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Adobe Barn Typology in La Mesilla and La Mesa, New Mexico: Emergence and Transformation

Tipología de graneros de adobe en La Mesilla y La Mesa, Nuevo México: Surgimiento y transformación

A tipologia dos celeiros de adobe em La Mesilla e La Mesa, Novo México: Origem e transformação

Keywords | Palabras clave | Palavras chave

Earthen architecture, Agricultural infrastructure, Vernacular transformation, Hybrid construction, Mesilla Valley

Arquitectura en tierra, Infraestructuras agrícolas, Transformación vernácula, Construcción híbrida, Valle de Mesilla

Arquitetura de terra, Infraestruturas agrícolas, Transformação vernácula, Construção híbrida, Vale de Mesilla

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

This research explores the emergence of hybrid adobe barn types in the Mesilla Valley of southern New Mexico between the 1880s and 1930s with the aim of understanding how changes in agricultural practices and material availability reshaped vernacular storage architecture. Our study documents five historic adobe barns in La Mesilla and La Mesa, employing typological analysis and comparative architectural reading to identify recurring spatial and construction patterns. It traces a typological transition from compact, subsistence-oriented adobe storage buildings toward larger-span, hybrid forms incorporating milled-timber trusses and metal roofing. It concludes that these adobe barn hybrids constitute distinct, under-recognized architectural types situated between inherited earthen building cultures and industrial-era construction, offering insight into landscape transformation and rural modernization in the Mesilla Valley.

Esta investigación estudia la aparición de tipos híbridos de graneros de adobe en el valle de Mesilla, en el sur de Nuevo México, entre las décadas de 1880 y 1930, con el objetivo de comprender cómo los cambios en las prácticas agrícolas y en la disponibilidad de materiales transformaron la arquitectura vernácula destinada al almacenamiento. El estudio documenta cinco graneros históricos de adobe en La Mesilla y La Mesa y emplea el análisis tipológico y la lectura arquitectónica comparada para identificar patrones espaciales y constructivos recurrentes. Se analiza la transición desde construcciones compactas de adobe destinadas al almacenamiento y vinculadas a una agricultura de subsistencia hacia formas híbridas y de mayor luz, que incorporan cerchas de madera aserrada y cubiertas metálicas. Se concluye que estos graneros híbridos de adobe constituyen tipos arquitectónicos diferenciados y poco reconocidos, situados entre las culturas constructivas tradicionales en tierra y la construcción de la era industrial, y que permiten comprender mejor la transformación del paisaje y la modernización rural del valle de Mesilla.

Este artigo explora o surgimento de tipos híbridos de celeiros de adobe no Vale de Mesilla, no sul do Novo México, entre as décadas de 1880 e 1930, com o objetivo de compreender como as mudanças nas práticas agrícolas e na disponibilidade de materiais remodelaram a arquitetura vernácula de armazenamento. O nosso estudo documenta cinco celeiros históricos de adobe em La Mesilla e La Mesa, recorrendo à análise tipológica e à leitura arquitetónica comparativa para identificar padrões espaciais e construtivos recorrentes. Analisa a transição tipológica dos edifícios, de edifícios compactos de armazenamento em adobe que são orientados para a subsistência, para formas híbridas com vãos mais amplos, que incorporam treliças de madeira serrada e coberturas metálicas. Conclui-se que estes celeiros híbridos em adobe constituem tipos arquitetónicos distintos e subvalorizados, situados entre as culturas herdadas de construção em terra e a construção da era industrial, oferecendo inspiração sobre a transformação da paisagem e a modernização rural no Vale de Mesilla.

Introduction

Adobe construction in New Mexico belongs to a tradition of Indigenous earthen building extending far back before European colonization, subsequently transformed through interaction with Spanish Colonial, Mexican, and Anglo-American building practices (Bunting 1976: 8-12). The incorporation of new materials into adobe construction was part of a broader architectural transformation. Documentation of La Mesilla Historic District describes the Territorial period as one in which adobe construction increasingly incorporated Anglo-American influences and newly available materials and technologies (National Park Service 1982), yet adobe barns and their significance within rural architecture remain comparatively under-recognized. This study examines how the expansion of irrigation infrastructure, the advent of railroads, and shifts in land tenure during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to the emergence of large hybrid barn forms, representing a distinctive intersection of inherited earthen building traditions and industrial evolution.

Methodology

This research is based on field documentation of five buildings selected for their typological diversity, accessibility, and variation in architectural and construction characteristics. Documentation included measured drawings, photographic surveys, and material observation, with a focus on wall massing, roof systems, openings, and wall-to-roof interfaces. Typological analysis was employed to compare spatial organization, construction logic, and degrees of material hybridization across the case studies, identifying recurring architectural patterns.

Literature Review

I referred to Jerry R. Davis's *Barns from the Land of Enchantment* for a survey of New Mexican rural building traditions. Through personal observation rather than academic typology, Davis reveals a surprising diversity of forms and materials, from log and stone to *terrón* (sod blocks) and modern hybrids. Among them appear a few adobe barns, typically gabled with corrugated metal sheeting over thick plastered walls (Davis 2012: 38–39). Although Davis does not focus on adobe barns or look closely at structural behavior, his survey points to regional material adaptations and recurring spatial patterns. In particular, his description of the gambrel-roofed Los Poblanos Feeding Barn near Albuquerque helped connect one of the barns I surveyed (Glover, in La Mesa) to broader trends. Davis attributes the infrequency of gambrel roofs in New Mexico to regional agricultural practices, arguing that the Southwest generally required less enclosed hay storage than the Midwest, where gambrel roofs became widespread, as barn forms reflected changing agricultural needs as much as building traditions (Davis 2012: 4–5). On this point, Myrtie Stedman, in *Rural Architecture in Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado*, notes that gambrel roofs were occasionally introduced through Midwestern

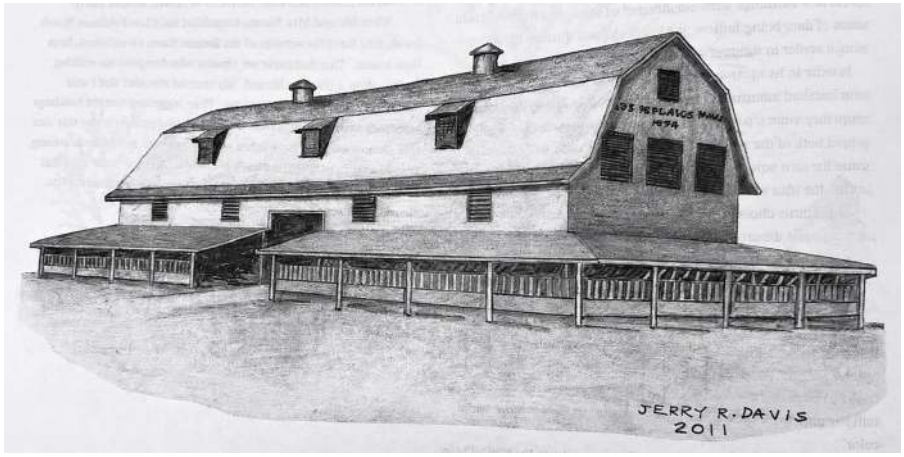


Figure 1. Feeding barn at Los Poblanos ranch (Davis 2012: 38–39)



Figure. 2. Adobe and lumber barn in Villanueva, (Bunting 1976: 58)

influence, often via pattern books or pre-cut lumber kits shipped by rail (Stedman 1981: 67–69).

John Michael Vlach's *Barns* (2003) provides an overview including barns in Watrous, Peñasco, and Mora. His visual archive shows that adobe agricultural architecture persisted well into the twentieth century and that southern New Mexican examples are part of a larger continuum (Vlach 2003: 271–280).

For insights into adobe as a construction system, I turned to Bainbridge Bunting's *Of Earth and Timbers Made* and *Early Architecture in New Mexico* (Bunting 1974 and 1976). Bunting includes detailed field observation albeit omitting the Mesilla Valley and saying little of how traditional adobe practices intersected with such imported roof systems as scissor and gambrel trusses. Building on this literature, below I examine five adobe barns in Mesilla and La Mesa with a view to articulating an emergent hybrid storage typology specific to southern New Mexico.

