EVENTS
Selected Encounters of the Strawbale Kind


June, August, and September 2010, Concow, CA. CASBA 2010 Summer Workshops. See article adjacent and also go to: http://www.strawbuilding.org

July 29-August 1 and August 5-8, Leavenworth, WA. Strawbale Building Workshop. Combination of classroom and hands-on experience while helping to build a two-story post-and-beam home. Instructors: Terry Phelan and Dallas Green, Living Shelter Design. $375, $350 early bird through April 30. <info@livingshelter.com> www.livingshelter.com/ workshops.html

THE CASBA JOURNAL
Newsletter of the California Straw Building Association
CASBA: A Non-Profit Project of The Tides Center
Volume XV, Number 2

CASBA 2010 Summer Workshops: “Introduction to Straw Building”

By CJ Cavet

Are you planning to build a straw bale home or structure? This could be a chance to acquire hands-on learning experience to prepare you for your own project while at the same time helping people from a burned out community and an opportunity to connect with others in the strawbale community.

This year’s workshops will offer some different techniques from years past. The building will be an infill strawbale system but instead of post and beam frame work; whole house trusses will be used. They were designed by Bob Theis, an architect and long time CASBA member and engineered by Butte County engineer Paul Krohn. We are also adding a one day workshop to teach some techniques for detailing windows and doors prior to plastering. Finally the exterior plaster may include lime in its mix to improve durability and fire safety. The final recipe has not been decided on at this time.

Part 1: Bale Raising Workshop
Friday-Sunday; July 9, 10 &11

Part 2: Window & Door Plaster Prep Workshop
Saturday; August 14 or 21

Part 3: Plaster Workshop
Friday-Sunday; September 10, 11 & 12

Location; Concow, Butte County (about a half hour east of Chico). The community was burned out in the summer wildfires of 2008 and has struggled to rebuild. To learn more about their efforts visit http://concowphoenix.org/index.html

The instructors for the workshops are Bob Theis, Architect (http://www.bobtheis.net/) for the bale-raising and Kathy Gregor & CJ Cavet (owner/builders with plenty experience) for the plastering.

The structure will be larger (17’ wide by 44’ long) than past

“Take a straw and throw it up into the air, you may see by that which way the wind is”
John Selden

Article continues on page 4...
EDITOR’S NOTE
Daniel Silvernail – Santa Cruz

Dear Reader,

Your Editor together with his esteemed dance partner, the graceful and elegant Carola Cuenca N.D., will perform the argentine tango at the CASBA Spring Conference on April 10th. Which fact must leave the Reader asking firstly, what are a practicing architect and a naturopath doing performing the argentine tango at a professional construction-related conference in the first place, and secondly, what has tango to do at all with strawbuilding?

The first part of the answer is simple: we were, in fact, recruited. You see, I was helping staff the CASBA booth with Maurice and Joy at West Coast Green last fall and Carola had come along to share in the festival when, in a spontaneous moment to pass the time, we shared a brief, impromptu interlude of our dance. It wasn’t much, just a few moves, or figures, as dancers call them. But tango is intriguing, the merest mention of the word, let alone the physical act of it, inspires, tantalizes, captivates. And it may have been at that very moment, her eyes gleaming, that Joy envisioned our performing at the Spring Conference.

The answer to the second question – what has tango to do with straw at all - is more abstract and more profound. You see, baleraising itself, where neighbors share in the stacking of walls, the building of home, is fundamentally about community-making.

The tango is a conversation, an intimate discussion between two individuals who agree to move together within a certain set of conventions to create a whole which neither dancer alone could create. Theirs is a partnership resulting in a community of two which has the capacity to inspire.

Straw-building, too, is a conversation, a choreography of neighbors and new-found friends moving in concerted effort within a certain set of conventions to stack bales, create a whole greater than the sum of its parts: theirs is a partnership of many in support of sustainable practice, a small community whose energy can inspire others to act similarly.

Let the dance of two professionals in collaboration with that of many folks gathered, two and all in support of sustainable practice, celebrate a certain moment in time, and let time tell what inspiration may result from our dance together.

Yours,

Carola Cuenca N.D. Daniel Silvernail A.I.A.

www.drcarola.com www.silvernailarch.com
NOTES FROM CASBA CENTRAL
Joy & Maurice Bennett – Angels Camp

Spring is here – the wildflowers are blooming, trees budding, grass (and weeds) growing – cool nights, warm days – AHHHH The joy of life!

CASBA Central has been kind of quiet so far this year – we say quiet but we have received 11 NEW memberships this year and we are also working on the upcoming Spring Conference.

We appreciate that many of you have been adversely impacted by the current economic situation – it has impacted membership and Resource List renewals also – but as we have repeatedly stated – “we don’t want to exclude anyone because of financial issues” – and that certainly applies now. We appreciate your support and participation – it’s critical to the success of CASBA.

Our workshop coordinator, C J Cavet, is working on this years workshop schedule – and remember that we are always looking for suitable venues for workshops so if you have a small project, or know of someone who does, please contact C J (cjbwpv@sbcglobal.net). What a great way to get that garden house, tool house, hen house or other small building started and have some expert leadership in building it and providing a place for others to learn about building with straw.

