Living walls: Building with cob

by

Lindsay Vogan ©

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Abstract

There’s an interesting phenomenon happening on the South Coast of British Columbia, particularly on southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands. Groups of women, couples and families are going back to the roots of craftsmanship to build their own houses. These houses are not your typical timber framed home. These cob homes are made from a mixture of clay, sand and straw. The author draws upon data collected through interviews with nine participants. Through the examination of why people live in or build with cob, the author shows the importance of this material in relation to community and connectivity, as well as environment and health. Two professionally produced audio documentaries and two magazine-style articles contribute to wider public knowledge and understanding of the physical and mental sensations and beliefs of the participants, as well as their understanding of how others perceive cob builders and dwellers to be.

Keywords

cob; material culture; ethnography; documentary; community; environment
Living Walls

By Lindsay Vogan

The magic of cob homes in southwest B.C.

Wearing a heavy sweater and thickly knit leg warmers in her cob home on Mayne Island, Jamie Ferguson takes a seat at her well-used wooden kitchen table. “Think of the Flintstones’ house— that’s what I tell people who have never seen a cob house before”, she says smiling, while she tucks her shoulder-length brown hair behind her ears.

Trained and apprenticed under master natural builder, Elke Cole, Ferguson’s been building with cob for nearly nine years. Although places like Afghanistan and England have been building with cob for centuries, building cob or earthen homes is still new to North America.
Checking to make sure there is wood in the weathered black iron stove, Ferguson says that cob houses are living beings themselves “because the walls are living and breathing.”

Without vapor barriers or moisture-sealing chemical paints, the thick walls of a cob house naturally act as a thermal mass. Ferguson explains; “The sun heats up the walls throughout the day, and by night time, the walls begin to release that warmth in to the house.” She says that one of the benefits is that they hold thermal mass. “Touching the walls, you can feel a warmth coming from them. It’s extremely efficient.” Looking out one of her large south-facing windows of her mostly round-shaped home, Ferguson explains, “With forced air heating, if you open a window or a door, all the heat escapes, but in a cob house because there is a lot of thermal mass, you can open the door and the heat doesn’t leave because it is stored in the walls.”

Aside from wood stoves, many cob homes feature a Rocket Stove—essentially a barrel with a pipe leading from its side and out through a wall of the house, similar to a chimney. Enclosed by cob and plaster, the barrel often sits at one end of a cob bench. The pipe then travels through the bench and out a wall. “The heat from it is amazing and so simple”, grins Ferguson. “Unlike a regular chimney, the cob bench and the wall absorb so much of the heat that by the time the pipe reaches the outside, there is hardly any smoke.”

From built-in wine racks in cool north-facing walls, to brightly coloured red, blue and yellow glass bottles as small windows, “Almost everything has a purpose in a cob home”, says Ferguson. Since walls are built up with cob, builders are able to create anything from couches and counters to built-in spice racks. Featuring a mural of a tree painted by her sister-in-law, Ferguson points to the small kitchen, adding, “And built-in shelving looks great and saves a lot of space”.

"Almost everything has a purpose in a cob home"
Esthetically, many walls of cob homes in the Gulf Islands of BC are organic in shape and form. The unique quality of building with cob rather than with common concrete gives the builder the ability to form the cob in any shape, angle or form. “Building naturally forming angles in walls is lovely and you want to follow that, but the truth is that in the end it’s hard to furnish”, laughs Ferguson. Tracing her eyes across each bump and divot of the curved walls in her house, Ferguson suggests, “that there should be at least one straight wall in every room because furniture isn’t curvy”.

The chocolate-coloured walls made from clay, straw and sand, not only retain heat, they also retain the energy and memories of those who built them.

Pulling her legs into a crossed-legged position on her chair, Ferguson looks at a peach tinted wall and says, “Whenever I am part of building a house, I always remember who built what, because each person’s energy stays in it.”

Learning by doing lets workshop participants focus on an area of the home, such as a nook or an arch, putting their newly-learned skills and hands directly into the home.

“The workshops attract bankers, moms- all walks of life”, says Ferguson. Prepared to camp on the land, build and eat with the same people for up to a week, participants are often surprised by how different they feel by the end. “It starts out with all these strangers- people you won’t think you’ll have anything in common with- but by the end it’s a real sense of community that’s created, and it’s this that really effects people I think”, says Ferguson.

Like stomping on grapes to produce juice, a common way to mix cob is by dancing on it. With the occasional drumbeat, participants dance on the cob with their bare feet, then sculpt with their bare hands. “So many sensations go in to that. The house gets built with community and love, and I feel that that stuff goes in to the walls- you can feel it”, says Ferguson.

“The house gets built with community and love, and that stuff goes into the walls- you can feel it”
With changing temperatures and absorbed histories, Ferguson truly believes the walls of a cob home contain something that cannot be found in concrete walls. “The first thing I do when I walk into a cob or earthen home is touch the walls”, admits Ferguson. “There’s a different warmth in your heart that you feel that you don’t feel with concrete. A cob or earthen home feels warm and loving”, she adds, reaching to her right to touch the peach wall.

