Story of a Shed

There is something disarmingly simple about building with straw bales and mud. It's a building site like no other, a site that encourages experimentation depends on trial and error engineering and certainly counter to the precise large scale concrete and steel that surrounds us. The shed came to symbolise the separation people feel from the making of their built environment, an environment that is left to the planners, structural engineers and specialist building contractors. The contrast couldn't be greater between the heavy plant in the next door field preparing to build a world class research centre and our piles of clay, straw bales and hazel pins.

The ambition was to build an allotment shed as a community, that community was going to be the Soil Culture Forum delegates, but getting elbow deep in cob has a certain beauty and attraction to it. Soon, we had delegates, non delegates, staff, students, non students, passers by, dog walkers and their children getting involved. An eager community illustrating our instinctive ability to build a home hewn from the environment in which it sits. To build from the ground is the childhood of mud pies, den building and sand castles, an engineering playground.

The building grew, so did the community that built it and the building grew into a classroom. As the volunteers stamped, rendered, smeared and slapped the walls they shared ideas, experiences and stories. Inspired by what they achieved some have designed their own cob and straw buildings, there is talk of cob bus shelters on campus and a straw bale wellbeing centre built by the students that will use it. The field in which the new classroom sits is now a hub for growing your own veg, of composting all the kitchen waste from the 250 student kitchens, festivals and a climate conference that will send delegates from the field to COP21 in Paris. Courses from the four different colleges on campus have come forward to work together to use the space for drawing, architecture, renewable energy, performance, Art and Politics.

As the communities that use the space grow and diversify so to does the building, an extra seat here an extension there even an orchard and a stone circle have appeared but it is the sharing of ideas that is the most important. From a conversation in a field with straw and cob to a global conversation in Paris to inspire new conversations new actions and hopefully more cob.

After a 48hr soak the clay slurry is ready for the 'key' layer

A large team of volunteers from the green living project make a start on the foundations

Clearing and leveling the site looking out for thistle and dandelion roots or anything else that may grow through the floor membrane.
Marking out the footprint of the shed with the first layer of rammed earth tyres for the foundation plynth.

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Preparing the base layer of hazel pins and connecting the bales to the plinth. Apart from a hedge trimmer used for trimming the strawbales the whole build was done with traditional hand tools.

Using hazel pins and staples to hold the bales together, the straw walls go up in a morning.

Volunteers from the green living project mixing Cob the fun way.

Making the clay slurry to mix with two parts sharp sand and one part straw for the cob mix

The straw needs a pure clay 'key' layer before applying the Cob

The completed shed waiting for a top coat of lime wash. Strawbale and Cob building project with RANE, Soil Culture Forum and the Green Living Project. Falmouth University, Penryn Campus, Cornwall