

Unfaded Passion

An adobe master's
comfort and joy in
Bernalillo's Bosque
Encantado

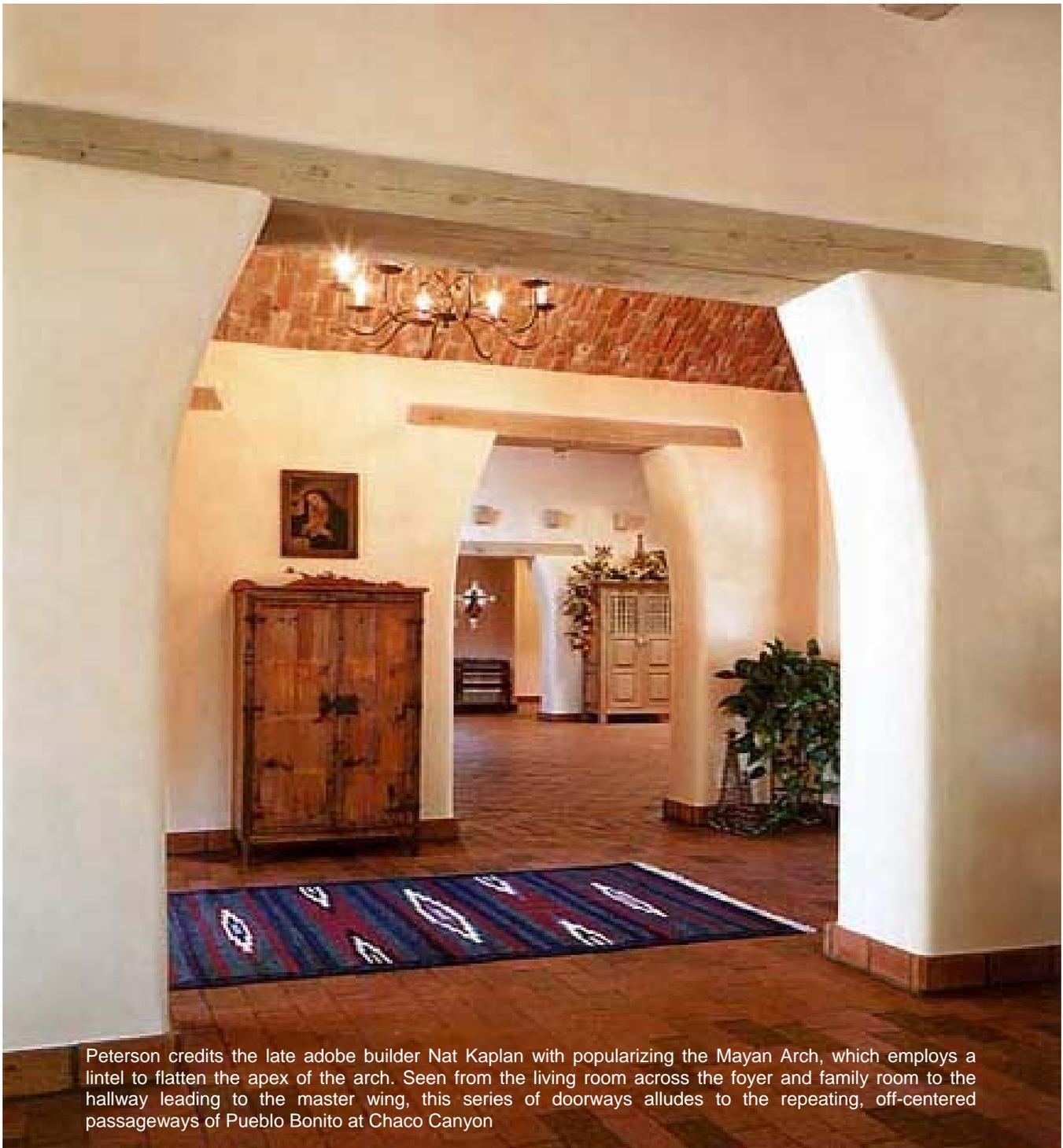
Albuquerque-area builder David Peterson preaches the virtues of adobe with a nearly evangelical zeal.

And why not? He designs lovely, traditional, understated New Mexico adobe homes that seem to extract every delightful nuance from this ancient construction medium: the subtle massing, rippling plaster surfaces, deep window sills, gracefully undulating patio walls, and not-quite-square corners that are expressed---at least in Peterson's opinion through hand-stacked, mud-mortared adobe bricks.

