

The Story of “Chiara”

By
Jenny Wallace

It is with wondrous delight that I have opened my EBANZ magazine over the years and seen the great renaissance of earth building in New Zealand, particularly since the 1990 seminar at Auckland University led by a young earth enthusiast and architect Miles Allen. At last the merits of earth building using the age-old medium, modern technology and loads of creativity was being proclaimed. My heart leapt. At last, I thought, the young ‘uns will make it happen!



I have lived in my Waiheke house “Chiara” for twelve years but it was a night on thirty years dream before the first brick was made and laid. Back in the late fifties, outside Melbourne, I saw a guy treading clay in a shallow trench for making bricks.--a fleeting glimpse as I passed in a car. Then on arriving in New Zealand in 1961 I saw an article by that courageous pioneer Charlotte Larkin and was later given the original booklet of her remarkable endeavour at Long Beach at Russell. (Her story is retold in Marion Bridge’s “Passion for Earth”).

Having no fixed abode for a lifetime, I discovered my paradise isle, Waiheke, and then it was full on dreamtime. In 1966 an old time resident directed me to a deteriorating one room earth building with an outside chimney purported to have belonged to the artist Francis Hodgkin’s brother, then owned by a Titirangi architect, but after I saw it I never found it again. In 1966 I wrote to the Australian Building Research Station and for 50 Aus. cents received G.F.Middleton’s booklet on EARTH WALL CONSTRUCTION – the earth bible of the time. I still have my well read copy plus lots of gathered information even a U.S. Peace Corps manual advocating (cimra) ram method.

I found a site for two hundred and fifty pounds down, three pounds a week and hopefully, less than five years to pay off, got approval from Waiheke Roads Board to build in adobe, but alas, was not able to live permanently in the shed plus deck which was already on the site because it did not have an eight-foot stud. Then, ill health and lack of funds put my house- to be- on hold. I visited an over one hundred year old adobe cottage in Knights Road Rothsay Bay, Auckland East Coast, after I’d met a carpenter who had cut into the 20 inch thick walls to put in a kitchen cupboard—an interesting find. Instead of the traditional addition of cut straw, the canny Scotch builder had used tea tree brush to great result.

The years passed but not the dream. I commuted to Auckland on the old slow ferries to work and save, saw sunrises and sunsets and dolphins frolicking—all this nourished my dream. Then in the early 1980’s I found a new site with wonderful gulf views, but alas it was half an acre and steep—unthinkable for an earth building but not impossible I thought—ignorance often colours the challenges but if we take the risk, tackle the task with faith the result will succeed our wildest dreams. That is how it was for me. I apologize to you THijs. I did not approach you for I knew you extolled a flat site and would never have let that mad mud woman from Oz go ahead. I was delighted then, when you and Graeme North visited during construction and wholeheartedly backed my project. The article “Glorious Mud” in the August 1992 “Listener” about the house gave strong promotion for EBANZ and I believe the follow up was 300 written inquiries and that both of you in your professional capacity have never looked back. Your dedication and work keep flowing on. You both have my admiration and appreciation. Earth houses are nourishment for the soul. Consider yourselves a pair of preachers!!

In 1991 Miles Allen gave a workshop on adobe, pressed brick and rammed earth on Mike Delamore’s Fossil Bay Waiheke farm which was attended by many alternative lifestylers and me

now aged 61. Miles' enthusiasm was magnetic. In his large display of books showing earth building around the world, I picked up a slim volume with a quote "Build simply in clay and wood" St. Francis of Assisi 1186-1221. Here was the Patron Saint of Ecology giving me the message! (Like Charlotte Larkin, I too was a Franciscan) I closed the book and excitedly said to myself "This house will happen".



I had mulled over my design for ages, gave it to an architect friend Ron Grant to translate, found an enthusiastic and able team of builders, Nick Parker and Andrew McLay who caught my dream and would make it happen. Hugh Morris from the Engineering Department of the University of Auckland advised on soil. We lured John Collins and his offsider in Opotiki to come to Waiheke. Things were moving! First, I had to find somewhere to make the bricks, clay was not available nor space on my steep site. The Mitre 10 boss who knew me over the years of pioneering offered me some reclaimed land

on their site. He also provided pallets for the made bricks to be transported on to my site one pallet at a time. (A logistic and expensive operation). I had 160 tons of dry volcanic red soil delivered, from the Waiheke land once owned by the American Rothschild family and with a great team we turned out 5,000 pressed bricks in six days. Hurray for John Collins and Co—it was a mammoth effort, a dream well caught, hot and dusty work in the peak of January heat but still exhilarating. We had begun.

You all know how labour intensive such a venture is but rewarding. We learnt a lot along the way. My bricks were not high tensile strength without the addition of imported river sand so it was decided to do post and beam construction—macrocarpa posts taking the load bearing with the bricks as the infill. An abandoned telephone post from a swamp in Temuka Bay on the Island was the pivotal post in the living room.