The CASBA Advisory Board would still like to hold a “Pow Wow” sometime in early fall- this would be an informal gettogether rather than a structured meeting such as our Spring Conferences – a chance to just gather, visit, chat, have some fun and create friendships. If you know a good site where we can gather for a weekend please let us know.

We had a two day “Sierra Green Days” up here in the Foothills – a seed start to educate the people up here about the GOOD way to do things. Thanks to Bill and Darcey Donovan for coming down from Truckee to help out- as well as Richard and Nancy Debusman also.

We have a good pre-registration for the conference – we hope we see you there – a great program – Carol Venolia, architect, educator, author and just good person, is our keynote speaker – and it looks like Catherine Wanek from Black Range will also be with us.

AND last but not least, PLEASE share your stories, experiences and your building with straw episodes. The Journal wants (and needs) your input to be the interesting reading experience we want it to be.
workshop buildings so there will be plenty of room for everyone to work on some section of it. As part of the effort to develop easy to build straw bale structures that are also easy to permit, this prototype will utilize “whole house trusses”, in which individual trusses that define both the walls and roof are built flat on the deck and tilted up, framing walls and roof in one operation. Walls are then enclosed by stacking the bales between the trusses. Another advantage of the design is that it can be started very small (340 square feet, plus loft) and added to in phases.

Meals are included in the cost of the workshops and camping space is available at a nearby campground. Hotels/motels are about 30 to 45 minutes away.

For more Information, costs, and registration information go to the CASBA web site, www.strawbuilding.org. Remember: early registration for the workshops SAVES you money.

The Mechanization Of Straw Bale Building Logistical Operations

By Rebecca Tasker, Co-Owner, Simple Construct

One Friday afternoon, my colleagues (Jim Plaster, Adam Shepherd, and Mike Long) and I sat catching our breath after loading, moving, and restacking 200 of the 400 bales that had been delivered to our current project. We began talking idly about how not to have to load, move, and restack the other 200. Observing that the remaining stack of bales was uphill from the building to be stacked, I wondered aloud if we could roll the bales down the hill. It was then pointed out that bales don’t roll well. Perhaps inspired by the gold-mining history of the town where we were building (Julian, CA), someone suggested we build a track with little cars to transport the bales. Then someone else proposed some sort of bale luge. “No, no, better yet,” one of us said, “we should get some of that roly conveyor belt that you see in warehouses!” We all laughed, delighted at the thought, but not taking it seriously…or so I thought.

That weekend, Jim went searching on Craigslist, and on Monday, he drove up to the site with his pickup truck loaded with 10’ sections of metal roller conveyors.

Feeling a bit foolish but excited, we laid pallets out in the field and rested the sections of conveyor on the pallets to allow the rollers to spin freely. The sections are each at least as heavy as a bale and a bit more cumbersome, so set up took about an hour. Once the ramp was ready, we uncovered our stack of bales and, with great anticipation, sent the first bale down the ramp. It rolled well: not too fast, not too slow, coming to a stop a few feet from the back door of the building.

With set up and take down, this system probably didn’t save time over loading the flatbed trailer twice. But it
did save people energy. When you are a crew of four, moving, stacking, and restacking 200 bales takes a good chunk of the day and leaves everyone tired (if not slightly injured). The conveyor system took some work to set up but very little effort to run, focusing the rest of our crew’s energy on raising bales.

What we hadn’t foreseen was the way this system could keep a continuous feed of bales coming to the building without having to stack them inside, taking up precious workspace in the 900 square foot building. When a bale was taken from the end of the conveyor, another one crept forward, patiently waiting to be next. We covered the train of bales with plastic at night and had them right there ready for use the next morning.

That weekend we ran a bale-raising workshop with groups of Girls Scouts. They ranged in age from 8 to 18 and had different levels of interest in straw bale building…but they all wanted to ride a bale down the hill.

Now that we are plastering, the conveyors are coming in handy again. The building’s front door is 4’ above existing grade to accommodate a porch that has yet to be built. This makes it impossible to use a wheelbarrow to bring plaster in (and the thought of carrying the estimated 2 1/2 tons of plaster in 5-gallon buckets really didn’t appeal). So Jim set up a few sections of conveyor on some bales and took the wheels off an old garden wagon. The conveyor is at the right height to dump straight from the mixer into the wheel-less wagon and the wagon’s bucket is just the right size to hold a batch of plaster from the mixer.

The wagon rolls up the ramp to the side of the mud corral, where it’s dumped. The empty wagon rolls effortlessly back down to the mixer to be refilled. It is about as elegant as anything this heavy and dirty can be.

