



Architect of Adobe

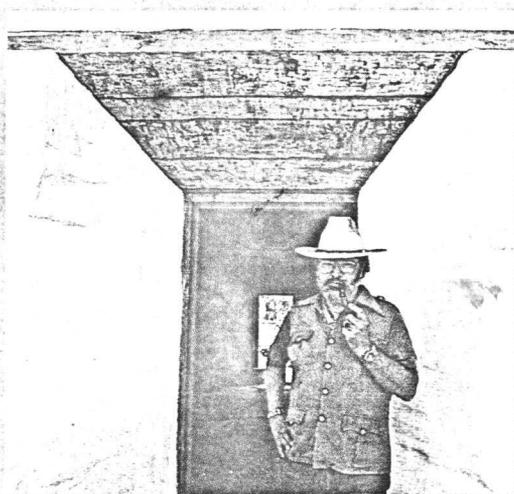
Gil Sanchez has made a career out of restoring historic adobe buildings. His current project—a mission in California—is the largest yet

by Billy Cache Lewis

Like an archaeologist cutting through layers of time in search of a hidden past, architect Gil Sanchez probes historic adobe buildings to determine how the structures were assembled so that they can be restored to their once-proud state.

It is a highly specialized, almost esoteric field, and Sanchez is its prime practitioner. He has restored approximately a dozen venerable adobe buildings in California and Nevada—three missions surviving from the days of Spanish rule, a hotel, two forts, and two residences.

Sanchez is now nearing the completion of his largest adobe



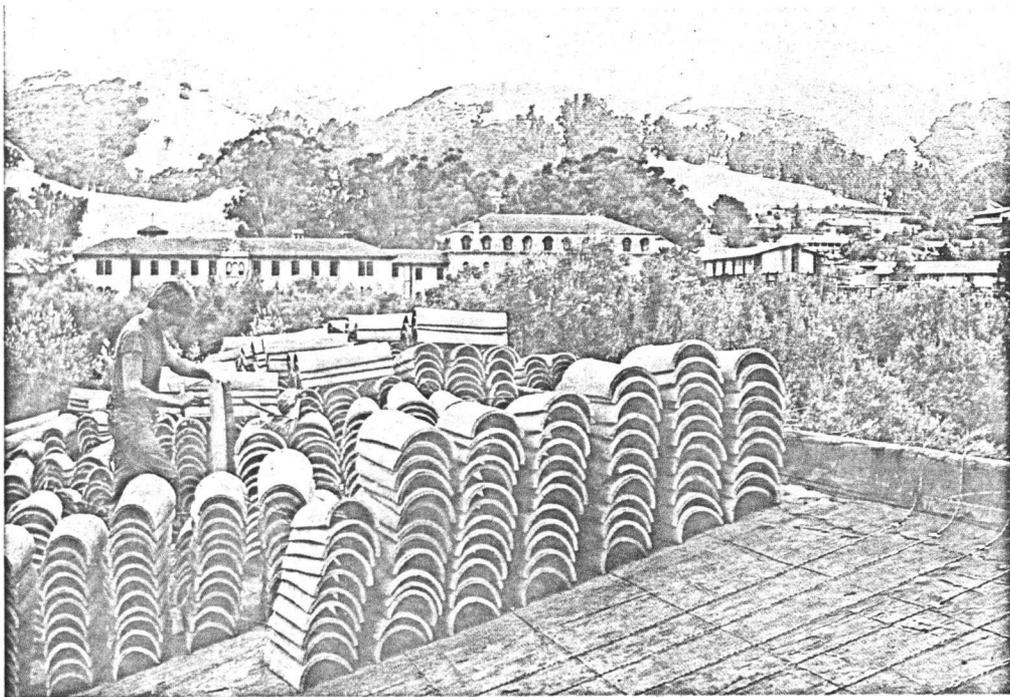
The adobe chapel at Mission San Jose, seen from the cemetery, was rebuilt to appear as it did in 1835. For the project, architect Gil Sanchez, above, relied on early drawings as well as archaeological research.

reconstruction, which may also, in an era of rising costs, turn out to be the last of its size. It involves Mission San Jose, which overlooks the southern portion of San Francisco Bay, and it is actually a total rebuilding (of the original structure, only the stone foundation and part of the terra-cotta tile floor remain). The \$3.2 million project, privately funded by the Oakland Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church, is expected to be completed by the end of 1984.

