

Built to Last Adobe's Still in Style for Builder to Rich and Famous: [San Diego County Edition]

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Abstract (summary)

For reasons that frustrate [Jack Weir]-including a bad rap by federal regulators a few years ago that temporarily gave adobe a bad name, and a paucity of architects willing to encourage clients to turn to adobe-adobe construction is on the slide in San Diego County. The last adobe home Weir built was two years ago-for Juli and Dan Fouts in Rancho Santa Fe, a kind of spiritual sister to the couple's log cabin home in Oregon.

Weir, the most prominent commercial adobe home builder in Southern California, raised a stink in Washington, armed himself with engineering reports and finally, 11 months later, succeeded in having the regulations amended to provide for the use of adobe. But adobe's image in the eye of the public was soiled, and demand for it almost ceased. The Escondido adobe manufacturer closed up shop and from then on, Weir has had to look to Fresno for his mud supply.

Jack Weir stands in front of one of his largest adobe homes: a 21,000-square-foot palace in Rancho Santa Fe.; Jack Weir's first adobe house, built in 1948, still stands in Encinitas, above. The walls of his homes, including this one in Rancho Santa Fe, below, are 16 inches thick.; Weir Bros. logo / DAVE GATLEY / Los Angeles Times

Full Text

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When Jack Weir says they don't build homes the way they used to, his point of reference is 6,000 years ago.

He talks of homes he has visited in Egypt which, he says, have been habitable for six millenniums. They were built of adobe.

It's the same stuff Weir and his Escondido-based, family-owned business has used in building more than 200 homes in Southern California-ranging from the first two-bedroom houses he built in the 1940s in Encinitas to the \$15-million, 21,000-square-foot residential palace he spent 15 months building for football team owner-turned-horseman Gene Klein in Rancho Santa Fe.

If nothing else, they have one thing in common: exterior walls built of mud, the earth's most ready supply of construction material.

No flash cube architecture here. Just 16-inch-thick earthen walls, built of bricks made of sand and clay, mixed with water and sweat and dried under the sun, treasured by Indians and the elite alike for the qualities both thermal and ethereal.

"People either love adobe or they wouldn't even stable their horses in it," Weir reflects.

But for reasons that frustrate Weir-including a bad rap by federal regulators a few years ago that temporarily gave adobe a bad name, and a paucity of architects willing to encourage clients to turn to adobe-adobe construction is on the slide in San Diego County. The last adobe home Weir built was two years ago-for Juli and Dan Fouts in Rancho Santa Fe, a kind of spiritual sister to the couple's log cabin home in Oregon.

While there are no adobe homes on Weir's current schedule, he is hardly looking for work. The business that Weir is now turning over to his son, Bob, also has won a reputation for building upper-end custom stucco and wood frame homes as well. Weir, at 65, has become a rich man building homes for those who build entire communities for the rest of us.

Weir is currently building a new home for Harry Summers, the founding father of Rancho Bernardo and who is himself responsible for building 20,000 homes in San Diego County. Weir is building his third home for shopping center developer Ernest Hahn. And Weir is also building an expansive Spanish pueblo in Bonsall for thoroughbred horse owner and industrialist Allen Paulson, perhaps best known for netting a \$450-million profit when he sold his Gulfstream Aerospace Inc. to the Chrysler Corp. in 1985.

Another recent Weir customer is Jay A. Pritzker, billionaire financier and hotelier involved in the recent bidding for Eastern Airlines.

So when you ask Weir what it'll cost for him to build you a home-adobe or otherwise-he's got the simple answer: "We won't tell you. We'll just ask you for your checkbook."

But you won't find Weir in a penthouse office in San Diego's Golden Triangle or a quaint home-turned-office in Rancho Santa Fe. The company and its 80 employees-some who work at job sites, others who make custom cabinets in the back shop-are based in an Escondido industrial complex. And Weir lives in-get this-a condominium in Del Mar. "It's a cracker box, but it's got a good ocean view," Weir says.

For fun he spends time on his cattle ranch in Arkansas or hunts for just the right kind of wood to serve as the beams in his homes.

His target is Douglas fir timber cut from virgin forests in the Northwest at the turn of the century, which were used to shore up the old Black Diamond Coal Mines in Washington state. He re-mills and hews the beams for reuse, and sings the praises of the wood.

"The finest timbers date back to the turn of the century-wood that was cured over the years with its bark still on it, not the kind of stuff that is cut today and sold in lumber yards 10 days from now. This wood is so fine the heart line runs straight and sure for 50 feet."

