
Introduction

Plopping that first pile of mud onto the foundation felt revolutionary...and illegal. After years of research, saving money and living in a yurt, my former wife and I were starting out building our own home, a place we intended (at least at the time!) to live the rest of our lives. Yet our building permit described a much more conventional home, a stick-built square cabin that any inspector would recognize as familiar, not the round cob home we were now building.

After an initial frenzy of finding beautiful and affordable land, making the time commitments to build, getting our building permits and septic and well and drawing on what turned out to be woefully inadequate building skills, we'd changed our minds from the square cabin to a monolithic dome, managed to get a foundation poured, and then run out of money. So we took the last chunk of change, built a yurt and moved in. We thought we needed space, so we made it big, perhaps the biggest yurt in the world: 32 feet in diameter. We lived in it, even though it baked in the summer and held as much heat as worn out lingerie in the winter. We worked, we finished college, we moved away for a year and then the whole thing fell down in a massive two-foot snow storm.

We were in Mali at the time, visiting a friend in the Peace Corps. It was just after the new millennium started, January 2000. We visited amazing places, like Djenné, where there was a seven-story mosque built out of earth, and countless other homes built out of the land they sat on. These were beautiful, simple homes, small but accommodating, decorated with love and attention, cool during the day and warm at night. Meantime, we ran into some fellow travelers from our neck of the woods, and heard tell of the snow storm back home, feet

of snow and then more ice on top of it, rare indeed for us southerners. Tentatively, we began to express doubts about our not so little yurt in the woods and if it could have withstood such an onslaught.

There were still weeks of traveling. Finally we made it back to North Carolina, got in the car and made the drive out. As we crested the hill of our property, we should have had a good view of our 14-foot-tall yurt through the bare trees. Yet we saw nothing. And so we knew. We parked and walked down the hill to find a swimming pool with an outline of our stuff on the bottom. The conical top section of the yurt had collapsed, but the cylindrical lattice-work bottom portion had held. The result was that the canvas that had made up the top was now a pool liner, with our bed, stereo, kitchen, etc. now underneath thousands of gallons of water. It was almost too funny to be upsetting, and we had been trying to figure out a way to get the mammoth yurt down without killing ourselves anyways. In our year away of work we had saved up money, and we were ready to start again and try to do things right.

After the amazing buildings we'd seen on our travels, the square conventionally-framed cabin described in our building plans looked downright pathetic and unappealing. Even the monolithic dome we'd poured the foundation for seemed too technocentric and energy intensive. What to do? Conveniently, our inherent cheapness had saddled us with a large pile of earth just downhill from our building site. The folks who'd dug out the foundation had offered to haul it away for 50 bucks or so, but we told them to just dump it down there at the bottom. We'd kind of regretted the decision, until now. Here was a gigantic pile of red clay, waiting for a purpose. After some dawdling, we decided to go for it. There was some vague talk of cob on the nascent Internet, and we ordered a lightly worded how-to book by Becky Bee. We made some test bricks. We found a good mix. We made a small model out of construction paper of the building we intended to build. And then we mixed up a batch of cob with our bare feet on a torn section of collapsed yurt canvas and plopped it on our foundation.

Without, of course, bothering to change our building permit. Which brings me to the subject of this book. Because at that moment,

both of us became part of something that we had no idea existed. With that first plop of mud onto that foundation, we had entered the Sustainable Underground.

There was the revolutionary sixties that petered out in the seventies, followed by the wasteland of the eighties. Then starting in the early nineties something started to happen in North America. People throughout the land started to figure out that the way we were living was unsustainable. To wit, it could not be sustained. Some said to themselves, why live a life that cannot be sustained? It almost goes against the meaning of the word “life” itself. Some people wrote about this unsustainability problem, some folks talked to politicians about it, some talked to their spouses about it over dinner. But some folks just went out and *did* stuff. And they didn’t ask permission first. Because why should you have to ask permission to do something that’s right? Why should you have to ask permission to build a home out of the materials available right on your own land? Why should you have to ask permission to run your home off sunlight? Who has the right to outlaw compost? Why should you need permission to use an abandoned and decaying building? Who says you can’t make giant sculpture on your property? What ever made people think they can make a plant illegal? What were they thinking when they said you can’t cook food in your own kitchen and feed your neighbor?