Despite their lacunae, the combined insights of Davis, Vlach, and Bunting allowed me to situate barns such as Guerra, Glover, Rigney, Miller, and Garcia within a vernacular continuum of adobe masonry hybridized with milled lumber and light industrial roofing materials following the arrival of the railroad in the Mesilla Valley in the 1880s. The scarcity of detailed structural analysis on these adobe-truss hybrids shaped my direction of research. In an interview, preservation specialist Mike Taylor noted that the primary historic building survey of the Mesilla Valley dates from the late 1970s and early '80s and has not been systematically updated. He said no formal inventory of adobe barns or other rural structures south of Socorro currently exists. The documentation and condition assessments below thus contribute to typological understanding and also to filling a gap in regional heritage records and informing future preservation planning.

Adobe Barn Types in the Mesilla Valley

La Mesa: Agricultural Context

The urban fabric of La Mesa has changed greatly over the past century. Many older structures show signs of deterioration, while modern development in the town has resulted in a mixture of new and old. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, growth in La Mesa was chiefly driven by agriculture, as the fertile Mesilla Valley allowed extensive farming, particularly of chili peppers, pecans, and cotton, which remain central to the local economy (La Mesa Historical Society 2025).

- Rigney Barn (La Mesa): Transitional Hybrid with Cement-Bound Masonry

Rigney Barn lies between two pieces of irrigation infrastructure: the Chamberino Main Lateral, which supplies water to nearby fields, and the Chamberino Drain, which collects irrigation runoff and groundwater. These laterals and drains form part of the network associated with the early twenti-

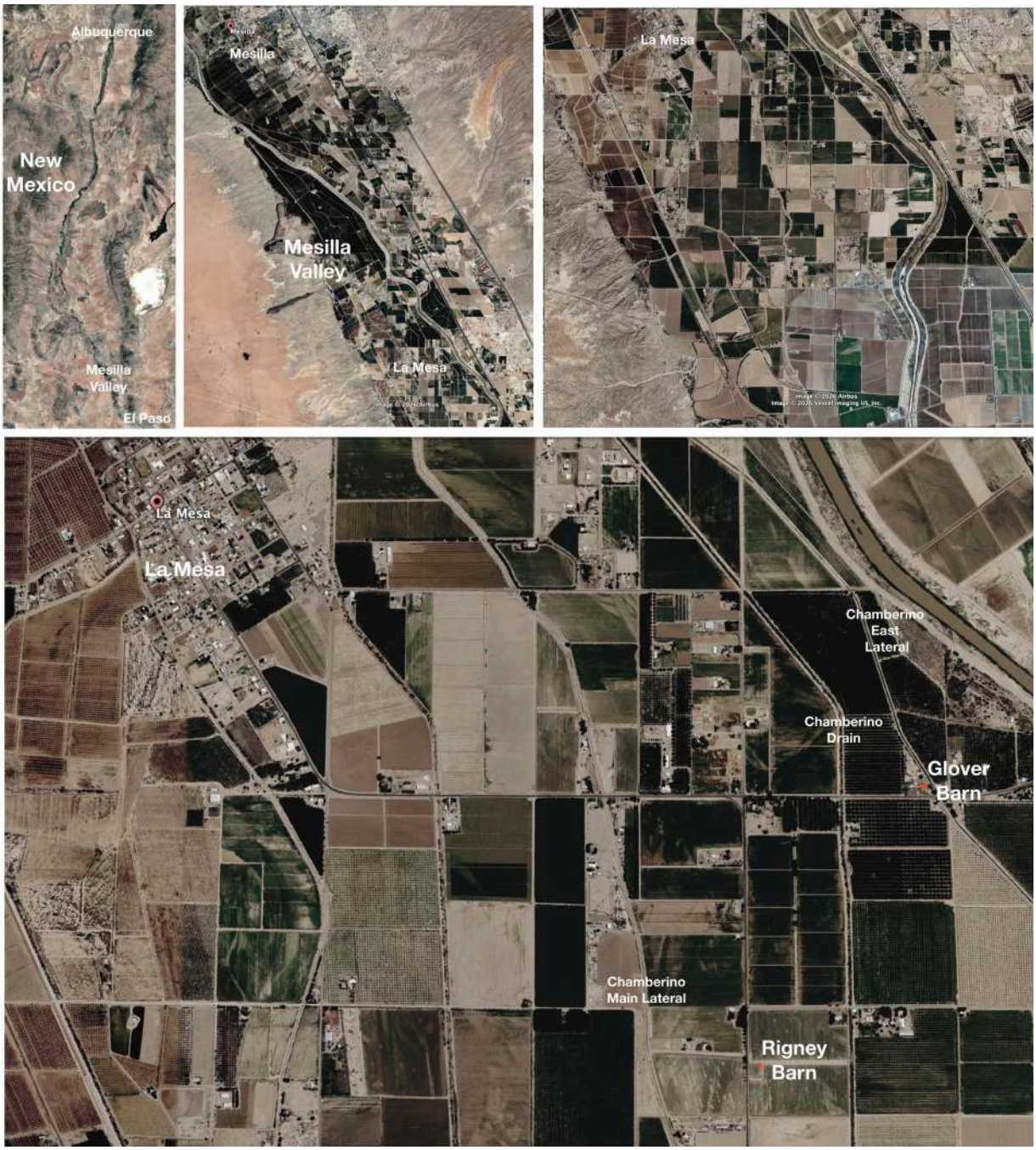


Figure 3. Mesilla Valley, Mesilla, and La Mesa study areas, and the adobe barns documented in La Mesa (Google Earth; author's annotations and composition)



Figure 4. Aerial view showing Rigney Barn in La Mesa and its proximity to the Chamberino Main Lateral and Chamberino Drain (Google Earth)



Figure 5. Rigney Barn



Figure 6. Rigney barn interior and wooden truss system

eth-century transformation of the valley with the Elephant Butte Dam project. The barn's position suggests that its siting was connected to the organization of irrigated farmland, taking advantage of the new infrastructure.

Rigney Barn maintains a compact, rectilinear vernacular form, integrating cement mortar in its adobe masonry and with a gabled roof of milled lumber trusses and corrugated metal sheeting. This selective adoption of industrial materials

