Taking a Place Seriously

I have never met Simone Swan but I deeply admire her sense of connectedness not just to a place, Presidio/Ojinaga, but to the earth itself. As John Davidson points out in this month's cover story, Swan's "mission" is to take earth and use it to provide efficient, affordable and aesthetically pleasing houses for people with moderate or minimal incomes.

To be able to live in a home shaped and formed from the earth itself—a home of one's own in a particular place on this earth—is a vital step in the process of creating a community. And people who feel connected to a community know what it means, in the poet Wendell Berry's words, "to take a place seriously." Berry, a Kentucky farmer as well as a poet, says that to take a place seriously is "to think it worthy, for its own sake, of love and study and careful work."

I think that's what Austin Bay's father was trying to convey to his granddaughters when he attempted to show them what was left of the old family homestead in Hale County ("Recollections of an Oil-Patch Past," p. 12). The children, being children, weren't particularly interested, but these days it's not just youngsters who are detached from place. As the 20th century becomes the 21st, cyberspace is increasingly our province and placelessness is more and more a way of life for many of us.

I believe we still have a need to "take a place seriously" and to connect to the places in which we live. The challenge is to find ways to make those connections strong, vital and enduring. It's not easy, but it's certainly worth the effort.

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THE SOARING PROMISE OF

ADOBE

SIMONE SWAN BELIEVES THAT AN EGYPTIAN ARCHITECT WOULD HAVE BEEN RIGHT AT HOME IN ARID WEST TEXAS

BY JOHN DAVIDSON

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“What I want to do is vanquish the trailer house,”

Simone Swan remarks as she negotiates the bumpy dirt road in her red jeep, her catahoula hound Fatima standing between the bucket seats. We are in the colonia on the outskirts of Ojinaga, just south of Presidio.

Almost all of the houses here are made of concrete block, small, hard-bitten little houses that cook in the summer and freeze in the winter. We drive across the airport — a wider track of dirt — that runs straight through the colonia. Children and adults sit in front of houses and watch us pass. It’s a bleak border scene until straight ahead an adobe house rises up out of the landscape — a soaring arch between two domes. It is like nothing else around it, but when we look back toward Texas, miles away on top of a mesa, we can see its twin, stark, sculptural and serene, as striking as a geologic outcropping or an alien space craft.

Simone Swan built both houses, and if she has her way, they eventually will change the landscape of the Southwest. The first is a prototype for low-income housing. The second is the headquarters for the Swan Group, a test site for adobe building technique, and Simone Swan’s home.

Swan, a single woman in her late sixties and an individual without the backing of a government agency or a private fortune, has taken on an immense task: to introduce ancient Egyptian building techniques to the Southwest, revive the use of adobe and reform low-income housing.

Swan apprenticed with the late Hassan Fathy, an Egyptian architect and Utopian thinker who rediscovered the way in which Nubians built vaults and domes with adobe bricks. Because no wooden forms were required, the technique was suited to poor people living in arid climates. Rather than buy expensive lumber and tin to put roofs over their heads, people could simply scoop up the earth they stood on to make dwellings with vaulted roofs and domes, dignified spaces in which the human spirit could grow. The houses would be easy to heat in winter and cool in summer. They would be an alternative to the sort of housing one sees in the worst colonias along the border — cramped cinder-block huts, rusting mobile homes, shacks pieced together with scraps of wood, cardboard and tin.

Swan first heard of Fathy at a dinner party in Paris in 1973 when she was the executive vice president of the deMenil Foundation in Houston. She read his book, Architecture for the Poor, and was so impressed with his ideas that she flew to Egypt with the intention of writing a book about him. The great appeal of Fathy’s work was that it functioned on several planes — aesthetic, economic, ecological, humanitarian, spiritual. As an East Texas woodsman might say, he had all his coons up one tree.

Swan made several trips to Egypt, and, after Fathy’s death in 1989, she decided
that rather than write a book, she would try to apply his ideas. She happened through Presidio in 1991 on a trip to Big Bend, and something about the rich river valley running through the desert reminded her of Egypt. Then she stopped at Fort Leaton, a 19th-century trading post being restored by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and noticed local adoberos (adobe artisans) at work.

She rented a room from the school librarian for six weeks and went to work making adobes. She had never thought about Presidio before, but it proved to be an ideal place to apply Fathy’s ideas. The climate was right, hot and dry. Adobe vaults and domes are not recommended in areas where the annual rainfall exceeds 10-to-12 inches a year. There was a tradition of building with adobe and people who still knew how to work with it. Moreover, there was a growing need for low-income housing. Presidio has a 47 percent unemployment rate. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population along the border will increase by 58 percent between 1990 and 2010.