Gil Sanchez, a bearded, rough-hewn man in his middle forties, is an architect who never got a college, let alone graduate-school, degree. Born in central



Proof of Sanchez's commitment to authenticity abounds: A buttress on the south side of the chapel is left exposed so visitors can see the adobe; rawhide ties, which Sanchez is shown checking under the bell tower, are used to attach thatching to hand-hewn beams; and an adobe wall, like one that surrounded the original mission, is being built in front of the chapel.



Perched on a rooftop with San Jose's Eastwood Hills in the background, a worker attaches copper wire to roof tiles so the tiles can be secured to the building. Tiles on the original mission were laid with mud, but Sanchez improvised to meet state earthquake standards.

California, the son of migrant farm laborers, he took an early interest in drafting and architecture. At the age of twenty-five he entered an apprenticeship program under the guidance of licensed architects that the State of California was offering as an alternative to a degree program. Eight years later he passed the state licensing exam. Today he is licensed in California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, and he plans to extend his business

in the near future.

For several decades adobe construction has been a specialized form of historic restoration in California and the Southwest. Restoration, Sanchez points out, implies a return to a previous period, while preservation aims merely at keeping the present structure—with all its intervening changes—intact. California's chain of Spanish missions form one of the principal groups of restorable buildings. The

late architect Harry Downie pioneered in adobe-mission restoration, reconstructing several almost ruined buildings in the 1950's and 1960's. (Adobe is a mixture of sand and clay blended with straw or a similar material to keep it from cracking. The addition of modern ingredients, such as Harry Downie's use of oil to stabilize the blocks, has enabled adobe brick to withstand moist climates.)

Since Downie's demise, Gil Sanchez has become the foremost adobe restorationist. His first project, launched in 1977, was the Peralta Adobe, the last adobe of the Pueblo of San Jose. He took on that task without any experience in adobe work. "What the heck," he says, leaning back in a cushioned chair in his San Jose office, "I didn't have anything to lose. So I did a lot of research on the material and the ways the Spanish constructed adobe-block buildings and put in a bid for the Peralta job." His work subsequently won awards from a number of local historical societies.

Sanchez's adobe projects since then have included the mission and Plaza Hotel in San Juan Bautista, the padre's quarters of the Royal Presidio Chapel in Santa Barbara, and a Mormon fort for the City of Las Vegas. The Plaza Hotel job, he points out, emphasized the American aspects of that Mexican-American structure—a definite change of emphasis for Sanchez.

His own historical interests run strongly to the Spanish colonial period, and his principal goal is to bring it to life for those visiting restored buildings today. Whenever possible, he conducts tours of restorations in progress. He considers restorations meaningful only if they enable viewers to appreciate the importance of their own past. Sanchez says he wants visitors "to smell the horses' sweat and manure and see how the people really lived." To achieve that goal, he becomes physically as well as emotionally caught up in his projects. A laborer at heart, he enjoys mixing the adobe, fashioning it into bricks, and doing the laborious ar-

chaeological digging with his crew of assistants.

Mission San Jose, Sanchez's current adobe project, may well prove to be his largest and most ambitious. It is the last of the big California missions to be reconstructed. The fourteenth in the twenty-one-mission chain, it was founded in 1779 and for decades served as a base for the punitive assaults made against marauding Indians. In 1868 the mission was completely destroyed by a violent earthquake and, until Sanchez started work, never rebuilt. The property is now owned by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Oakland. Working through a committee that solicits private donations for the project, the diocese has managed to fund a \$3.2 million construction budget. That makes the San Jose mission one of the costliest adobe reconstructions in memory.

The structure was designed in the basic mission quadrangle form, with the main chapel providing the capstone in the northeast corner and workshops, living quarters, and storerooms completing the configuration. Only the padre's quarters and church bells survived the earthquake, leaving Sanchez to begin his reconstruction with nothing but the church's original stone foundation and some of the terra-cotta tile floor.

Restoring old adobe buildings entails remaking and duplicating bits and pieces—endlessly uneven shapes and surfaces—and hunks of hardware that were made by hand and pounded into shapes never exactly like the ones made earlier. "You can't look in *Sweet's Catalogue* and order parts for adobe restorations," Sanchez explains. "Everything is a different shape or size, and we often have to make special pieces—the no-longer-existing hardware or the unique tool to duplicate work done one hundred fifty years ago."

