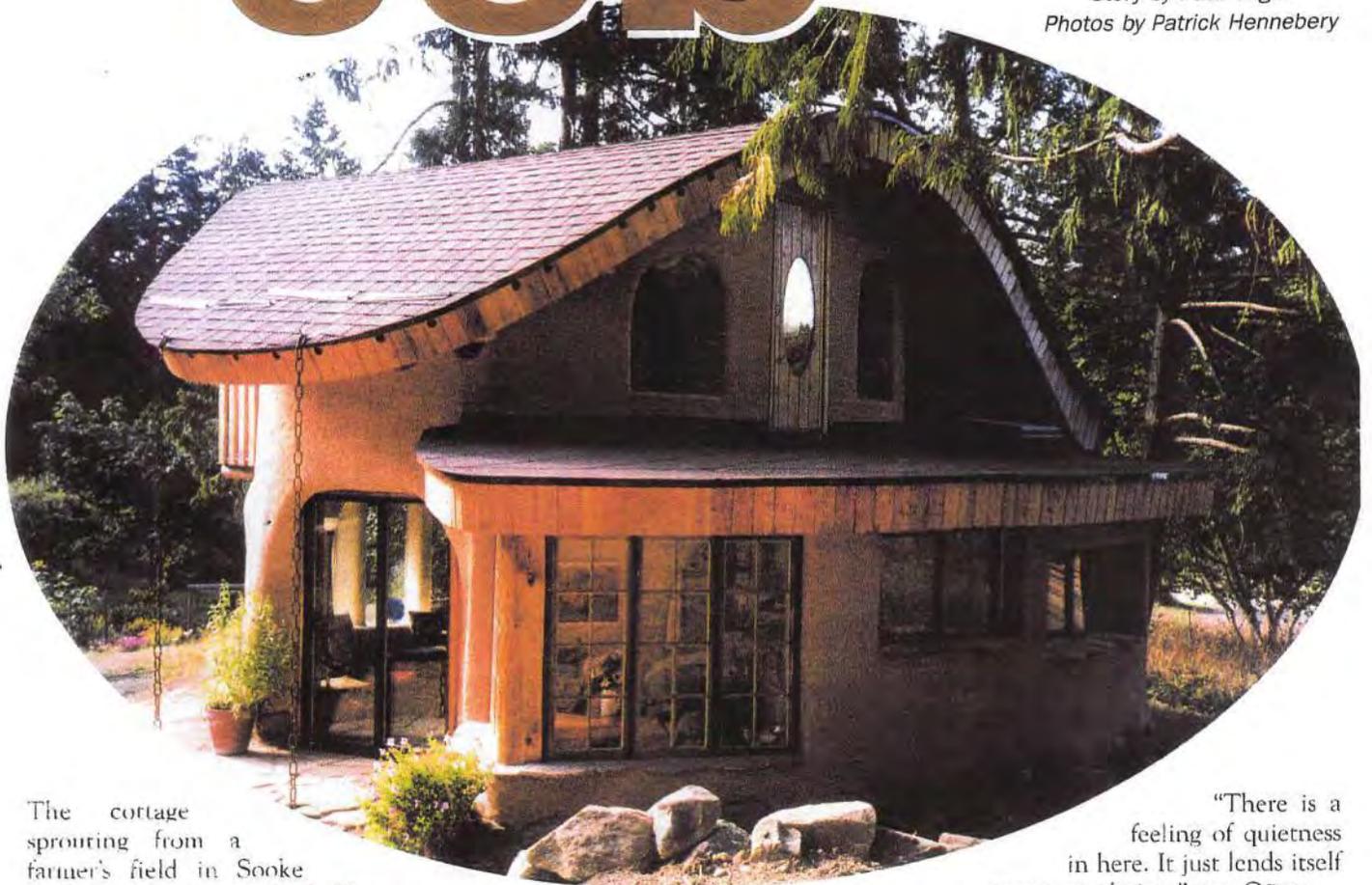


Of This
Earth

Building with cob

Story by Patti Edgar
Photos by Patrick Hennebery



The cottage sprouting from a farmer's field in Sooke looks like the home of a hobbit.