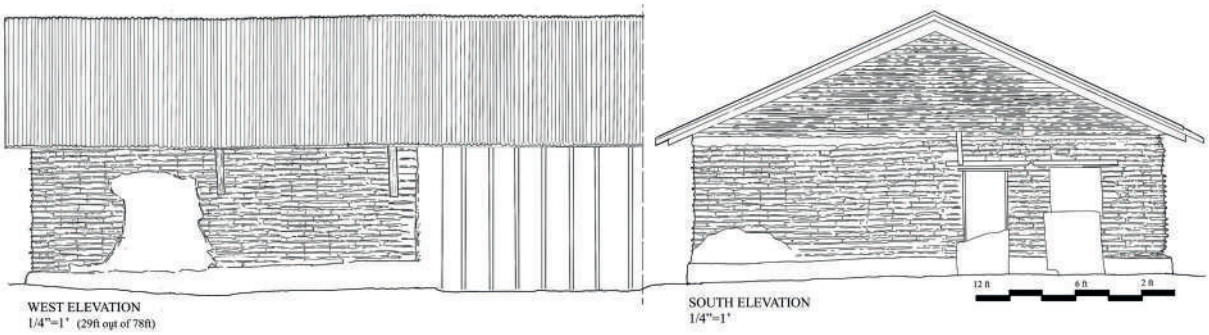


Figure 7. West and south elevations of Rigney Barn

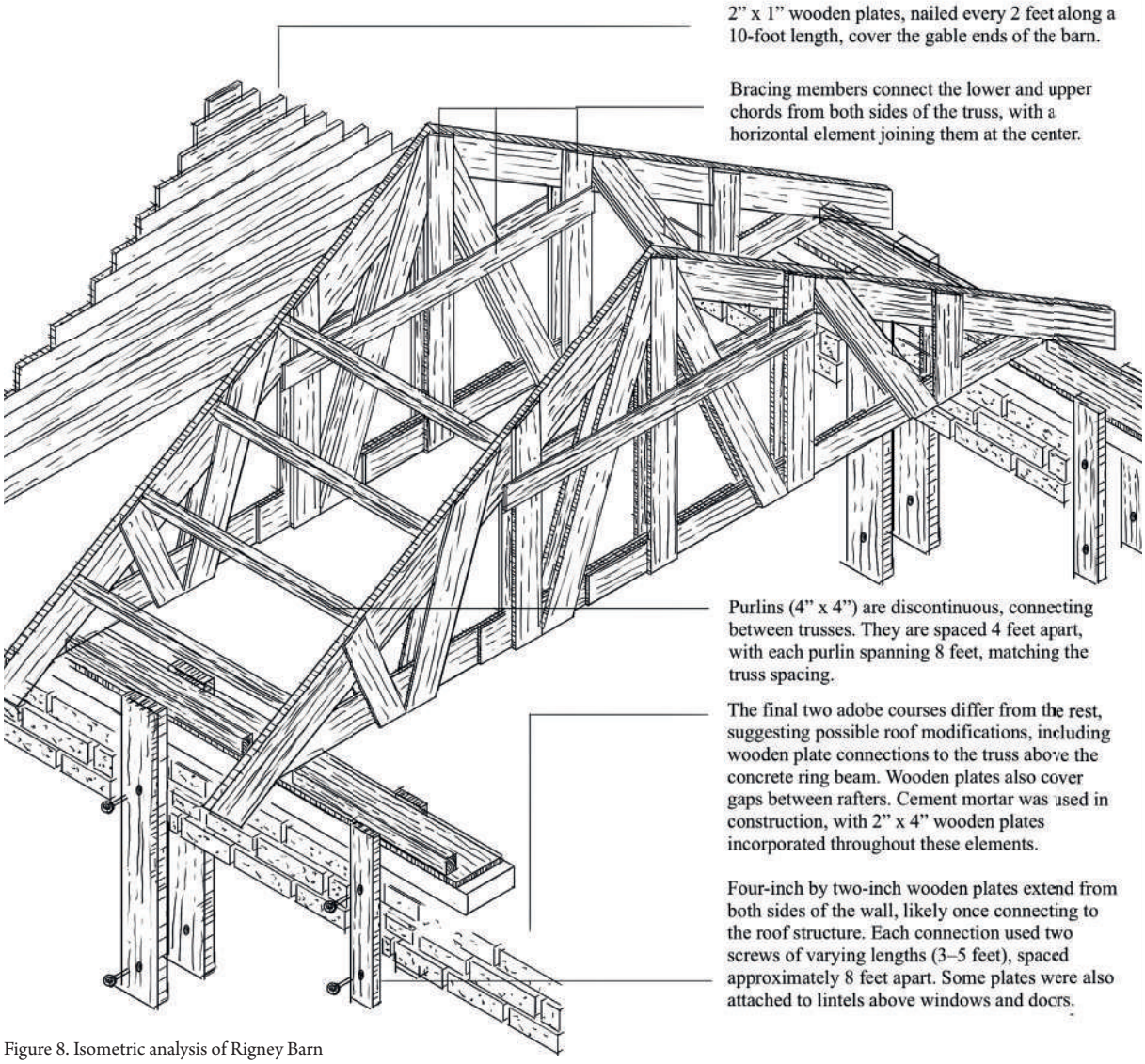


Figure 8. Isometric analysis of Rigney Barn

bespeaks an experimental phase in which traditional earthen construction was adapted to accommodate larger spans and storage requirements. Typologically, Rigney Barn exemplifies a pragmatic hybridization of adobe building culture on its encounter with industrial-era materiality.

- Glover Barn (La Mesa): Large-Span Hybridization

The barn stands by the Chamberino East Lateral, watering the local fields, and also the Chamberino Drain, collecting runoff as mentioned above. According to the current owner, the barn has always been associated with dairy use, dependent on irrigated fields for forage and feed crops. It can therefore be seen as part of an agricultural system of irrigation infrastructure, cultivated fields, livestock, and attendant buildings.

Glover Barn is at the most spatially ambitious end of our emergent adobe barn typology. Its long open interior span and gambrel roof profile reflect a departure from compact vernacular forms toward the larger spatial requirements of specialized agriculture. The roof, of milled lumber trusses and metal sheeting, sits atop adobe walls, with a pronounced material hybridization at the interface showing how construction was adapted to accommodate larger spans with the primary load-bearing system remaining earthen.



Figure 9. Aerial view showing Glover Barn and its proximity to the Chamberino East Lateral and Chamberino Drain (Google Earth)



