

Introduction

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.

— Arundhati Roy

By Jen Gobby

FOR OVER A DECADE NOW, The Mudgirls Collective has been building healthy, eco-friendly homes out of natural and recycled materials. Conventional construction is part of the polluting, wasteful system that is driving the many global crises, contributing to massive biodiversity loss, climate change, and growing economic inequality. At this time in history, when most buildings are built in unsustainable ways — with materials mined and extracted, creating mass pollution and waste — this is some very important work.

Unlike some ecobuilding initiatives, The Mudgirls' work goes well beyond offering alternative building practices. Teaching, building, and organizing, these women are offering inspiring alternatives to many of the deeply entrenched social inequalities and systems of oppression underlying and driving the social and ecological plights we face: patriarchy, hierarchy, and capitalism. And they don't just confront these forces by saying no to them — they provide a model, a vision, and lived experience of another world: a fundamentally different way for humans to live in harmony with the Earth and in equality with each other.



Our founder, Jen Gobby.

The Mudgirls Natural Building Collective is an all-women group. They empower themselves with skills and employment in a traditionally male-dominated field.

Childcare is built in to all their events, workshops, and meetings; they bring care for the next generation to the front and center of social change and insure that parents have equal access to learning and employment.

The Mudgirls are structured non-hierarchically and practice consensus-based decision-making: challenging top-down, inequitable power structures by practicing ways of working together in which all voices are valued and have equal decision-making power.

They are challenging the capitalist paradigm of business by keeping their wages lower than market value and by practicing bartering systems of exchange.

Through hands-on workshops, they have been training and empowering hundreds of people with skills to build their own homes and their own collectives.

As this book shows, The Mudgirls model a different kind of activism. It's what one friend of the collective calls applied activism. While constructing buildings, The Mudgirls are simultaneously deconstructing capitalism, patriarchy, and inequality. Where some activists focus on educating people about the destructive and unethical impacts of these forces, The Mudgirls provide themselves and others with tangible, hands-on experience and skills based on feminist, collective, non-hierarchical, anti-capitalist principles. The Mudgirls are creating spaces where we can start to unlearn patriarchy. This kind of applied activism is helping us break out of social structures created by capitalist logic, that separate us from each other, from our own labor, and from the land. Instead of arguing that a better world is possible, The Mudgirls are enacting and showing this better world through their building practices, their business model, and through their organizational structure.

While this book has many helpful tips on building techniques, it is focused more on the revolutionary process and practice that this group of women embody. It shares insight and inspiration about starting and sustaining a revolutionary collective, regardless of what work a collective takes on. This book doesn't shy away from identifying the challenges that come with this kind of collective process. We're raised in a culture based on hierarchy and individualism — principles hard to unlearn. Sometimes, collective process can be very difficult!

And I know the challenges of collective process well. I founded The Mudgirls Bartering Collective in 2004. The current wage-earning collective started three years later, and I worked full-time with them until 2010. Being part of The Mudgirls Natural Building Collective was the most empowering experience of my life thus far. Nothing has taught me more about myself than the years I spent as a Mudgirl. I learned how powerful I can be. I discovered in myself an organizer, a teacher, and a leader. I also found out what a control freak I can be, and the collective helped me confront the internalized power hierarchies in

myself. Being part of The Mudgirls empowered and challenged some fundamental parts of me. It also raised some huge questions for me about how we can affect larger social change by scaling up the small-scale, locally focussed initiatives like The Mudgirls.

After some unexpected twists and turns in my path, I am now in my final year of a PhD at McGill University in Montreal, working with climate justice activists and organizers in Canada, studying how large-scale social transformation happens and how we can strengthen our movements to be more powerful. From this current vantage point, I look at The Mudgirls Collective with new eyes.

There is amazing work going on, on the streets, on blockades on the land, and in courtrooms. People across Canada and across the world are actively opposing the expansion of the Alberta tar sands and proposed oil and gas pipelines and other extractivist projects that threaten ecological and social well-being and violate the rights of indigenous communities. This is the crucial work of opposing and resisting the capitalist, colonial expansion. Sometimes, though, these movements are criticized for merely saying no. What are they saying yes to?

