



Tasting the Walls

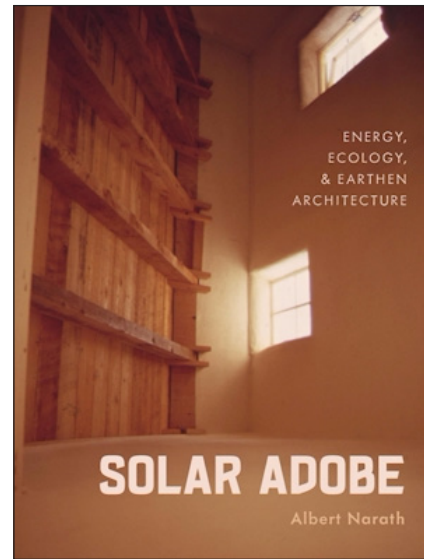
Will Davis, Università della Svizzera italiana, CH, davisw@usi.ch

Review of Albert Narath, *Solar Adobe: Energy Ecology and Earthen Architecture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2024, 296 pages, 51 b&w illus. ISBN: 9781517914073. An investigation into the cultures surrounding adobe construction in the American Southwest in the 1970s.

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In early summer of 1968, eminent Yale art historian Vincent Scully found himself camera in hand witnessing a corn dance at Tesuque Pueblo in New Mexico. At this point in his career he was already well known for *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture* (1962), which proposed a new way of understanding of how ancient Greek temples were perceived in relation to the surrounding landscape, arguing that gods and landscape alike were divine. Whether or not a vainglorious attempt to shift discourse to a new kind of architectural history, Scully found himself teetering on a precipice between academic genius or coffee table embarrassment. He was castigated for being an art historian who waded



into unfamiliar territory with an insufficient toolkit, his work lambasted in classical scholarship for being unscientific. Scully leaned heavily on erudite visual formal analysis, which he was legendary for back in New Haven where students learned about art and architecture through dual-projector slideshows accompanied by drawn-out first-person narratives. Students didn't just watch the images; they followed Scully on a trail through them. He navigated a journey of successive ideas, revealed in photographs often taken by him, offering a formal analysis in his gruff baritone and rhythmically thumping a long stick to announce to an assistant at the back of the room that it was time to cycle to the next slide. But things were different in New Mexico. Far from the classroom, far from the European and East Coast metropolises that usually provided him with material, and despite the risk of offending residents, local activists, and the anthropologists that frequented them (a problem given that his method also relied on in-person visits and photography), Scully remained undeterred. 'Only in the Pueblos,' he notes in the preface to *Pueblo: Mountain, Village, Dance*, 'could my Greek studies be completed, because their ancient rituals are still performed in them' (1975: xi). Albert Narath dives into Scully's encounter with Pueblo architecture at length in *Solar Adobe: Energy Ecology and Earthen Architecture*, situating Scully at the extreme end of a sentimentalizing spectrum that associates the people, buildings, and landscapes of the Southwest with a particular building material, adobe. The adobe architecture is the intermediary framing device fixed by Scully's camera between the people dancing the corn dance in the foreground and the mountains in the background. For Scully, Narath notes, "the adobe architecture was nature" (137). Scully is Narath's chief exemplar of a figure that took mud associations with primeval romance the furthest, and the central character of the third chapter of *Solar Adobe*.

Solar Adobe is about the circulation of ideas around adobe, whether formed as bricks or shaped into walls. Because it evokes earth itself, adobe tends to take on the color of the environment around it, sometimes giving the impression that architecture is an outgrowth of landscape. The rough matte surface is textured and patterned, and like pottery or ceramic work can be molded with wet human hands and left to dry in the sun. It was this tactile materiality that seduced Scully and many others in the 1960s and '70s in the warm dry environments of the U.S. Southwest. Building with mud bricks is of course a global phenomenon, but this book is a historiography of a particular scene, one percolating with a heightened sense of ecological interconnectivity and Malthusian alarmism. Adobe never made it big as a material, and what is left behind is a messy ephemeral paper trail. Whether a case of East Coast snobbery toward adobe's hippy-ish proponents or a latent racism toward the Pueblo architecture of Native American communities, the movement that coalesced around adobe, as Narath notes, was located on an inscrutable, even unwanted disciplinary map (208). The characters that populate the book are scattered and inscrutable too. They appear as lonely individuals for a material that supposedly conjured such communal ways of life. In *Solar Adobe*, these Twentieth Century Men spend their time in labs, university lecture halls, workshops, or under a hot desert sun. Following their paper trail is not straightforward. Zines, pamphlets, and posters are the purview of enthusiastic adherents or nostalgic collectors and can perhaps be found in local libraries or thrift stores, but not necessarily through a national library search. An opportunity disguised as a limitation, perhaps, it means that the book is shaped around such a wide range of material that I suspected that Narath too is one of those enthusiastic collectors.