Figure 10. Glover Barn



Figure 11. Timber addition to Glover Barn



Figure 12. Glover Barn with its roof collapsed

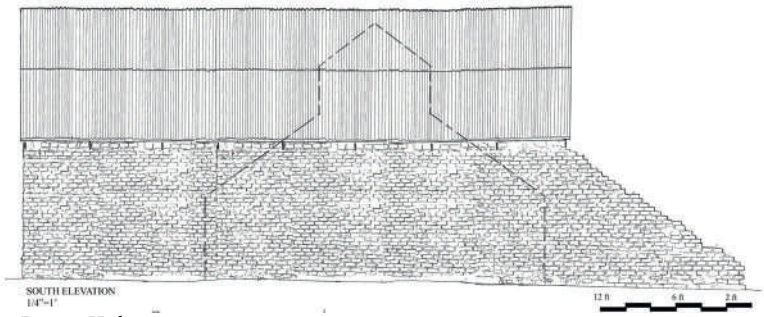


Figure 13. South elevation of Glover Barn on Highway 189

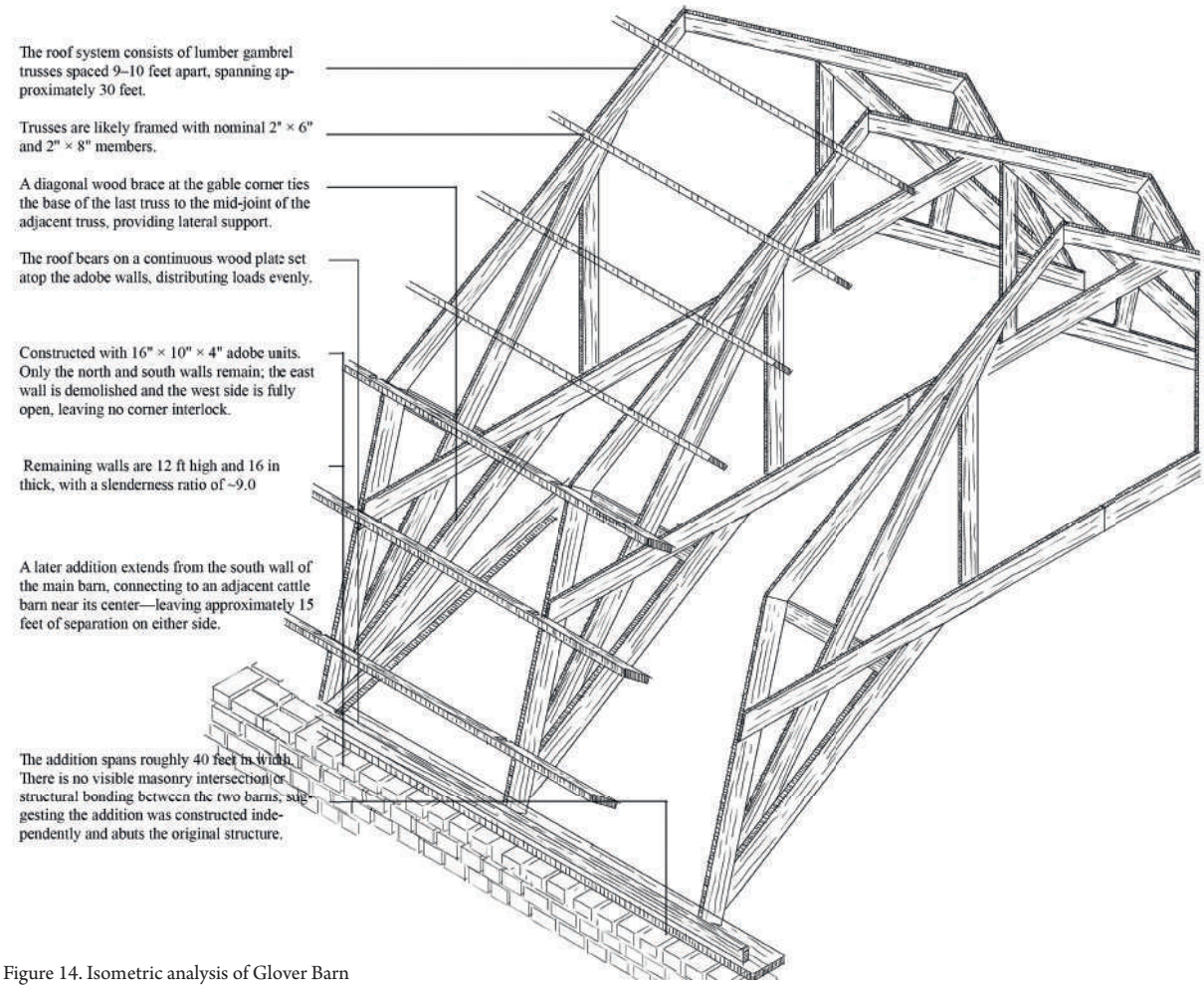


Figure 14. Isometric analysis of Glover Barn

Mesillan Agricultural Context

Founded in 1848, Mesilla developed within a landscape of irrigated fields and acequia ditch systems along the Rio Grande. Agriculture around the compact town relied on communal irrigation infrastructure (National Park Service 2020). By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this landscape was increasingly shaped by changes in water management, transportation, land tenure, and access to regional markets. Unlike the Rigney and Glover barns in La Mesa, situated directly in fields, the Miller, Garcia, and Guerra barns are embedded in the historic settlement of Mesilla, reflecting different relationships between settlement and infrastructure and particularly Mesilla's older acequia network.

- Miller Barn

The location of Miller Barn, bounded by both the Mesilla Drain and the Mesilla Lateral, suggests a functional relationship with the landscape. In an interview, Mesilla resident Emily Guerra recalled an older acequia that historically connected the vicinity of Miller Barn with Guerra Barn, evoking



Figure 15. Mesilla Valley, La Mesilla, and La Mesa study areas, and the adobe barns documented in Mesilla (Google Earth; author's annotations and composition)

a shared irrigation landscape, although the former course and extent of the acequia require documentary verification. The barn has good access, with its longest elevation parallel to Calle de Picacho.

Miller Barn preserves a vernacular core in its compact massing and thick adobe walls, yet it has accrued hybrid layers through roof replacement and accretion. The original structure appears to have been covered by a traditional flat earthen roof on cottonwood viga beams. This was later replaced by a pitched roof of milled-lumber rafters and metal sheets, retrofitted to meet evolving needs. Typologically, the barn demonstrates continuity with pre-industrial spatial patterns.

Its relatively small scale, evidence of an earlier viga-supported roof, and substantial buttressing indicating successive structural interventions distinguish Miller Barn from the larger hybrid barns documented here and suggest that it may be the earliest of the five.



Figure 16. Miller Barn (Lori Miller)



Figure 17. Main entrance of Miller Barn (Lori Miller)



Figure 18. South and west elevations of Miller Barn

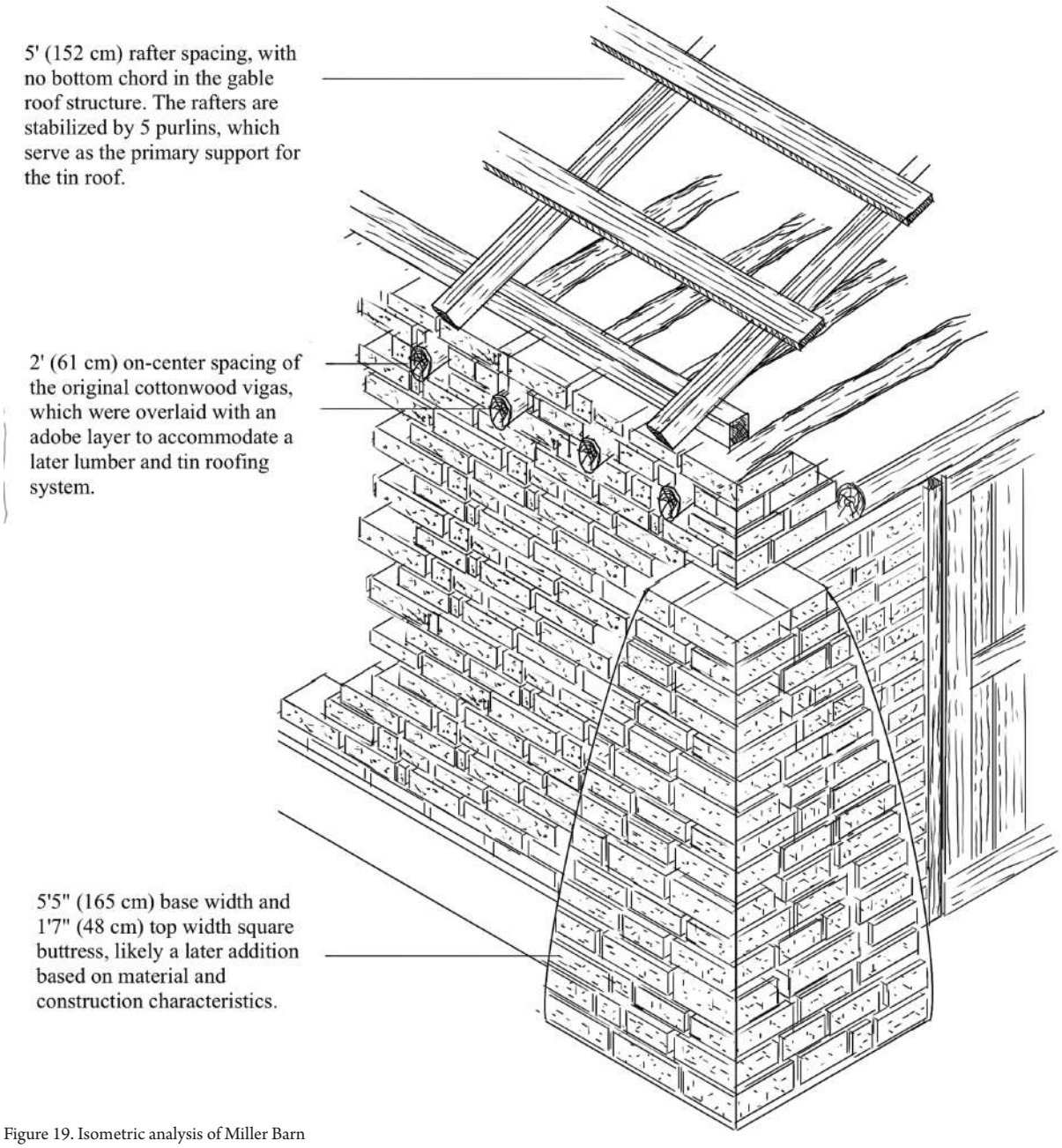


Figure 19. Isometric analysis of Miller Barn

- Garcia Barn

Directly fronting the Mesilla Lateral, this barn is in a transitional area between the tightly arranged residential core of the Mesilla Historic District and the more open, agriculturally zoned parcels around the town

It retains a traditional compact footprint and low-rise profile but incorporates milled beams and metal roofing. The modest character of this adaptation is evident in the roof structure, with lumber trusses assembled from short pieces. Adobe walls bear the load, while the roof assembly reflects the integration of industrial materials to extend span and durability. The barn exemplifies a modest hybridization typical of smaller-scale farming embedded in Mesilla's historic fabric.



