



Making a Living in the Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin

by Erin Martin Ross

From street-food vendors to international collaboratives, border businesses often succeed by incorporating elements of their regional culture into the commercial process. Juan Caudillo, who comes from generations of piñata makers, runs his business from his home in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas; Jesusita Valenzuela Ramírez de Jiménez builds homes with adobe in the Big Bend region of Texas; while the Tierra Wools weaving cooperative uses wool from the *churro* sheep originally brought to New Mexico by the Spanish settlers. All of these enterprises rely on regional traditions, knowledge, and experience. They incorporate regional culture into the processes, materials, and forms of organization, which work well for their businesses and fit comfortably within their communities. The strong sense of confidence and self-reliance in these communities enables local small businesses to integrate new materials and technologies without losing their sense of place and value. Many of these enterprises are “sustainable,” showing promise that they can be maintained over a long period of time without degrading the social and natural environments. The family-owned brick-making businesses of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, are an interesting example of this kind of local business, especially as they manage their collaboration with the Southwest Center for Environmental Research and Policy, a binational research organization trying to develop and maintain environmentally friendly economic enterprises.

On any given day in Ciudad Juárez you can see

dark clouds rising like steam from the city’s dirt-encrusted brickyards. These are the clouds of smoke that billow upward from the tops of more than 400 family-owned kilns, the sooty manifestation of an age-old craft that today maintains the industrial momentum of a modern border city. Ciudad Juárez, a metropolis of 1.7 million people, is known for its bustling *maquiladoras*, the enormous manufacturing plants that employ more than 550,000 people in labor-intensive assembly operations. The *maquiladora* industry has grown in Juárez and with it, the need for commercial bricks.

By most standards, Juárez bricks are light in color and porous to moisture. Their touch is coarse and sandy. A Juárez brick is not like the smooth red bricks of the Northeast, the yellow bricks of the Rocky Mountains, or even the unfired adobes of the American Southwest. A Juárez brick is produced expressly for the climate and building conditions of the U.S.-Mexican border.

For obvious reasons, the thermal properties of border bricks must meet the practical needs of a border lifestyle. A good brick must be porous enough to slow the transfer of heat during the intensely hot summer months yet capture and retain internal heat during the winter. A good brick must be heavy, but need not support more than a two-story structure, as tall buildings are incompatible with the warm border climate. Ideally, a good brick represents a perfect adaptation for a sustainable border lifestyle. It is an ideal



material for both the long, low walls of manufacturing plants and the shady patios and heat-resistant walls of Juárez homes.

As a rule, Juárez bricks are used to build walls — long or short in length, tall or short in height. Bricks are rarely used for corner support or for structural foundations, where other materials are believed to be better suited. The brick walls of Juárez are often erected using a mixture of mortar and sand. Typically, a coat of stucco is applied to brick work for aesthetic reasons.

Brick makers, or *ladrilleros* as they are known in the border region, produce bricks chiefly in two sizes: *tabiques*, or large ten-pound bricks, are produced for larger, commercial structures; *ladrillos*, or small five-pound bricks, are designed for constructing smaller structures.

Juárez bricks come in varying shades of color —

Founded as a cooperative in 1983 with a philosophy of local control of land and resources, Tierra Wools has revived the region's weaving traditions, rescued the almost extinct *churro* sheep, and provided jobs to local residents.

Fundada en 1983, con la filosofía de control local de tierras y recursos, Tierra Wools ha revivido la tradición de tejido de la región, ha rescatado la casi extinta oveja churro y proporcionado trabajo para residentes locales.

Photo by/foto de Olivia Cadaval

often a light pink or pale yellow — according to the sand and clay used in their manufacture.

Although these bricks have slightly different structural properties, the color of the brick chosen for a particular building is more often than not determined by the aesthetic preference of the brick buyer.

Brick making is a significant cultural and economic activity in the border region of the Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin. In Juárez alone, munici-



In the border city of Juárez, over 450 family-owned kilns fire bricks commercially. A typical family-owned brickyard contains a small family home, a kiln, and a large open area for drying bricks in the sun.

En Ciudad Juárez, más de 450 familias tienen hornos para cocer ladrillos comerciales. Una ladrillera típica de una familia consiste en una pequeña casa, un horno y un espacio grande para secar los ladrillos al sol.

Photo by/foto de Michael Kiernan/MKimages, courtesy Southwest Center for Environmental Research and Policy

pal officials estimate that more than 450 families own and operate commercial kilns, each producing an average of 10,000 bricks per week.

As with many commercial operations, there is an art to the process. Determining the temperature of the flames, assessing the moisture content of the bricks, discovering the length of time for drying a pile of bricks — all these require a sensitivity to process, place, and aesthetics. Underlying the art is the economics of brick making: cracked and ugly bricks don't sell.

When you enter a Juárez brickyard, the smoke may appear dirty and the brick makers sooty or covered in dust. But make no mistake; there is pride and satisfaction among those who practice this craft. The regional business of firing a mixture

of sand, clay, and water to produce a useful and sound construction material for sale is gratifying to the brick maker and his family.

The ancient craft of brick making precedes written history, and today, it supports many families of the Third World. In the U.S.-Mexican border region brick making is a revealing “way-in” to the regional culture, in which we see evidence of the dynamism, spirit, and pragmatism of the people of the Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin. Making bricks is a lesson in regional culture and economics.

Erin Martin Ross is Chairwoman of the Southwest Center for Environmental Research and Policy.