A straw in the wind:
something that shows you what might happen in the future (usually plural).

A straw in the wind:
a slight hint of something to come.

[Middle English, from Old English streaw.]

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The Braly Residence
by Cole Butler

Every building has a story of how it got there. The life of a building hosts events and experiences new each day and different each season. These environments offer a backdrop for memories; our summer in Lake Tahoe, the wonderful smells from grandma’s kitchen, the tree we climbed in when we were kids, the holiday the storm hit or the place I know I can relax and feel rejuvenated from.

Space takes shape all around us. We activate the space between the buildings. Our eye is drawn to discover those spaces just beyond our reach that delights us with intrigue or desire to move into the space. Sometimes it is as simple as slowing down long enough to watch daylight move across the room like romantic tango dancers in slow motion.

Maybe it’s so subtle you never really put your thumb on it. You just know you love going back to the same place to nurture one’s soul. The space could be manmade or nature made. In some architecture there is a indistinguishable line were nature stops and the built environment starts. Perhaps it’s when the brilliant views outside are powerful enough to come into and be a part of the interior space.

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Editor’s note: this is a reprint of an editorial served up to you our Reader in 2004, reprinted with kind permission of yours truly the Author who finds the words still ring true today...

Greetings,

Earlier this summer I was blessed to share the brilliant water, precise clarity, and tight quarters of a smallish sailing sloop named Febus, among the tiny dots of land known variously as the Antilles, or West Indies, places variously on or off the tourist track. Places where the languages are variously French, Dutch, and increasingly, English. Where the sky is humid, the seas toasty, and everyday cares seemingly remote. Along the way I read, quite deliberately, Bill McKibben’s classic 1989 essay The End of Nature. McKibben described the impacts of industrial greenhouse gas production upon the global ecosystem. His conclusion: inasmuch as human activities are now the predominant contributors to earth’s atmosphere, we are, wittingly or not, responsible for the results. Wittingly or not, we now have assumed management responsibility for earth’s climate. Hence his title: the domination of human activities over nature signifies the real end of nature itself.

Henceforth human activities, human management, witting or not, will determine nature’s course. If human activity increases the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere, the climate will change accordingly. If human activity decreases carbon dioxide production, the global climate will respond. Paraphrasing the old Outer Limits byline, We control the horizontal, we control the vertical. We can make it warmer, we can make it cooler. His is an accurate description of the philosophical, moral, and pragmatic results of industrial technology’s domination over the natural environment, and the profound message is that the ecosystem itself is no longer a self-regulating entity independent of an single species, but rather a subset, a side effect, of human activities. Wittingly or not, our activities dominate, master, and administer to the global ecology and so the continued viability of every living thing on, above, or below the face of this once-virgin earth, not least our own small selves: this is the essence of McKibben’s essay. Yet as we all know our governments, most particularly our current administration in Washington, not only ignore this fundamental reality but instead ploddingly perpetuate what collectively is perhaps our most egregious and most fundamental denial.

Aboard Febus, drinking from our great sky dome whose CO² content is rising, breathing in our warmer sea in whose waters dead corals lay, I took sustenance in the following and it became my mantra: we who would build with straw build on the side of lesser greenhouse gases, not more. Weighing in with our thoughts, deeds, and actions, our choice is on the side of a once-virgin Nature, a Nature that once upon a time was sovereign, beyond the base scrappings of any single species.

Take a straw and throw it up into the air; — you may see by that which way the wind is.

John Selden (1584–1654)
NOTES FROM CASBA CENTRAL
Joy & Maurice Bennett – Angels Camp

Membership renewals in general have been slow this year – our numbers are down but we have had 6 new additions in the last few months. How about a little campaign of -- each member get a member? If you know of someone who is interested hit them up to join! I would hope that interest will perk up as the economy improves and also as more individuals realize that the future in sustainable, natural building.

Kudos are due to C J Cavet and her crew on the June Bale and August Plaster workshop – and our thanks to the host, Max Salkin and Jim Furness for their efforts in having the site ready – a tremendous amount of work was accomplished. Our thanks to Bob Theis, Tracy Theiriot and Kathy Gregor for sharing their expertise and for being just super workshop leaders. Thanks to the participants for their interest in building with straw.

