

Thoughts on Slow Architecture

My husband and I (carpenter and architect) have spent the last three years designing and building our earthen home. It has been a journey into the world of slow architecture and through this process we have discovered certain truths which we feel identify with the philosophy of slow.



1. Absorb the Environment, Physically Experience It in All of the Seasons

Much of 'slow' is about having time to honour the job at hand and do it properly. We lived on site for three years prior to finalising our design. There is a difference in knowing where the predominant wind comes from and being actually blasted by it. Computer programmes and charts can tell you where the sun will set on any given day, but that is far removed from watching those glorious sunsets in reality. On our site, we have many dramatic panoramic views, but over time some of the more subtle elements of the immediate landscape became our favourite focus.

Of course, it is impossible for an architect to live on site prior to designing projects. However, I think it is vital that the architect and client spend *real* time together on site in a variety of weather conditions and physically experience what that site has to offer. Even if one visits a site throughout the month of June rain and shine, one must be able to visualise what happens on that site in the depths of winter.



2. Design Appropriately for the Environment & for the Materials

This should follow on quite organically from the previous point, if the information presented by the environment has been absorbed in a meaningful way. The client and the architect should have a genuine *feel* for the site, almost as if through a process of osmosis.

I believe we should acknowledge the wisdom of tried and tested building methods appropriate to the environment, not to copy them slavishly, but to respect that there is a reason as to why they have endured. Of course, there is room in the world for technological advances, but there is still something within us which connects with the simple wisdom of the past.

Take flat roofs, for example. Advances in material technology mean that flat roofs are inherently more reliable than those of the 60s and 70s. However, they still do not sit easily with the majority. A pitched roof makes sense in a waterlogged climate. They are aesthetically acceptable. They are appropriate. They are part of our psyche. In spite of the technological advances and warranties, flat roofs are not so generally appealing. Yet the flat roofs of Morocco for example, where they are culturally and climatically appropriate, delight us.

Regarding materials and the design process, we chose to build the majority of our home from earth. Therefore our initial design process involved large 1:20 models built from modelling clay, allowing us to physically engage with the material's potential. In this case, 2-D drawings were inappropriate and computer modelling was too detached for such a sculptural material.



3. Select 'Slow', Local Materials

This ties in quite well with the 'Slow Food' philosophy of sourcing organically and locally. Although contemporary, our home has been built using mostly traditional materials, sourced on site (earth) or within a 20 mile radius (stone and timber). The building materials used for millennia before the industrial revolution are natural, largely unprocessed and often renewable. They often dictate the pace of construction, which is a forgiving human pace, whether it be the drying period of earth in between lifts, or the curing and working of lime before it is applied to stone, or the acclimatisation of timber floorboards before they are laid.

I feel the selection of local materials also has relevance to the idea of eating seasonally appropriate foods. The nutritional content of these foods is well matched to our needs at these times, e.g. vitamin C laden blackberries in autumn, carbohydrate comfort from winter potatoes. The materials available in the local environment are exactly the materials which can cope with the climate of that environment.



4. Connect with the Past, Reclaim and Re-Use

Our home has been built using many ancient methods and materials. The building embodies a sense of timelessness, a connection with the past. Many of the materials used in the house were salvaged locally, from recycling yards, from skips and from demolitions.

Using reclaimed materials allowed us to amplify the soulful quality of our home. For example, during construction of the house, a local 1960s school was demolished and, among other things, we salvaged douglas fir floorboards. Their character is perfect. Some are richly varnished, some are worn bare. They have been laid in a random pattern and set off the rooms beautifully. A waste product to everyone else, we could not have sourced a more suitable floor.



5. Be Physically Involved, Make Things from Scratch, Connect, Connect

This is a point that I feel is very important for the end-user of the building. Even if there is just one small element of the building that the client can get involved with, a section of wall in a lobby, an area of floor with hand-made tiles, they should be given an opportunity to physically connect with their building during its construction.

As with 'Slow Food' making things from scratch can give immense pleasure and satisfaction, particularly in a world where almost everything is available off the shelf.

All our internal walls are plastered with our own home-made earth plasters. We go to the neighbour's fields to collect the cow dung which helps the workability and adhesion of the plaster. There is no doubt that we are connected to nature. We have sourced natural pigments and will be making our own clay paints.

We were lucky to acquire a number windfall trees from a local estate which we brought back to our site, dried out and had milled. Therefore were able to hand-select each single piece for our internal joinery.

We have carved into the walls to form light recesses and bookshelves. We have sculpted forms on our walls to accommodate up-lighters. Making our own materials, working with our bare hands, fashioning the shapes of our home has given us a wonderful connection to the building and to the earth on which it stands.



6. Find Peace

Many of the building processes have been silent, requiring no machinery or power tools. The earth itself is wonderful at absorbing and blocking sound transmission. The curves promote pleasing acoustics. The overall effect is very peaceful, an ambience which is deeply felt by visitors to the house. As human beings, we have a heart-felt connection with stone, earth and wood. While we can appreciate steel, glass, metal, concrete and plastic buildings as awe-inspiring and beautiful, with their cold hard surfaces it can be difficult to find soul in them (or silence) .



7. Acknowledge the Power of Nature and the Passage of Time

These 'slow' materials and 'slow' building methods work with nature, accommodating it and submitting to its actions, rather than repelling it, as so many modern materials and details do. Fast architecture often wears badly through time as the forces of nature will always win. Slow architecture settles into itself with time.

Slow materials and structures will require maintenance. They acknowledge the passage of time and invite the building owner to participate in understanding and responding to the march of the seasons. A building like this cannot be neglected, it must be loved.

8. In Conclusion

To me, slow architecture is fundamentally about time and connection. One needs the time to explore and develop connections meaningfully. To love our buildings there needs to be connection to place, to nature, to the past, to our culture. The building must be connected to its site and we must feel connected to the building itself. In order to feel its soul, the building must inspire our souls. The more senses we can engage in this process, the more successful we will be.