Nestled between out-buildings, the small round house has curving windows and a roof like a floppy straw hat.

"This house breathes," says Susa Oñate, stomping a foot on the ground while she waits for her tea to heat above the hand-built hearth inside. "This is earth under here. It isn't a half-foot of cement, a vapour barrier and plastic. It's mud, straw, gravel and rock."

The cottage was sculpted out of earth and straw over three summers by

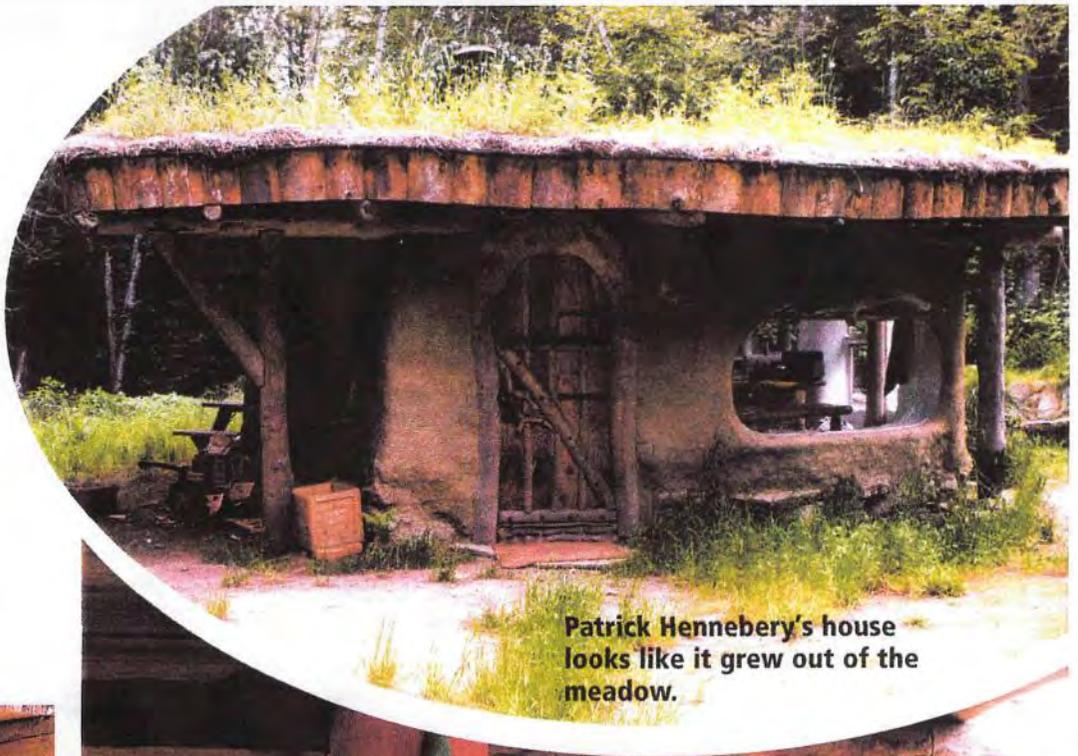
Oñate and more than 100 people. It's circular foundation was laid with stones from the farm, while the post-and-beam frame was built out of wood scavenged from a near-by burn heap. Piled on top of the foundation are loaves of earth and straw – dried, stacked and sanded by hand to create smooth, 2.5-metre high walls. Embedded in the walls are old windows from the farm, most facing south to capture the sun's heat.

"There is a feeling of quietness in here. It just lends itself to contemplation," says Oñate.

The cottage in Sooke is one of more than a dozen homes on the West Coast built out of "cob." Builders mix together straw, water, clay and sand, usually without machinery, and form them into loaves by hand. The loaves dry to a hardness similar to concrete and are called cob, an Old English word meaning "rounded mass."

People have built homes out of unbaked earth for thousands of years. David Easton, author of *The Rammed*

People have built homes out of unbaked earth for thousands of years. Today – from Adobe homes in Mexico to white-washed cottages in England – as many as half of the world’s population live in homes made from the earth.