Groups like The Mudgirls are creating, living, and promoting such alternatives. Their work can serve broader environmental and social justice movements by providing the resistance with inspiration they can point to when people inevitably ask: How do you think we're going to live without fueling our economies on oil and gas? The Mudgirls are showing that there is a low-carbon way to provide ourselves with homes. There are other, non-capitalist ways to make a living. There are other, viable ways to organize ourselves that align with our values. There is such an important niche in the movement ecosystem. The Mudgirls are continually exploring and living the yes. Given how much needs to change in such a short time, we need more projects like this, that manage to foster multiple practical benefits simultaneously.

This kind of activism helps us unlearn what capitalism and patriarchy have done to us. It creates space for transformation in our hearts and minds. This is the kind of activism that helps change the stories that we tell ourselves and each other about what we're capable of. It changes our stories of what activism looks like. This is a kind of social

organizing that is resilient, that clearly it isn't dependant on one leader to keep it going. It builds leaders. It builds confidence. And perhaps that, in the end, is my favorite thing about The Mudgirls: it is actively building confidence in the world. I have always loved the look on a woman's face, while helping build a house for the first time, as it dawned on her that she could build her own house. If she could do that, she can do anything! And this sense of renewed confidence in our own ability to transform the world around us is so badly needed in these cynical, doom and gloom, "why bother" days: it is the confidence that the world can be remade. And we can do it. And that we don't have to wait till we're experts, we can do it now.

It is my hope that *Mudgirls Manifesto* will help inspire readers to create their own collectives to do important hands-on work in their local communities in ways that confront the systemic oppressions and systems of domination. There is no one "right" model of collective organization. Each one can and should reflect the local needs and conditions and be designed around the values, concerns, and interests of the collective members. All you need to know is: do the work, do it together, and do it as equals.

Let us know how it goes!

Collective Statement

When we began working as a collective, most of us had very little building experience. We learned to build by building. We hope this book will encourage others not to wait for permission to embark on the building of their dreams, never forgetting to celebrate the things that go right along the way.



*An old rusty saw finds
a new purpose —
trimming the cob walls.*

Part I:

A HISTORY WRITTEN IN MUD





Chapter 1:

Our Ways of Building

Guiding Principle #1: We work mostly with unprocessed natural and recycled materials to create and decorate beautiful and healthy structures that are Earth friendly.

Guiding Principle #2 : We believe this work to be so important that we cannot wait until we are all experts. No matter the level of experience, we value each individual for their contribution and abilities and believe strongly in skill building on the worksite.

We Went for It

Creating the World We Wanted to Live In

WHEN THIS WHOLE THING GOT STARTED about 10 years ago, as a group of 20 or so women, we pretty much had no idea what we were doing. Certain members had previous natural building experience — our founder, Jen Gobby, had taken a comprehensive natural building course. Another woman had studied drafting. We also had a carpenter, some herbalists, a baker, a tree sitter, a lawyer, and a circus acrobat. The rest of us were enthusiastic learners, and we all felt compelled to take action. We were a bunch of young women, some of us mothers with babes at the breast, with little money and a few survival skills. We found ourselves fundamentally dissatisfied with the options on offer for addressing our basic needs in a way that lessened



*Workshop participants
positioning windows in
a cob wall.*

CREDIT: BRIANNA WALKER

our contribution to the mess we were making in the world, and avoided enslaving us in a exploitative economy based on debt and credit, mortgages and ever-increasing rents. It was real: we needed shelter, and we needed meaningful work. We realized that if we wanted to provide homes for ourselves and our families in a way that made any sense to us, we were going to have to come up with something that didn't exist yet.

The place where we all live and call home is the south coastal region of British Columbia, Canada. This area is a temperate rainforest, very different from the rest of Canada: the winters are much milder and wetter, and our summers are dry but rarely extremely hot. It is a wilder part of the world where large expanses of forest cover islands running

north to south, dotted through the sheltered Salish Sea. To the west of these Gulf Islands is Vancouver Island, to the east, the mainland from Vancouver to the Sunshine Coast. People drawn here over the past two centuries have tended to be those looking to find their fortune, whether it be furs, gold, or timber. Beyond economic reasons, people came for the freedom, the wildness, the get-away-from-it-all, close to the land subsistence living. Obviously things have changed, but still people arrive here from faster places, looking to slow down. In the times before chain building supply stores, newcomers made do with what was around them. Here on the BC coast, there is so much to build with. It's brimming with wood, clay, sand, lime, rocks, and resourceful like-minded folks. It's because of this place, because of its bounty, because of its people, that we have been able to walk out and find what we were looking for.

