

Taylor's Garden Buildings

Est 1953

Manufactures and Suppliers of quality wooden buildings. Specialists in bespoke projects.



Taylor's Garden Buildings, Ashwellthorpe, Norwich. 01508 489260

www.taylorsgardenbuildings.co.uk

Edwards Eco Building

specialising in cob beauty



We design and build eco houses, extensions, garden studios, cob, strawbale and cob bale structures- all at affordable prices. Discover what you could have in your home or garden.

Contact Kate for a free quote and more info.
01263 519024 or 07949241815
sheepie32@hotmail.com
Log onto
www.edwardsecobuilding.com
for more information.



Kate Edwards' fascinating cob houses can be used for all sorts of purposes, from art studios to accommodation. Chloe Hobbs reports. Pictures by Adrian Judd.

Resembling the mythical and almost ethnic, cob houses are quite something to see. Rising quietly out of the earth from which they came, they sit peacefully alongside the rest of nature. And with techniques dating back thousands of years, cob building is "not just some New Age hippy drivel," as Kate Edwards, who has just completed the first project of her new eco-build venture, tells us.

Kate is filled with passion for her cause, and talks enthusiastically about her cob building training in Ireland, and various cob structures from around the world, especially New Zealand. Clearly she puts a lot of effort into what she does, and shows a lot of affection for the building we have come to see. It was built as a studio at the bottom of the garden for artist and writer Frances Viner who couldn't stress enough how much she loves it. She tells us that the "more she uses it, the more she loves it" and that it has a "fabulous, healing atmosphere". Kate emphasises the satisfaction she gets from the job that she does, confiding that it is the "best job I can possibly do". Unlike conventional builders she attempts to keep a personal relationship with her clients, overseeing the job from start to finish.

After three years at Camberwell Art College in London, Kate found herself working in interior design. However, five years later she was keen to try her hand at something more creative, and, seeing herself as a bit of an eco-warrior, cob building was a natural progression for her. Creating cob houses involves a lot of artistic talent, as they are somewhat of an art statement within themselves, although the genuine attractiveness of these self-made buildings allows them to be art forms and to provide a habitable environment where the emphasis is on simplicity.

The intricacies of these eco-buildings make them seem very complicated and as if they require a great deal of skill to make, however Kate is eager to explain to us just how simple the construction and creation of these buildings really is. The houses are very ecologically friendly, and I find this new trend for cob buildings with a "contemporary twist" refreshing and frankly a relief from the square concrete circus of our cities. Kate describes the process of making the cob to us, which basically involves a lot of stamping on a mixture of clay, sand, straw and water. Physical stamping, which must require an awful lot of labour. However, Kate tells us how she runs cob classes, teaching as many people as she can how to work with cob, and her students carry out the labour for her - "they learn as they work," she explains. This resourcefulness relates perfectly to that of cob building, with the natural materials used (the beams in the studio are made from reclaimed wood, and the cob is made mostly of subsoil dug up in Frances Viner's garden). These practices reduce building costs considerably. Kate estimates that generally a cob house costs less than half of a conventionally-built home, thus making this dramatic structure not only eye-catching and ecologically sound, but financially a good investment, too.

She tells us how a cob building is created. This involves digging a large trench to act as a drainage system to prevent water from reaching the cob, and to provide foundations. Then the earth which has been dug out is mixed with any other necessary ingredients (for example, if your subsoil is rich in clay, you would need to add sand to it), the completed mixture is stamped down and then built up over a small stone wall which acts as a base. Then the cob must be left to dry, which, in the case of a large building, takes about six to nine months. After this the roof is put in place - this can be a "living roof" which, Kate explains, involves using the turf that has been dug away at the start of the



A labour of love

project. For Kate, the whole process seems to be a labour of love, involving handcrafting the walls, which can be inlaid with pretty much anything you can find, including wood, pebbles and even old bottles.

I found the almost limitlessness of cob building a surprise; the fact that the walls can be moulded and sculpted is a delightful quirk of these buildings, the amount of weight they can take is interesting, too, as they are load-bearing walls - the studio we visited even had a stained glass roof.

For me, however, the most interesting point about these buildings is the natural beauty they radiate, although I was concerned that they may dissolve after being subjected to a British winter. However Kate reassured me that these structures are built to last, and she mentioned a block of flats in Yemen that is 10 storeys high and over a thousand years old!

Also, she told us that the walls tended to be about 3ft wide, and remain insulated throughout the winter. After the success of her first project, Kate is ready to take on other cob buildings. And although the particular studio we saw was on a relatively small scale, she showed us photographs of much larger designs - three, four and even five bedroom properties which had been moulded the cob way.

Fortunately, the use of cob as a building material is becoming increasingly popular, and I believe this is a good thing. These eco houses are naturally beautiful, and offer a sanctuary in which one can hide away on one's own. And, having seen a cob house for myself, I am convinced that I have to have one ●

Kate Edwards at Edwards Eco Building.
Tel 01263 519024 or 07949 241815.
Email: sheepie23@hotmail.com
Website: www.edwardsecobuilding.com



(Above) The cob house designed by Kate Edwards (foreground, bottom right), and its owner Frances Viner.