Visiting engineers have since asked me would I have gone ahead with the project had I known what it entailed—building in earth on a steep site with difficult access, extensive retaining walls, extra strength footings and foundations, just the whole logistic "catastrophe"—bricks delivered to roadside, manhandled singly from pallets down to the site, later delivery trucks having to be hauled out by another. For all of that I just smiled and answered "yes". All you would be builders tho' be advised by Thijs—a flat site is the sweet way.



"Chiara" was a happening house. It grew as we went along—the arched doorways, the large round window. I laid the first brick and cut the cornerstone of my bedroom doorway. The boys dubbed me "The Queen Mudder". I was on site, supervising, encouraging, dog-sbodying, each day for the 10 months of "Chiara's" conception to full realisation. I was awed by the workmanship, enthusiasm and total dedication of my duo team and all others involved to achieve my dream. It was a house built with love and I thrilled to know every inch of the way, every nook and cranny. It is a great feeling to be enfolded in Mother Earth. At 62 I was a child playing with mud, ecstatic as my dream castle cum-glass-fronted-cave took shape. Everyday on site I did a joyous dance at the progress—my "Modulus of Rapture" a play on the term "Modulus of Rupture".

It was surprising that progress was made at all so great was the interest from locals and afar that Nick and Andrew were inundated daily by interested onlookers, a couple of sceptics (mainly regular builders) but mostly genuine inquirers wanting the “know how” of building in earth. All this was fanned by “Chiara” being catapulted into the media by being the first new earth house being built in the Auckland area and on Waiheke Island. My dream had been if I could get it approved by authorities by being architecturally drawn from my design and well engineered for the site others could have an easier access to building approval by Local Councils.



Housing is a basic need and EBANZ, steered by Graeme and Thijs, have worked tirelessly to fulfil this need. They and the many others involved are to be congratulated for such dedication in getting the Earth Building Standards approved. The way has been made clear, and now 12 years on since my “Adventure”, wonderful, diverse and creative earth houses are emerging throughout both the North and South Islands.

Back in 1992/3 the interest in earth building was overwhelming, the awakening came with a blast from the media, TV 1’s “Open Home” programme followed by David Cull’s book, TV 3’s “Living Earth” with Annie Whittle, the late Ted Reynolds’ 16 page article in N.Z. Geographic Vol.19 and sundry magazines and articles by eco-builders, organic and permaculture followers.



All this interest meant folk came in droves (I gave up after counting 600 in the Visitors Book) “Chiara” as well as being a house of hospitality, was a house of inspiration to many. I’ve always regretted that later ill health kept me from following up the new wave of earth houses being built and also kept me from sharing in all the A.G.M’s and tours. I was sorry at missing all the wonderful collective enthusiasm, creativity and fun, but thanks to EBANZ magazines I’ve shared in spirit while armchair throned. I was chuffed, the young ‘uns, and not so, had made it happen. Yippee!

Ten years on you’d think the mud in my veins would have turned to slurry, but not so. Spurred by a medical call that I would need to leave “Chiara” before too long—to which I muttered “not plurry likely”—stage 2 was envisaged. If old age was to get me it would be at home. I’d just need to provide private accommodation for a carer in the long term.

Logistically, I had overcome great hurdles realising Stage 1 but this new venture presented mammoth mountains. The existing septic line did not allow “Chiara” to spill down hill to the bush and bay. The only way was to go underneath. Most folk build a basement and put the house on top—this was to be a reverse venture!.



I found a Jack of all trades builder in Gary Brown who was also a welder and had earth moving machinery and although new to earth block building was enthusiastic. I also had a very good engineer in David Bishop who quietly reassured me that it was not impossible but needed to be strictly engineered. They took up the challenge where a doubtful architect had left me.



Firstly we had to demolish the 5,000 gallon concrete tank under the decks looking seaward, excavate back to the original foundations and underpin (one metre at a time closely supervised by the building inspector). Initially, after basic excavation, workers were like miners. Once the new concrete foundations (well drained and waterproofed behind by the latest technology ordered by council regulations), concrete floor laid, 2 huge steel beams installed to carry upstairs decks to be downstairs roofing. Lastly the ready made bricks from Muriwai Sandstone Developments were delivered. (I had visited the Houghtons farm when they were just embarking on their earth brick venture). This time the bricks came on site by a work-horse “dumper”. We were ready now to build an open plan space, wide arches framing the view and a 4 arch cloister along the front of the building, all tucked nicely into the hillside. It exceeded all dreams far more than ever expected.

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Congratulations to all you earth builders who have followed your bliss and with hard yakka have created such exciting innovative homes. I feel very privileged to be the Patron of EBANZ. “Chiara” was a very tiny part in the kick start of a wonderful renaissance in mud brick building. My last words in true royal fashion: “Long may Earth Building reign” says the “Queen Mudder”.

“Chiara” (key-ara). Italian for light. My site high on the hill reflected the ever changing light of bush, sky and sea in a magical way.

Jenny Wallace. September 2004.

P.S. Now that I am lurching towards 75--health good but not so mobility—if any one has any ideas or plans for a pulley seat to get me up my drive I would be thrilled.