Building things is a very direct route to satisfying basic needs. Natural building was a revelation: a direct connection to materials, innate knowledge, with the laser focus of necessity. We realized that people have always provided themselves with shelter using what was at hand. Having given ourselves the permission to build shelters out of the materials around us, both natural and recycled, we also gave ourselves permission to design our group and our way of working around our needs, instead of around some imagined legitimacy or marketplace.

In essence, our idea was to build homes for each other, and to teach others while we were doing it. We were going to keep the process very affordable so people like ourselves could come, and so we could share the knowledge as quickly as possible. Genius. So simple. So beautiful. This is what Jen Gobby and her partner Pachiell had been doing already at their place — offering workshops that taught people how to build a cob house — her cob house. This is where the women that became The Mudgirls first met — at Jen's ridiculously cheap, ridiculously fun, and inspiring series of workshops.

At the very beginning, we valued our inexperience as an asset to creativity and built it into the way we work and teach. Sharing knowledge and skill building on the worksite has always been integral to the development of the collective. If we waited for everyone to be an expert,



Some satisfied newbie natural home builders, circa 2008.

we would never get this great idea off the ground. This radically simple, fun, beautiful, empowering, new/old way of building was something more people needed to know about, and fast. We knew that what had attracted us would attract others. There were a lot of people like us out there, feeling disillusionment and lack of alternatives. This was turning out to be about way more than providing shelter.

We sought to incorporate the skills each of us already had that didn't necessarily even relate directly to building, because we were going to need way more than just a roof over our heads — the kind of houses we were talking about building weren't going to fly anywhere that was flush with services. We needed to think like pioneers: Where's the water coming from? How were we going to grow food? Will we have electricity? What's that look like? Where were we going to poop?

We sought allies. Our workshops would feature guest speakers from the community, or workshop participants themselves, on things like bike repair, solar power systems, pirate radio, medicinal herbs, homemade micro-hydro turbines, singing, whatever. When you think about it, everybody has some cool useful thing they know that can be shared. We were pooling our resources. We wanted to get a revolution brewing. We shared the belief that there was so much to do and face in the world; change was coming down quick, and we needed to forge communities that could withstand the economic, cultural, environmental, and political stresses that can divide people. In order to be sustainable, we also knew that this group was going to have to be a ton of fun,



because we are people who like to have fun. This collaborative spirit gave us inspiration and support from the earliest days onward — we had each other, a direction, a passion, and even the possibility to create fairly paid work for ourselves so we could sustain this amazing thing we had found. The revolution had begun.

Looking back, it seems kind of amazing. Not just the idea that we were going to build anything, let alone houses, but that we were going to organize this riotous band of impassioned idealists into a thing. We ran workshops where people camped together, ate together, and cared for each others' children, even taking on wet nurse duties sometimes. We built together — teeny tiny spaces and whole houses, ovens, walls, benches. We traveled and met people and were part of their dreams for their lives. We learned more that first season than we could ever have imagined. Not just about building, but about working and living together, the reality and pressure of client expectations, and looking

It's dirty work, and everybody wants to do it! Nobody said we couldn't have fun at the same time.



Workshop participants happily smooch earth with their bare feet.

after the health of our collective and our families, all while trying to uphold our grand social and environmental vision. It has not always been an easy balance to find, but easy gets boring real quick.

Somewhere in the last ten years, the worry that all the oil in the world was going to run out turned into something a lot more scary. Now we can't just surf the apocalypse by mastering caveman technologies. Climate change threatens to destroy the actual systems that support life on Earth. It threatens entire countries. Climate refugees are a real thing, fleeing rampant fires, back-to-back 100-year floods, landslides that devastate homes, fields, and livestock. We could go on, but you know already. So what are we to do? How will we care for these displaced people? How will we prepare for a completely unpredictable climate, and changing community dynamics? Because you know, it might be us running for our lives one of these days, and we should all hope that someone will look out for

us, take us in. We hope that our hearts and minds are ready to roll with this mess we've created without hurting each other more than we already have. The world needs Mudgirls and the resilience we are trying to build into communities, now more than ever.