With his passion for historical accuracy, Gil Sanchez found more than enough thorny reconstruction problems in the San Jose project. One involved a trait common to adobe buildings: walls of incon-



Details adorning the inside of the mission include, from left, a nineteenth-century copy of a "Relic of a Holy Nail" from the Crucifixion; gilding on part of the main altar, which artist Huu Van Nguyen touches up; and ten-foot Roman columns for the altar flanking a gilded fan. The original fan decorated the altar when fresh flowers were not available.



Stunning altar pieces and a figure of St. Joseph, patron saint of Mission San Jose, surround artist Richard Menn, director of interior work for the chapel. The muted red and green color scheme is based on colors he found by scraping part of the chapel's original altar railing.

sistent dimensions. Relishing the fact that the Indians, as he puts it, "just laid the walls in there" without the aid of straight edges, Sanchez made certain that the tradition was maintained. That meant hiring workmen who were open-minded as well as skilled and who would willingly experiment with new methods and materials.

Similarly, Sanchez refused to settle for a conventional new tile roof. Instead, he found a company

in central California that still makes tiles the old way, in big ovens. Semicircular Spanish roof tiles have to be dried to shape and then cooked in ovens. The heat gives each tile a distinct discoloration, which Sanchez prefers to the perfectly toned commercial variety.

Sanchez had the redwood beams adzed with a special chopping tool to give them a hand-hewed look. He treated the wood with a lime wash and then left it to dry. Con-

Sanchez went so far as to get real cactus juice—an original adobe ingredient.

temporary technology required by the state building code—steel I beams and reinforcing rods and radiant heating—has been so well integrated into the design of the reconstructed mission that visitors will not even be aware of it.

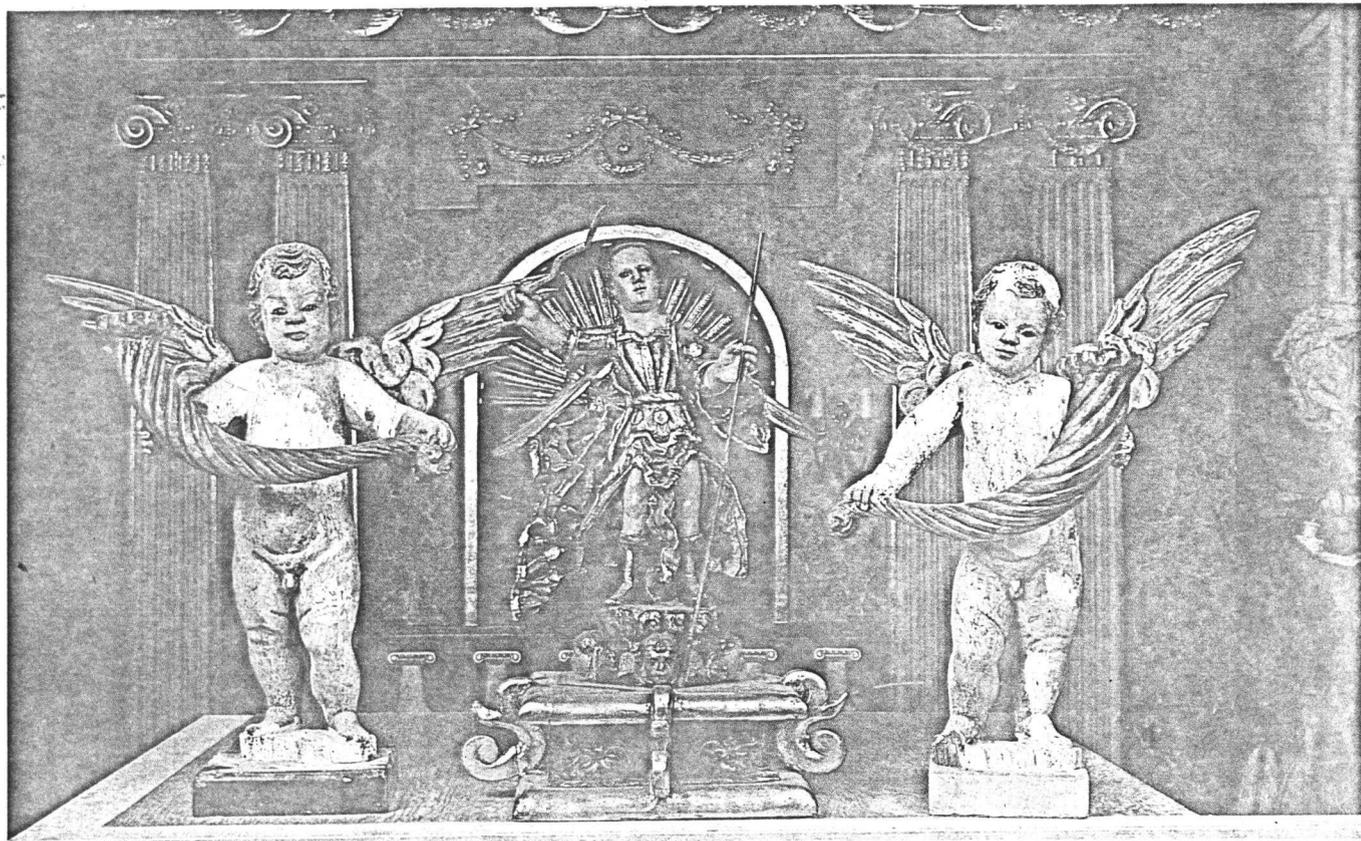
According to the late Father William N. Abeloe, former curator of Mission San Jose and church coordinator of its reconstruction, Sanchez possesses “a finely tuned sense of historic fabrics” and an