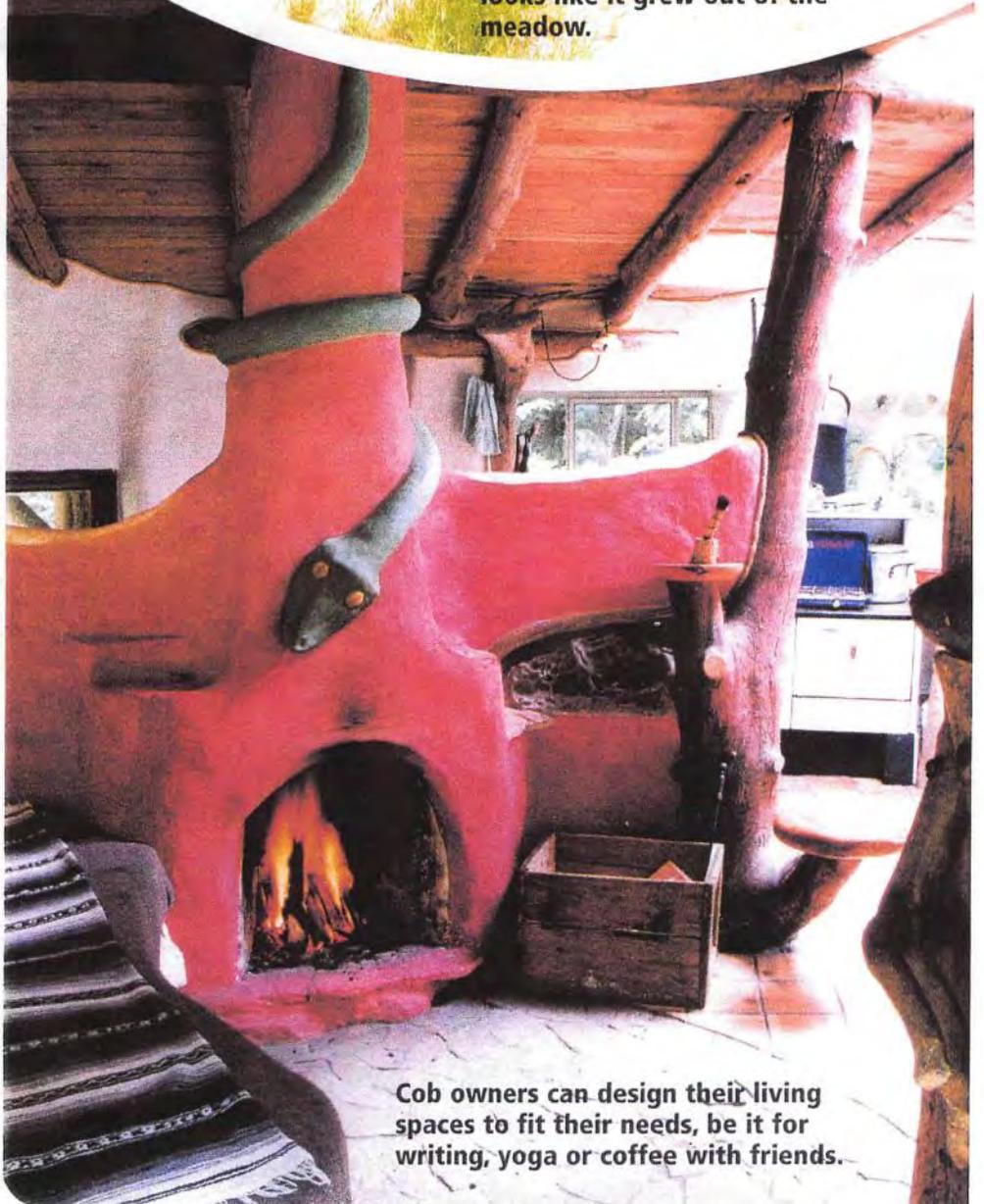


Patrick Hennebery's house looks like it grew out of the meadow.



Earth House, says that there's "10,000-year-old archeological evidence of entire cities built of raw earth: Jericho, history's earliest city; Catal Huyuk in Turkey, Chan-Chan in Peru." These ancient structures were not simple either, but "vast imposing monuments, temples, churches and mosques." Today, from Adobe homes in Mexico to white-washed cottages in England, as many as half of the world's population live in homes made from the earth.

