

Adobes, real adobes, are something special

And you won't find them in Connecticut



David Peterson

“You have to learn how to build an adobe house properly. You have to pay your dues, and you don't do that by watching Bob Villa on TV.”

David Peterson has paid his dues. An English major in College, he spent his summers and vacations turning mud into adobe in Silver City and working for adobe contractors in the Albuquerque area. He had five years experience in adobe before getting his license in 1980.

You have to work for adobe builders to figure out how to do it – and how not to do it,” he says. “It's a constant learning process. If you think you have it all figured out, you're probably not progressing.”

He had a good roll model in Nat Kaplan. Who he calls the “god-father” of all adobe builders. Nat Kaplan was an artist who built about 200 hundred homes in Albuquerque's North Valley during his career. His work evolved gradually, and different

interpretations continue to develop today through people like Peterson who once worked for him.

Peterson has taught adobe construction and presented talks and

seminars. “I feel qualified to do that, “ he says, “because I worked for someone who was so much of a force in adobe homes that he helped write the New Mexico building code in adobe construction.”

His love affair with adobe homes started with the first one he worked on.

“ I had always been in construction, but these people came from a different mold. They really seemed to care about their work, The process was slower – it took a little more patience.”

A native New Mexican, he had always had an affinity for the state's traditional adobe style, which he describes as complex but simple, a blend of the Indian and Spanish cultures. “It's a combination of the Indian Pueblo and the Mexican home. To be authentic, it must have

“An adobe must have a simple design... Every floor must be the same... every piece of wood stained the same shade.”

David Peterson

STORY:
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The exposed adobe walls are brushed smooth and painted white, The floors are brick and the beams are lightly stained.



This authentic adobe home is characterized by Saltillo tiles, a traditional beige plaster finish on the walls and dark woodwork.

a simple design; every floor must be the same, every wall the same, every piece of wood stained the same shade.

In a client's recently completed home in Placitas, the exposed adobe walls are brushed smooth and painted white, the floors are brick, the beams and other wood lightly stained, and the bathrooms finished with Blanco Talavera Tile. But there are choices. For other homes, he has used Saltillo Tile floor tiles, traditional plaster finish walls and dark stained woodwork.

"You can see a Cape Cod home anywhere, but not a New Mexico style adobe," Peterson says. "It's unique to the area. But you need to stay within certain design boundaries to do it successfully."

It's also an energy-efficient home, he points out. "If designed and built properly, it can surpass anything out of frame. He admits some of the old adobe homes were notoriously cold.

"Basically, you're living in a cave. You can have a very cold and dark adobe home, but you can also have a very cold and dark frame home. The R-value of adobe is extremely poor, but if you design and build it right, it will be warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Once you get it warm, it stays warm. It can take up to a year for a new adobe home to stabilize and develop its natural core temperature."

The windows traditionally are small. But, then, large panes of glass just didn't make it across the plains in a covered wagon. "No one but the Native Indians were taking advantage of solar gain, and they probably understood it better than we do today." He is an advocate of trying to get as much solar efficiency as possible without compromising the look of the house.

He takes issue with the assumption that the adobe process is expensive. Adobes are always custom homes, he points out, and that means upscale amenities. "A frame house with the same amenities will cost the same. It's the brick floors, tile, vigas, decking, heavy beams and the like that cost big money. A true adobe is competitive with a custom frame home built to look like an adobe. "It's the look that's expensive, not the adobe."



The comedor, or dining room has a traditional covered ceiling and traditionally small windows, in an attempt to gain as much solar efficiency as possible

Sometimes, when asked, he will provide furniture for the home. He might sell a table that he has built. Right now he's constructing a house where he is providing tables, headboards and trasteros throughout, building them on site. (A trastero is a wardrobe used traditionally in an adobe, which were usually built without closets.)

His wife, Linda, is getting more and more involved with his work. She has helped him lay tile and seal floors and has taken over the company bookkeeping, computerizing all its records.

Interest in adobe has grown, he observes, from just a few houses by just a few builders when he first started. "But a lot of designers have lost touch with what made New Mexico style so attractive to so many people. They need to go back and study 200-year-old New Mexican homes. It's not the number of nichos or the vigas. People are trying to capture the adobe's mystical feeling in a frame home when they don't really know what that feeling is. New Mexico style is adobe and that has been lost in the transition to frame. Some of the most successful frame

houses with that feeling," he adds, "have been put up by adobe builders."

He usually constructs just one home a year. When clients come to him, he doesn't have to talk them into anything. "You either love adobe or you don't. By the time they come to me, they know what they want, they want an adobe."

"I take them to see as many adobe homes as I can. There are a lot more finishing details to decide on than in frame homes—beams, decking, vigas, cove ceilings, exposed or plastered walls." Some clients have presented him with a long

computer printout representing years of thinking and dreaming about their ultimate adobe home.

“ I have to learn about their lifestyle, and they have to learn about adobe. I’m a little bit more forgiving because I know we’re not building an architectural monument; It should feel like a home when we are done-and I know it’s not my home! We try to get the design as concrete as we can get it before the construction actually begins, and then we try not to make any changes”

“I am aware of nichos and curved walls, and will put them in a house if I see a real purpose or if the clients want one, but I have probably only built three nichos in all the homes I have built since 1980.” He says he has had clients move in and say they would not change a thing if they were starting to build all over again.

“ I love what I am doing,” he says, “I wouldn’t want to do anything else. If I had to give it up...” He shakes his head to put that thought out of his mind.

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