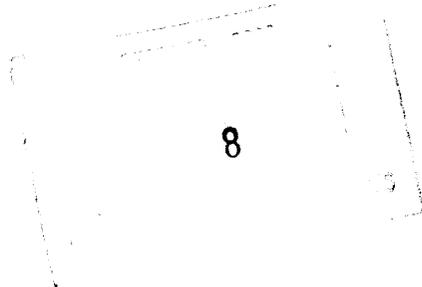


(Oct. 1990)

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM**



8

**1. NAME OF PROPERTY**

**HISTORIC NAME:** Southern Union Gas Company Building  
**OTHER NAME/SITE NUMBER:** N/A

**2. LOCATION**

**STREET & NUMBER:** 723 Silver Avenue S.W. **NOT FOR PUBLICATION:** N/A  
**CITY OR TOWN:** Albuquerque **VICINITY:** N/A  
**STATE:** New Mexico **CODE:** NM **COUNTY:** Bernalillo **CODE:** 001 **ZIP CODE:** 87102

**3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  
\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of  
Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  
 meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant \_\_\_ nationally  
\_\_\_ statewide  locally. (\_\_\_ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

*Katherine Slich*  
Signature of certifying official

*12 February 2004*  
Date

State Historic Preservation Officer

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.  
(\_\_\_ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

**4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register  
\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.
- \_\_\_ determined eligible for the National Register  
\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.
- \_\_\_ determined not eligible for the National Register
- \_\_\_ removed from the National Register
- \_\_\_ other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper  
*Edson H. Beall*

Date of Action  
*3/31/04*

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**5. CLASSIFICATION**

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**OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY:** Private

**CATEGORY OF PROPERTY:** Building

<b>NUMBER OF RESOURCES WITHIN PROPERTY:</b>	<b>CONTRIBUTING</b>	<b>NONCONTRIBUTING</b>
	1	0 BUILDINGS
	0	0 SITES
	0	0 STRUCTURES
	0	0 OBJECTS
	1	0 TOTAL

**NUMBER OF CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES PREVIOUSLY LISTED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER:** 0

**NAME OF RELATED MULTIPLE PROPERTY LISTING:** Buildings Designed by John Gaw Meem

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

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**HISTORIC FUNCTIONS:** COMMERCIAL/TRADE/business, specialty store

**CURRENT FUNCTIONS:** Vacant

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**7. DESCRIPTION**

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**ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION:** International Style

**MATERIALS:** FOUNDATION: concrete  
WALLS: terra cotta  
ROOF: asphalt  
OTHER: aluminum , glass

**NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION** (see continuation sheets 7-5 through 7-6).

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

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**APPLICABLE NATIONAL REGISTER CRITERIA**

- A** PROPERTY IS ASSOCIATED WITH EVENTS THAT HAVE MADE A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE BROAD PATTERNS OF OUR HISTORY.
- B** PROPERTY IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE LIVES OF PERSONS SIGNIFICANT IN OUR PAST.
- C** PROPERTY EMBODIES THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF A TYPE, PERIOD, OR METHOD OF CONSTRUCTION OR REPRESENTS THE WORK OF A MASTER, OR POSSESSES HIGH ARTISTIC VALUE, OR REPRESENTS A SIGNIFICANT AND DISTINGUISHABLE ENTITY WHOSE COMPONENTS LACK INDIVIDUAL DISTINCTION.
- D** PROPERTY HAS YIELDED, OR IS LIKELY TO YIELD, INFORMATION IMPORTANT IN PREHISTORY OR HISTORY.

**CRITERIA CONSIDERATIONS:** N/A

**AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE:** ARCHITECTURE

**PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE:** 1951-1953

**SIGNIFICANT DATES:** 1951

**SIGNIFICANT PERSON:** N/A

**CULTURAL AFFILIATION:** N/A

**ARCHITECT/BUILDER:** Meem, Zehner and Holien / Clough and King

**NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE** (see continuation sheets 8-7 through 8-22).

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES**

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY** (see continuation sheets 9-23 through 9-24).

**PREVIOUS DOCUMENTATION ON FILE (NPS):** N/A

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

**PRIMARY LOCATION OF ADDITIONAL DATA:**

- State historic preservation office (*Historic Preservation Division, Office of Cultural Affairs*)
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University: (*Meem Archives, Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque*)

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

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**ACREAGE OF PROPERTY:** less than one acre

**UTM REFERENCES**    Zone Easting    Northing  
                          1 13    349000    3883540

**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION** (see continuation sheet 10-25)

**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION** (see continuation sheet 10-25)

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**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

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**NAME/TITLE:** Chris Wilson / J. B. Jackson Professor of Cultural Landscape Studies

**ORGANIZATION:** University of New Mexico

**DATE:** July 2, 2003

**STREET & NUMBER:** 1820 Gold Avenue S.E.

**TELEPHONE:** 505 710-7169

**CITY OR TOWN:** Albuquerque

**STATE:** NM

**ZIP CODE:** 87106

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**ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION**

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**CONTINUATION SHEETS**

**MAPS** (see attached USGS 7.5 minute-series quad; Albuquerque West, New Mexico)

**PHOTOGRAPHS** (see continuation sheet Photos 26)

**ADDITIONAL ITEMS** N/A

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**PROPERTY OWNER**

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**NAME:** RAY A. GRAHAM III

**STREET & NUMBER:** ONE WIND NW

**TELEPHONE:** 505-255-6086

**CITY OR TOWN:** ALBUQUERQUE

**STATE:** NM

**ZIP CODE:** 87120

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 5

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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## 7. DESCRIPTION

### Summary Paragraph

The Southern Union Gas Company Building stands on the west side of Albuquerque's historic downtown surrounded by parking lots and the central fire station. Office buildings are located to the east and residences to the west. This 49-by-127 foot, International Style structure occupies the western portion of its 125-by-142-foot lot. The parking lot for the building is located on its east side. A flat-roofed, two-story building with a full basement, it has a reinforced concrete post-and-beam structure, with hollow concrete block infill walls, sheathed outside with 12-by-14-inch unglazed terra cotta tiles. A loggia on the west side was enclosed soon after construction in a manner consistent, in term materials and details, with the original architectural design. Large plate glass windows on the south and west sides are surrounded by slightly fluted aluminum frames, while other windows are more utilitarian steel sash units. Its most notable interior features are a 47-by-54-foot, 17-foot tall Display and Sales Room on the first floor, a 35-by-52-foot, 11-foot-tall Hospitality Room on the second floor, and the cantilevered, reinforced concrete stair that leads up from the Display Room to a four-and-a-half-foot wide balcony and the Hospitality Room. These character-defining interior features, and the exterior (except for the enclosed loggia) remain largely unchanged.