Although Sanchez lost that battle, his pursuit of authenticity is unabated. To duplicate the Spanish adobe, on one job he went so far as to get real cactus juice—an original adobe ingredient—to use as a binder.

While Sanchez has architectural control of the entire Mission San Jose project, an artist and craftsman named Richard Menn acts as consultant/director of the interior work. Most of Menn’s knowledge

because San Jose was, Menn believes, the wealthiest mission in the entire California chain. San Jose, for example, was able to import a professional artist from colonial Mexico to paint pictures on the walls, and the interior also boasted gold-leafed mantels and ceilings illuminated by one hundred fifty candles mounted in hand-scrolled chandeliers.

Much of Menn’s work on the San Jose project actually takes



Richard Menn's Carmel, California, studio is often filled with such treasures as these eighteenth-century angels, which he is restoring for Mission San Jose, and the figure of St. Michael the Archangel, owned by another client. In the background is the upper section of the mission's side altar, which he built from scratch.

ability to “bring back the past in a craftsmanshiplike manner.” Father Abeloe also believed, however, that Sanchez’s vision of the past occasionally blurs his view of the present: “We were going over the preliminary plans when Gil mentioned that he wanted to remove the row of beautiful palm trees that border the street in front of our parish, since the trees were not there when the Spanish built the mission.” A strong discussion followed—and the trees remained.

of the original missions stems from ten years of extensive investigation of official documents and personal accounts written by visitors. The highly detailed records of the missions’ financial transactions, he says, have proved most helpful in determining “how things were made and what they were made of, right down to the dimensions.”

Menn’s task—overseeing both the reconstruction of the interior and the replication of its original artwork—is all the more intriguing

place at another mission, nearby Carmel, where he maintains a workshop. There Menn and his multitalented Vietnamese assistant, Huu Van Nguyen, have reconstructed such interior pieces as the choir loft, nave, altar, and re-dos to the same dimensions as the originals. Menn and Van Nguyen have also done quite a bit of hand carving to make the high-relief figures that decorated the originals. Marbled surfaces and textures predominate. To create

the effect of Roman or Greek marble, Menn has perfected a technique using turkey feathers to dry-brush the freshly painted surface.

Because of the high cost of adobe construction, the rebuilding of Mission San Jose might well be the last major project of its kind. In addition, government funding has become highly uncertain for projects of this kind. When Ronald Reagan was governor of California, public restoration came to a standstill, and no one nowadays expects it to return to the former level of activity. Yet Gil Sanchez and others like him hope that the increased popularity of adaptive restoration—recycling old structures for modern uses—will attract grants from industry and other private sources. Somewhat surprisingly, Sanchez, the stickler for accuracy, champions the restoration of old buildings even when the work is not done to the most exacting historical standards.

His greatest concern, Sanchez indicates, is that the buildings and their original inhabitants not be forgotten. "Historic buildings," he declares, "are one of the ways that a culture is identified. I believe that our society must look to the past to develop the present to work for the future." ❖



Spanish roof tiles, shown here on the bell tower and chapel, were laid randomly, in much the same pattern that the original builders, untrained in construction, used.