

Restoring an Adobe Home

in Mora BY ILKA VILLARREAL

Few things in northern New Mexico are more emblematic of our land and heritage than adobe architecture. Mark Schwartz's journey to restore a century-old adobe farmhouse in the heart of the Mora Valley provides a great example of what is possible.



Old adobe farmhouse that has been renovated by Mark Schwartz

Owning and restoring an adobe home had always been Schwartz's lifelong dream. After roughly 30 years as a health technician and deep soul-searching following the Covid pandemic, his time, finances and life path converged, leading him to purchase land in Mora in 2020 while still living and working in Albuquerque. On the land was an uninhabited adobe farmhouse. Some of the contractors Schwartz consulted with told him it wasn't worth fixing; that it should be torn down. He didn't listen. Consultation with Cornerstones and other adobe experts convinced him that it was not only eminently salvageable but more cost-effective and a better long-term investment than new construction.

In his own words...

From the moment of first setting eyes on the land and adobe farmhouse, it was love at first sight—the place that I had searched for all along. A pasture irrigated by a high

The adobe buildings of northern New Mexico tell such rich and vibrant stories of the land and peoples of this place.

mountain watershed with a small apple and pear orchard standing peacefully above it. The adobe farmhouse sits tucked into a small depression of land above the orchard, sheltered from cold winter winds while enjoying ample Southern sunlight to keep its thick earth walls warm. Against that same wall rested an old greenhouse foundation, awaiting restoration. Behind the house, gently rolling hills of native grasses and ponderosa pines rise to steep timberland of juniper, piñón, and oak—completing the farm's third ecosystem.

The farmhouse had been left abandoned—save for mice, feral cats and bats—for years and was not livable. Fortunately, the previous owners had added critical infrastructure over the years, including septic, plumbing, electricity and community water, assets that made restoration far more manageable.

The ancestors who shaped homes from earth and love seem to reach across time and guide the way.

The home is believed to have been constructed in three distinct parts, each reflecting the era in which it was built. The oldest is the central rectangular section, featuring older-style window casings and thick 16-inch adobe walls dating to the early 1900s. A northern addition followed in the 1930s or '40s, introducing newer window casings, thinner adobe bricks and a gabled roofline with a small attic window. A third addition on the south side was added in the 1970s, mirroring the northern wing's style but constructed of cinder block.



Restoring the adobe has been a tremendous endeavor, drawing on early construction experience, invaluable guidance from the folks at Cornerstones, local craftspeople, neighbors and plenty of reading and YouTube videos. The first logical step was addressing the roof—the old bones of the farmhouse were strong, but it needed a new hat. A local roofer was brought in to replace it, preserving the original lines while adding insulation and new corrugated tin to match the historic material. Gutters were added for rainwater harvesting, and combined with excavation work, the new roof now protects both the foundation and walls from the elements.



With the exterior secured, attention turned inward. Cleaning the attic came first, followed by removing all the drop-ceilings, revealing beautiful wood vigas and a milled wood ceiling crafted from timber cut in the valley. Next came stripping five-to-seven layers of old plaster, paint and wallpaper from the interior walls, freeing the adobe to breathe again after years sealed beneath synthetic materials.



The floor told its own story—an eclectic mix of milled-wood sleeper joists on grade with particleboard subflooring, and even a few remnant strands of lime green and purple shag carpet still clinging to their staples. Rather than a conventional replacement, a traditional earthen clay floor will be laid throughout the entire home in the spring, once the walls are repaired and plastered.

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That plastering process has become an unexpected joy. Using earth sourced directly from the site—much of it from the house itself—making and applying clay plasters has become equal parts art, science and alchemy. Experimenting with ratios of clay,

sand, water and straw yields an infinite number of combinations, each with its own texture and character. Even a large section that cracked and delaminated completely just after I completed it brought no frustration. The failed mix was peeled off, adjusted and reapplied a touch thinner—the result was beautiful.

The cinder block addition will serve as the functional heart of the home, a thoughtful tiny home containing the kitchen and bathroom with a modern foundation and crawl space that makes plumbing and electrical work manageable. The interior will be transformed with locally milled timber, some new and some old and weathered, treated with nontoxic linseed oil paints and stains. The original rusted and patinated corrugated roofing, salvaged from the old roof, will find new life as texture and contrast on the walls and ceiling, completed by hand-built rustic cabinets and counters.

A wood stove and hearth now anchor the adobe, complemented by beautifully restored 1900s radiant electric heaters. The home's southern orientation, thick adobe walls and newly insulated ceiling keep it naturally cool in summer and warm in winter, just as it was always meant to be.

Restoring an adobe home was never meant to be a solitary act. Working alongside friends, neighbors, skilled artisans and local tradespeople has brought the true spirit of the adobe tradition full circle—the same spirit of community that raised these walls generations ago. A lifelong dream, built by many hands, and finally, a beautiful home. □

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