With so many hands building the walls of a cob house, it isn’t just a house rising up, but a community as well. “Sure some people have bad days and shit gets thrown in to there too, but that’s life”, Ferguson says shrugging her shoulders. Believing that houses are a microcosm of the world and life, Ferguson laughs as she unfolds her legs, putting her feet back on the floor, “But you get to live in this house of mostly love with a little bit of crap too”. And with that, she gets up from her chair to throw another piece of wood on the fire.

- Photos by Jamie Ferguson
Sitting in a downtown Victoria pub on a chilly fall Thursday after work, Nate Cunnings takes a big sip of ale. “There’s a real transition taking place right now with natural building. It’s becoming more accepted”, he says as he adjusts his faded black biking cap.

Trained under the guidance of master cob-builder Pat Hennebery on Mayne Island, British Columbia, 31-year old Cunnings has been building cob ovens for the past nine years. Once the norm in much of England and Ireland, 500-year-old cob houses are still lived in today. Not covered in mud like one might think after a long day’s work, but in a pair of clean black jeans and navy flannel plaid shirt, Cunnings says after taking a cob workshop in Mexico eight years ago, he “really realized where community fits in because cob-building is very labour intensive.”

Specializing with cob ovens gives Cunnings the freedom to work alone and at his own pace. When asked why he chooses to build alone, Cunnings smiles and says, “Because I don’t want to have to babysit other people. It also gives me the artistic freedom to build how I want.” Cunnings remembers one of the first ovens he was commissioned to build; “It was for this seafood restaurant called the ‘Smoking Tuna’.” Building the oven into the shape of a fish, “I made the mouth as the oven opening with the chimney pipe coming out of its tail. It’s really cool”, exclaims Cunnings. With a proud smile, he describes the restaurant owner’s reaction to the finished oven, “He was absolutely blown away. He never anticipated the oven to turn out the way it did”, he says.
This is often the case with clients, says Cunnings. While his clients understand how powerful the oven will be when it’s finished, they don’t often envision how beautiful the oven will look. “Most people don’t realize how much you can actually do with cob. Esthetically, I make the outside of the oven look as smooth as concrete, then depending on the owner, I can add detail or artistic forms on the outside”, says Cunnings.

Many people don’t realize the benefits of building with cob. “It’s a forgotten building material and art”, says Cunnings. Although there are numerous cob structures in the south coast of B.C., some remain skeptical, particularly when it comes to the wet climate. “People think it’s going to melt away in the rain”, laughs Cunnings. He goes on to explain that without a proper roof the outside of the oven might begin to look worn and get small cracks in it, but the actual oven will function normally. “With a proper roof over them, the ovens will last anywhere from 50 to 80 years”, Cunnings explains.

Taking only two to three weeks to build, the ovens provide a means for chemical-free cooking. “I only use all-natural materials”, says Cunnings as he takes another sip of ale. He laughs when he recalls a build he did for German hobby farmers in the Chilcotin area of B.C.; “They asked me where I got the clay from. I pointed to a small hole near where we were standing and said ‘right over there’.” He goes on to describe how the farmers couldn’t believe he got all the building materials from their land. Adding to the appeal for natural building is the fact that much of the material is found on site.

It’s no surprise that Cunnings is able to get full time work building cob ovens in and around Victoria, B.C. “A lot of people here are active and have an interest in sustainability“, Cunnings says. Attributing it to the climate, Cunnings thinks that people have strong interests in cooking and food, entertaining at home and going out less. He’s also beginning to see a movement towards upscale outdoor kitchens, a new avenue which Cunnings sees his business taking. “I’m not interested in babysitting, but I do see myself hiring help if I get more kitchen jobs”, says Cunnings.

Made from a mixture of clay, sand and straw, cob is a popular material to build with. Hybridized building is increasing in popularity as well. Using natural wood, local sandstone, recycled brick, cob and other materials, building green is not difficult. For Cunnings, knowing that harsh chemicals are not being cooked into his food is at the core of his passion for cob. With the ability to cook most foods, including pizzas in two minutes, cob ovens “make the food taste amazing”, says Cunnings.
When asked if cob ovens are representative of his business structure, Cunnings says, “Absolutely. They’re small, but have the strength to last a very long time.” He goes on to tell that his business is in its beginning stages and that it continues to evolve, as do the designs of and uses for his ovens. “There are people here that use the ovens everyday to cook anything from meat to fresh bread”, Cunnings says as he adjusts his riding cap. “I want to see every oven succeed, it’s important to me and it’s what my business is based on- achievements”, he says.

When asked what is in the future for him, Cunnings, taking his last gulp of ale, simply replies, “More cob ovens and hopefully an increase in upscale outdoor kitchens.” Although Cunnings’ ovens do not come cheaply ($3000), he has had no problem finding work. “I don’t even know how many jobs I’ve had to turn down this year”, he says. Taking the year to focus on his business and marketing plans, Cunnings is grateful for the support he has had along the way. Getting up from the table, Cunnings puts his bike helmet on and says, “I just love creating, designing and building.” And with that, he hops onto his bike and rides off down the street.

A newly finished cob oven awaits its first loaf of artisan bread.

Oven at the Smoking Tuna restaurant. ~All photos courtesy of Nate Cunnings~