What happened to some of these doers is what happened to us. We got busted. After three years of hard labor, we finished our cob home and moved in. It turned out great, but there was always that nagging feeling that we were living in a home that was illegal. It’s hard to hide a house. It’s not like a quarter-bag of pot that you can squirrel away in your underwear drawer. It’s out there. We were still connected to the utility with a temporary electric pole, but we were working towards an off-grid solar electric system and hoped to get the grid turned off soon. But the world was moving too fast for us. Satellite images of our property unmistakably revealed an odd round building that caught the eye of our county tax assessor. And of course he was obliged to tell the county inspector about our illegal home.

To anyone who's ever lived underground (i.e., hiding from the law), there's always that fear of the dreadful moment of getting caught. Ours happened when I had just got back from work late in the afternoon. I parked at the top of the hill and hopped out of the car to take a leak. My relief was temporary, because I soon noticed a suspicious white truck coming from the direction of our cob home. The man rolled down his window and said, "I've got a report of some folks living in an uninspected building on this property. You know anything about it?" Startled out of my urinary reverie, I made a split second decision that would change the course of my life and my former wife's. I told the truth. "Uh, yeah, that would be me."

And then something very unexpected happened. A little sliver of trust developed between me and that public official, the "Man" and the "squatter." The man in the truck replied, "I need you to come down to my office so we can talk about this matter. Give me a call by the end of the week." He handed over his card, and then said, "You can go back to taking your piss now," and drove off.

Was this the end? Was our beloved cob home about to be bulldozed by men who drove around in white trucks? It turns out there was an alternate ending. The inspector allowed us to prove to him that not only was our cob home strong and safe enough to be legal, but that our solar electric system was legitimate, too. After some improvements, and a year or so of back and forth, we got our Certificate of Occupancy. Our solar cob home was legal! What had started out as revolutionary just five years before was now aboveboard, legit. And that meant we weren't afraid to show our home to other people and teach them about natural building and solar electricity. They could use our home as a precedent for creating similar systems on their own property.

It didn't take long after that to start hearing about lots of other cool stuff going on around North Carolina. A few counties over, crazy folks were huddled over pieced-together piping and antique solar water heaters, turning waste veggie oil into biodiesel and driving ancient Mercedes around. Folks up in the mountains were building an eco-village of small homes built of straw and discarded windows on

a dead end road that entered another county and where inspectors rarely roamed. My artist friend Matt had bought property up in the Catskills of New York and was building giant inhabitable sculptures made of twigs, rocks and detritus from nearby New York City. And each person seemed to know about at least one other group or person doing something equally crazy and daring and who were determined to not just drop out of civilization, because that just doesn't work anymore with globalized everything, especially problems like global climate disruption. They were determined to change the very fabric of society from the bottom up. I wanted to meet them all!

Of course I haven't met them all. Hopefully, that's not even possible because of the sheer number of awesome folks experimenting across the land. But I did meet some amazing and incredibly inspiring people with some fantastic stories. Originally, I thought this book would be about activists dedicated to sustainability who think it's easier to ask forgiveness than ask permission. To some extent, the varied group of folks I met on my big summertime journey in 2010 did consider themselves activists, but these were in the minority and honestly, almost no one I met seemed the least bit contrite. Mostly they're just doing what they believe is right to make the world a sane and livable place, and any effect they've had, or will have, on the law of the land is accidental. But whether challenging the law is what they set out to do or not, there's no denying that is what they're doing, and we all benefit from their courage and hard work.

There are laws that are worth having and ones that aren't, and the well-being of our society depends on a constant process of trying to increase the number of good ones and reduce the number of bad ones. When you come across a bad law and want to change it, there are two ways to go about it. There's the conventional way of going down to city hall or the county commissioners or contacting your representative and trying to get them to sponsor a bill or give them a signed petition of concerned citizens. Which is a great thing to do. But a great deal of what makes for a sustainable life are functioning systems that need to exist in the first place for conventionally minded folks like a representative to understand that they do work. Systems

like a home built out of natural materials, or an effective means of composting human waste or a small community-supported kitchen run out of a neighborhood home. Asking for permission to create something that the legislator can't conceive of — let alone it working properly — is very unlikely to meet with any success. You have to have the thing before it can become legal, but you can't have it without building it or doing it first. And the folks I met on my journey are doing just that.