifically to embrace the sunny and warm California days and nights. There is no doubt that Cliff May should be included in this architectural book that celebrates California's most talented architects. May's ability to modernize the California ranch house to fit the contemporary American family and making it available to the masses is how he earned his place in this book.

To understand Cliff May and his designs, one must first understand the origins of the ranch house. The original California ranch house began when the Spaniards inhabited the state. Their homes were unique to the area in their methods of construction. In order to properly support the heavy roof, the adobe walls had to be at least three feet wide and because the house had no foundation, it had to be close to the ground, therefore restricting its height. Low roofs allowed for a deep overhang which would protect the

¹ Faragher, John Mack. “Bungalow and Ranch House: The Architectural Backwash of California.” *Western Historical Quarterly* 32 (2001): 171.

adobe walls from rain and keep out the hot summer sun. A typical rancho home had a plain façade but a hand-carved wooden front door and decorative patio. The house usually began with an “L” shaped floor plan and as the family grew, so did the home. A second wing would be added converting the floor plan to a “U” shape.²

Cliff May was born in one of these early California ranch houses. Cliff May was born in San Diego, California in 1908 to Beatrice Magee and Charles Clifford May. May’s mother was of the Estudillo and de Pedrorena families—families well known in the history of California. These families had participated in important military, political, economic, and social positions under the Spanish, Mexican, and American rule. These two families also owned several ranchos in what are now San Diego and Riverside counties. It was Casa de Estudillo that was built in the typical rancho “U” shape adobe home. The house was made into a museum in 1910 and was publicized as “‘Ramona’s Marriage Place’, becoming part of the growing movement to preserve the romance of California’s rancho days.”³ May was able to visit his grandparents’ home, but he spent most of his childhood summers at his aunt’s home in Rancho Santa Margarita and the adjacent home called Las Flores Adobe. A lima bean ranch that once belonged to Pio Pico, Las Flores Adobe was built in Monterey style while Rancho Santa Margarita was a “U” shaped adobe home. It is these homes that inspired and shaped May’s vision of the twentieth century California ranch house.⁴ Reminsicing his childhood, May explained his facination for the home: “The ranch house had everything a California house should

² Sunset Magazine (ed.) *Western Ranch Houses by Cliff May*, Santa Monica: Hennessey + Ingalls, 1997, p. 13-20.

See Figures 1A-C

³ Mary A. van Balgooy. “Designer of the Dream: Cliff May and the California Ranch House.” *Southern California Quarterly* 86 (2004) : 127-128.

⁴ van Balgooy, p. 129

be. It had cross ventilation, the floor was level with the ground, and with its courtyard and the exterior corridor, it was about sunshine and informal outdoor living.”⁵

Cliff May, unlike other architects, did not initially desire to become an architect. In fact, he did not become a certified architect until the last years of his life. His career as a designer began soon after he dropped out of college. A student who excelled in music, May attended San Diego State College, but due to the Great Depression, dropped out and joined his parents’ neighbors, the Styris family, to design and build furniture. His work sold so well, he was encouraged to place his Monterey style furniture in a new home that was for sale. The house was soon sold, and according to Mary A. von Balgooy, it was due primarily to May’s furniture. May continued to place his furniture in homes, and the homes continued to sell fast. His popularity encouraged May to decide to design and build a home himself. He contacted Roy C. Lichty, a real estate developer and future father-in-law. Lichty owned land in San Diego and decided to put up the land for May on the condition that May put in the labor and split the profits with Lichty when the home was sold. May’s second home was featured in *Architectural Digest*, and soon after, his homes were appearing in magazines such as *American Home*, *California Arts & Architecture* and *Sunset*. These homes were reminiscent of the old rancho homes with one story L- or U-shaped floor plans with wide overhanging eaves and low-pitched roofs.⁶

May moved to Los Angeles in 1939 and began working with John A. Smith and his company, First National Finance Corporation, and with Alphonzo Bell, a Bel Air developer, who helped May finance and begin working on his first tract development in

⁵ Alan Hess. “Romantic Mandalay: Recalling the Architect’s Dream House in West Los Angeles.” *Architectural Digest* Special Edition (2005) : p. 301.

⁶ van Balgooy, p. 130-133.

West L.A. called Riviera Ranch. Twenty-four homes were placed on two-thirds to one-acre lots. May advertised his homes as having “recreated ‘the romantic charm of early-day California Ranch-life’ but with all the modern conveniences.”⁷ He also developed homes in Rolling Hills and Valley Crest that boasted three or more bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room, dining room, kitchen, and sunroom. The homes also included outdoor patios, a garage, tack room, paddock for horses, and a “ranch” gate, which opened to a driveway leading to horse stables, and horse trails.⁸

With war looming over the United States, the need for new homes was high in demand. May took advantage and began to design ranch homes for defense workers. Major Corliss C. Mosely commissioned May to design temporary barracks for aviation workers in Glendale, California. These barracks, now demolished, were reminiscent of California’s ranch house. This same commissioner asked May to design another tract in Ontario, California. May was sure to use “the same quality of design as seen in his other residential work so that this low cost duplex would pose as a single-family California Ranch House.”⁹ Named revolutionary in its day, May’s ranch homes sold about 15,000 of its designs, making up the entire neighborhoods of Long Beach and Anaheim. May’s designs traveled as far east as Ireland, Switzerland, and as south as Venezuela.¹⁰

In 1953, Cliff May and his partner, Chris Choate, began authorized sales of their ranch homes in California via their newly established Ranch House Corporation to

⁷ van Balgooy, p. 133.

