

# Building as if People Mattered: A Good House by Elke Cole – Cobworks, British Columbia

## Introduction

A good house is like a good pair of shoes – it fits comfortably, with room to wiggle but not too loose to collect debris. It is made of good materials and put together with skill, like smooth leather becomes a beautiful shoe by the hands of a shoemaker. Like a good pair of shoes it ages gracefully, doesn't need constant polishing to look good, and having a few wrinkles just shows how much you love being there. Good shoes support your feet, which in turn support your posture and whole body. A good house supports not only your body but also your soul, giving you refuge and rest. And a good house is timeless as is a good pair of shoes – not giving in to fashion's whim.

## The Fit and the Support

Perhaps we all agree that a comfortable shoe is hard to find. What's comfortable for me won't be for you: we want to find the right fit for each of us. With a shoe that's a little easier to accomplish than with a house design: the house has to fit more than one person most of the time. It is a process of inquiry that, with help of inspiration and creativity, leads to a custom layout. Questions to ask are addressing what happens in the space: what do you do in any of the rooms you wish to create. Drop the labels for a while – let's not assume too much. What do you ask of a space to be able to do what you want to do: does it need to be bright? Warm? What does it feel like to be there? How does one space relate to others? What else might happen in the same space?

Now the typical trap is to make too much space for everything – just in case. A little discomfort here and there is a small price to pay for a cozy place. If your living room feels like a hotel hall it is probably too big. If we can't see into each other's eyes or hear a quiet word when we sit together, we're too far apart. Intimacy and relationship come from bumping into each other. We learn respect by finding boundaries, not by avoiding them.

Think about all the people in the world who live in small one-room houses. They have few belongings, and their house is their shelter and safety. In societies like that people know how to be together – they feel unsafe when no-one else is there to sleep beside them. And they share what there is: I have been humbled a few times by the incredible sense of generosity and hospitality.

So what does it take? How simple can we make it and still have our needs met? A place to sleep: just wide enough and long enough – perhaps not very tall. Make it cozy, with curved edges, let the morning light wake you. Keep out the toxic vibrations of the world: no phone, no electronics. Switch off the electricity so you may rest. Keep your clothes someplace else – perhaps close to the bathing area.

A place to wash or bathe: soothing water runs over your body, the air is warm and there's space for elbows and knees.

What about the toilet you say? Well perhaps it has its own little place: with a little window for a view and some fresh air or some poetry to read.

A place to cook and prepare food: where things are at hand and within easy reach, surfaces open and easy to clean. Here food is at the center: bins and containers to store, dry places and cool ones, stimulating the senses. Food and hospitality go hand in hand – allow for someone to be on the edge of the kitchen to talk or snack, and have the dinner table right close as well.

A place to eat: a table surrounded by seats good for an intimate dinner for two or a party of a few. Inviting conversation, within reach of the stove where the food is prepared. Comfortable enough to linger after the meal is finished.

Finally: a place to hang out – alone or with friends, with a book or a movie. Warm and cozy in winter, bright for doing things, allowing for stuff to tuck away, like favorite books, some candles, pieces of Art. The play place that connects to outside – opens up on warm days, lets the sun in.

You may have a few others, more specific places that you need for work or recreation, or for keeping stuff. I believe the basic needs are very similar for all of us, and if we can come back to a level of simplicity we will be rewarded.

## **The Materials**

Good materials like good food are materials that haven't been highly processed or chemically created – things like Wood, Earth, Stone and Wool. In other parts of the world it looks like Bamboo, Palm-thatch and Clay.

Point #1: Work with what's local, perhaps even on the site. Claysoil is found in abundance in many places and can be used for cob, light clay, earth plaster and floors without needing to be fired or chemically treated. Combined with Straw and Sand, natural pigment and some horse manure it is probably the most versatile material from structure to finish. Earthen homes have a special quality that no one can resist: thick walls, soft edges, often curved shapes with built in seats stir our soul. We want to stop there and stay for a while, let our eyes wander and feel the grounding energy. Earthen walls have the capacity to uptake humidity from the indoor air when there's excess, and release some back when there's not enough, balancing the relative humidity around 50%. This wonderful attribute means that we don't require mechanical systems that deal with excess moisture.

Let's also note here that earth building is fairly easy to learn: people of all ages can participate in workshops and enjoy working together to acquire the skills while making new friends. To understand that you could build your own home is very empowering.

A house is of course more than its walls: it needs a good foundation and a good roof, some insulation, heat, windows and more. For a low ecological footprint foundation we can consider options that combine a concrete footing with a stemwall of stone or earthbag.

There's nothing wrong with using wood if we pay attention to the methods of harvest. Ideally you'd cut down a couple of trees to allow solar access and mill them up to have rafters or floor boards. It's not always that simple though; and you may go to a local mill to source your lumber. Wherever possible it's best to leave the wood round: it's strongest that way.

One of the hardest things to choose is the roofing. Natural choices would be slate, wood shingles or thatch. Back to the question here: what's local? "Living roofs" or "green roofs" are becoming more and more common but still require a waterproof membrane. They improve insulation value, filter rainwater and can grow a crop if built for that.

In a colder climate we want to insulate. Nature offers some choices here too: sheep's wool, dried sea grass, straw, and hemp can be used to fill cavities.

Good materials are all around us if we pay attention and learn to use them.

### **Timelessness and Aging**

Have you ever seen a piece of wood that has been touched thousands of times in passing? The hands slowly polish it resulting in a beautiful patina. When a building is designed carefully with attention to such details, and with the use of good materials, we experience a 'timeless' quality. The designer's reference for this has been *A Pattern Language* in which Christopher Alexander and his team lay out the pieces that in combination make a whole that is both functional and beautiful. The patterns at work in good buildings are independent from technology and new developed things – they address our soul.

Natural Houses have a powerful impact on visitors. There's an impulse to sit down and stay a while. Exhale. People go and touch the walls that are finished with clay plaster, showing bits of straw. Eyes light up when they meet sculpted elements. And the realization that you can do it yourself is the most liberating discovery: Now the good house is within reach.

Placement and relationship to the natural surroundings are at the beginning and the end of the life of a house. When holistic design is applied, the house will be connected to place: garden, access, sun, and trees. When built from local materials we see harmony in color and surface. And if further we can stay close to the original state of a material, it will have the possibility of a graceful ending: compost or back to the earth.

Hopefully this will happen many generations later.

<p>Elke Cole is a Natural House Designer, builder and educator. She lives at O.U.R. Ecovillage on Vancouver Island, Canada, where she coordinates the "Natural Building Skillbuilder " programs and has her consultation and design business <i>Houses That Love You Back</i>. Elke's work takes her around the globe with projects in Africa, India, and Costa Rica. Her designs are based in Permaculture and value relationships between owners, builders and the natural environment presented at the site.</p>
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Elke is one of Cobworks founders. Working with groups on design and leading workshops on building projects has earned Elke a solid reputation in the Natural Building field. Elke is available for consultation, architectural design and to facilitate natural building and design workshops. Please visit [www.elkecole.com](http://www.elkecole.com) , read her blog: [On building and being](#) or email [elke@cobworks.com](mailto:elke@cobworks.com)