Figure 20. Garcia Barn



Figure 21. Interior of Garcia Barn

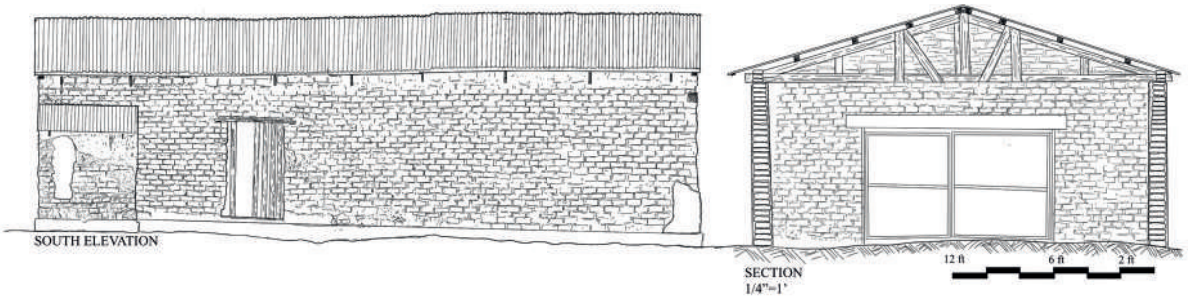


Figure 22. Section and south elevations of Garcia Barn

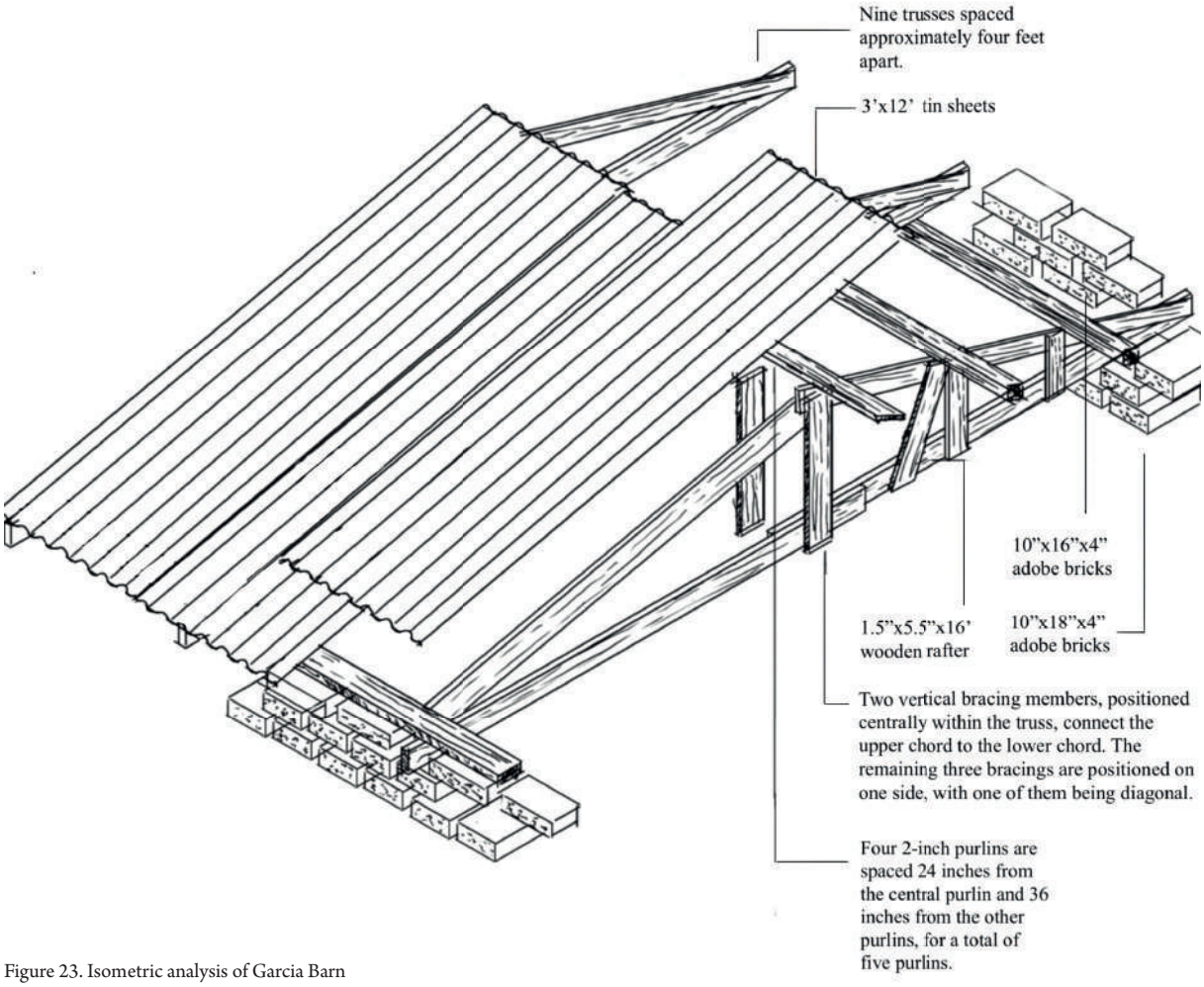


Figure 23. Isometric analysis of Garcia Barn

- Guerra Barn

Guerra Barn exemplifies a more pronounced typological evolution, combining tall adobe walls with scissor trusses and metal roofing for broad spans. Its engineered roofing atop earthen masonry marks a clear structural hybridization, enabling greater storage capacity and altered interior proportions. In contrast to more compact barns, this one reflects the spatial ambitions associated with early twentieth-century commercialized agriculture. The presence of steel ties connecting opposing walls suggests that the proportions and spans exceeded the limits of conventional adobe construction, necessitating reinforcement.



