

FEAT OF CLAY

Ex-builder fires the imagination with possibilities

Under The Dome Former Home Builder Joseph Diliberti Constructed His `Dream Home` Of Fired Clay, Straw And Water. It Cost Him About \$20 For The Materials. He And Some Friends Supplied The Labor.

December 28, 1990

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Special to the Los Angeles Times

SAN DIEGO -- It's shortly after dawn in rural eastern San Diego County. Awakened by pink streaks of sunrise, former home builder Joseph Diliberti rises from the mattress on the floor of his ceramic dome house.

He meditates, draws well water, showers from a bucket and goes out to tend his garden. On other such mornings, he might ride his bike, fish, swim or read.

What he doesn't have to do is wake to an alarm clock, balance a checkbook, fill a gas tank, pay an electric bill, fight rush-hour traffic or endure the other daily burdens of modern civilization.

Most of what he eats, he grows or gathers. He uses candles for light. A stone pit behind his house serves as the stove.

His dome house, 20 feet in diameter and 20 feet high, is made of fired clay, straw and water; it is the color of a red clay garden pot. On the warmest days, its inner walls feel cool. A breeze passes freely through the dome, directed by a series of ``wind chimneys.``

In the winter, a small fireplace heats the dwelling so the walls exude their own warmth. The waterproof dome offers its owner all he seeks: cover, safety, quiet and a cocoon-like environment conducive to personal metamorphosis.

With his dangling dreadlocks, simple attire and unadorned lifestyle, Joseph (he discards last names) no longer relates to the successful Bronx-born home builder he was just over a decade ago.

Now, the building materials that fascinate him are straw, water, silica- borax glaze and the clay beneath his feet.

“Being a builder and a contractor, I got a firsthand shot at experiencing to the fullest the way they construct things out there,” he said. “And being a traveled man, I knew there were other ways.”

Joseph, 42, who served in Vietnam as a Marine, said there he witnessed the annihilation of whole environments in the name of America’s way of life. Coming home to construction didn’t feel a lot different.

“I realized that in the end you get a box that owns you,” he said. “Isn’t it a joke that we as sophisticated, thinking human beings have to spend 30 years of our lives to put a roof over our heads? No, it didn’t make any sense. So I tossed it all up in the air to search for another way.”

It took 10 years for him to find a way to build in harmony with nature. The answer was beneath his feet.

Clay -- indigenous red clay, straw and water -- kneaded together in a hole by Joseph’s feet and fashioned into bricks by his hands. Using only a bucket, scaffold board and wooden mold, he made the bricks and laid them in place to build the dome home.

Then Joseph and friends fired the entire structure for 36 hours by building a huge bonfire inside the dome. The flames grew so hot they melted a bottle placed inside as a heat test. Steam rose from the clay, sealing the bricks and the glaze coating.

When the firing was done, he had created what he terms a storm-proof, earthquake-proof, fire-proof, low-maintenance, earth-friendly housing model for the future.

The house contains no internal posts because each handmade brick is edged slightly to lie snugly against the weight of the one below it. Small round glass windows -- recycled bottles and chunks of broken glass -- were added last.

Joseph first built a camper shell on his truck out of scrap wood about 10 years ago. “I realized there was so much scrap wood, you could build a city out of the waste of America,” he said.

Collecting more scrap wood from construction sites, he built a simple cabin on his land.

“Then a visiting friend gave me an idea for a tree house in the large oak near the cabin,” he said. “I climbed the tree barefoot and started building.”

Joseph’s next inspiration was a five-story pagoda with a recycled glass roof. But this time, he built a structure that was round. Instantly, he said, he felt a sense of peace and inner security in a round dwelling -- round like the womb, like the eouses and How To Build Them and I found my answer. Then, during a rainy day, I discovered I had clay on my land.”

Joseph began experimenting with a few scale models, then built a few forms, “and before you know it, I was up to my knees in clay. For two solid years. With wind, earth, fire and water, plus \$20 for glazing, I built a house, a nice one.

``So it`s obvious that there`s really no reason why we have to spend \$250,000 or more to put a roof over our heads and become, in effect, victims and slaves to a greedy monetary system. I believe the only reason people do is because they have no idea there are alternative ways.``