

HANDMADE WITH LOVE

By Home San Miguel's Lead Architect



How I came to appreciate the unique qualities of Mexican homes

I first arrived in San Miguel de Allende in 1994 and, like everyone, was astounded by the beautiful city and its intriguing and colorful cultural differences. As an American architect, I would stop and stare at construction sites with amazement. At first they seemed so chaotic, rough and different from what I was used to that I nicknamed them "Flintstone Construction."

Months after settling into SMA, I accepted the challenge of redesigning a ruin in Centro and overseeing its construction. This was a wonderful experience for me as it opened my eyes and enabled me to learn what was possible. Slowly I realized that what we were creating were large scale, handmade structural sculptures. My ridicule transformed into awe.

How Mexican homes are different from homes in the US and Canada

In the US and Canada, houses are built using pre-cut lumber sizes to frame structures. In Mexico, the structure is built with hand-formed columns of hand-tied steel rebar and poured concrete. Similar methods are used to construct structural floors and rooftops.



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In the US and Canada, almost all the materials used to finish a home are prefabricated with precise methods in factories. The workers simply install them. Additionally, many materials like drywall, stucco and paint are applied or installed with sophisticated tools to automate the installation and ensure no surface looks different from another.

In Mexico, and especially San Miguel de Allende, the materials used to finish a home are made by artisan workers. Two examples are windows and doors. In SMA, small shops of artisan workers fabricate windows and exterior doors out of steel or wood, while in the US and Canada, they're all made by factories to exacting specifications. If you look carefully at windows and doors, you'll see that there is a handmade quality to each one. Small imperfections - that you would never see in a prefabricated window, for example - add to the charm of these Mexican homes.

Here's another example that will help you better appreciate these differences. In between a home's structural columns, the workers install one handmade brick at a time with hand-mixed mortar to build up the interior of each wall. When the bricks and mortar dry, another group of artisans applies gesso over the interior of the bricks and the columns to make a very smooth interior wall that later receives paint. On the exterior walls, a different group of workers apply a cement based plaster or stucco, again entirely by hand. All a home's walls and surfaces are lovingly built by hand.



What this means for you as a proud owner of a Mexican home

These natural materials have unique properties of their own and will likely move in very slight ways. For example, very minute gesso or stucco cracks can occur during the life of these homes. This is a function of the material, not the structure, since Home San Miguel architects and engineers are exceedingly careful to inspect the soil beneath each home, and determine at what depth the existing soil needs to be removed and the proper soil installed and compacted, so that the home is properly supported and structurally sound. These purely cosmetic settlements are a result of the natural materials used in Mexican homes. Many people in SMA relish this kind of patina in their homes. Homeowners who want their homes to always look more like US and Canadian homes, however, will need to have these materials touched up throughout the years.



Let's revisit the maintenance implications of our earlier example - handmade steel windows and doors. These doors are hand painted whereas prefabricated ones are factory finished. Handmade steel windows and doors require touch up of the paint on the exteriors to keep them in good shape. The exterior paint has been applied with brushes by hand using a good quality Mexican paint comprised of a primer and two finish coats. The yearly sun exposure is hard on paints and therefore needs to be maintained from time to time. This need for regular maintenance is not a failure of the door or window, but a consequence of living with architecture made by handcrafted artisans.

Lastly, let's explore moisture in Mexican homes. We engineer proper drainage for all our homes from rooftops and patios via internal drains that deliver water to the street rather than to the sewer. On the second floor and roof top patios, and on the roof tops, we install a state-of-the-art torch-down rolled waterproofing system. Over this, we install ceramic tile to provide an attractive, finished walking surface.

This kind of waterproofing is the best available. However, it only works properly if water can move over it to the drainage areas. Water cannot be allowed to pool up or then it will then find the most minute openings and pass through. For this reason, it's critically important that all drains be kept clean of debris to allow for proper drainage during the rainy season.

In summary

Those of us who fall in love with the handmade quality of Mexican homes, built by artisans, are kindred souls. We appreciate the unique materials in these homes, and the special touch of the workers who build them with care. We are happiest as homeowners when we appreciate what makes Mexican homes special and unique, apart from those we may have known in the US and Canada. And when we learn to care for those homes in the unique ways that they require.