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Set at the northeast corner of Silver Avenue and Eighth Street on the west side of Albuquerque's historic downtown, the Southern Union Gas Company Building is surrounded by parking lots, commercial buildings and the central fire station. There are also single family residences to the west that are set back from the street. This 49-by-127-foot, International Style building occupies the western portion of its 125-by-142-foot lot, with its forty space parking lot to the east, (Photos 1, 2). A flat roofed, two-story building with a full basement, it has a reinforced concrete post-and beam structure, and concrete floors with integral joists. The structure is infilled with hollow concrete block walls, plastered inside and sheathed outside with 12-by-14-inch unglazed terra cotta tiles. Interior partitions are wood frame with plaster over plasterboard. The roof consists of steel trusses covered by a wooden deck with a tar and gravel membrane on top. An acoustical tile ceiling is suspended below the trusses on the interior.

The large plate glass windows on the south and west sides (for the Display and Sales Room), measuring 16-by-37-feet and 9-by-41-feet respectively, have aluminum mullions and are surrounded by slightly fluted aluminum frames that project ten inches out from the walls, while the windows are recessed four inches behind the wall plane. Those on the west are also shaded by a cantilevered, seven-foot-wide, reinforced concrete canopy, (Photos 3, 4). The double, glass plate doors of the main (south) entrance are recessed four feet and framed with glass walls and ceiling to define a roofed porch, (Photo 5). A side entrance on the west side--with centered double door, flanking windows, and symmetrically placed windows above--is contained by an aluminum frame similar to that of the display windows, (Photo 6). Incongruous electric coach lamps, added after construction,

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 6

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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are intended for removal in the planned building restoration. The double, aluminum-frame glass doors of this side entry are not original. Most of the large pane, steel sash windows including awning windows, on the east, north and northern half of the west side are divided by vertical mullions into A/B/A compositions. A drive-thru window of unfluted aluminum and plate glass was added near the rear of the east side about 1960, and the parking lot reconfigured to accommodate a drive-thru lane. The re-conversion of the drive-thru lane back to parking is being considered as part of the adaptive re-use of the property.

The 47-by-54-foot, 17-foot tall Display and Sales Room on the first floor opens onto Silver on the south, while offices and rest rooms occupy the remaining sixty percent of the floor to the north, (Photo 9). Reinforced concrete stairs lead up from the Display Room floor to a four-and-a-half-foot wide balcony, both with aluminum railings, (Photos 10, 11). The balcony opens north into the 35-by-52-foot, 11-foot-tall Hospitality Room, bordered on the west and north by offices and rest rooms, (Photo 12). The side entrance at the northwest corner of the building opens to a small vestibule and stairs leading up and down. The basement is open storage.

All but two of the original character-defining features of the building are intact, and, as a result, the building retains a high degree of integrity of design, workmanship, feeling and association. The original aluminum, *san serif* letters identifying the Hospitality Room entrance and the company name have been removed. Soon after construction, a second floor loggia on the west side was enclosed using the same material palette as the original construction. (The original fired tile floor of the loggia remains in place, and the restoration of the loggia – based on original working drawings – is being considered as part of a renovation during the coming year.) The original exterior doors, windows, unglazed terra cotta, aluminum frames and other exterior materials remain unchanged. The Hospitality Room kitchen, and its linoleum tile floor and acoustical tile ceiling, as well as the tile floor and light fixtures of the Display Room have been removed. The interior character-defining features – the Sales and Display Room, the Hospitality Room, and the circular stair and balcony linking them – remain substantially unchanged and convey a strong feeling of the original spaces. The removal of many frame partitions from the basement and the offices of the north end of the first floor do little to undermine the building's historical integrity because these were not public areas.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 7

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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### 8. SIGNIFICANCE

#### Summary Paragraph

The Southern Union Gas Company Building is eligible at the local level of significance for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C as an important design by John Gaw Meem--an acknowledged master architect--and as a one of the foremost manifestations of early Modernist design in Albuquerque. The building satisfies the three registration requirements for the Public and Institutional Buildings Property Type of the National Register Multiple Property Context, "Buildings Designed by John Gaw Meem." (Kammer, 29-30) First, it possesses a high degree of architectural integrity as detailed in the description section. Second, it conveys clear associations with Meem's work as a designer by possessing seven of eight characteristics of his modernist institutional buildings: cubic, flat-roofed forms, doors and windows punched in solid masses, a sensitivity to solar orientation, floor to ceiling windows, and an overall asymmetric composition with a classical undercurrent in its symmetrical entry facade, and A/B/A window compositions. In addition, its flat roof, solid masses and gray-cream, unglazed terra cotta exterior walls hint at traditional regional architecture, but executed with crisp lines reflecting modernistic aesthetics. And, third, formal aspects of the design, and documents in the Meem office archives establish Meem's substantial participation in the design. In addition, the Southern Union Gas Company Building, which the company occupied from 1951 to 1976, is the most significant, and arguably the best International Style structure erected in Albuquerque<sup>1</sup>.