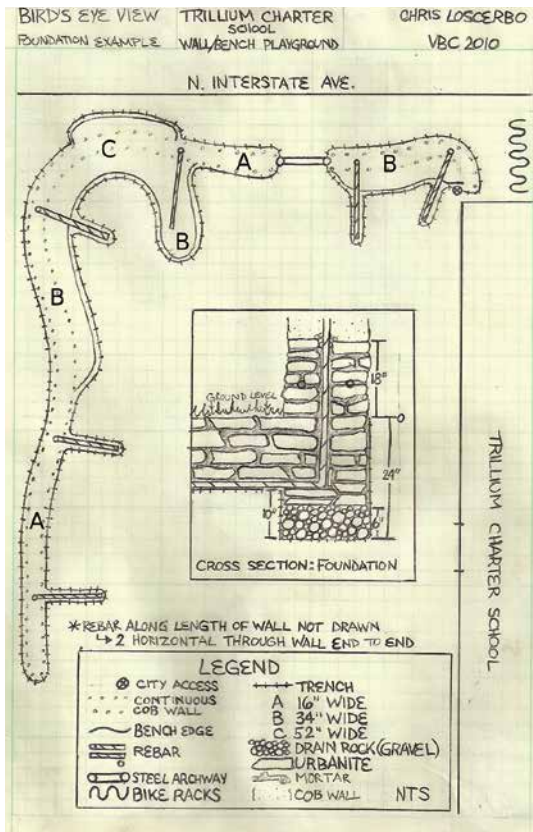
The Measuring Tape

Skill-Building as a Priority. A Non-intimidating Approach to Building

Who hasn't played in mud before? Somewhere in our ancestral memories, we harbor an innate and wholesome connection to natural

building. Once you get your hands working in this reconstituted earth, you feel a surge of understanding, as though you have done this before. Surround yourself with piles of sand, clay, straw, and a hose, and it can seem anything is possible! We can build a wall out of mud; that's a revelation. But there's a lot more to consider! What about the roof, and the digging, and the cutting, and the height and the slope, and the sawing, and the measuring ... and the ack! The variety of tasks can quickly become overwhelming, or worse — boring. Building a wall out of mud with your bare hands is primal and monumental. Thinking about gutter systems ... not so primal. It can help if you remember that it's your building resources and your values that are precious; not the hoops you have to jump through for a building inspector. Water is precious, that's why we're going to figure out how to collect it. Wood is precious, that's why we're going to figure out how not to burn too much of it to stay warm throughout the years. Your life is precious, that's why we're going to build something beautiful with toxin-free, natural materials. When you consider that your house is going to be a big part of your life, your little abode becomes an ecosystem, full of relationships; then insulation doesn't seem so boring anymore. Gutters will have you throwing your head back and laughing like a decadent millionaire as water rockets off your roof and into your cistern. Once you get stoked thinking about gutters, go back to the beginning and just take it one step at a time.

Without the bigger picture, it's easy to get steps out of order and create a new and unnecessary set of puzzles to solve. If you approach a building like an ecosystem, though, the puzzle pieces start talking to each other. Instead of feeling like you are memorizing arbitrary things, imposing solutions, and struggling to keep it all straight, you will feel increasingly like the materials themselves are helping you find solutions and order. Mistakes will be made, but this is where the best learning takes place. Understanding how something could have gone better only comes when you look back on what you have done and see how changing the order, or taking more care in this or that thing, would have made your life so much easier right now. You will feel new knowledge muscling its way into your brain. Be ready for all the new ideas; one of them could be the next best thing since the baling machine!



We can't always go back and fix our mistakes. Patience and problem-solving are your best assets. How well do you cope with a change in the plan, how do you make the best of the new situation you find yourself in? From this point forward, how will you do that thing better? Humans are clever. Give yourself permission to go ahead and do it, read, google, take a workshop, experiment — don't let the unknown stop you. You will never "know it all" anyway, so waiting until you "know enough" is highly specific to the individual. Sometimes you have to recognize when you're just putting obstacles in your own way because you're scared of screwing up. Fair enough — but don't let it stop you.

Be one of those people who does things.

In every work of art something appears that does not previously exist, and so, by default, you work from what you know to what you don't know.

— Ann Hamilton

Above: A simple but clear hand-drawn building plan with cross-section detail for a cob wall at Trillium Charter School (Portland, 2010 Village Building Convergence).