Spend some time in one of his houses, like his latest eminently tasteful creation in Bernalillo's Bosque Encantado, and you might consider converting to a religion of mud huts yourself.

**BY CHARLES C. POLLING
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIRK GITTINGS**





Peterson credits the late adobe builder Nat Kaplan with popularizing the Mayan Arch, which employs a lintel to flatten the apex of the arch. Seen from the living room across the foyer and family room to the hallway leading to the master wing, this series of doorways alludes to the repeating, off-centered passageways of Pueblo Bonito at Chaco Canyon

Peterson was baptized in mud, as it were, back in 1974 in Silver City, NM, where he was born and raised. Already an outdoorsy guy who loved to ride motorcycles, bicycle, and backpack in the wilderness, Peterson found himself drawn toward a new endurance sport: churning up batches of mud mortar in a portable cement mixer, then dumping the load into adobe brick molds. You'd better believe it was hot, strenuous, *macho* work.

Summer was adobe-making season. Winters, Peterson headed up to Albuquerque, where he found work on construction crews, building houses with various contractors. "I knew I needed to go to Albuquerque to learn to build adobe," he recalls. "It was the adobe capital of New Mexico back then." There he meet a key figure in his life, the legendary Nat Kaplan, a mentor who inspired Peterson to pursue a home-building career dedicated to adobe homes.

Peterson first met Kaplan at a job site in Albuquerque.

“I’d been making adobes all summer,” Peterson recalls. “I was charred by the sun, I had hands like feet, and it took me about a minute to stand up straight after getting out of the truck. I walked up to him to introduce myself, I was in great damned shape, and I was motivated. I walked up and said, “I want to learn how to build adobe houses.”

Peterson started out where he’d left off in Silver City—mixing mud, this time for mortar for the walls. He worked fast so pretty soon he was rolling the wheelbarrows over to the wall and slapping shovels full of the mud mortar onto the top course of adobe bricks.

“I’d be so tired when I went home that I’d fall asleep without even changing my clothes,” he says.

Hard work, sure, but inspiring. After maybe five years as an adobe-maker by summer, and construction worker by winter, Peterson felt ready to take charge of his own project. In 1980 he obtained his contractor’s license and built his first house, which happened to be his own personal residence. True to the vibe of the day, he built a passive-solar adobe out side Silver City.

“Passive Solar Adobe was all one long word back then,” Peterson remembers. Like a number of today’s prominent builders in New Mexico, he cut his teeth on such homes, using adobe’s thermal mass to store solar heat gained from south-facing windows. During the night and into the next day, the thick walls and masonry floor would slowly release the heat back into the living space.

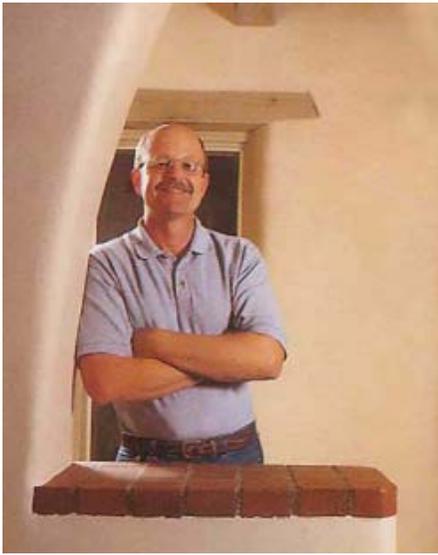
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Above: The open floor plan for the kitchen-dining-family room makes entertaining easy. Posts, beams, corbels and vigas, along with brick floors throughout the house, reinforce the home’s timeless adobe character.

Below: Every room, including the master bedroom, has a fireplace.





DAVID PETERSON

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It was a fortuitous marriage of material, style, and environmental consciousness that flowered around New Mexico in the late 1970's and has since waned: "Nowadays, the passive solar thing isn't a big concern in the price market I'm building in," Peterson admits, although he'd be happily build a solar heated home for a client. And innovations in window glazing—including ultra-violet blocking windows that practically eliminate the threat of fading precious artwork or oriental rugs—are answering many of the objections high end homeowners have to solar heat.

Peterson's design sense went beyond south-facing glass and black painted trombe walls since the beginning, however. He's always liked building homes that evoke the traditional design elements of Historic New Mexico Adobes. He developed his skills and style in Silver City, moved to the larger markets of Las Cruces from 1983 to 1986, then came to Albuquerque—apparently to stay.