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The National Register Multiple Property Historic Context, "Buildings Designed by John Gaw Meem" by Kammer, and scholarly monographs on the architect by Bunting, Chauvenet and Wilson, document Meem's position as New Mexico's preeminent architect and historic preservationist from the late 1920s into the early 1950s, and the person most responsible for shaping the state's regional architectural identity, sometimes referred to as the Santa Fe style. His primary regional idioms were the Spanish Pueblo and Territorial Revival styles.<sup>2</sup> The first Spanish Pueblo Revival buildings erected just before his arrival in Santa Fe in 1920 often had a picturesque cut-out or stage set quality. Meem reinterpreted the idiom with sculpted adobe masses and limited ornamentation concentrated on porches and entrances, which brought a new gravity, elegance and

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<sup>1</sup> It has not been possible to visit or otherwise research the current condition of the other six Southern Union Gas Company buildings designed by Meem's firm. An evaluation of the plans for all seven buildings in the Meem Archives, however, reveals that the Albuquerque building is best of the group. Located in the state's largest city, with the largest program and the last to be designed, it boasts a two story sales room, the most elaborate hospitality room, and a refined, asymmetric composition unmatched by any of the others. (Meem Archives, Jobs 441-A through H)

<sup>2</sup> The Spanish Pueblo Revival style draws inspiration equally from the historic Pueblo Indian villages of the Southwest and the Spanish colonial architecture of New Mexico. Because the popular designation, Pueblo style, is unconsciously racist in its omission of the Spanish contribution to the style, the more historically accurate term, Spanish Pueblo Revival, is employed here.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 8

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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monumentality to the style. In notable New Deal civic buildings--for instance, on the University of New Mexico campus--Meem broke large buildings into smaller masses which he composed into carefully balanced, asymmetric compositions. For buildings and clients requiring a higher degree of formality, Meem developed his own brand of regional classicism – the Territorial Revival – inspired by mid-19th century Anglo-American structures, which mixed traditional flat-roofed, earthen forms with provincial Greek Revival detail such as fired brick cornices and white pedimented window lintels with porch posts wrapped with molding capitals. Meem’s reputation as a major preservationist rests on his leadership of the Society for the Preservation and Restoration of New Mexico Missions (including his restoration of the landmark Acoma mission in the 1920s) and his roles as southwest director of the Historic American Building Survey in the 1930s. He is also recognized as a founding and guiding member of the Old Santa Fe Association. (Bunting; Chauvenet; Kammer; Wilson, Facing Southwest)

### Meem’s Modernistic Designs

Although the Historic Context and monographs on Meem’s career appropriately emphasize his regionalism, his work also includes a significant vein of modernistic design, which these sources acknowledge but do not exhaustively analyze. Their earlier observations along with new research in the Meem Archives undertaken for this nomination are synthesized here into an overview of Meem’s modernist work, which serve as a supplement to the established Historic Context.

Meem’s modernism was fueled both by the wishes of some clients for contemporary buildings and by Meem’s own desire to reconcile his regionalist inclinations with modernist architectural theory. Proponents of modernism held that architecture should express the spirit of the scientific, machine age through the forthright use of such industrial materials as steel, concrete and plate glass, and the expression of a building’s structure and functions. But rather than fetishizing industrial materials, Meem sought to intuitively reconcile regional traditions with modern technology and contemporary social patterns. To Meem’s way of thinking, Indian pueblos, with their stepped massing, were substantial aboriginal structures of “utmost directness and simplicity,” and “the earliest expression of an American Fundamental Form.” “Particularly in the Southwest,” he wrote in 1934, “. . . the fundamental form of the time can best be expressed in a language native to the region. These ancient shapes are modern!” Not surprisingly, the monumental, sculptural adobe forms of Meem’s Spanish Pueblo Revival designs echo the massive, flat-roofed Art Deco buildings of the era. (Wilson, Facing Southwest, 36-38)

Meem’s most convincing reconciliation of regional traditions with modernism is his 1932-34 Colorado Springs Fine Art Center (listed on the National Register). The building is undeniably modern in its exposed concrete construction, although the careful selection of sand and gravel aggregates to give the concrete a light beige tone reinforced the Pueblo evocation of its terraced massing. The overall asymmetric massing of the building reflects Meem’s taste for and mastery of picturesque composition, while secondary symmetrical passages reflect the

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 9

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

classical underpinnings of his Beaux Art training. The daring Modern Regionalism of the Fine Arts Center won him national and international recognition. (Figure 1 at end of section) (Wilson, *Facing Southwest*, 39; Wilson, "Unique Opportunity"; Bunting, 145-54; Kammer, 20-21, 23)

Because his major institutional clients in New Mexico insisted on historicist designs, Meem's attempts to reconcile regionalism with modernism during the late 1930s were limited to occasional houses. To simulate adobe, Meem had been satisfied in the late 1920s to apply earth colored stucco over reinforced concrete and hollow clay tile. But increasingly during the second half of the 1930s, he internalized the modernist call for the honest use of materials--the notion that they should be used directly for what they are rather than disguised as something else--and sought ways to use traditional materials "honestly." For his own flat-roofed, cubic house of 1936, Meem employed stones from an arroyo on the site, along with a wrap-around porch that protected exposed, earthen-plastered, adobe walls beneath. (Wilson, *Facing Southwest*, 43-44, 156-64; Bunting, 145-54)

Meem next elaborated this wrap-around porch idea into the two-and-a-half-foot roof overhang of the 1939 Elinor Gregg Residence. This pragmatic arrangement protected the adobe walls from moisture, while displaying them with the honesty demanded by the modern movement. The interior rooms also wrap around a sixteen-foot-deep open air living porch (in local parlance, a portal), which is oriented south for maximum solar gain--his first passive solar design. (Wilson, *Facing Southwest*, 44-45, 126-27; Bunting, 144-45)

Meem's staff engineer in the 1930s, Hugo Zehner (who became a partner in the firm in 1940) took the lead in the design of two buildings for clients in Albuquerque who desired a greater degree of modernism than the firm's typical regional revival work. The Lovelace (later Sears) Building (begun in 1937, with additions in 1946 and 1953), gives its basically Streamline Moderne design a regional inflection with light brown brick walls. The (unbuilt) ten-story Simms Building of 1938 embraced a somewhat dated, Art Deco style in its symmetrical composition of stepping masses with vertical grouping of windows and geometricized ornamentation, albeit built of exposed concrete as the Fine Arts Center had been. During the early stages of World War II, the firm designed numerous facilities for the Army, notably the (unbuilt) Roswell Army Flying School. The mixture of Beaux Art formality and an austere International Style with projecting flat roof of this military work was also employed in a small hospital for Española, New Mexico in 1945. At the height of the war, in December of 1943, Meem hired Edward O. Holien, an architect trained in the Beaux Arts tradition, who had worked in the office of Harrison and Abramowitz on the design of Rockefeller Center. (Bunting 56-58; Meem Archives, job files and drawings #s 265, 269, 381, 411; Wilson, *Facing Southwest*, 47).