Figure 24. Southeast elevation of Guerra Barn



Figure 25. Interior of Guerra Barn

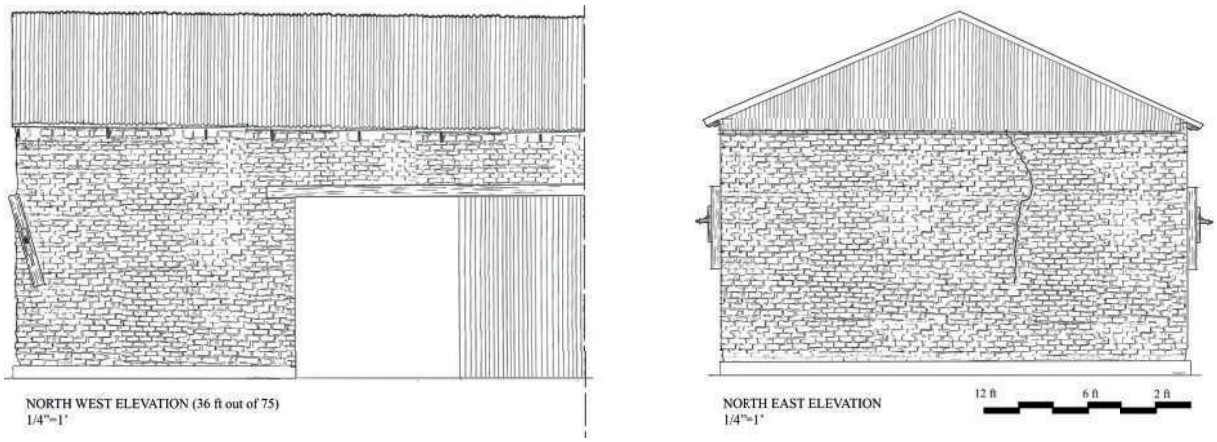


Figure 26. Northwest and northeast elevations of Guerra Barn

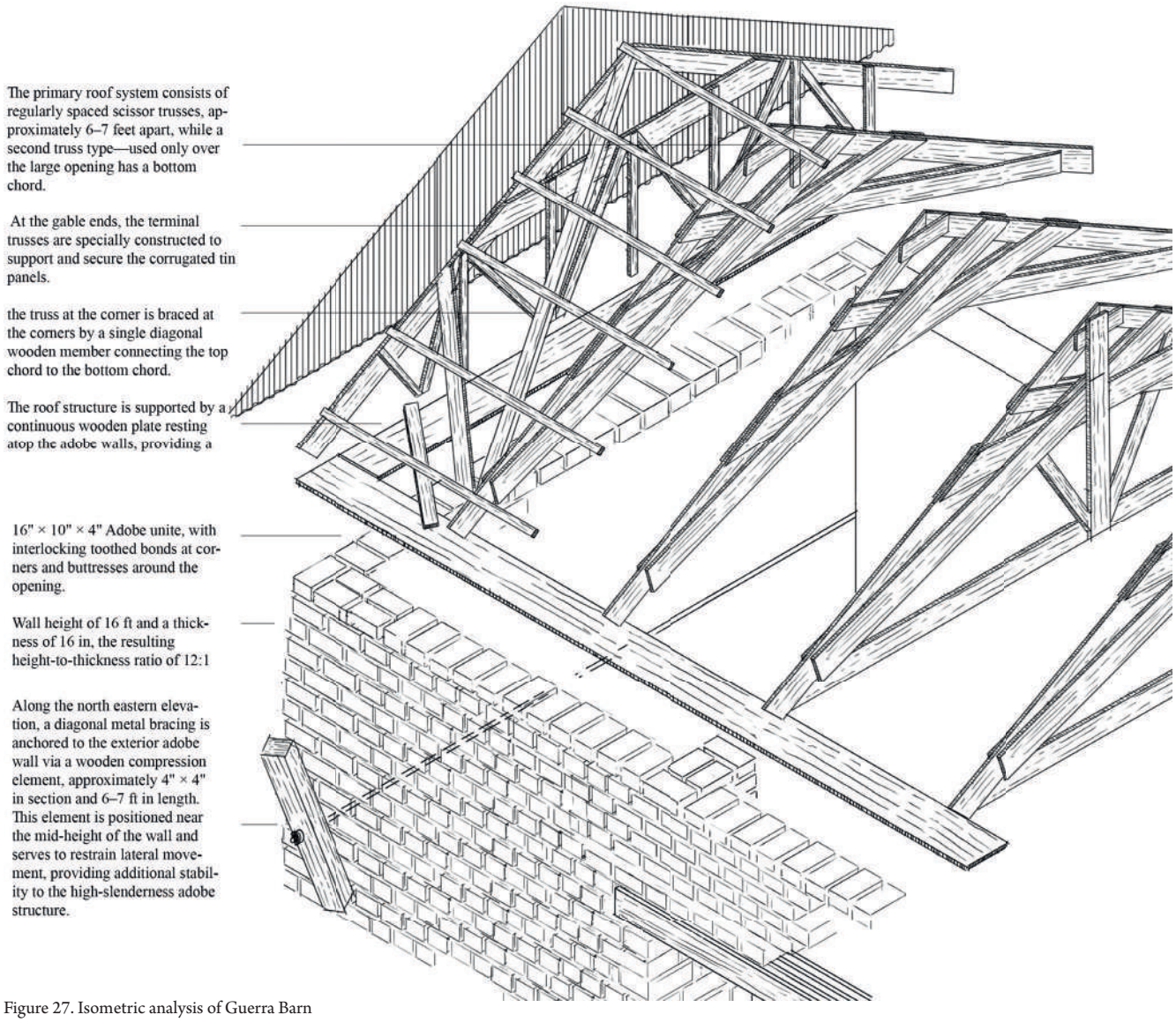


Figure 27. Isometric analysis of Guerra Barn

Typological Synthesis

Across our five case studies, a consistent typological shift is visible: compact low-rise adobe forms (Miller and Garcia) give way to longer-span barns integrating milled-lumber trusses and metal roofing (Rigney, Guerra, and Glover). But the degrees of hybridization are different. Miller retains evidence of an earlier viga-supported roof replaced by milled lumber and metal sheeting; Garcia has a comparatively modest truss system assembled from shorter milled members; Rigney, Guerra, and particularly Glover employ larger roof structures for substantially greater spans. The transition therefore involves not simply a change in material but a reconfiguration of design toward larger barn volumes and entrances and modified wall–roof interfaces that mediate between earthen load-bearing systems and lightweight roofing. The resulting hybrids maintain continuity in adobe wall-building while selectively incorporating new materials and systems.

The original builders of the five barns could not be identified from the available records. But though their incorporation of milled-lumber roof systems and other industrial materials reflects the growing Anglo-American influence in Mesilla, these features do not point clearly to their builders' cultural background. Mesilla's population included both long-established Mexican and New Mexican families and Anglo-American settlers, making these barns the products of a hybrid culture.

Discussion

To understand how and when these adobe barn types emerged, we must situate them within the transformation of the Mesilla Valley's agricultural landscape as the railroad connected the valley to regional markets and brought industrial materials into these borderlands, including dimensional lumber and corrugated metal roofing. These allowed for the

longer spans and lighter frames that we see in all five barns, replacing the traditional vigas and earthen roofs of Spanish Colonial and Mexican extraction. Yet the new availability of such materials was just one factor.

Although sovereignty shifted after the U.S. acquisition of New Mexico in 1848, agriculture in the Mesilla Valley remained rooted in earlier Mexican patterns of irrigation, communal labor, and mixed farming. Several circumstances hindered a transformation. First, the valley was not stable farmland but a plain characterized by seasonal flooding, shifting river channels, and extensive wetlands. This is evident in Mary Daniels Taylor's description of acequia maintenance: "Acequias were being cleaned for water to come from the river to the fields, the Mesillero [resident of Mesilla] either made his own *fatiga* [crew for required communal labor] or paid a *peón* [hired laborer] to do his ditch cleaning for him" (Taylor 2004: 143). Second, agricultural development was