We had the good fortune to have a chance to meet in Ramona, CA with many of the Southern California members recently – many thanks to Jim Plaster and his wife for opening their home to CASBA and friends – about 18 people attended the pot luck and slide show by Mark Tighe – it was a good afternoon. We hope that we can start a few CASBA workshops in Southern California – our workshop coordinator C J Cavet is working with the socal members to get that started, hopefully for 2010. The Southern California contingent is also looking at possibly hosting the 2010 Spring Conference – we have not been down there in a long time.

CASBA had a presence at West Coast Green in San Francisco the first of October. Our thanks to the professionals for volunteering to help staff our booth/display- Pete Gang, Daniel Silvernail, Dan Smith, Deitmar Lorenz, Andy Radowick, Lance Cerney, Dmitri Ozeryansky, David Arkin, and Anni Tilt. In light of the economy we thought that it would be good exposure for them. It was great: builders show and always many sustainable vendors. Marty Hammer, in spite of a pending trip, made an appearance as did many former and present CASBA members. The economy seems to have impacted immediate interest but there were plenty of questions and comments from those who stopped by our booth.

We are scheduling an Advisory Board meeting for early November – if you have comments or suggestions please forward them to us at mbennjr@mac.com.

CASBA members are reminded to sign on to the CASBA Members Google Group – this has replaced our old “listserve” and a great way to communicate your ideas, suggestions, problems, events – and just to spread the work. If you have a problem signing on let us know and we will help get you started.

A repetitive theme – support the CASBA Journal with your pictures, articles, experiences and don’t forget to support The Last Straw Journal with your subscription.
Within each one of us, we have an inherent ability to feel connected to nature. Somehow seeing a beautiful plant, amazing animal or breath taking waterfall can give us an understanding that nature shows us endless examples of good design.

In Homewood, California winters are long and deep with snow pack. The summers are cool and lush with vegetation. Along the west shores of Lake Tahoe lies a small straw bale home made for one gracious and inspiring woman to live in. Born in the 1931, Ruth Braly has lived an adventuresome and busy life raising a family and running scuba diving shops. She and her husband Ed were early pioneers of scuba diving instruction starting in 1957 through Ed Brawley, Inc. She decided she would like to build a house that would allow her to age in place. She took the care to spend a year discussing the designs over many dinners, walks on the site and cups of tea.

The original objective was the vision of the owner. Ruth Braly recognizes the economic benefits of responsible design and the harmful ecological impact of neglecting this in the built environment. Integrated with high design, her home focuses on energy efficiency and sustainability, emphasizing innovative building materials, daylighting, and conservation of natural resources. In addition to just another home being built, we created enthusiasm for restoring the environment and inspired others to participate in more natural building projects.

Reading books like Natural Capitalism and Cradle to Cradle has changed my awareness as an architect to understand it is time to make a difference in my home, workplace and for clients. I believe that restoring our environment is this generation’s “Great Work”. Akin to three other significant times and events in U.S. history- throwing off tyranny (American Revolution), eradicating slavery (Civil War) and defeating fascism (World War II). No generation has ever had greater work to do and none more reason to rise to greatness. The owner, Ruth Braly, had vision to be a steward of the earth in her construction project. Her intention is what sets this building apart from others.
She empowered a creative team in design and construction enabling this project to demonstrate leadership in how our efforts can be a service to others. The project is a beautiful combination of natural building construction methodologies and is the first straw bale home in the Tahoe Basin.

A case study of the project was featured in the Sierra Green Building Association’s (SiGBA) 2007 Green Building Resource Guide. While under construction, the home was on the SiGBA home tour. It is currently a finalist for an architectural award, featured on the 2009 SiGBA Home Tour Oct 17, 2009 and set for a future story in the Moonshine Ink publication.

We performed investigations, we made the best decisions at the time, we learned lessons, and we grew as professional and as individuals. We made new friends and had to overcome making enemies. Each individual that worked on the project has a huge amount of pride for their contributions and humble smiles thinking of the hard work and long hours needed to complete such an artesian creation. The project was like no other I have worked on and many others on the project team agree.