Also at the end of 1943, Meem persuaded the Santa Fe Builders Supply Company (Sanbusco) to commission a set of two and three bedroom model house plans for distribution following the war. Meem took this as an opportunity to augment his Spanish Pueblo and Territorial Revival vocabularies by developing a third design mode--in the title of one of these plans, "A Santa Fe Style House for Contemporary Living." In place of the open-sided living porch of the Gregg House, Meem and Holien deployed a floor-to-ceiling, glass curtain wall

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 10

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

along the south side of a combined living/dining room. "The major rooms," text on the plans explains, "are treated as a glass sheltered portal, tending to bring the garden and house into a unit of indoor-outdoor living." Each of the three plans oriented major windows south for passive solar heating, while the overhanging roofs protected them from the summer sun. While Meem cited Pueblo precedents for the roofs, he also consciously echoed the flat, cantilevered roofs of the International Style. Likewise, the plans noted that either adobe, or more modern concrete block could be used for the walls. (Wilson, *Facing Southwest*, 47-49; Bunting, 145-47; Kammer, 14)

The firm further refined this contemporary Southwest idiom in 1946 in another model house plan for a book sponsored by the Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Company. Meem hoped to develop his solar house ideas following the war, and in 1946 and 1947, designed at least eight houses employing this "extended eaves" idiom. Many of these designs went unbuilt or were modified before construction to achieve a more traditional appearance. As it turned out, most clients were less interested in the "honest" use of adobe, than in a historic adobe look, whatever the underlying material. By the end of 1947, Meem abandoned his experimentation with contemporary solar house design. (Wilson, *Facing Southwest*, 50-54; Kammer, 14-15)

Two institutional clients at the end of the decade, however, sought contemporary designs from the firm. The regional Vice President of the Southern Union Gas Company, James R. Cole, who lived in Santa Fe, hired the firm to design a series of company stores for New Mexico cities between 1945 and 1950. The first two store designs (and a private residence for Cole) employed Meem's trademark Spanish Pueblo Revival. While the first store was built in Tucumcari in 1945, the other in Carlsbad was delayed. Whether in response to comments from corporate headquarters in Dallas, or to better reflect the modern industrial underpinnings of the business and the modernistic tenor following the war, they shifted to a more contemporary vocabulary for the 1946 Artesia store. Holien took the lead in defining a rectilinear vocabulary of large plate glass display windows surrounded by projecting aluminum frames; blocky, *sans serif* aluminum letters; gray-cream, unglazed terra cotta exterior wall tiles; and steel sash windows on the sides and at the rear. (Meem Archives, job #s 441, 441-A, 441-B) In his study of American main street commercial architecture, Richard Longstreth notes that facades that incorporate display windows such as those found at the Southern Union Gas building, and which he terms the Enframed Window Wall, gained popularity in the early 20th century. In Art Deco interpretations on the window type, "the surround is more overtly treated as an abstract form and may give the facade a sense of massiveness, counterpointing the large, central window area." (Longstreth, 69) This vocabulary was repeated in Clovis, and in a second design for Carlsbad. Brick walls were substituted for the terra cotta tiles, however, in the modernistic buildings for Southern Union Gas Company in Farmington and Portales. (Meem Archives, job #s 441, 441-C, 441-D, 441-F)

When the expanding Southern Union Gas Company purchased the gas distribution system from the Albuquerque Public Service Corporation in 1949, Cole turned to Meem for the design of new facilities. In his memorandum of a client conference on September 6th, Meem noted that, "Mr. Cole states that the Company

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 11

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

wishes to standardize on the type of architecture we developed for the Clovis Building. They particularly like the grey cream terra cotta, the light aluminum moldings, and the silver and turquoise colors.” (Meem, “Memorandum of conference with Mr. James Cole ....,” September 6, 1949, Folder 24, Box 46, job 441-H, Meem Archives) Larger than the previous six buildings, the design for the Albuquerque building did employ the material and formal vocabulary worked out in the Artesia and Clovis buildings--aluminum frames around plate glass windows, and light terra cotta wall tiles with a thin, slightly-projecting tile cornice. But its more complex forms were organized in a balanced, asymmetric composition that expressed the function within, while also introducing a six-foot-wide cantilevered hood over a bank of west-facing windows. (Figures 3, 5; Photos, 2, 4, 5-8) (Meem Archives, job # 441-H)

When the Albuquerque commission came into the Meem office (and was rushed to a finished design two months after the first client conference), the firm was already at work on another major project: the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. The summer and fall were devoted to resolving its floor plan, and, in November (after the Southern Gas Building had intervened) attention turned finally to the museum facades. Meem suggested in early notes that the interiors should be “neutral” to accommodate the varied collections from around the world, while the exteriors “should harmonize with the present building near it [the Spanish Pueblo Revival Laboratory of Anthropology, designed by Meem in 1929] and still reflect its rather modern interior.” (Meem to Florence Bartlett [museum donor], April 6, 1949, (Meem Archives, job # 570) The first design employed an International Style vocabulary of crisp rectilinear forms with overhanging flat roofs and light earth-toned stuccoed walls. The overhanging roofs were soon replaced with a thin, horizontal cast concrete cornice much like the terminating tile accent of the Gas Building. Here too, Meem’s facility with picturesque composition tempered Holien’s formal Beaux Arts inclinations to create a carefully balanced asymmetric facade. (Figure 4)