CREDIT: AUGUSTE MANN

Right: Clever little suspended tarp sack, invented by two workshop participants.





Luckily, we have done a bunch of the mistake making for you! We experienced that gross feeling of being wrong together. We worked out solutions together, and sometimes it felt like our fingers were growing their own brains. It doesn't feel good to have messed up, but it feels amazing to work our way through to the eureka, and have that as a shared moment that further strengthens our bond. These adventures have definitely bolstered our confidence and resilience, but they also keep us grounded.

It's why when we work with clients, we prefer to keep it collaborative, and have them work with us, as opposed to exiling them from their own project by assuming we know everything. The people that live

Molly and Auguste describe how to make a simple frame for a lightly used opening window.



Above: Kate squishes cob next to her ear and listens to the grating/crunching sounds of a well-proportioned mix of sand and clay. Use all your senses! CREDIT: BRIANNA WALKER

Below: Constructing a wattle and daub wall with fresh willow. These walls are light and quick to build, with little to no insulation value. Use sparingly, decoratively, and/or desperately. CREDIT: BRIANNA WALKER

on the land — who will live in this house — are crucial to the success of the structure because they hold the knowledge and the stories of how the land behaves, where the water gathers, clues that will lead us to clay or sand deposits. It is the clients' priorities and values that will inform how we work and what we build, and maybe if they get into it enough, they won't even need to pay us to finish it, because they will feel empowered to finish their own structure! That's the most rewarding moment for us, because the whole point for us is to spread this knowledge. Plus, it's more fun for both sides, and you keep the learning and sharing opportunities alive when you aren't making like a puffy-chest expert.





Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control

Permits = Limits

Where we live on the south coast of British Columbia, each district has different building and density regulations. Municipal bylaws dictate where, how, when, and with what materials, and, as of recently, who can build something on your own land. These rules make sense when applied to large, impersonal contracting companies that are building for profit in a market where land and houses are commodities. This development=profit paradigm dictates that things are going to get done the cheap and fast way. If left to themselves, for-profit contractors might build less than safe, dry, warm homes in the name of saving costs. The capitalist system and its players thrive on this. In this environment,

The forging of relationships: At the end of a seven-day workshop, one participant decorated another participant's beater car with this lovely artwork and a rearranged Rumi quote.

CREDIT: PHOTO BY

BRIANNA WALKER,

ART BY BRANDI RAWLUK

rules and building regulations are meant to protect a future buyer from being taken advantage of, or purchasing a lemon. These rules do not take each builder and landowner into consideration, only that developed land is an infinite asset to banks: properties reenter the market and are bought (mortgaged) over and over and over again.¹

Many of the products required to build homes to code are extremely toxic, their very production carrying a heavy carbon footprint, laying distant lands to waste, and they aren't even the ideal materials in the first place. The building codes are sometimes in place not because they represent best practices or the most suitable materials — they represent a secure chain of production that can be provided consistently and efficiently, so nobody has to strain themselves thinking too hard about what they are building with and why. The thinking is that consistent and cheap materials allow houses to be efficiently stamped with a seal of approval that in turn allows them to be insured, thus protecting

Clare and Alex's load-bearing, off-the-grid cob house.

CREDIT: CLARE KENNY



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the buyer. (If only insurance stopped there, and did not also serve as another racket that exploits and puts restrictions on people trying to gain access to land!) In many jurisdictions, to build anything outside conventional building regulations requires an engineer to approve the house designs, which adds a significant extra cost to an already pricey endeavor. Many people are interested in building homes out of more local and natural materials, but are scared away by all the red tape and additional, often unnecessary, expenses.

Using locally sourced, natural, and recycled building materials is much less expensive in terms of your money and planetary resources. Clay is free, sand is cheap, and straw is a by-product from the grain industry. A lack of understanding of the way these systems perform over time, and unfounded concern over maintenance in wet, cold weather, has put the brakes on progressive acceptance of this method of construction, despite the proof of 500+ year-old mud buildings in very wet parts of England and many other ancient earthen structures in Mexico, Japan, Africa, and the Middle East. There are people in the natural building world who are working diligently to bring methodologies like cob into code, and we are so thankful for their efforts. For example, Ann and Gord Baird of Eco-Sense² built a beautiful home that people can tour and see for themselves. This home was built with natural building technologies that satisfied all code and seismic requirements. With people like Ann and Gord pushing at that end of the spectrum, our collective doesn't have to feel guilty for looking for ways to buck the system. They have legitimacy covered, so we can merily continue to provide examples of building things that make sense for people with no money. Not to say we don't often collaborate on projects that are fully code and/or engineer approved — we do so all the time. But what really gets our hearts pumping is figuring out how to do things according to good sense and natural laws, not according to capitalist logic.