⁸ van Balgooy, p. 133.

⁹ David Bricker, “Built For Sale: Cliff May and the Low Cost California Ranch House.” Thesis, UC Santa Barbara, p. 15-16.

¹⁰ Patricia Ward Biederman. “Prefab Rehab: Low-Cost Home Has Rich Pedigree.” *Los Angeles Times* 21 Oct. 2004: B2.

Gill, Brendan. “Brendan Gill: Remembering Cliff May.” *Architectural Digest*, 48 (1991): 27.

builders and dealers. These designs, which came complete with plans, materials, and techniques, became so popular, that by the end of 1954, their business spread across the western and southern portions of the United States. They also were benefiting from their sales of the “Magic-Money House”. The home made its first appearance atop of a W&J Sloane’s in Beverly Hills and San Francisco. Local media kept close watch on this pre-fabricated home that later received recognition when it was selected for an exhibition at the Ninth Annual Los Angeles Home Show in June 1954.¹¹

To be included into a book that specifically deals with California architecture, an architect must understand California’s history, its people, and the most importantly, the warm and sunny California weather. Although the idea of the California ranch house has been around for hundreds of years, May was able to modernize it and make it appealing once again to the masses. His passion was not the style of the home itself, but more about the way that people wanted to live. A reputable architectural historian, Talbot F. Hamlin believed that the ranch house’s popularity was not due to the potential homebuyer’s nostalgia for the past, but because of the home’s basic form and simplicity.¹²

While “Americans almost universally rejected modernist houses as sterile, they embraced the ranch house enthusiastically.”¹³ May did not discriminate as many trained architects did; he did not build exclusively for the wealthy, and his innovative tracts homes are proof of that. He used plywood for his wood frame construction to help keep cost down. May designed several layouts of these homes so homeowners would not feel

¹¹ Bricker, p. 85-91.

¹² Bricker, p. 17.

¹³ Faragher, p.168.

trapped into a home just like their neighbors. Knowing the negative connotations of a pre-fabricated home, May stated that these homes are "... a collection of 'parts' that can be assembled in an infinite variety of sizes and layouts."¹⁴ The California Ranch homes have what the homeowners called walls of windows (sliding glass doors) that "connect you to the day, to the time of day and the weather of the day."¹⁵ Out these sliding glass doors, homeowners found themselves in beautiful patios; these patios are often called his signature feature. May was once quoted as saying, "I rebelled against the boxy houses ... I wanted a design that was about sunshine and informal outdoor living."¹⁶ With the popularity Cliff May received, it is no surprise that by 1955, eight out of ten tract houses in the United States were built in the ranch style with Cliff May as the designer.¹⁷

Many believe that because Cliff May was not a trained architect, his work was not taken seriously by the architectural world. This might have been the case in some instances, but his awards speak for themselves. From 1940-1950, May was the president of the Los Angeles division of the Building Contractors Association and from 1946-1952 a staff consultant to *House Beautiful* magazine. May also received design awards from the National Association of Home Builders in 1947, 1952, and 1953, not to include an Award of Merit for Residential Design and Construction from *House and Home* in 1956 and the "Hallmark House" award from *House and Garden* in 1958. His greatest

¹⁴ Bricker, p. 90.

¹⁵ Balzar, John. "Back at the Ranch House." *The Los Angeles Times* 4 Dec. 2003: F9.
See Figure 2B

¹⁶ Hess, p. 298

¹⁷ van Balgooy, p. 138.

recognition came when “*Sunset* magazine produced a second Western ranch house book that featured his work exclusively—an accomplishment few architects have achieved”.¹⁸

Some believed that the ranch house did not deserve any recognition at all because it was a symbol of the middleclass, therefore it was too middlebrow to be taken sincerely.

Alan Hess of *Architectural Digest* says:

The ranch house is the poor stepchild of American architecture. Unpretentious, low-slung, cranked out like Big Macs by tract-house builders in the 1950s, it was America’s most widely built single family home its very success casting a spell that doomed it to invisibility.¹⁹

It has not been until recently that there has been a renewed interest in Cliff May and his designs. In March of 2003, *Architectural Digest* advertised a Cliff May Estate in the Santa Ynez Valley, California, for \$2.295 million.²⁰ A quick Google search on the internet will tell the researcher how many websites there are about ranch houses and realtors that boost the “Cliff May’s” that they have for sale. Communities have set up websites to discuss the proper way to restore a May rancher. The interest for his homes grows stronger every day.

In all, for a man that become a certified architect until late in life, after he caused a great stir in California architecture, Cliff May certainly deserves a place in a book that celebrates Californian architects. A native Californian who grew up surrounded by architecture that understood the great weather and how a home could benefit from it, May’s California ranch house was a great phenomenon. It was reminiscent of the old, yet modern and built for the contemporary family. May’s contribution to the growth of Los Angeles when he realized the need for housing for defense workers and the general

¹⁸ van Balgooy, p. 138.

¹⁹ Hess, p. 296.

²⁰ “Editors Select Properties Around the World.” *Architectural Digest* 60 (2003): p. 97.

population adds to his significance. Overall, Cliff May's ranch house became a symbol not only of California, but American culture as well.

Dominguez Adobe, Carson, CA
Photos by Laura Gallegos



Figure 1A



Figure 1B



Figure 1C

Long Beach, CA
Photos provided by Rochelle Kramer



Figure 2A



Figure 2B

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