This relatively small, sporadic vein of modernistic and modern regionalist designs did not coalesce into a single, homogeneous idiom as had Meem’s two previous regional styles. However, a series of characteristics weave through and unify this work. Cubic, flat-roofed forms with masonry walls predominate, whether of stone and adobe, or cast concrete, stucco and unglazed terra cotta. The typical earth-toned palette evokes traditional regional architecture, but with crisp lines reflecting modernistic aesthetics. Similarly, the containment of doors and windows as openings punched in solid-appearing masses is in keeping with both traditional regional forms and with the 1930s and 40s phase of Streamline Moderne and International Style design (in contrast to the 1950s Miesian International Style of volumes defined by planes of glass and solid walls). From 1939 on, many of Meem’s contemporary designs are sensitive to solar orientation, and employ floor-to-ceiling windows. The residences and smaller commercial buildings tend to be symmetrical, while the institutional commissions reflect Meem’s deft hand with asymmetric composition for picturesque effect and to reflect interior functions. A classical undercurrent is generally reflected in the institutional buildings in symmetrical compositions framing entrances, and in A/B/A window compositions.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 12

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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The best of the smaller examples is the Gregg House (and possibly other residential and commercial buildings yet to be identified in the field and evaluated). The best of the larger commissions are his monumental Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, and two major post-war modernist essays: the Albuquerque Southern Union Gas Company Building and Museum of International Folk Art.

### Design of the Albuquerque Gas Company Building

As was the firm's practice, Meem's notes of his client conference with James R. Cole on September 6, 1949 would serve as the program for the building. In two-and-one-half, single-spaced typed pages, Meem noted not only Cole's wish to standardize the modernist design and material vocabulary of earlier buildings as a signature corporate style (discussed above), but also that the functional components would be similar to their other buildings scattered around the state. Those buildings typically included a display room for the sale of gas appliances facing the street (sometimes at a corner); accounts and management offices behind these; a community room for meetings (sometimes located in a partial second floor over the offices); and a shop and storage room to the rear, opening onto the alley. Meem notes that, for Albuquerque, utilitarian shop functions would be placed in a "Service Building on the out skirts of town," while a Sales Building would project a public face for the utility in the downtown. (Meem, "Memorandum of conference with Mr. James Cole . . .," September 6, 1949, Folder 24, Box 46, job 441-H, Meem Archives)

The schematic design was quickly resolved by early November through three sets of plans with elevation drawings. In this important location--in New Mexico's largest city--the Display and Sales Room was given a 17-foot-tall, two-story volume. The offices stood to the rear, as in the earlier buildings, while the Hospitality Room occupied the second floor above. Three south elevation drawings and a presentation perspective done in November each featured the modernistic, curving stair and balcony, seen through the windows. The overall cubic, rectangular form of the building was relieved somewhat by a loggia notched into the long side, and by the rough balance of the tall, formal Display Room windows against the more informally-organized office and Hospitality Room windows to the rear. (Meem Archives, drawings, job # 441-H)

This design was intended for the lot at the southwest corner of the intersection of Silver and Eight, which meant that the large Display Room windows would be acceptable facing north and east. But when this lot proved unavailable, the Gas Company secured the northeast corner. This reoriented the large windows to the south and west, which would overheat the room in the strong Southwestern sun. As Meem explained in a December 19th letter to Cole, "Under these circumstances, it seemed imperative to reduce the glare and protect the interior by providing a canopy and reducing the height of the [side] windows." This solution echoed the overhanging eaves of Meem's solar house designs, but in the form of a signature International Style detail -- the cantilevered, reinforced concrete hood. "Actually, in my opinion," Meem continued, "our present solution is a better design and will actually look better than the first one. It emphasizes the main entrance and gives a slightly more friendly and informal look to the side elevation. . . ." Indeed, the result is a fine example of the balanced,

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

## **National Register of Historic Places**

### **Continuation Sheet**

Section 8 Page 13

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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asymmetric composition that Meem favored for larger, institutional buildings. Standing on the opposite corner, the eye is drawn first to the tall, symmetrical, framed windows of the main entrance on the south. The eye next plays to the left along the side windows with their cantilevered hood, moves up to the loggia and the taller mass and windows of the Hospitality Room, and finally down to the framed, formal side entry. (Meem to Mr. James Cole, December 19, 1949, Folder 24, Box 46, job 441-H, Meem Archives)

#### **Meem's Contribution to the Design**

Kammer and Bunting suggest that Meem's partner, Edward Holien, took the lead on the series of buildings the firm designed for the Southern Union Gas Company. Holien did develop a signature style and material palette in earlier company buildings, and was in the process of assuming day-to-day leadership in the office for design at the point in 1949 when the Albuquerque Gas Company Building was developed. Indeed, Van Doren Hooker, a young architect in the office from late 1950 until 1955, reports that Holien took the lead on all design during his time with the firm. (Bunting, 59; Kammer, 23; Hooker, 122-23) However, a study of the files and project drawings in the Meem Archives identified significant evidence of Meem's leadership on this design, and little documentation of Holien's participation. The notes of the pivotal, program-setting conference and correspondence with the client on key design issues were all executed by Meem. Meem gave the final sign off on the working drawings and initialed most of the later miscellaneous detail drawings. Meanwhile the only direct sign of Holien's involvement uncovered are his initials approving one minor detail drawing executed when the building was already under construction. In addition, the Albuquerque design abounds in details and elements established by Meem before Holien joined the office. In particular, the combination of cubic modernism with regional evocation, the hint of classicism in the secondary symmetrical passages and A/B/A windows, and the over arching, balanced, asymmetric composition are features already strongly present in Meem's 1934 Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. Early elevation drawings for the Albuquerque building appear to be in the hand of John W. McHugh, and two presentation perspective drawings are initialed "JWM." McHugh was a young, but very promising architect in the office, with a good drawing hand, who designed a number of houses under Meem's close direction during this period, before opening his own successful practice in Santa Fe in the mid 1950s. This information suggests that Meem had primary responsibility for this project, while McHugh served as the junior project architect. (Drawings and files, Job # 441-H, Meem Archives)

