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Earthen Architecture Preservation Along the Borderlands—Symposia Between Mexico and the United States

It is estimated that over one-third of the world's population lives in some type of earthen dwelling. Earth has been a building material of choice in the Americas for thousands of years, whether it be in pisé, coarsed earth, jacal, or adobe brick. Adobe (sun-dried brick) is the predominant earthen material medium used along the Borderlands. A large number of historic adobe structures still exist along the border shared by the southwestern part of the United States and northern Mexico. In fact, there is still a very active building tradition in adobe throughout this region, one that is gaining more and more international attention because of its ease in construction, affordability, living comfort, and sustainability.

Borderlands Symposia/workshops

Recognizing the importance of preserving and perpetuating the tradition of building with earth, various organizations from Mexico and the United States have been collaborating in sharing expertise and information pertaining to maintaining structures built with this venerable building material. The Republic of Mexico, through the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) in Mexico City and its Regional Centre in Chihuahua; and the United States of America, through the Mexico Affairs Office of the National Park Service and New Mexico State Monuments, Museum of New Mexico, have organized working symposia that bring together practitioners in the field of adobe.

Recent Symposia in Mexico

The venue for the symposia/workshops has been the large prehistoric archeological site of Paquime in Casas Grandes. Paquime is a 2,000-room town built out of earth and occupied from 700AD to 1400AD. The site fell into ruin and became mounded over until large portions of it were excavated in the 1960s and 1970s, exposing

earthen walls up to 20' tall. Today, the site is an important focus for heritage tourism in the Republic of Mexico, having been earmarked by the President of Mexico as one of the top 10 historic sites in the country to interpret. A large museum and interpretive center has just been constructed at the site.

These ruins of Paquime have been the backdrop for two Mexican symposia at which adobe practitioners and site managers from the United States and from Mexico have shared insights and suggestions on ways to better protect and use our shared earthen architecture patrimony. Subjects presented included preservation methodologies that are being used at Paquime, rehabilitation projects in the historic center of the City of Chihuahua, and examples of other adobe conservation projects throughout the northern Mexican states of Coahuila Sonora Baja California, Zacatecas, and Durango.

*Our Lady of Refuge,
Guerrero Viejo,
1992, Tamaulipas,
Mexico.*



Recent Symposia in the United States

Reciprocally, a group of practitioners and managers participated in a traveling symposium/workshop that began in Las Cruces, New Mexico to observe and critique various earthen architectural preservation projects at a number of sites in New Mexico and west Texas.

The traveling workshop started at Doña Ana in southern New Mexico where a 19th-century

*Jesus Treviño Fort,
(1830–1871) San
Ygnacio, Texas.*

adobe church is being stabilized and restored by youth from the community under the direction of Cornerstones, a New Mexico community-based partnership program. The next stop was the nearby site of Fort Selden State Monument which comprises the ruins of an abandoned military fort occupied from the 1860s through the 1890s. The fort served as an offensive post from which cavalry units pursued Apaches. Fort Selden State Monument is the site of an extensive adobe test wall experiment intended to address the preservation issues at the site that was begun in 1985 and continues to be monitored, and new tests implemented, today. The test wall experiments have been a collaborative effort between New Mexico State Monuments and the Getty Conservation Institute and has received wide international attention.

The group also traveled to the mission sites in lower El Paso, Fort Davis National Historic Site, then up to northern New Mexico to visit the sites of Pecos National Historical Park, Jemez state Monument and Coronado State Monument. At many of the sites visited, the need for comprehensive archeological site management plans was a recurring theme.

Upcoming Symposia/workshops

In early September 1997, a workshop on traditional lime plasters was held in San Elizario below El Paso, Texas that will center on the preparation, use, and application of lime based plasters on adobe walls. The use of traditional lime has for the most part been lost in the United States. Actual lime practitioners and architectural conservation personnel from INAH in Mexico and



Cornerstones in the United States conversant in its use will conduct the workshop.

Also in the fall will be a symposium held in southern Arizona and northern Sonora, Mexico. This traveling symposium/workshop will visit such sites as San Xavier del Bac, Casa Grande, and San José de Tumacácori in southern Arizona and various missions in northern Sonora.

Objectives

The objectives of the symposia and workshops are;

- To provide the opportunities for the exchange of information regarding adobe preservation techniques between practitioners from the states along the Mexico/United States border.
- To illustrate adobe preservation issues and ongoing projects along the Borderlands by visiting various earthen architecture sites and assessing their preservation and management
- To encourage candid and constructive critiques and recommend methods to improve upon current adobe preservation practices on both sides of the border.
- To enable the establishment of a tight network of adobe practitioners and managers along the Borderlands that can continue the exchange of techniques and methods pertaining to the conservation of our earthen architecture heritage.
- Prepare a bi-lingual publication of the symposia/workshop proceedings will also be produced for distribution to others in the field throughout the world.

*Adobe masons
from the
Cornerstones youth
program stabilizing
the facade of
Nuestra Señora de
Candelaria Church
in Doña Ana, New
Mexico, 1996.
Courtesy the
author.*



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