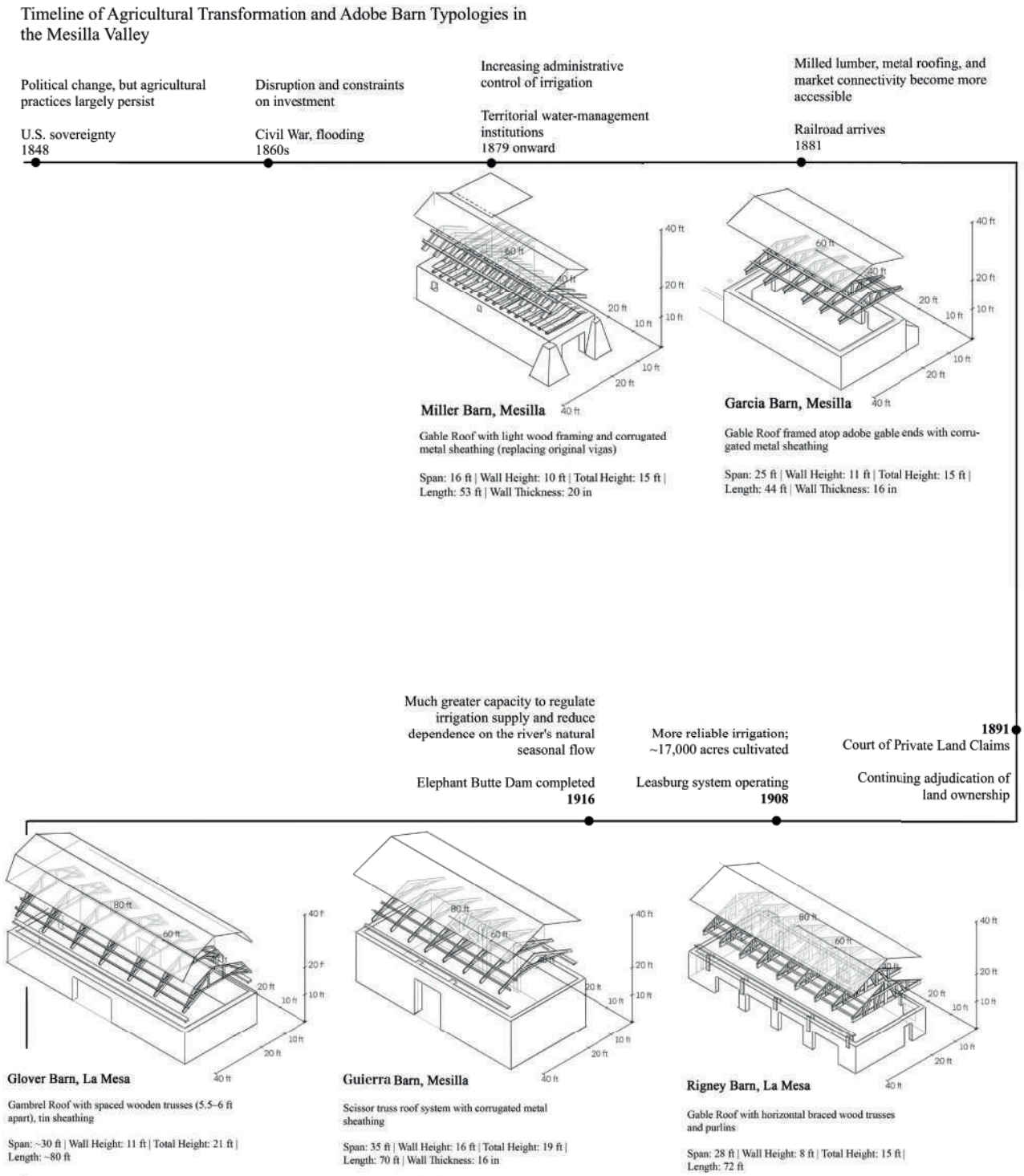


Figure 28. Timeline of agricultural transformation and proposed emergence of adobe barn types in the Mesilla Valley

constrained by political instability. Taylor notes that "Others also had moved away from Mesilla in earlier times of trouble and heartache. The Civil War and the flooding river gave motivation to some to look toward the Sacramento Mountains to the East" (Taylor 2004: 170). Third, the agricultural landscape of the Mesilla Valley was shaped by changing administrative frameworks. Much of the valley had developed within Spanish and Mexican grant systems. Following the Mexican Cession (1848), Congress established the Office of the Surveyor General of New Mexico (1854) and later the Court of Private Land Claims (1891) to investigate and adjudicate these preexisting claims, reflecting ongoing land ownership conflicts up to the late nineteenth century. More broadly, the reorganization and privatization of communal land grants disrupted village-based agrarian systems, fragmenting some holdings and enabling the consolidation of others (Correia 2009: 88–89).

Alongside these changes in land administration, water management was increasingly institutionalized. Baldwin notes that as of 1879 territorial legislators established a framework consisting of water companies, irrigation districts, and conservancy districts. Authority over this system was centralized through the office of the territorial engineer, and following the passage of the Reclamation Act in 1902 the federal government also assumed a role, as manifested in the completion of the Leasburg Dam and Canal. By the 1908 irrigation season, the Leasburg system provided farmers with a "constant and ample supply" of water, supporting some 17,000 farm acres. The increased reliability of irrigation encouraged the purchase of farmland as confidence grew in the valley as a site for agricultural investment (Baldwin 1938: 319–322). With improved transportation and new building materials, this confidence was favorable to the raising of larger hybrid adobe barns.

The transformation was also conditioned by geography. The larger barn forms in the Mesilla Valley reflect agricultural conditions different to those of northern New Mexico. Rivera's study of acequia culture describes New Mexican irrigation as a system in which water management was intertwined with landholding, agricultural practice, and community organization (Rivera 1998). As Rivera said in an interview, "Landholdings were tiny up north. You didn't need a big barn if your crops were just for the family table." Hence the link between the scale and spatial organization of agriculture and the attendant architecture. In northern New Mexico, narrow valleys, fragmented landholdings, and community-managed acequia systems produced patterns of cultivation around the *acequia madre* and its secondary channels, with agricultural buildings for small-scale output. In the Mesilla Valley, by contrast, larger parcels were integrated into an engineered system of main canals, laterals, and drains associated with the expansion of federally managed irrigation. These larger and more regularly organized agricultural landscapes supported increasingly commercial production with greater requirements for storage, livestock, equipment, and processing. Figure 29 illustrates this contrast spatially, juxtaposing the northern irregular, acequia-oriented agricultural landscape with the Mesilla Valley's larger and more regular fieldscape. It also situates barns within these systems: smaller granaries (*galeras*) are distributed among the narrow plots in the acequia landscape while larger barns appear alongside