One of the leading Albuquerque construction firms of the post-World War Two era, Clough and King, received the contract to erect the Southern Union Building. Their other projects in 1950 and 1951 included the American Furniture Building (demolished), Garfield Junior High School, the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, and a series of more modest office and commercial buildings. (Albuquerque Progress, 1950-51)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 14

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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## Southern Union Gas Company's Corporate Image

Dallas-based Southern Union Gas Company began purchasing small town utilities and developing production and distribution systems in New Mexico in 1930. They soon built a 155-mile pipeline from the new natural gas fields in the San Juan Basin of the northwestern corner of the state to Albuquerque, where they sold their gas to the Albuquerque Public Service Company. Southern Union, which campaigned to acquire as many local utilities as possible, finally was able to purchase the gas distribution system for Albuquerque in September 1949. By 1980, the company distributed 90% of the natural gas in the state. Some Albuquerque residents wished that the city had exercised its option to purchase the distribution system, and, in later years, the company came in for criticism as an aggressively integrated utility that fixed prices at artificially high levels. During the 1940s, Albuquerque's population grew from 35,449 to 96,815. Booster expectations of further growth were borne out when the population more than doubled to 201,189 in 1960. In their first four-and-a-half years of operation in Albuquerque, Southern Union climbed from 27,000 to 46,000 customers, and from 133 to 296 employees in the city. So when they took over the Albuquerque system in the fall of 1949, the company not only faced a backlog of customers awaiting service and the prospect of continued rapid growth, but also a need to appear more civically motivated in the face of disappointment that the system would not be publicly owned. (Chestnut, 24, 91; Monopoly Practices, 1, 4-5, 10-11; Albuquerque Progress, March 1954)

As a result, the building campaign laid out in the conference between Meem and company vice president James Cole in the fall of 1949 called not only for expansion of offices and distribution and service operations, but also that their new store and office building project the image of a progressive, public-spirited company. One of the pioneers in the use of architecture for corporate image-making, the Santa Fe Railway, brought this practice to Albuquerque at the turn of the century with its trademark California Mission Revival style depot and Fred Harvey house hotel, the Alvarado. Cole, likewise chose to standardize the architecture of their store/offices for New Mexico, but in the modernistic vocabulary discussed above. The crisp lines, large display windows, aluminum trim, and, especially, the structural exhibitionism of the cantilevered, curving staircase constituted the most modern vocabulary to be seen in Albuquerque to that point. The hospitality room sign and the company name repeated on three sides in modern, sans serif letters turned the building into a tasteful billboard. (Figure 3)

Yet, the dramatic advertising drawing of the building that ran in both daily newspapers announcing an open house on November 9, 1951, was headed "Come See Our New Home," and extolled "our modern, new home," and "spacious Hospitality Room." (Figure 5) Not only were a full line of gas appliances on sale in the Display Room, but also the hospitality room boasted "a staff of home economics experts to help Albuquerque housewives with homemaking problems," and make home demonstrations of gas appliances. The *Albuquerque Tribune* noted on the eve of the open house that, "the hospitality room, equipped with an all gas kitchen, will be used by Southern Union for demonstrations and entertainment of guests and employees, and will be made available to the public for use by fraternal and religious organizations and other groups." A company hostess welcomed visitors and community organizations using the room. In those days many still preferred to pay their

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 15

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

bills in person, and, on due dates, company hostesses distributed fresh baked goods, recipes, cook books, balloons, key chains and other favors. Given this strong domestic image-making, the curving stair may have seemed modern while also evoking the grand staircase of a mansion entry hall. (Figure 6) (Albuquerque Tribune; Albuquerque Progress, "Southern Union Gas Company Issue," March, 1954; Chestnutt, 117)

### Albuquerque Public Buildings, 1930-1955

The importance of tourism to the state's economy, the romantic inclination of many Albuquerque residents, and the identification of civic institutions with local history meant that most new buildings from 1930 to 1950 embraced a variety of Southwestern revival styles. A generic Mediterranean style represented the national government in the Federal Building (1930, design supervised by Wetmore, listed on the National Register). The more-overtly New Mexican Spanish Pueblo Revival style was adopted for the University of New Mexico (UNM) campus, and a Veterans Administration Hospital (1931, NR), and the Municipal Airport (1939, Blumenthal, NR). The regional classicism of the Territorial Revival style was favored for the Coronado Grade School (ca. 1938, Hesselden, NR), Old Hilton Hotel (1939, Korn, NR), and the Immanuel Presbyterian Church (1949, Meem, Zehner and Holien). (Dewitt, 80, 118-19; Bergman, 112, 204-05; Albuquerque Progress, especially 1934-41, 1946-50)

The popularity of the regional revival styles for New Deal projects and, even after the war, on the UNM campus left the exploration of modernism largely to designers of commercial buildings. Roadside buildings from 1935 to 1950 favored the rounded, flat-roofed forms of the Streamline Moderne, notably the white stuccoed Jones Motor Company (1939, Burke, NR); the Hendren Building (1946, Gaastra, NR), originally sheathed in black glass tiles; the Sears Building Addition (1948, Meem, Zehner and Holien), with its regional inflection of light brown brick walls; and the Nob Hill Business Center (1947, Hesselden), detailed with Territorial Revival brick cornices. Beginning during the Second World War and continuing into the early 1950s, a more rectilinear International Style appeared at Kirtland Air Force Base, albeit in modestly-detailed, utilitarian buildings. While some one-story, roadside commercial buildings following the war also adopted this rectilinear modernism, the most significant, and arguably the best International Style structure erected in Albuquerque was the Southern Union Gas Company Building--a major harbinger of Albuquerque's wholesale embrace of modernism in the 1950s. From the rounded, wind-tunnel-tested forms of Albuquerque's Streamline Moderne buildings to its less numerous International Style examples, the city's first generation of modernist buildings were designed by architects trained in the Beaux Arts tradition. Although their modernistic buildings dispensed with ornament and historical reference, they remained solid in appearance, with openings punched into and contained by surrounding expanses of wall. (Bergman, 121, 179-89; Albuquerque Progress, 1938-41, 1946-50, especially September 1951, March, 1954; Whiffin, 235-48)

