

The Earth Builders

Two urbanites take stock of their lives and decide to go au natural in rural Oregon.

At first glance, you wouldn't think an earthen house would provide much luxury. But take a seat on the cob bench that Le Huynh

and Bernhard Masterson built in their Estacada home, and you'll feel how comfortable natural building can be. "It's heated," says Huynh. "If we fire up the stove for a couple of hours

in the evening, in the morning the bench will still be warm."

Huynh and Masterson moved into their 450-square-foot home three years ago, and have been pleasantly



THE WALLS: The walls are created layer by layer. First Huynh and Masterson covered the 14-inch thick straw bales with cob: a mixture of sand, clay and straw. Then they hand-formed the cob with tools and covered it with two layers of plaster, a scratch coat and a top coat that contains the pigment iron oxide.



THE BENCH: A pipe runs through the bench from the couple's wood-burning stove, which heats the bench along with the house. "We're receiving heat from the bench instead of losing it to the walls in the house," says Masterson. The stones are from the creek at the bottom of the canyon.



THE MATERIALS: The couple wanted the house to be financially sustainable in addition to being environmentally sustainable, so they used things given to them such as light fixtures, even if they weren't perfect. "Our goal was to divert things from the waste stream," says Masterson.

surprised by it ever since. “There is something I can’t quite describe about living in this house,” says Huynh. “It just feels so good.”

The couple met at Lewis and Clark College in the 1990s. After graduation, they both got jobs as teachers and bought a bungalow in Portland. “But we were both feeling like we didn’t have a particularly good balance between our work life and our personal life,” says Masterson.

The couple decided to make a list of what they wanted out of life. “We wanted to garden more, to get closer to the natural cycles of the earth, to do things in a more sustainable way and to remove ourselves as much as possible from the cash economy,” says Masterson.

“We discovered that what we wanted to do was far enough from the norm that it would be extremely difficult to do in Portland,” he says. Luckily a college friend had some property, which



The couple framed the windows with salvaged lumber and used a lime plaster to add color to the exterior. The south-facing windows provide heat in the winter.

he invited Huynh and Masterson to build a home on. A few books and a cob-building apprenticeship later, and they were on their way.

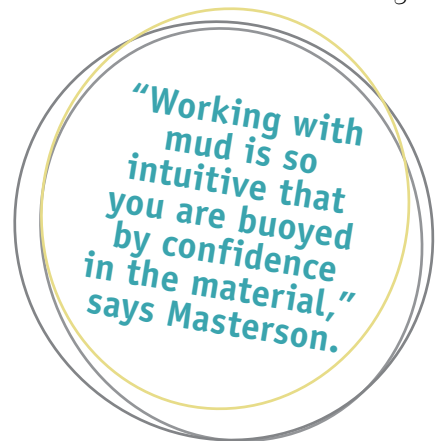
“Working with mud is so intuitive that you are buoyed by confidence in the material,” says Masterson, who has years of experience making large-scale clay sculptures. “There must be a kinesthetic memory that allows people to

just identify with mud!”

Masterson says one key experience that helped them make the transition from urban to natural was living in a tent the summer they started building. “When you’re living in a tent and you don’t have running water and you’re cooking on a camp stove—that’s a pretty nice experience in the summer,” he says. “Then fall comes and

things start to get a little uncomfortable. We moved into our house before it was very finished, but we had heat. Other people thought it looked like a mud pit, but we thought, *It’s absolutely fantastic!*”

The couple designed their house to help them stay in close touch with the seasons. “We have big picture windows oriented to the south,” says Masterson. “How the sun and the moon rise and set in the sky has a big influence on how our house feels inside.” The windows look out onto their gar-



den, which provides them with fruits, veggies, herbs and spices.

The drawback to country life, according to Masterson, is the driving. “In the city, both of us rode our bicycles to work,” he says. “We’d go shopping by bike or out to dinner on bikes. Now we’re in the countryside and we have to drive a long way.”

Huynh, who drives their hybrid to work in Portland, says, “I used to think what I really wanted to do is just live off the land and not be so attached to an urban environment. But there’s a part of urban life that I’m still very interested in. This whole thing started out as an experiment. It was never meant to be a permanent situation.”

Then again, never say never. “When we sit here, I can’t imagine living in a stick frame house in Portland because here all we see are trees and birds,” says Huynh. “You don’t hear traffic, you don’t hear other people. At night there are no city lights, so you see all the stars.” ■