Though we laughed at first, we have come to appreciate Jim’s Craigslist find. Not every crazy idea works out, but some do. And if you know Jim, you know that’s just how he rolls.
A Designer's Perspective on Straw Bale
By Chris Keefe

As I enter my fifth year as a designer, my mind seems to continually bring me back to the same question – Why Straw Bale? On the surface, there are all of the obvious reasons that answer this question. First, there is the act of diverting an overly abundant, otherwise “waste product”, from either the air, via burning, or the earth, via the land fill, and using it to create a super-insulated efficient shelter. Then, with the situation with the world’s forests, there is a considerable decrease in the need for so much wood. Many folks in the construction field will say that nowadays with all of the technological advancements around building materials, raising a building is getting quicker and quicker. Yet the payoff is a lot of toxic materials that take an invisible or hidden toll on the environment and the people that live within these highly toxic yet “time-efficient” buildings. There really is something about having a raw, natural, and copious material making up the bulk of your home. In my mind, it can act as a sort of catalyst that brings us back to our natural center. The same center that we are constantly knocking ourselves off of each day with things like over-working, addictions, conflict, you name it. What I mean is, it is a home. It is where we sleep, where we rest and rejuvenate ourselves to wake up and take on yet another day.

Three years ago I made a decision to move exclusively into straw bale design. At the time I thought it was a really “cool” idea. It was a “niche” that very much blended with my philosophy. As well, it was the most viable, simple, elegant and ecologically sensitive alternative to conventional construction that I could imagine. And to top that, it wasn’t the norm, and therefore by my definition, it was truly innovative. As a designer...as a human, that hits me deep. It speaks to what I feel is the essence of being human; being present and aware of our situation and striving and searching for the next and better place to be. I think that everybody embodies this essence, although some are aware of it more than others.

So, presently, as I am embedded deep in the field, I still think it is a “cool” idea. It is a blooming field that has a wealth of experience and even larger possibilities. The “family” of builders, designers, engineers, and of course home owners, that I have been fortunate enough to meet and be a part of, is a real blessing. It almost demonstrates what I would associate as a tribal community. You see, there is not “one way” to design and build with straw bales. For the last few decades, many folks have been laying the groundwork, experimenting with new (and old) techniques, pushing the envelope, and meticulously documenting many different ways to move this forward. Just in the last ten years, the techniques and efficiency for designing and building has gone through enormous changes. And much, if not all of this, is due to the sharing of information. There seems to be communal accord that working together and sharing information, will allow straw bale building as a whole to become a real, true, and efficiently knit practice. For me, that speaks to a new paradigm. I can’t say that I have ever met anyone involved in the field of straw bale (builder, designer, and owner) that I would consider cut-throat or just out to make a buck. In a world like the one we live in now, I feel lucky to be a part of this movement.

In the 21st century, straw bale building is more becoming synonymous with concepts and phrases like cost effective, ecologically sensitive, natural, and elegant, and less so with earlier ones such as, rustic, hippy, cheap, or labor-intensive. Much of this is due to the countless time and energy that has been expended by builders, designers, engineers, visionaries, scientists, and just plain old folks who choose to live light on the land or those that simply choose to do what just makes sense.

So as I sit here and ask myself once again, “Why Straw Bale”?... my only response is “Why not”?

Chris Keefe became interested in straw bale as a student at the S.F. Institute of Architecture. Soon thereafter, he founded a company called Organicforms Design which offers ecologically and artistically based design utilizing natural and sustainable materials. In 2002, he began to focus primarily on straw bale research and design as the lead designer on the innovative Straw BALE Village in Jacksonville, OR. Please visit his website at www.OrganicFormsDesign.com
What Would I Do Differently

By Joy Bennett

I think the main thing I would focus on when building a straw home would be; being as “sustainable” as possible. As time goes on I feel we need to consider our distance from shopping, gas, etc. We need to be “real” will we always have the fuel to get our needed supplies? No one knows this for sure. We can speculate. As I have said before, I think, ideally, we straw bale folks should be building in a village setting, not creating more sprawl.

Maury and I so love what we have and where it is, however, we do stop and ask, how smart was this, 20 acres, 3.7 miles from our mailbox and 13 minutes to anything? Definitely, if I were doing this again, I would reconsider how far I’d build from amenities. We live in a different time now. We need to think more practically.

I would put in a root cellar and have storage for food at least twice of what we now have-so as to save trips for food, etc. I would be sure I had plenty of space for growing crops and having orchard space (we do). For me building with straw is like a whole entire package. I want to “walk my talk” and these things are all part of that talk. I feel we must set a very strong, positive example for our children and for their children.

I have said this before but for the new folks who may not have seen it: I would carefully consider my outside choice of patio material. If you build where it gets really hot (we did) you do not want the bounce from the summer sun coming into your home. You want it cool. Too bad grass needs water. However, if you had water that was recycled maybe that would work. I would consider my windows carefully and my doors. We simply love our wood-casement windows! We would plant shade trees when digging for our home--initially.

Be sure you know your orientation very well.

Live, camp on your land before you build and be very aware of the sun angels. In a perfect world I would have a greywater system.

Happy building and if you have any questions on “what would I do differently” please feel free to call Maury or myself (Maury is the boss and knows more than me—usually!) 209-785-7077: CASBA headquarters.
photo credits: Selene and Rene Vega.