



The Hand-Sculpted House: A Practical and Philosophical Guide to Building a Cob Cottage: The Real Goods Solar Living Book

By Ianto Evans, Michael G. Smith, Linda Smiley

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Are you ready for the Cob Cottage? This is a building method so old and so simple that it has been all but forgotten in the rush to synthetics. A cob cottage, cobb, however, might be the ultimate expression of ecological design, a structure so attuned to its surroundings that its creators refer to it as "an ecstatic house."

The authors build a house the way others create a natural garden. They use the oldest, most available materials imaginable--earth, clay, sand, straw, and water--and blend them to redefine the future (and past) of building. Cob (the word comes from an Old English root, meaning "lump") is a mixture of non-toxic, recyclable, and often free materials. Building with cob requires no forms, no cement, and no machinery of any kind. Builders actually sculpt their structures by hand.

Building with earth is nothing new to America; the oldest structures on the continent were built with adobe bricks. Adobe, however, has been geographically limited to the Southwest. The limits of cob are defined only by the builder's imagination.

Cob offers answers regarding our role in Nature, family and society, about why we feel the ways that we do, about what's missing in our lives. Cob comes as a revelation, a key to a saner world.

Cob has been a traditional building process for millennia in Europe, even in rainy and windy climates like the British Isles, where many cob buildings still serve as family homes after hundreds of years. The technique is newly arrived to the Americas, and, as with so many social trends, the early adopters are in the Pacific Northwest.

Cob houses (or cottages, since they are always efficiently small by American construction standards) are not only compatible with their surroundings, they ARE their surroundings, literally rising up from the earth. They are full of light,

energy-efficient, and cozy, with curved walls and built-in, whimsical touches. They are delightful. They are ecstatic.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Ianto Evans is an applied ecologist, landscape architect, inventor, and teacher with building experience on six continents. Cob is traditional in his homeland, Wales. In addition to teaching ecological building, Ianto has consulted with USAID, the World Bank, the Peace Corps, and several national governments.

Michael G. Smith teaches practical workshops and consults on cob construction, natural building, and permaculture. He is the author of *The Cobber's Companion: How to Build Your Own Earthen Home* and co-editor of *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources*.

Linda Smiley teaches workshops on cob, sculpting sacred spaces, intuitive design, and natural plasters and finishes. With a background as a recreational therapist, she specializes in helping people use natural building as a tool for personal transformation and healing.

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Building a Cob Cottage Step-by-Step excerpted from Part II: Building the Cob Cottage

EVERY COB BUILDING IS UNIQUE, but most require the same basic steps. The order of some of these steps is critical; others can be rearranged as desired. For a first-time builder, it can be very useful to map out the sequence of all construction tasks. Following is a sample sequence to help you think through your project to completion before you begin. The next ten chapters walk through each of these steps in great detail.

* Select your building site very carefully, for best exposure to winter sun and for good drainage. * Decide in advance roughly what spaces, shapes, and features you will need, both indoors and out, based on the scale of your own activities. Make many sketches and models. Keep the building as small as possible. If you need more than 400 square feet, consider phasing the project to complete the most essential sections first. * Work on a scale model of the building, including site features such as trees and slope. * Decide the wall plan in detail, especially where doors connect the indoors with outdoors. Design the roof at this point, including the roof and how it is supported. Make a full-sized mock-up of the building on the site. Spend time in it, and imagine what it would be like to live there. * Assemble on-site all building materials you will need for enclosure, including glass, lumber, rocks, hardware, pipes, wires, and so forth. Gather your tools, scaffolding, and water storage. * Check your soil, and assess by making test mixes and test blocks what needs to be added for the best cob mix. Measure your proportions and calculate the amounts of sand, clay soil, and straw you will need. Plan out and prepare mixing spaces close to the building. * Arrange delivery of sand, clay soil, and straw as needed. Store deliveries close to and uphill from the building, in locations that won't impede work. Make sure straw is stored under cover, off the ground. * Stake out your design and finished levels precisely on the site using many strong, firmly driven stakes. Adjust for the last time. * Clear and level as little as possible. Grade away from the building so that water runs away on all sides. Set aside excavated soil for gardening or making cob. * Dig drainage and foundation trenches, lay in drainpipe, insulation, plumbing, and wire connections; backfill trenches immediately with drain rock. * Build the foundation stemwall, setting in door frames or frame anchors and joists if floor will be suspended. Leave openings for utilities and water lines in and out. * Tamp the subfloor, lay several inches of drain rock, and, if you will be using an earthen or other mass floor, lay the floor base coat. * Frame the roof, either on

permanent posts or on temporary posts that will be removed when the walls are complete. You may also wait until the cob is nearly finished before framing the roof. * Experiment with cob mixing techniques -- for speed, ease, enjoyment, and different numbers of workers. Concentrate on gradual improvements. Apply your mix, probably at first by fork, trodden, then using "Gaab cob" or cob loaves. Sew it all together solidly with your fingers or a "cobber's thumb." Try to raise all the cob walls at the same rate. * Make sure you build vertical or tapered walls; don't leave big bulges or hollows. * Pare each new part with a machete or handsaw before it gets too hard, leaving it ready to plaster as you build. * Set pipes, wires, outlets, junction boxes, and so on into the walls as you build. * Build in windows as you go. Bury "deadmen" in the walls, wooden anchors to which you can later attach door frames, shelving, countertops, and so on. * Sculpt built-in furniture, bookshelves, niches, and alcoves. * Let the walls dry and settle somewhat, then build loft or second-story beams, joists, and ledgers directly into the cob if the wall is loadbearing. * Locate roof deadmen one and a half to two feet down from the rafters. Complete the walls. * If the roof is on, you can now enclose and heat the building. If not, now is the time to build the roof. If the roof will be heavy, allow the cob to dry throughout first. * Do final ceiling work. * Finish interior built-in woodwork, counters, cabinets, interior door frames, and plumbing fixtures. * Apply interior plaster. * Lay a finish coat on floor. Seal an earthen floor with linseed oil and beeswax. * When interior plaster is dry, apply natural paint, lime wash, or alis. * Plaster the exterior, if desired. * Have a big party! Invite everyone who helped you build.

Users Review

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