

Adobe

Alberto D. Parra

Our world is in the midst of a housing crisis. Cities abound with the poor whose need for shelter grows. In America, where home ownership is the heart of the American Dream, fewer and fewer can afford it because of the cost of land, labor, materials and financing. Governments and individuals fail to see the earth under their feet as cheap, common building material. New Mexico and the American Southwest could very well have found the solution in adobe.

Adobe is one of mankind's earliest building materials. The word itself has roots in an Egyptian hieroglyph denoting brick. An etymological chain of events ultimately produced the Arabic *at-tob* or *al-tob* ("sun-dried brick"), which then

spread to Spain in the form of the verb *adobar*, "to daub or to plaster." The Spanish Conquest brought the word adobe to the New World where it still exists today.

Generally, any building that employs soil or mud as a primary material can be considered adobe. It is certain that when mankind became non-migratory, these early civilizations built their first permanent structures with adobe.

Remains of adobe structures have been discovered in Mesopotamia dating as far back as 7000 B.C. Hand- and form-molded bricks have been found in the ruins of structures such as the Walls of Jericho, Egyptian pyramids, sections of China's Great Wall, the Alhambra Mosque, the Mosques of Fez and Marrakesh and the Saudi Royal Palace at Riyadh. The earliest use of adobe in the Western Hemisphere is 3000 B.C. in the

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Like many churches in New Mexico towns and villages, the Sagrada Familia Church in Pajarito at Black Mesa, Santa Fe County, has been restored by community and volunteer effort. *Photo by Jim Gautier*



Carmen Romero Velarde began working with adobe at the age of ten. This fireplace is in the kitchen of her Ranchos de Taos home. *Photo by Pete Reiniger*

Alberto Parra used 18,000 adobe bricks in the construction of this contemporary home in Albuquerque. *Photo by Robert Reck*

Chicama Valley in Peru.

I came to the tradition of adobe construction in the early 1960s, in Albuquerque, where I was reared by my great-grandmother. One day when I was eight or nine years old I met Don Gaspar Garcia who was making adobe bricks near our home in Old Town. He looked up at me and said, "Well are you just gonna stand there and look at me or are you going to come and help?" With my great-grandmother's permission I began working for Don Gaspar.

By the time I was 21 years old, he had taught me all he knew of the art of making adobe homes and encouraged me to apply for my contractor's license. Since then I have been working full-time as a builder and designer of adobe homes. I have learned from working with Indians from Jemez, Acoma and Laguna. I've also been influenced by Don Gaspar, Fr. Benedicto Cuesta (former curator of the Museum of New Mexico), and architect John Gaw Meem, among others. I design homes according to traditional dimensions and build fireplaces that heat the home. I enjoy looking at houses in disrepair and imagining how I could build a new home like it.

Just about anyone can build an adobe house. Requirements are few. Most important are patience and desire. While the skeleton of most wood frame homes can be built in two days, a typical adobe home with the same square footage can take two to four weeks. The time,

and the physical effort of working with the earth have a lasting therapeutic value. Adobe building gets us back to the land. It is of great benefit in our present society to have somewhere or someplace to be nurtured. The massive qualities of an adobe home make it a place of refuge and a place to be refreshed. It is where the soul is soothed.

Because it is of the earth, in the true adobe there is no sharpness, no edges, no harsh angles. It flows and imitates the land that surrounds it. And because of its origin, when the adobe's journey is finished, it quietly descends back to its source, as often seen throughout New Mexico.

In today's Earth First consciousness, adobe is and should be the first alternative for basic shelter, a very basic need that eludes many. New Mexico's traditions and heritage could easily be at the forefront of a cause as important as this.

The outstanding quality of the architecture of New Mexico is its elegant simplicity; or as some say, "It's simply elegant!" The earth (*nuestra tierra*) makes the walls so that the house of the *pobre* (poor) and the house of the wealthy are not so very different after all. It is probably the only place in this world where that happens.