Weir couldn't always offer the quality spiel. His first home-his first dabbling in adobe-had walls with hay sticking out of it.

Weir was a naval aviator who, after World War II, hoped for a job as an airline pilot. But there were plenty of fellow pilots in line for the jobs, so he decided to wait for his turn by doing odd jobs in Encinitas, doing this and that for local mechanics and others.

He decided to build himself a home, and cut a deal with a fellow who owed him some money: Take these old adobe bricks, instead. Don't let that grass growing up through it bother you; this is great stuff. Weir shrugged and, consulting books in a library at night, set off building himself an adobe home.

Used Soil on Property

Before he had it finished, he sold it to another person, getting enough cash to start over again. This time he used the soil on the property for his adobe, and molded and cured his own bricks. By the end of 1948, Weir and his brother, Larry, had built six homes on Windsor Avenue in Encinitas, all with unencumbered views of the ocean-vistas that today are blocked by apartments.

The brothers were off and running, working 16-hour days, six-day weeks building adobe homes for others, primarily in Rancho Santa Fe. They'd dig up the soil-oftentimes on the site of the house itself, add some emulsified asphalt for its waterproofing and adhesive qualities, and let it cure for eight weeks in the sun while they dug and poured the foundations. Then they would lay the bricks, hang the beams, build the doors, construct the interior walls, install the plumbing and wiring and tile the roofs. Some Weir homes include his trademark-a wagon wheel inset in the adobe wall.

In 1951, Jack Weir moved to Escondido, partly because of the supply of adobe at what is now Kit Carson Park in the southern part of the city, near Lake Hodges. The adobe supplier was Weir's primary source until 1975 when the business closed-no thanks to the federal government. That memory still riles Weir.

"The government came out with a new energy code for home building, because of the energy crisis- and it almost put adobe out of business," Weir said. Federal regulators, in laying down guidelines for appropriate home-building materials, ironically overlooked adobe-which is held in high regard for its insulation qualities. Instead, adobe was blackballed.

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Going Gangbusters Elsewhere

The number of area architects who encourage use of adobe has dwindled-even though adobe home construction is going gangbusters in El Paso, Tex., and Santa Fe, N.M.

"It's easier for an architect to make money by pulling out his stock (design) sheets off a shelf-boilerplate plans-than to start from scratch by designing an adobe home," Weir grouses.

But adobe has qualities unparalleled among building materials. Not only does it keep a home cool in the winter and warm in the summer, but it is also virtually maintenance-free, doesn't attract termites or rust and, while its ability to withstand earthquakes is open to some debate, when is the last time you heard of an adobe home burning to the ground?

One drawback to an adobe home is its price, contrasted with a more conventional house, Weir notes. Everything else being equal in design and amenities, an adobe home will cost about 15% more than a wood frame house, he says.

Among the reasons, Weir says, are that the foundation has to be heavier, a larger slab is needed to accommodate the 16-inch-wide walls and electrical wires in the adobe walls have to run in conduit. Also, the cost of the adobe-the material itself plus its shipment-is about three times greater than the cost of conventional lumber and stucco, and the cost of labor, which is a function of the cost of the material itself, is higher.

Architect Tom Hayward remains an adobe champion, having designed 40 adobe homes for Weir's clients-including one for himself.

`Romantically Involved'

"People become romantically involved in their adobe homes," Hayward said. "My home has character that you can't match with plaster or dry wall. When you walk into an adobe home, you want to sit down and put your feet up on the coffee table."

Sid and Laverne Shaw bought a Weir adobe home in Encinitas in the late 1940s, and have lived there ever since.

"They have personalities of their own," said Laverne Shaw. "I was born and raised in an old mud adobe in Yuma, and that's why we wanted this one. Sid told them that when they laid the blocks, to have some jut out of the wall so it wouldn't be all even and alike. You won't find another house like this anywhere."

In 1954, Earl and Edith Denney bought the second home Weir built in Encinitas. The couple still live there-and their complaints are compliments to Weir's ears.

"I tried to knock out one of your (interior) panel walls and the nails you used were so damn big I had to get a nail saw," Denney complained to Weir the other day, chuckling.

"I guess that means he's still a satisfied customer," Weir said.

Illustration

PHOTO: Jack Weir stands in front of one of his largest adobe homes: a 21,000-square-foot palace in Rancho Santa Fe.; PHOTO: Jack Weir's first adobe house, built in 1948, still stands in Encinitas, above. The walls of his homes, including this one in Rancho Santa Fe, below, are 16 inches thick.; PHOTO: Weir Bros. logo / DAVE GATLEY / Los Angeles Times

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