The market doesn't decide everything. We can decide what's better for people and the planet.

— Winnie Byanyima, Oxfam International

Earthen materials are breathable; this is one of their key benefits. In mainstream building, a current trend is to create airtight dwellings in the name of energy conservation. Completely wrapped in plastic, they require expensive air circulation units to exchange stale inside air with fresh air from outside. This is necessary because we humans are mostly made of water, and we release quite a bit of moisture through just breathing, let alone cooking and sexy time. If the building we live in can't breathe, moisture will condense on the walls, ceiling, and windows, and the house will begin to come apart at the seams, mold will take over, the home will become unhealthy. Here, on the wet coast, people deal with this issue every winter when hot steamy humans are cooped up inside. So wrap us in plastic, give us vents, and we'll be as happy as a bicycle commuter in a "waterproof yet breathable" raincoat? Yup, sure, for a while. But what happens after that measly ten-year warranty expires, or if the builder was hung over while she taped the seams of your plastic wrap and missed a bit? Soon, there is water seeping under the siding onto the plywood, into the insulation, into the stud frame — and because it's all encased in plastic, it can't dry out. It stays invisibly damp all fall, winter, spring, and boom: you have joined the leaky condo circus, you're under the big top, living the tarp life.

Now, if the *natural builder* was hungover and missed plastering that spot over the window, it can be fixed easily and cheaply, and will be

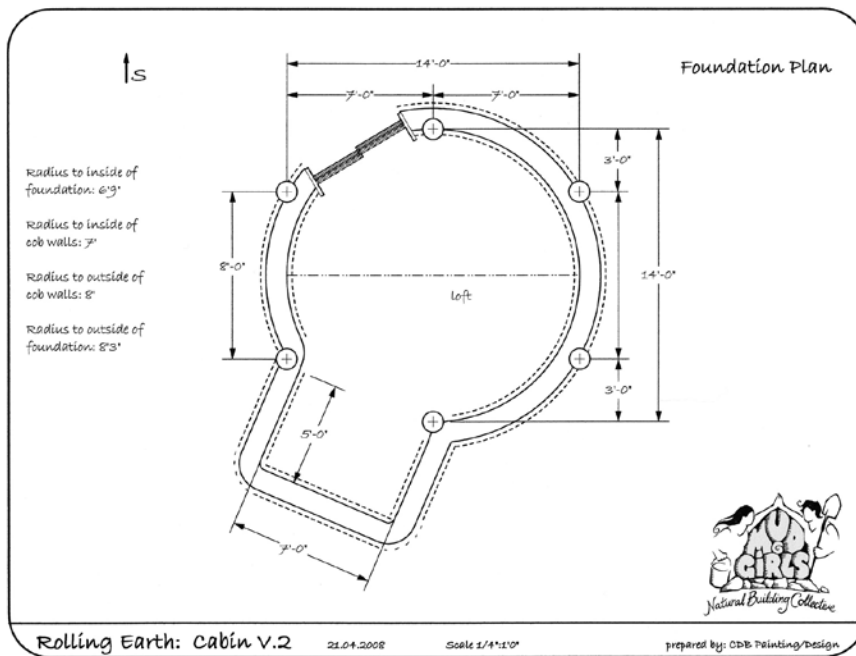
The beautiful farmstand and pizza oven at Golden Tree Farm, Salt Spring Island: its thick cob walls keep veggies cool, and compel people to slow down for a closer look.



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able to dry out evenly with the breeze. The best part about building naturally is that you will have hopefully gleaned all sorts of knowledge from your eager-to-share Mudgirl team, and will be able to take care of the problem yourself without shelling out for expensive, professional fixit labor. Most problems can be seen right away and dealt with promptly. Insidious internal degradation that won't be noticed until months later will be very expensive to repair. Breathability is key to any building's long life.