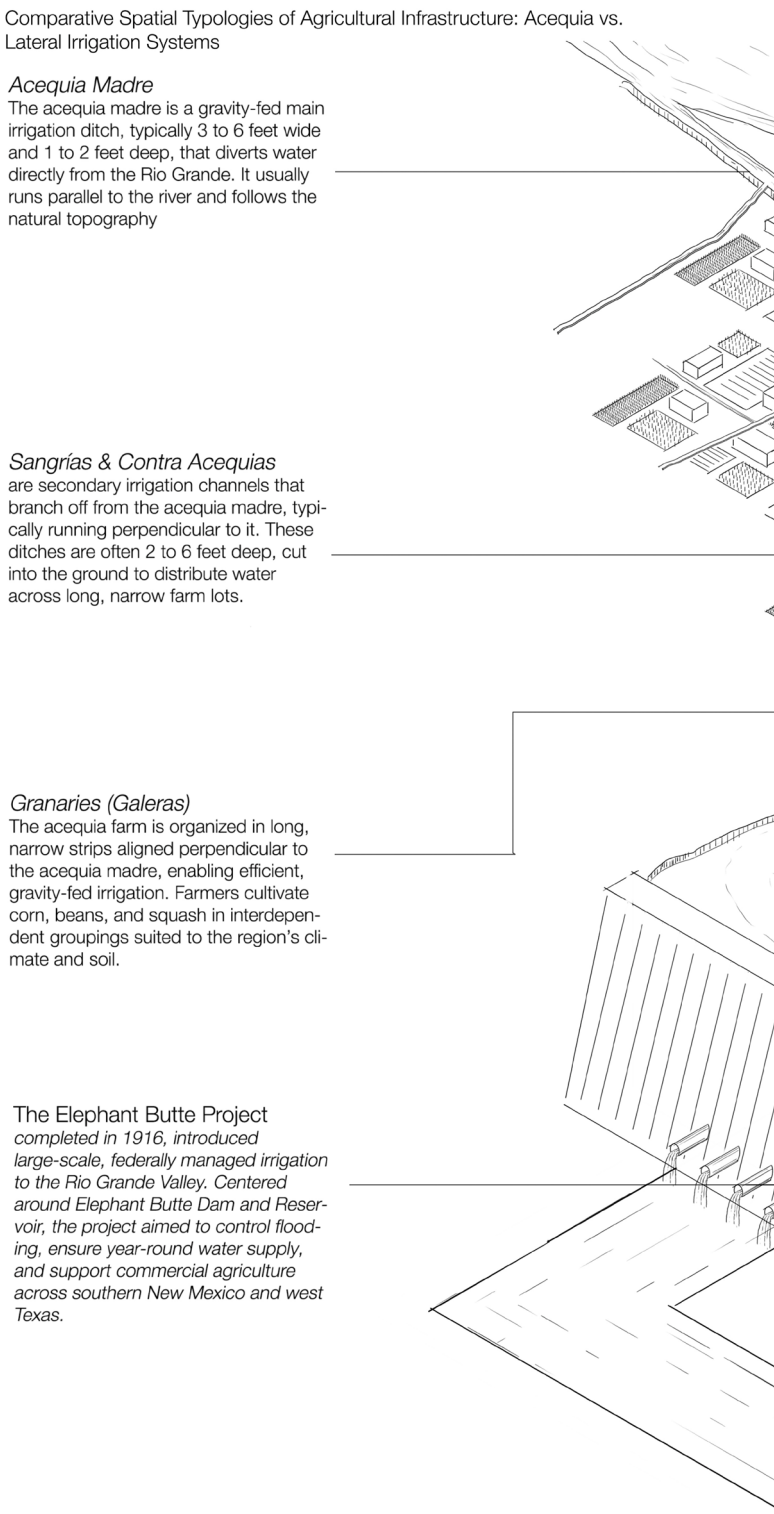
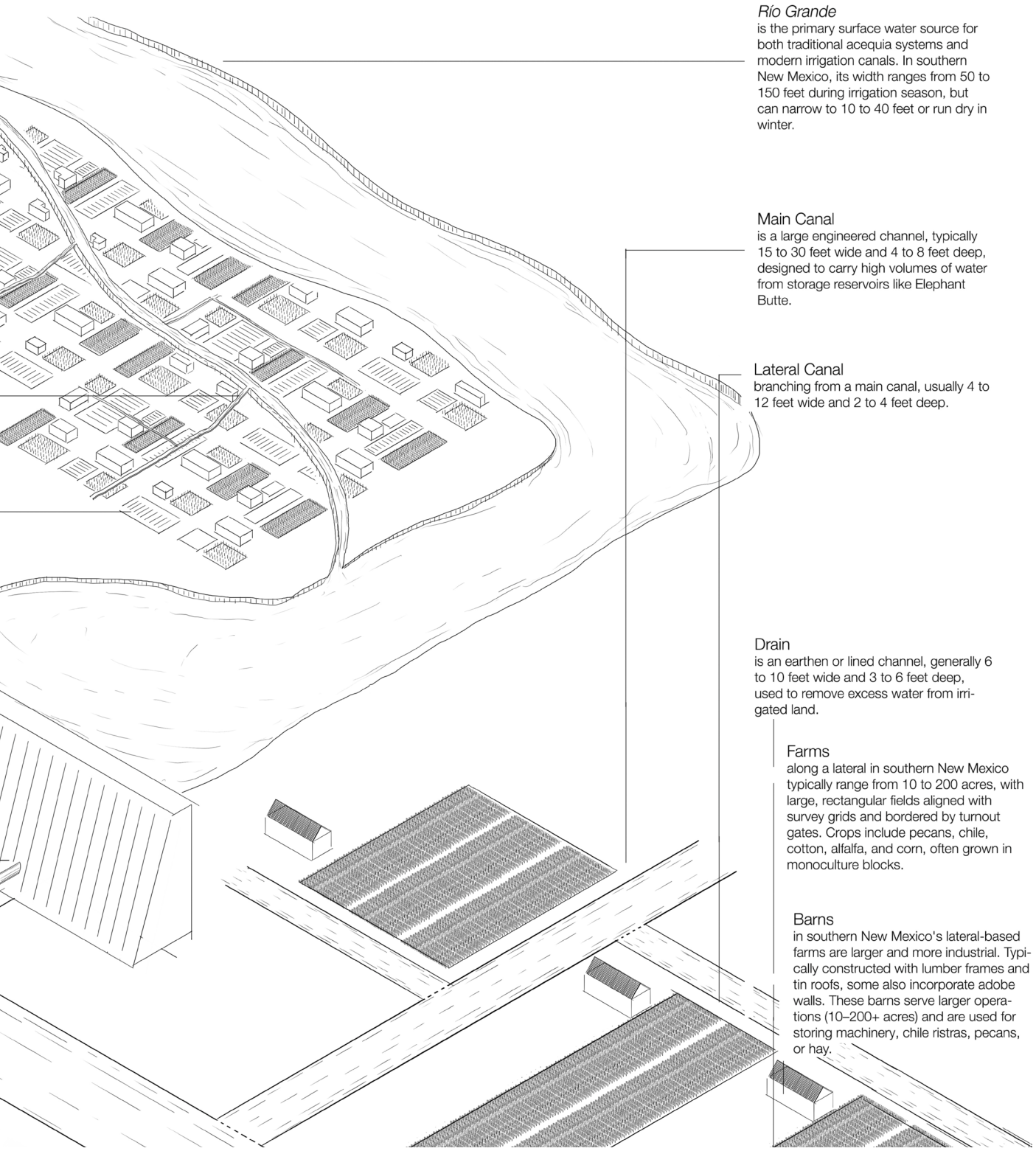


Figure 29. Spatial comparison between northern and southern New Mexico

expanded fields, roads, and engineered irrigation in the southern system. The larger hybrid adobe barns can therefore be seen not simply as enlarged versions of earlier agricultural buildings but as components of differently scaled and increasingly infrastructural farmland (Rivera 1998: 30-36).

Our five case studies appear to register these changing conditions at different scales. The smaller Miller and Garcia barns, embedded within the historic settlement of Mesilla, retain compact vernacular characteristics and a closer spatial relationship to the town's older agricultural landscape. Rigney



and Glover, by contrast, are within the cultivated landscape of La Mesa and its lateral-and-drain network. Their larger spans and more specialized functions suggest a closer relationship to the expanding rural economy of the time. Guerra is in the middle, retaining adobe construction while incorporating an enlarged roof and volume.

The architectural evidence therefore complicates the association between political sovereignty, railroad arrival, and typological change. The Mexican Cession of 1848 did not immediately reorganize agriculture, and as of 1881 the railroad gave access to new materials without necessarily creating the conditions for larger barns. The Rigney, Glover, and Guerra barns rather appear connected with a later convergence of improved transportation, regulated and reliable water management, and investment. Their scale and incorporation of industrial building materials are a product of this agricultural expansion.

Changes in land tenure and economics further conditioned the transformation of adobe storage buildings. The reorganization and privatization of communal land grants following U.S. annexation disrupted village-based agrarian systems, fragmenting some holdings and consolidating others. These shifts altered the scale of barns and their siting, away from household compounds to the edges of fields and transport routes (Correia 2009: 88–89). The Great Depression accelerated these dynamics: as capital-intensive industrial barns became unattainable for many smallholders, hybridization (such as with milled-lumber roof systems atop existing adobe



Figure 30. Cotton gin in La Mesa



Figure 31. Timber and corrugated metal barn in the Mesilla Valley

walls) offered a pragmatic means of expanding storage without abandoning vernacular construction. In this context, adobe barn hybrids can be seen as architectural responses to both agrarian restructuring and economic constraint (Hurt 2002: 297–304).

The later decline of adobe barns in the Mesilla Valley raises further questions about the links between economic, agricultural, and architectural developments. The context of the Great Depression deserves investigation, as it placed new pressures on American farmers and altered patterns of investment (Hurt 2002: 297–304). How these conditions affected the construction, modification, or continued use of adobe barns in the Mesilla Valley remains unclear. At the same time, the expansion of commercial agriculture, particularly cotton-growing in the 1920s and '30s, introduced specialized processing requirements and new building types, including cotton gins.

Mechanization and buildings with timber and metal framing, metal roofing, and other industrial materials may have further reduced the suitability of traditional adobe barns for evolving needs. Modernization may initially have encouraged adaptation before increasingly specialized agricultural practices favored different types altogether. Further research into the economic conditions, chronology, materials, and functions of twentieth-century agricultural buildings in the Mesilla Valley could clarify the relationship between these developments and the hybrid adobe barn's eventual decline.

Conclusions

The adobe barns documented in the Mesilla Valley represent distinct, under-recognized agricultural building types. Through case studies, our research has identified recurring spatial and construction patterns that distinguish these hybrid structures from smaller adobe storage buildings and later industrialized ones. Recognizing these adobe barn hybrids expands our view of earthen construction beyond the domestic and religious spheres more commonly studied in New Mexico. Studying Mesilla Valley barns may help illuminate a potentially broader transformation of adobe rural architecture across the American Southwest.

The expansion of agricultural economies in the Mesilla Valley led to the development of new building types driven by greater storage and circulation needs and the incorporation of industrial roofing into adobe building culture. Further research should examine additional examples along the Río Grande and investigate how later developments such as the Great Depression, cotton-growing, and mechanization contributed to the adaptation and eventual decline of these curious hybrids.

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Biography | Biografía | Biografia

Mulham Alkharboutli

Mulham is an architect whose work focuses on traditional construction practices, adaptive retrofitting, and resilient housing. He holds a master's degree in Historic Preservation from the University of Notre Dame and a degree in Theory and History of Architecture from Damascus University. He is the founder of metmar.studio, a practice developing low-resource building systems for vulnerable environments.