

# A LEGACY IN MUD: THE HISTORY OF ADOBE

BY MELODY ROMANCITO

Mud has a timeless simplicity that stands fast and remains a popular building material -- even in a time when our technology and our lives have become increasingly complicated.

Mud, or more specifically, traditional adobe, still has the capacity to shelter us. Aside from the lessons in morality tales like the Three Little Pigs or the New Testament Bible's allegory of the man who built his house on rock, adobe continues to be a practical building material in the dry climates of the world.

Although the style in which adobe has been expressed has undergone regional change and revival, the fundamental qualities of the material remains the same. Adobe mud is available in abundance and its desirable thermal properties have made it a pragmatic choice throughout the centuries.

In the language of New Mexico, "adobe" can refer to either the mud mixture, the brick itself, or even whole buildings of the material. *Adoberos*, or people who make adobes, might disagree as to the best ratio of mud to sand and straw, but essentially adobe is a folk solution in an economy of scarcity.

Grand homes have been built of adobe, with expensive Spanish tiles and elaborate wood carvings and modern conveniences, much like the haciendas of the past or even the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe -- but adobe is what it is. It's the same mud that holds together a shepherd's simple mountain shelter. It's the same adobe that built the humble chapels in the little villages.

The Spanish word *adobe* derives from the Arabic *atob*, which literally means sun-dried brick. Before the arrival of the Spanish, the Indian method of building was to puddle, which is to lay stiff damp courses of mud about eight to ten inches deep, one on top of the other, allowing each course to dry before placing the next. This method was also used extensively in North Africa and the Middle East.

When the Spanish came to the New World, they brought the craft of forming adobe blocks in wooden molds. After a period of drying or curing, the blocks were laid up with adobe mortar.

Recognizing a good thing when they saw it, the Indians immediately embraced the new method. Where the early Indian builders had

*Taos photographer Walter Gruver shot this image of the Taos Pueblo getting a fresh coat of adobe in the fall of 1995.*

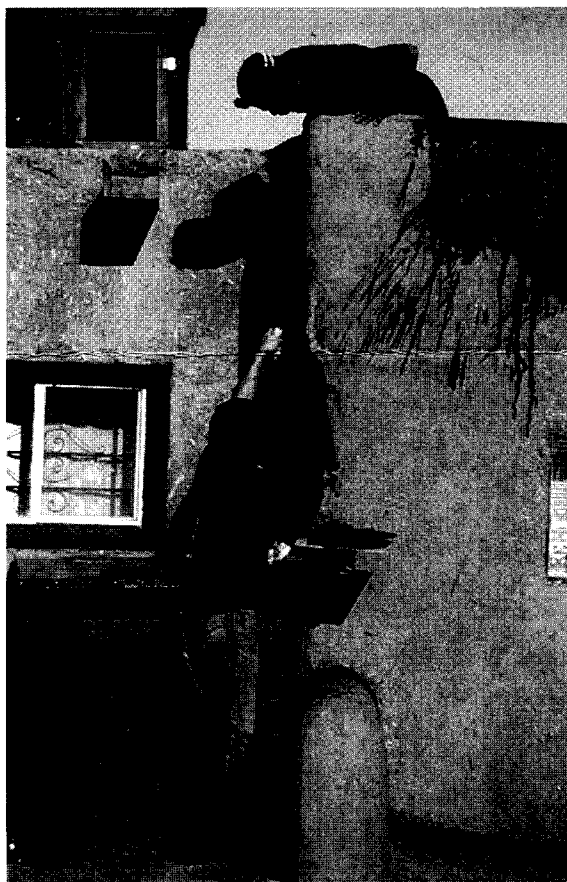
*"When it's genuine mud adobe, a fresh coat of mud should be applied every year."*

*—Walter Gruver*

usually built their walls directly on the earth, the Spaniards used a simple stone rubble footing which drained water away. Even though adobe endures as an architectural method, adobe wants nothing more than to return to its original state -- mud. These footings, though limited in their ability to support massive weight, at least reduced the destructive impact of water on the base of the wall.

During the Spanish Colonial period, window and door openings were very limited, both for security and for maintaining temperature inside. Those windows were usually covered only by pintled shutters or hides. The Territorial period began in 1846 with the annexation of New Mexico into the United States. Historians divide the period further, but essentially, from the time Mexico gained independence from Spain and the opening of the Santa Fe Trail in 1821, through to 1880, when the railroad practically replaced the Trail, the Southwest experienced wave after wave of American influence. Glass could now be transported from the Midwest and local production of milled lumber and brick was established, each new technical improvement making its mark on the local architecture.

With the advent of sawmills, originally built to serve the military's needs, milled lumber



became commercially available. This resulted in wooden doors, window frames and cases and detailed porch woodwork. Milled lumber also allowed for the widespread use of the pitched roof. Wood-framed pitched roofs were often added directly over existing flat roofs.

Floor plans also changed during the Territorial period. Spanish Colonial architecture generally tended toward

rooms in single file, or if the builder was wealthy, a quadrangle of these single file rooms enclosing a patio in the style of the hacienda. But now floor plans carried the focus of a central door into a central hall.

The early brick kilns in Las Vegas, Santa Fe and Albuquerque provided the material for another key element in the Territorial style: dentiled brick copings that capped the parapet wall of adobe. With erosion being a persistent problem, especially on the top of the wall, several courses of brick, laid in mortar, proved to be at least a partial solution.

In the years following the turn of the century, through to the present day, the revival of regional styles has had a strong impact on Southwestern architecture, bringing to mind a simplicity of an architectural style that epitomizes the indigenous beauty of the past.

The Moors had a word that described the special character in places or things created by time and by long use and appreciation. That word, *baraka*, probably best describes the quality of adobe and why, besides its practicality, it has survived over the centuries.