In practice, our healthy suspicion of building codes has translated into knowing enough to avoid things that will definitely prompt a building inspector to come calling. As it happens, these are things you should do anyway: keep it small, and make sure your neighbors aren't going to give you a hard time about it. Most inspections are complaint driven, and even the most code-perfect house can get held up by someone who thinks your mud hut is ugly. It turns out neighbors are part of natural building! So start getting along.



Mudgirl drafts person Chelsey Braham's simple and clear foundation and post placement plan for a small cob cabin.

Deep in the forest on wee little islands, we have and are building small breathable dwellings. Some have been built with only the permission of the landowners, the workshop participants, and us, of course. Is it possible that such permission is enough? On land owned not in any part by banks, on land the owners have a relationship with, and are planning to die on? Capitalist logic sees land only as a profitable commodity to be developed, sold, and resold. Banks rake in the interest each and every time that piece of land goes through the system. Our freedom to choose how we live our lives is kidnapped, forcibly wrapped up in this plastic capitalist mind-set, and tossed out, regarded as irresponsible and a little bit crazy.

When you decide to build yourself a house with non-conventional materials, using natural building principles, your motives are obviously very different from those of a large contracting company. You are willing to risk guaranteed sales potential in favor of a safe, healthy, enduring home for you and your family. Are you going to cut dangerous corners, are you going to make something that will fall apart before your grandchildren are born? Or are you are going to build well, with thought and consideration for the future of both the land and the people on it? It's in these cases that we believe that building permit bylaws are extremely limiting, in part because they are based on

Participants learn to sculpt designs in plaster and use non-toxic earthen paint to brighten up the exterior finish of this strawbale house in Lillooet, BC (see "Clay Paint Recipes That Work" in Chapter 9).



the assumption that people don't actually want homes, they want "real estate." While we fully realize that the concept of "real estate" is a fact of modern life, it pretty much demarcates a philosophical Great Divide of building things at all. If you're worried about resale values, maybe a house that lasts 600 years is a liability. So once you work that out with yourself, you can proceed to the next order of logic: on your own land, you should be able to submit your designs to the local council, have them deemed structurally sound (if they are), sign something giving you full responsibility for your actions, and be sent merrily on your way. Let them mark your deed with a big red flag if they must, but if your primary concern is not your "real estate's monetary" value, then you should be free to continue building your life. This goes against everything our culture tells us — everybody knows that we're all supposed to "get into the market" — pour everything into a downpayment and mortgage, and hold on for dear life. Hopefully you'll sell it at just the right time and make enough money to do it all over again. It's a lot to ask that everyone should be interested in this deranged gamble. The Mudgirls want to provide a true alternative. We aren't even quite

Small spaces require thoughtful design. This cob house has a custom kitchen built right against the curving cob walls, creating more counter space that you can still reach across.

CREDIT: MOLLY MURPHY



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Cheerfully colored clay paints brighten up this old shed that has been retrofitted with natural light clay straw insulation and cob benches. It is now a sweet cozy tearoom.

sure there is one, but we're working on it. This is when it might dawn on a person that a revolution is indeed in order. By releasing people to build their dreams, we're opening up the possibility of grand new innovations that will change the way we live, not just in our homes but in our neighbourhoods, our communities. We can develop precedents that others can reference, and last but not least, we can have the freedom and opportunity to learn from our mistakes.

Messages from Mud

It's Not About How Much You Know, But How Much You Believe in What You're Doing

When you walk into a mud house, you get a distinct feeling. It's relief intertwined with wonder at the forms and textures that surround you. It's ancestral fibers stretching out into modern light and suddenly reminding you of something you had forgotten for a really long time. It's a place that holds you just right, makes you lower your shoulders from your ears and breathe deeply. The air is clean and dry, and you feel calm and sheltered.

Perhaps this sublime impression echoes the empowerments of all the human beings who put their laughter and tears into those walls with each handful of barefoot-mixed earth.

People come from all over the world to participate in the creation of such dwellings with us. And when we are finished, the owner gets to feel all those feels. Maybe the person who has travelled from near or far to help build and to learn doesn't quite see the same picture, at least not at first. They work hard, dig, peel logs, move wheelbarrows donkey-style up steep, root-filled forest paths. They stomp, pull, drag, and carry bucketload after bucketload of homemade mud and place it exactly here it needs to go. Handful by handful. They laugh, play, eat, and make connections over the walls they build. Those connections are woven into the earth just as the straw is, both equally holding the whole structure together. The connections made over the cob wall go forward in time. They continue on in the world after the workshop

We try to tell people to stop laughing and joking around. They are obviously not taking this stuff seriously. The struggle is real, people.