Can a list of material specifications and environmentally responsible choices create such special space? Was it the foundation blessing we performed the day before the concrete pour that we were all moved by for a week to follow? Was it a good designer? Was it a skilled builder? What was the recipe that combined the ingredients into this successful home for the soul? This home resonates nature’s good design, technology where it made sense, simplicity where we demanded it and heartfelt intention. The team was made up of amazing people each with their own strength and contribution. Each with a common understanding that responsible design and sensible solutions on a budget was what we needed to achieve.

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Unique features to this project include: Living roof, straw bale construction, earthen floors, earthen plaster interior, hydronic lime plaster exterior, Rastra foundation blocks and stem walls, pex plumbing lines, air to air heat exchangers, dual flush wall mount toilet, permeable driveway, hydronic heating, solar hot water, and a power pipe.

Eco-friendly features of design and/or construction include local harvested wood from Lake Tahoe, rice straw bales from Sacramento area, earthen plaster from Lincoln, CA, Rasta Block manufactured within 100 miles Sparks, NV. From a LEED standpoint
in terms of the building envelope features include high insulation rice strawbale infill walls, lowE2 dual paned windows, the acoustical benefits of bale walls, spray cellulose insulation foam, expanded clay insulation between the floor plates, high density polyurethane roof insulation, R-12 Insulation outside footing and top of footing, hydrolic lime plaster exterior for breathability, local earthen plaster interior finish, and high performance low-E windows.

Was this a dream team? Will teams like this come together again? I know that the challenge to do environmentally sound practice can feel like an uphill battle at times. Our environment on the earth is crying out for a change from the inhabitants that ignore the devastation which is compounding from our individual lifestyle choices to corporate and government policies and behavior. I used to think that being an architect I was contributing to the problem by creating another energy consuming building off gassing to its occupants and taking away habitat from others. Today I live with the excitement that we are living in the most influential era of positive change to affect the environment. The role that we play as professionals, home owners and parents in being stewards of the earth is like no other time in history. This is our time to live and teach these age old principles to others.

This century will be noted for what we did and did not to do help each other, the environment and all of the inhabitants on the earth. How much are you willing to participate? It starts with small steps in our everyday lifestyle. It could mean building in such a way that the earth is healed with our expanding populations, where waste equals food and we think about design decisions with full lifecycles in mind. How does a structure die? Can a building be dismantled and reused; up cycled not just recycled? Does it get composted and return into nutrients for the earth? Can building filter our water so it is cleaner leaving the structure than when it came in? Does human occupation support other habitants?

No one said it would be easy, but no one said it would be so hard. We came together in a commitment to our common goal; each one of us with a different specialty or skill. We were orchestrated to perform as individuals. In unification, we made something beautiful,
meaningful and perhaps existential. We pulled up our boat straps, never lost sight of our goals and achieved our mission. Love is the world’s largest renewable resource.

Gallery of Photos

Day 4 Workshop # 109 Upper Brookfield Brisbane

Shannon and Adam Discussing the Goals for the Day

Graham Ready to render

Andreus Pre-compressing

The Ridge Beam

CASBA Journal thanks John Glassford/Huff ‘n’ Puff’ Construction, Ganmain, NSW, Australia
CASBA Group Photo, Walker Ranch Conference, Spring 2009

FRONT ROW  John Cruickshank, Dillon Bell, Turko Semmes, Tracy Vogel Thieriot, Yoshi Makino, Bob Theis, Pete Gang, Darcy Donovan, Kelly Walter, Daniel Silvernail, unidentified, unidentified, Tim Javelos, Phil McGoohan, Martin Hammer, unidentified, Robert Arnet  SECOND ROW  Rita Bell, Dan Smith, Athena Steen, Bill Steen, Lesley Christiana, Kathleen Jones, C J Cavet, Kate Breckenridge, Kathy Gregor, Celline Pinet, Joy Rogalla, John Swearingen, Maurice Bennett, Joy Bennett, Deitmar Lorenz, Greg Vanmechelen, Dimitri Ozeryansky  BACK ROW Bruce King, Jim Bell, unidentified, Tom Loomis, Mark Weir, Jim Christiana, unidentified, George Jones, unidentified, Dan Gallagher, unidentified, unidentified, unidentified, John Gregor, Bill Donovan, unidentified, unidentified, Jim Reiland, unidentified, unidentified, Jim Furness.

Photo credits: Daniel Silvernail

A non-profit project of the Tides Center

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