A younger generation of architects educated just before and after the Second World War, introduced a more radical form of Modernism at the beginning of the 1950s. Their interpretation of the Miesian International Style

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 16

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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shifted from the earlier more massive version of the style to an architecture of volumes defined by precise wall planes--usually of brick--that contained floor-to ceiling, wall-to-wall skins of glass. Notable Albuquerque examples of this second phase of the International Style were Temple Albert (1950, demolished; Flatow and Moore); St. Timothy's Lutheran Church (1951, remodeled; Pearl of Ferguson and Stevens); Albuquerque National Bank (1952, Pearl of Ferguson and Stevens); Medical Arts Square (1953, Flatow and Moore); Simms Building (1954, Flatow and Moore, NR); Los Griegos Branch Library (1954, Ellison); Civic Auditorium (1955, demolished; Ferguson, Stevens, Mallory, and Pearl); and the Solar Building (1956, Stanley and Wright, NR). (Dewitt, 124; Bergman, 226-56; Wilson, Regionalism Redefined, 18-19; Albuquerque Progress, December, 1951, August, 1953, December, 1954; Whiffin, 251-56)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 17

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

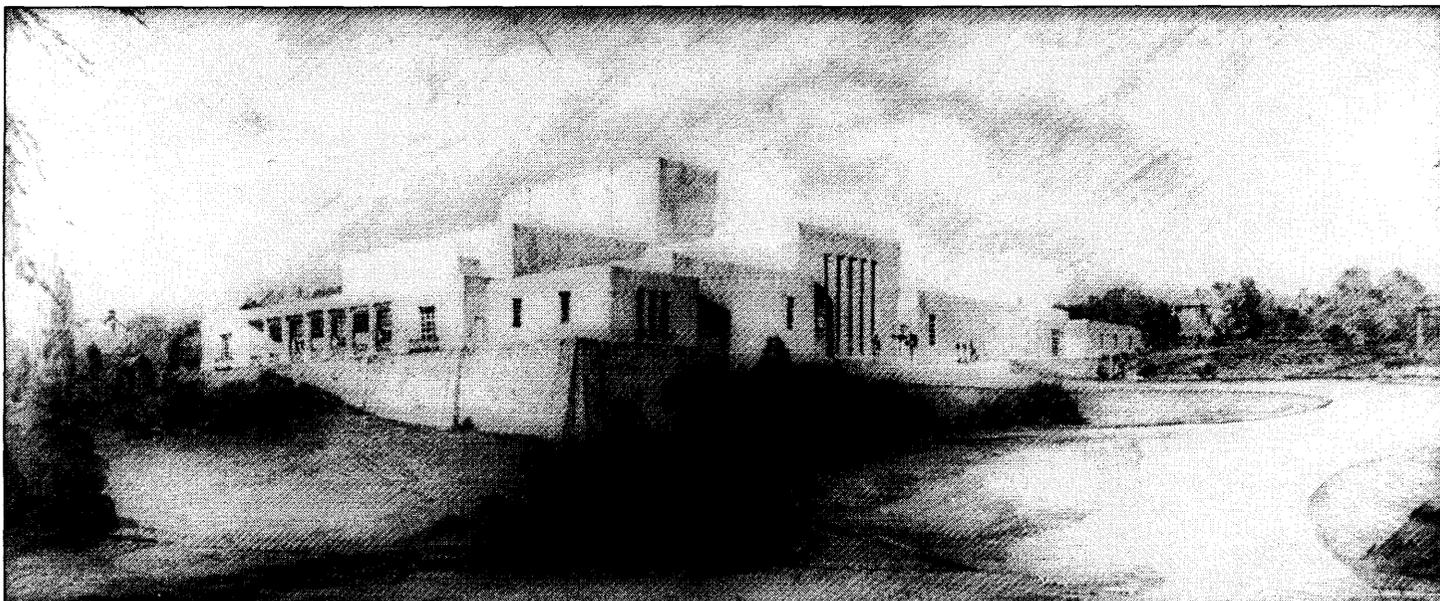


Figure 1. Perspective drawing, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. John Gaw Meem, 1932. (Meem Archives, University of New Mexico).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 18