CREDIT: BRIANNA WALKER



is over. As the house is finished, relationships are formed. As those earthen walls go up between people in the material world, they start to crumble in the builders' hearts and minds. We are doing so much more than building a wall higher — we are making our worlds bigger, better, and more alive.



Nydia and Brianna met not long before this picture was taken. Living, eating, working, learning, and laughing together makes for fast friends, tight new bonds that last the workshop and beyond. CREDIT: BRIANNA WALKER

Case Studies

Ray and Soozie's Place

There is this little island around here where the rules are different — what rules there are, are held up by those that live there. In this small community, a group of twenty-some women coming together deciding they were going to build houses out of trees, rocks and mud, and other people's discarded trash was hard to ignore. Ray and Soozie heard us loud and clear and were interested in a little guest cabin on their land, made entirely from the stuff the island could provide.

Here in this builder's dreamland, we had no building council telling us how deep to dig, how often to place structural supports, dictate insulation value and chimney distance from the wall. These things are terribly important, of course. Freedom is great, but if the universal laws of building things get overlooked, Very

*Ray and Soozie's
stunning cob cabin,
built in collaboration
with many local folks.*

CREDIT: AUGUSTE MANN



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Inside Ray and Soozie's cob cabin. Bright walls increase the feeling of space.

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Measure Twice, Think Three Times, Cut Once Because Chainsaws Are Forever

Back in the spring of 2010, we were embarking on the building of a little house in a remote wooded area. We hadn't dug down very far before we hit bedrock in a few places, which meant we couldn't make the entire site nice and level to itself. This left us with a very uneven starting point, but not beyond what we felt we could handle. The design called for three sets of posts. Each set is called a bent, each bent was made up of two cedar posts in the round and one fir beam, all notched and bolted

Bad Things can happen. So, being that the newly minted Mudgirls were pretty green at this housebuilding thing, we befriended a few allies. Folks that were not afraid to do things outside the box, folks that understood how a building works, folks that for some reason took us seriously and were happy to be along for the ride, to share their thought, care, skills, and knowledge. The house was built with the inspiration of the landowners, the knowledge and wisdom of long-time island dwellers, and our keen minds and ability to rally folks and organize it all into one complete building plan. With dates set for crew jobs, community work days, and a series of Mudgirl workshops that saw us teaching groups of up to 18 people at a time, this house got finished, and The Mudgirls were effectively launched. Ray and Soozie's cabin is a beautiful standing³ example of how the power of an idea and the willing cooperation of people can create a thing so precious, one-of-a-kind, that fits exactly into the environment it resides in.

— Mudgirl Molly Murphy

together. The house would have a loft, the loft floor would sit on the beams. The top of the beams that connected each set of posts would need to be at the same final level in the world to insure the floor of the loft would also be level.

If the site is uneven, it just means all the posts need to be different lengths. To make this happen with nothing but wild rocks to help you out for post pads, you need to figure out the final floor height and the loft height, and then you can calculate the differences in the length of the posts: subtracting the post length as you get on higher and higher ground. The higher the ground, the shorter the post. This makes sense after doing it a few times, but can be confusing at first (as you can imagine).

We had one member of the collective skilled in the use of a chainsaw doing the wood cutting as we puzzled out the math. We had readjusted the measurements on one of the posts a few times, and the marks we made were probably getting a bit muddled. Too much was going on at once, and, well, as you can guess, the post was cut too short. In seconds it was over. A tree that we had scouted, taken down, limbed, peeled, and notched was now useless for this house. We had to go into the woods, find another tree that met our criteria, take it down, limb it, peel it, notch it, and assemble the beast one more time.

We learned a lot with this mistake. We realized that so much depends on proper communication, proper understanding of what's happening at all stages of the building. If we had kept our cutter more informed of what was going on, they wouldn't have been so hasty to cut, and we wouldn't have all ended up so annoyed with each other. The awesome thing was that because we were using the materials that immediately surrounded us to build this house, we were able to simply head back out into the landscape and harvest what we needed pretty easily, and with a very low carbon footprint to boot.

— Mudgirl Molly Murphy