STRAW BAIL HOUSING – *An Open Discussion*

Numerous individuals and groups have asked our opinion and endorsement of the current popular construction of straw bale houses in virtually all parts of the nation. One of our long-held principles is that one must build to the location and with native materials. Because wood is far more plentiful than straw bales in Appalachia, you can surely understand our emphasis on the use of wood products such as cordwood, or our use of slabs from saw mills for siding and numerous other construction needs.

Straw bale buildings are known to function well on the Great Plains or the arid southwest where straw is relatively plentiful and in some places regarded as an agricultural waste. But should such a building be recommended everywhere? This is the question we pose to you the reader. We invited two of our consultants on affordable and safe housing to respond.

David Omick, Building Coordinator at the ***Proyecto Fe Y Esperanza*** *in Alamo, Texas writes:*

"It is implied in much of what is written on straw bale construction that it will result in a house that is substantially easier to build and potentially less expensive than other construction techniques. Readers, particularly those without previous construction experience, do well to bear in mind that straw bale construction is not a technique for building an entire house, but is only a wall building technique. Individuals without previous construction experience may be able to build walls more easily and perhaps less expensively with straw bales than with other materials, but house construction involves much more than just wall building. A house also requires a foundation, floor, wall sheathing, roofing, windows, doors, wiring, plumbing, etc., all requiring resources of time, materials, money, and skill. Walls usually account for only about 20% of the total time and cost of constructing a house."

Ernie Muhly, our ASPI construction consultant at Keedysville, Maryland writes:

"The Straw Bale Dilemma – Construction materials which are considered appropriate for a given bioregion are traditionally used because of their availability, the reasonableness of their cost, and because the skill level of the population is well suited to working with the materials. Throughout history, groups of people have experimented with different building materials and techniques, and those that have survived over time quite often have been incorporated into the accepted practices for an area.

Straw bales have been used at various times by many different groups of people to create shelters. Sometimes they were used because they were the only building material available to provide shelter quickly. Recently straw bales have been viewed as an energy efficient, environmentally safe, relatively inexpensive material for shelter construction. However, since little is known about their long-term viability in different regions with different climates, how appropriate they are for different locations is an unanswered question - and one that needs to be answered.

If you are considering building a straw bale structure there are a number of questions you might want to ask yourself, such as:

> Can I or my family afford to lose the money spent on the structure if it doesn't work in the long run?
>
> Would a hybrid structure such as a timber-frame with straw bale walls be more appropriate if flexibility is a concern?
>
> Is the novelty of a structure more important then the known longevity and sale ability of a more conventional approach?

Whether or not to build a structure out of straw bales really comes down to personal decisions about doing so. If there aren't a lot of long lasting straw bale houses where you live, then building one becomes an experiment with all that entails. If your structure proves successful, then you will have created something that other people can learn from. However, before you build a straw bale house make sure you can live with the possible consequences.

ASPI at this point can neither encourage nor discourage the technology. What we would like to do is create an infobase of the experiences of those who have worked with the technology in our Appalachian region to share with others who would like to learn. If you are building a straw bale structure, or know of someone who is, we would like to receive as many drawings and design information, maps, notes, photographs and other anecdotal information as you would be willing to provide.

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