The four chapters of the book are each organized around one or more individuals and the often large institutions that connected their research environments. The sprawling first chapter is shaped around Unit 1, a solar house designed by William Lumpkins, figure of a bygone era of architects who designed incessantly, his output of buildings tallying in the high hundreds, if not thousands, many in the Pueblo revival style. Unit 1 was from the beginning an advertising ploy for the developers of the housing estate it sat on, even its occupants, Douglas and Nancy Balcomb were adobe proponents, albeit in a more technocratized manner. Douglas Balcomb led the solar group at Los Alamos National Laboratory, which would test computational modeling on adobe performance, including in his own house. Balcomb also convened the Passive Solar Heating and Cooling Conference in 1976 at the University of New Mexico that attempted to bring together the crafty world of Lumpkins and the technocratic circle of Los Alamos. The narrative shifts again, still following Unit 1, to Centre Pompidou where it was presented in an exhibition curated by Jean Dethier, for whom it symbolized perfect ways for

‘modernizing adobe technologically’ (60). The first chapter ends with the story of Peter Van Dresser’s Sundwellings project in Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, but no conclusions are offered. Rather, it provides a survey in ‘exercises in a settler technology’ (74) that adobe has been transformed into. The second chapter centers on Ralph Knowles and his Natural Forces Laboratory at the University of Southern California. The lab simulated natural environmental effects on model buildings with water, sunlight, and wind and attempted to create measurements and standardized design principles. Knowles was heavily influenced by the ecosystem thinking of the ecologist Eugene Odum and set up scale models of Long House, Acoma Pueblo, and Pueblo Bonito in a heliodon machine (a model environment that simulates the path of the sun) to measure the impact of sunlight at each site. In measurements recorded with photographs, then charts, then tables, Knowles established a Latourian dissonance between lab and field by recreating the field in the lab.

At this point in the book, almost exactly the halfway mark, Narath remarks on the pattern that this solar adobe array of experiments, observations, calculations, conjectures, and musings reveals: ‘Knowles’s research joined a host of other projects by architects and historians who envisioned Indigenous architecture, either as a historical precedent, case study, or object of appropriation, as the basis for critiques of postwar development and more environmentally focused approaches to design’ (98). These projects may have traded in a vision of Indigenous architecture, but it seems few Indigenous voices were represented in them. In chapter 4, however, Narath provides a welcome reprieve to the white men that populate the book up to that point by introducing us to Theodore Jojola and Rina Swentzell. These figures connect debates around energy ecology through adobe to a Native American push for energy independence and tribal sovereignty (supported by the American Indian Movement and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975). Narath begins the chapter by quoting Swentzell, an architect and ceramicist who grew up in Santa Clara Pueblo, describing how as a child, she would ‘taste the houses and kivas because each group of adobes were different, depending on the source of the clay’ (15). Her story, which is of the intertwined work and thinking of an architect, author, and ceramicist, is not the main topic, but her presence pervades the events of the chapter, which focuses on Jojola’s work with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Swentzell is often alluded to by Narath in subtle counterpart to the Housing and Urban Development planning processes with which Jojola tangled.

Solar Adobe is a pleasure to read. Narath is a virtuoso when it comes to the art of noticing. His flair for formal analysis is demonstrated even with respect to the sparsest

of illustrations, as when, for example, in the introduction he describes a line drawing of an adobe brick. He deftly unravels an apparently casual sketch, showing how it ‘signals a broader set of ideas related to the technocultural dynamics of solar adobe discourse’ (21). As one reads this account of how adobe found itself at the center of so many discourses, so many research directions, romantic visions, and spurious claims to technical superiority, it is hard not to consider what will be made of the rampant greenwashing in architecture today in fifty years’ time. In *Solar Adobe* Narath shows how optimistic, decadent, and short-sighted architecture can be and how imperializing its gaze and finely-tuned its obliviousness to certain voices can be too. Yet in his history there are glimmers of beauty that we have much to learn from — the simplicity of a material that actually worked, forms of collectivity that thrived, and ways of seeing architecture as a part of its landscape. We are also reminded that the 1970s is never far away from now.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Reference

Scully, Vincent. 1975. *Pueblo: Mountain, Village, Dance*. New York: Viking.