In Presidio and elsewhere on the border, many poor people live in old mobile homes, or they build their own houses. They buy land in colonias through contracts for deed, an onerous arrangement by which they accrue no equity until they have made the last payment and are subject to lose everything should they default. They buy a few cement blocks at a time, and when they finally have put up four walls, they wait years—all the while paying rent—until they can save enough money to put a roof over their heads. Accustomed to operating outside the traditional cash economy, they are the sort of people who would benefit from Fathy’s building techniques.

As we pull up to the Ojinaga house, the owner, David Camacho, comes out to greet us. He and Swan designed the house together and built it, with Camacho providing much of the labor while Swan was securing financial support from the Jacob M. Kaplan Fund in New York. Camacho wanted the kitchen and bath to be detached, so there are two smaller square structures with domed roofs connected by short, covered walkways to the main structure, a larger rectangle with a vaulted roof. The kitchen would feel cramped.

The Egyptian technique does not require wooden forms.
The domed roof keeps an adobe structure from feeling cramped.

were it not for the domed roof soaring above. In the main part of the house, the vaulted ceiling rises to 16 feet. Camacho was so taken by adobe that he used it to build his furniture — bookshelves, banquettes and a coffee table in his living room, a raised platform for a mattress in his bedroom.

The house cost $11 a square foot to build, and almost all of that went for labor. Swan paid the minimum wage in Mexico — $10 a day — to Camacho, to an adobe artisan from Presidio named Jesuita Jimenez and to occasional helpers.

"When we had our ribbon-cutting ceremony, about 50 families asked if I would build them similar houses," Swan says. "I spent months writing proposals for the Mexican government, but it was a waste of time. The cheapest financing we could find in Mexico was through commercial banks at 48 percent. We can't continue there until we find someone who will make micro loans."

Meanwhile, Swan has proceeded on the U.S. side of the border where, rather than let her team of adobers disband, she started a house for herself. The project allowed her to use Kathy's techniques and experiment with adobe and mud plasters. Swan designed two long, rectangular structures with high, vaulted roofs. One structure would be bedrooms with baths; the other a kitchen, dining and living room. A long, narrow library would connect the two horizontals, forming an H. The ends would be partially closed to create courtyards, which would serve as an entrance garden with fountain on one side and an outdoor dining room with herb and kitchen gardens on the other. The floors would be Saltillo tile or mud mixed with spirit of turpentine and linseed oil, according to the recipes of a woman in Taos.

Swan projected her building costs at $44 a square foot, calculating that the cost of labor in Texas would be four times what it was in Mexico. Daniel Camacho, across the river in Ojinaga, made the adobes and has gone into the business, employing his neighbors. Jesuita Jimenez and Mauro Rodriguez built the house with the help of day laborers.

Construction began on March 10, 1997, and Swan moved in nine months later when a third of the house was completed. She says that the house changed and evolved along the way. A 10x12-foot vaulted structure was built to hold the solar energy system she decided to install, which pumps water from her own well, and a 10x10-foot domed storeroom has turned out to be so beautiful that Swan is looking for new uses for it. In addition to experimenting with traditional mud recipes, she built to meet U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guidelines, hoping that the soundness of the structure would help secure funding for subsequent projects.

On a warm afternoon, it is light and airy beneath the vaults, the adobe bricks overhead rising in a serene wave-like pattern. As Swan gives a tour of the house, she talks about the difficulties she faces, the foundations she must make and submitted to HUD and the assistant she desperately needs. "I'm at a fork in the road," she says. "If I'm going to save my reputation, I'm going to have to double my efforts."

Then she leads the way to a rooftop deck. The view is oceanic, the house riding on the rolling desert hills. To the south beyond the Rio Grande stand the Sierra Ricas in Mexico. To the north, Chinati Peak rises 8,000 feet above the ridge of the Cienega Hills. All around the house, eerie ocotillo cactus raise their spindly arms to the sky. Due east, in the direction of the Big Bend, we can see a grove of cottonwoods.

"Well, yes," Swan says, "I'm glad I put my money where my mouth is."

Austin writer John Davidson wrote about growing up in Fredericksburg in the November 1998 issue of Texas Co-op Power.

Swan's Presidio house cost $44 a square foot to build.