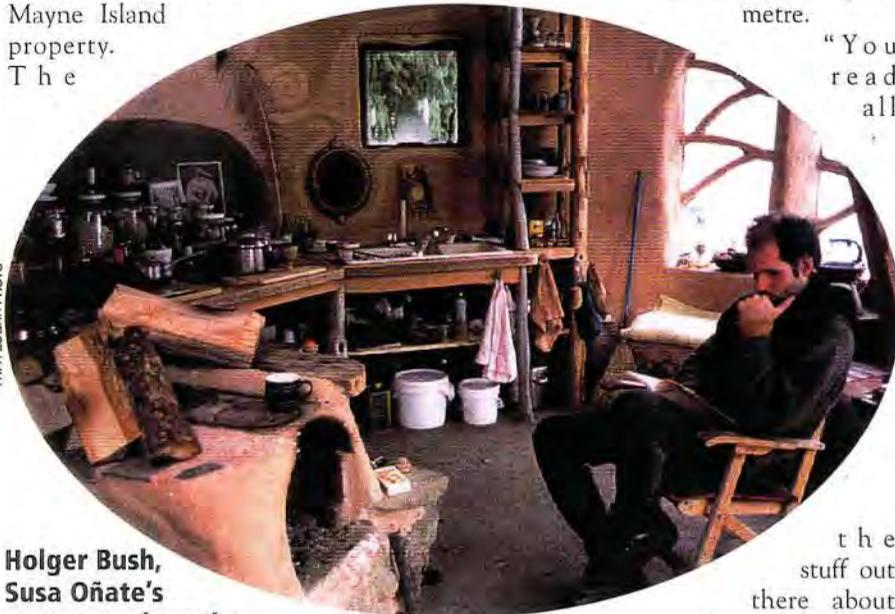
In the late 1980s, builders in Oregon, attempting to recreate English cob homes, concocted a North American recipe for cob, as well as a



Cob owners can design their living spaces to fit their needs, be it for writing, yoga or coffee with friends.

building based on thick, rounded walls. The founders of this technique, Ianto Evans and Linda Smiley, created a company called Cob Cottage. They began teaching the technique to others and encouraged people taking their courses to share their knowledge with others. Today, hundreds of cob houses have been built along the West Coast and across the continent.

Patrick Hennebery's cob cottage could have grown out of the meadow on his Mayne Island property.



PATTI EDGAR PHOTO

Holger Bush, Susa Oñate's partner, enjoys the quietness of his cob home.

curving, 20-square metre abode seems like an unlikely creation for a man with hands rough with 17 years of building many of the Island's timber houses.

Hennebery was attracted to cob building because of the room for creativity in the building process. He has used a piece of driftwood as both an inspiration and a frame for a front door. An ice cream bucket and old glass panes created a row of round windows for light. A tree trunk shaped like a question mark holds up an arching door.

Building with cob can be very cheap and environmentally friendly. Many of the materials can be found in nature or acquired for free at demolition sites or garbage dumps. You don't need to rent heavy machinery and the homes are much smaller than a traditional home, making it easy to build on small pieces of property. Hennebery's cottage, built

to building codes, cost about \$1,000 in materials.

But unless you can find a community of friends, neighbours and like-minded strangers to help with the building, it can be expensive to pay people like Hennebery to do the physical labour. A charming two-story cob house Hennebery built for a neighbour through his company Cobworks (www.cobworks.com) cost the equivalent of a cheaply built house – about \$300 a square metre.

“You read all

the stuff out there about cob and they are talking about the best price scenario,” he says. “But it's not always possible. You need people to want to do the work and the ability to scrounge.”

Although cob homes are small in size, people who step inside them are surprised by the feeling of space. The round shape of Oregon-style cob houses make them appear larger. Plus, because cob is a movable formwork builders often do away with awkward furniture that can be replaced by cob. Shelves are scooped out of the walls. Curved beds and couches are built as extensions of the walls. Cob owners can design the living space to fit their own needs, be it for writing, yoga or coffee with friends.

“Your vision changes a lot when you live in an alternative home,” says Oñate. “You are no longer looking through square windows. When you look through round windows, things change forever.” ■

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