

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Layers of Desert Time [Layering]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1tc943cw>

Journal

Places, 14(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Carson, Chris

Publication Date

2002-06-01

Peer reviewed

Layers of Desert Time

Chris Carson

The Cibolo Creek Ranch was built in 1857 in the Chinati mountains, about a three-hour drive from El Paso or Midland, halfway between Marfa and Presidio on the Mexican border. It is a very harsh but beautiful part of Texas, with a tough climate. Milton Favor, a pioneer rancher, was able to establish a cattle empire here since he controlled three of the major springs in the region: Cibolo Creek, Cienega Creek and Morita Creek. He built a house on each of the three springs and guided the water through irrigation ditches called *acequias*.

In 1990 John Poindexter, a man from Houston, bought the ranch with the intention of restoring the buildings. When we originally drove out to the ranch to look at the three little houses, I wasn't sure if Poindexter understood the scope of a restoration project (or didn't know but then discovered as we went along). Some of the adobe buildings were still there, but some had been cut in half in places, others had completely disintegrated and one of them was still being lived in but was surrounded by new houses. We soon realized that the project was not only about rebuilding these structures, but also about restoring their connections to the vast, 40,000-acre landscape.

As the early settlers were still fighting Indians and bandits coming through the area, the main structure (built by Favor and called the "fortified ranch" residence) was centered around a large court with high turrets at two opposite corners so they could fire down the four sides. (I later found out that these were called territorial houses and were built on both sides of the Rio Grande River.) The only foundation we unearthed was an "L" outlining the original big room and several smaller rooms, which were lined along a portalis. The main room was where the family members did their business and stored things; the smaller rooms are where the family lived. There was also a wall around a holding area where the family kept its goats and chickens.

It was interesting to learn how people lived in those days; despite how basic it all was, the architecture was so powerful that it informed all of the new work we did. We discussed for a long time how we didn't just want to replicate the historic fort, but also to use the lessons it offered about the landscape, water, light and materials to make new buildings that would be fitting companions to the old structures.

Favor had engineered and built extensive irrigation systems from each of the springs, given how critically important the water and its management was (and still is) in the arid climate. His original diagrams became the basis for our own reconstruction of the system. There are no pumps; the water just comes out of the spring and flows

by gravity down into the various areas, through an orchard of peach and cottonwood trees, into the main courtyard and back out into a main holding pond.

The ranch reminded me of O'Neil Ford's view that sense of place is derived to a large extent from building materials. Cibolo Creek relied more than anything on adobe, a simple material that comes out of the ground, so that the fort is literally built of the earth upon which it stands, emphasizing its connection to the color and texture of the mountains. There were some early photographs that showed the heights of the walls, where some sections of the adobe surface plaster had fallen off, exposing the adobe blocks underneath. We produced new adobe bricks using the same mud as the originals, and plastered them over with a more durable adobe stabilized with cement. For two years, teams of men also reconstructed miles and miles of the dry-stack stone walls that stretch out from the fort into the landscape.

Oddly for west Texas, where the sun is so relentlessly strong, the light is incredibly mercurial, always shifting and quickly changing the colors of the skies and the quality of the shadows. As you move through the buildings, it is a very memorable experience to be under that powerful light and then to come inside, through successive layers, to the protection of the deep shade. The incredible shadows cast by the ocotillo-twig ceilings create covered, dappled patches into which one can escape from the brightness; in other places it is amazing to discover the strength and power of deep shadows on a simple wall.

Given the importance of the shade, I couldn't force myself to create big windows. We thought about arbors, but ended up designing a screened porch, scaled to stand up confidently beside the fort and its massive walls, and strong enough to relate to the giant landscape that you see out beyond. Now the porch has become the living room of the place, where guests gather to have drinks and eat.

Cibolo Creek Ranch, Marfa, Texas.

Site plan, screened dining area, compound and landscape.

Photographs by Tracy Lynch. Graphic courtesy Ford, Powell and Carson.

