



Clay plaster and timber frames—a green combination

DURING HER opening remarks at the recent Eastern Conference in Roanoke, Sarah Susanka reminded us all of the importance of being conscious of the whole picture when designing and building. Well-known architect and author of *The Not so Big House* and its companions, and leader of a cultural revolution in building “better, not bigger,” Sarah spoke to a large and attentive crowd. Creating warm, inviting, and “not so big” spaces was the challenge she offered us. She also suggested that we not be afraid to personalize our living space, whether through a window seat, meditative space, or layering the levels of ceilings and walls through the use of soffits and trim.

Noting how the structural system of timber frames inherently includes vital psychological breathing space, we were encouraged to help our clients, especially the cultural creatives, envision and build in such a fashion. Cultural creatives are the people many of us work for, typified by the following interests: better health, lower consumption, more spirituality, and more respect for the earth. According to some estimates, 50 million cultural creatives reside in the U.S. alone. (For more information, see www.culturalcreatives.org.)

While many of us are contracted to fabricate and install a timber frame, we may or may not be asked for assistance with other aspects of the client’s home. Our clients do often look to us for ways to complement the timbers in their interior design. Questions can cover lighting, flooring, wall covering, plumbing, and heating. Many products, both green and conventional, are of course available. Depending on our time and resources, we can provide clients with some thoughtful insight or at least steer them in some helpful directions.

One complement we’ve explored with much success has been the application of clay plaster on our own timber frame addition. We knew we were looking for a natural product that would meld well with the exposed timbers, both S4S and live pieces. Clay plaster’s natural pigment choices and types of finish allow for expression of individual style and taste. The product we chose, American Clay (www.americanclay.com), offered easy-to-follow instructions and a helpful website, complete with an instructional video.

The smoother of the finishes, Porcelina, still gives much depth to wall space when applied, and its polished surface is almost silky to the touch. Those looking for a more suede-like appearance will love the slightly rougher texture of the Loma finish. Best of all, the product emits almost no odor, just a slight aroma of clay reminiscent of childhood times spent digging clay out of the nearby creek. Preparation is much like other products: walls must be clean and timbers need to be taped. American Clay adheres to most surfaces; some, such as blueboard, require a sanded primer applied over any joint compound. Others, including unsealed earthen plasters or porous stone, require only a cleaning and dusting. After two coats of plaster, several finishing techniques, including burnishing, provide the opportunity to personalize the walls. A sealer is available to protect the clay from high traffic areas or rooms prone to moisture. Unlike other plaster products, clay plaster has a long workability period, and actually improves the longer it sets up (up to 24 hours). A comment from our plasterer sums it up well: “This stuff is so forgiving, it’s much like working with wood.”

Another speaker at the Eastern Conference, Janell Kapoor (www.kleiworke.org), started her session, Awe-

some Earthen Buildings from Around the World, by asking the audience to close our eyes and imagine a space where we felt comfortable and secure. After a few moments, she jokingly asked how many of us had envisioned a Tyvek-wrapped structure complete with vinyl siding and vinyl windows. Quite to the contrary, the majority of the replies involved some sort of outdoor setting—a childhood tree house, oak savannah, or rippling creek. Much like Sarah’s ideas on creating not so big spaces, Janell’s focus on natural building involved utilizing indigenous materials and a small footprint. Janell has enjoyed success building earthen structures around the globe.

Sometimes the answers we seek are so simple we miss them. We can feel entrapped by what the construction industry claims is the latest trend, the new quick solution, or what marketing giants insist we must have to fulfill our lives. What could be simpler than bringing clay, timber, and other natural products into our living environment?

—Laura Collins

[For color versions of these photos, see Scantlings on the Guild website.—Ed.]



Timber frames and clay walls. Top right, Tom Basler applies water in preparation for the second coat of plaster.

Left, taped live walnut timbers with Baton Rouge Red American Clay plaster.

Right, taped live timbers with Choco Latte American Clay plaster.



photos Laura Collins