Peterson builds a house a year. The spec-built home in Bosque Encantado reveals much about Peterson's approach to design and to craftsmanship.

Seen from the street, set amongst a loose copse of cottonwoods against the Rio Grande, the house looks like it evolved on it's own from native materials. The design is clean, elegant and without frilly ornamentation. The low rooflines, arched patio gateway to the front door and tall, narrow divided-light windows reference New Mexico's architectural past, yet no particular detail dates it's construction.

Although every Peterson-built home is a unique design, all share his aesthetic sensibility. "Keep it simple, and it will look right," Peterson says. "But it doesn't have to be a box. It depends on the job, the site, the client—I do a design for their desires, their wishes. The clients educate me about their lifestyle and I educate them about adobe."

That education centers on what can and can't be done with mud bricks versus much more flexible wood frame construction.

"The success of an adobe home—in looks, structurally, economically—all starts with the design," Peterson claims. And to design one, "you must know how to build one." Adobe is a simple material so you should have a simple design." Peterson prefers to build homes he has designed because he understands the adobe medium and knows how to build it economically.

For instance, varying ceiling heights are limited by the requirement to top each wall with a bond beam that adds structural rigidity. Too much up and down variations and the building loses strength.

Another aspect of that education is cost. Peterson insists that adobe need not be particularly expensive, as long as the builder is willing to do most of the work with his own crew, not subcontractors. Builders who claim it's expensive, he says, "just don't want to get their hands dirty, so they sub every out," which he claims inflates the cost.

In the 3700-square foot Bosque Encantado house, the master bedroom occupies it's own wing,

though the main portal connects it to the rest of the living area. The guest wing and master suite are reached through hallways, which Peterson uses to define the separate spaces of the house

Peterson also pays attention to scale. Ceiling heights and room size feel carefully proportioned to for human comfort—nothing is oversized or grand for it's own sake. These are homes you can live in, not show off a 20-foot Christmas tree.

Another Peterson touch is ceiling treatments, which evokes old village adobes, where, each generation of occupants might add a room or two to the original structure, with different detailing and materials in each. The front entry features an arresting red-brick barrel vaulted ceiling; the family beams and plank decking: the living room, hand peeled round vigas with perpendicular *latillas*; in the master bath, a plaster cove ceiling between the vigas.

The house offers also offers terrific sight lines. From the living room through the "Mayan arch" doorways to the family room, then the hallway to the master suite, the view invokes Chaco Canyon architecture, with each open doorway not quite aligned with the others creating a wonderful sense of movement. (A Kaplanesque feature, the Mayan arch employs a horizontal lintel to interrupt the top curve of the arch.) The entry door leads into a brief foyer, which opens through French doors on to the portal and outdoor fireplace. Through a bank of windows in the dining area, the cook can enjoy sweeping views across the patio to the Bosque.

Those outdoor views—outdoor access in general are important to Peterson. "In New Mexico, the interplay between indoor and outdoor living space is important," he says. I this house every room but the two guest bedrooms opens outdoors, either onto the main portal on the northeast, or a smaller covered portal on the west side.

The portal itself with it's neat brick floor, plastered kiva fireplace,

and open ceiling—simply vigas without decking set from house to header beams atop posts with corbels at the edge of the patio—is an inside/outside space, shaded from summer heat by the walls of the house and heated in the winter by the fireplace.

As for craftsmanship, much of it results from Peterson's own hands, as well as skills of the five-man crew that's worked for him for a decade or so. Peterson built all five fireplaces and his signature vaulted brick ceiling in the foyer. Other touches include the brick window sills—inside and out—and some invisible details like the invisible exterior stucco with embedded fabric mesh—no cracks here—or multiple coats of linseed oil on the brick floors, which will deepen in color with age.

Although retirement may be years or even decades off for Peterson, he

already knows what he'll do after he's finished building other people's houses.

"When I build my final home, my house, I'm just going to eyeball the corners and I'm not going to use levels except on the doors and windows," Peterson says, alluding to the notoriously not-plumb, not square dimensions of older New Mexico adobe homes. He's going to build a really nice mud hut.

Even in retirement, then Peterson is likely to be found mixing mud, rolling wheelbarrows, and slinging mud onto a newly laid adobe wall.

"This is not so much a labor of love," he explains. "It's a love of labor. Building adobe homes—I mean really doing the work—is what butters my bread. My passion has not faded. I need to build." **CP**

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