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

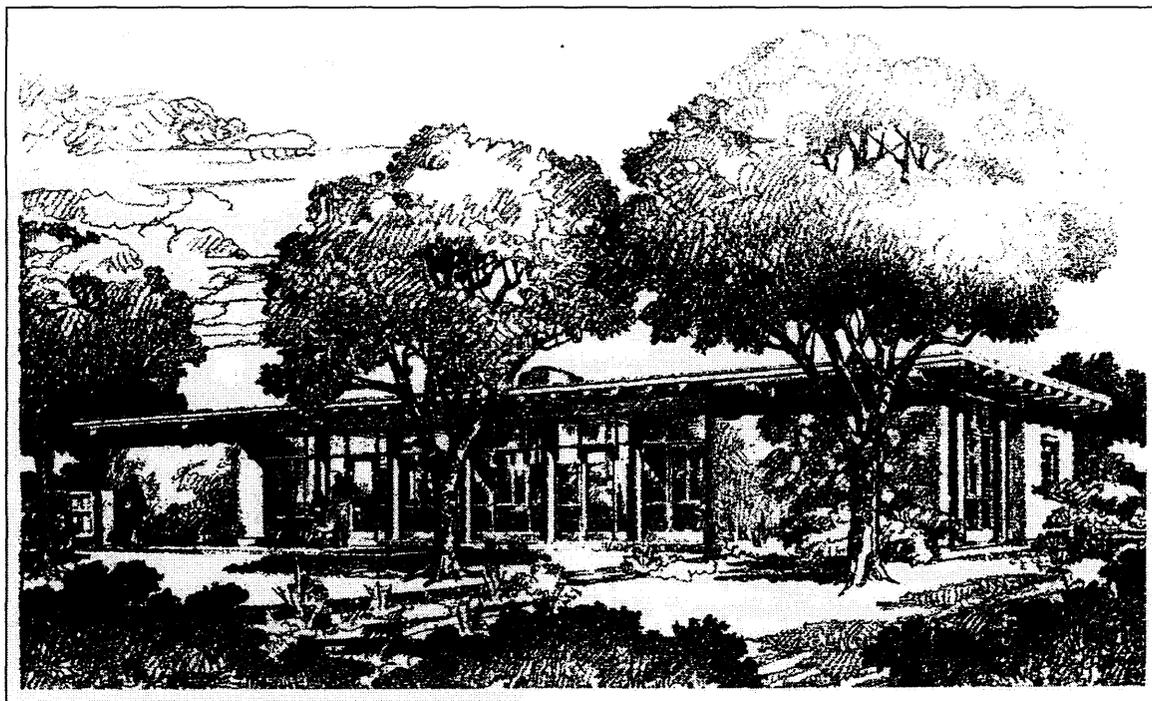


Figure 2. Perspective Drawing, Sanbusco Model House. Meem and Zehner (Edward Holien delineator), 1943. (Meem Archives, University of New Mexico).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 19

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

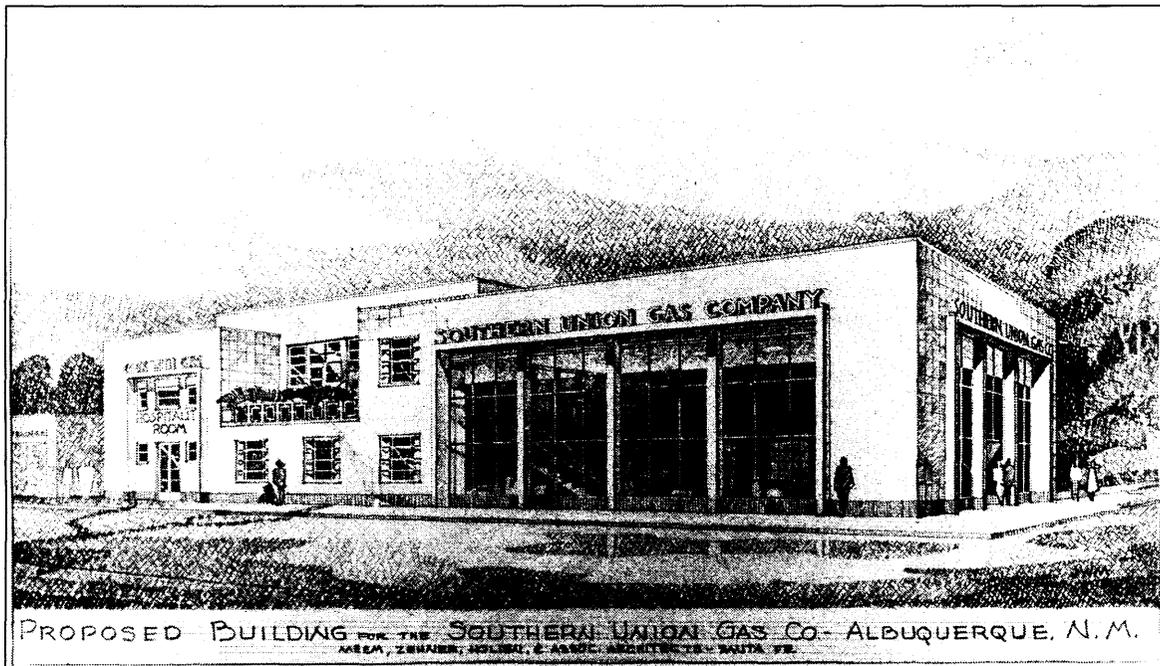


Figure 3. Perspective drawing, Southern Union Gas Company Building, Albuquerque. Meem, Zehner and Holien (John McHugh delineator), November 1949. (Meem Archives, University of New Mexico).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 20

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico



Figure 4. Perspective drawing, Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe. Meem, Zehner and Holien (John McHugh delineator), early 1950. (Meem Archives, University of New Mexico).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 21

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico



Figure 5. "Come See Our New Home," advertising for Southern Union Gas Company Building open house, *Albuquerque Journal*, November 8, 1951. (Meem Archives, University of New Mexico).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 22

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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Figure 6. Staircase, Southern Union Gas Company Building, Albuquerque. Meem, Zehner and Holien, photo by Tyler Dingee, 1951. (Meem Archives, University of New Mexico).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 23

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 24

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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"New Southern Union Building Formally Opens Tomorrow," and advertising, "Come See Our New Home." *Albuquerque Tribune*. November 8, 1951, 6.

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 10 Page 25

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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### 10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION:** The boundary of the nominated property consists of Lots 21-24, Block 28, of the Original Town Site Addition of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION:** This boundary encompasses the entire property developed by the Southern Union Gas Company in 1951, including its building and parking lot.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places

## Continuation Sheet

Section PHOTO Page 26

Southern Union Gas Co. Building  
Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

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### PHOTOGRAPHS

*The following information pertains to all photographs unless otherwise noted:*

Southern Union Gas Building

Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

Photographer: Chris Wilson

Location of Negatives: NM State Historic Preservation Office (HPD)

Date of Photographs: June 2003

Photo 1 of 12. South (main) elevation and west elevation. View from southwest.

Photo 2 of 12. East elevation. View from east.

Photo 3 of 12. Detail, west elevation. View from northwest.

Photo 4 of 12. Detail, west elevation. View from southwest.

Photo 5 of 12. South (main) elevation. View from south.

Photo 6 of 12. Detail, west elevation. View from northwest.

Photo 7 of 12. Detail, west elevation. View from northwest.

Photo 8 of 12. North elevation. View from northeast.

Photo 9 of 12. Interior, Display and Sales Room. View from northeast.

Photo 10 of 12. Interior, staircase. View from south.

Photo 11 of 12. Interior, staircase. View from east.

Photo 12 of 12. Interior, Hospitality Room. View from southeast.