

FEBRUARY 2014

It's been three years since I've written a news letter. I told my husband Billy "I simply cannot write another letter saying the house is still not finished, oh but look at all this other cool stuff we did instead." So I am not going to write about the house. I am going to write about the shop, which isn't done either, but we have been working on it for only a few months, not yet embarrassing.

In January 2013 Billy and I dismantled and sold the greenhouse. It went to a company in Little Rock, AR. that does environmental restoration and is being used to grow native grass starts. The greenhouse was never the structure we needed but it was what we had and we used it as well and fully as we could for fourteen years. It had been such an inspiring and integral part of our lives for so long it was bittersweet to take it apart. Removing the greenhouse, however, was the first step in preparing for the new building we have been planning for years, a combination shop-studio.

We have always just hobbled along using whatever we could as a work space, the greenhouse, the shed, and even the house in its early stage. We've never had a proper, enclosed, heatable space to work in. And my rented studio, though obviously functional, is a poorly built, detached, two car garage in the middle of our neighbor's pasture. At only 600 square feet, the studio is very restrictive and challenging to work in. It is also difficult to heat to a comfortable temperature in cold weather

The new building is 1300 square feet and sits on the footprint of the greenhouse, just ten feet west of the house. Roughly half of it will be shop and half pottery studio. The building will not be physically divided. This openness will allow a flexibility of the work spaces as needed. For the walls we used a block called Faswall. The blocks resemble cinder blocks but are 2' long by 1' deep by 8" tall and weigh about 30 pounds. They are made from chipped, recycled pallets and Portland cement. The blocks are dry-stacked with re-bar running vertically and horizontally, then poured full of concrete.

The Faswall forms have several advantages for us. The R-value is 25. The blocks can have a direct flame on them for four hours before they burn, an important consideration for the kiln area. The material of the block allows for attachments for cabinets and shelves to be made anyplace on the wall. They are very do-it-yourselfer friendly. No special skills or tools are required to stack them and they can be exposed to the weather for years and not be damaged.

This is a sharp contrast to the straw bales for the house which had to be constantly protected from moisture with plastic sheeting until we got the first layer of mud on them.

The bulldozer operator we hired began leveling the ground for the shop in mid-June. Our hope was to have the floor slab poured the end of June, and begin stacking block mid-July when we got home from our Wyoming shows. Mother Nature, however, didn't give a hoowee about our personal plans.

We were constantly being shut down by the rain. The material used to stabilize and level the ground under the slab is a clay-based soil with a lot of limestone in it. Because it is clay, it packs down well and gets really hard, creating a good, solid, void-less base. But because it is clay, it gets unmanageably sticky and takes forever to dry after it gets wet.

First it was too wet to dig the base material and haul to our site. Then it was too wet to spread out and level. Then the footing could not be dug. And, surprisingly, the contractors we hired to do the dirt and concrete work were not just sitting around waiting for our little world to dry out. Even when there was a good working window for us, they were catching up on other delayed jobs.

Although we don't anticipate ever making the shop into a house, we did go ahead and install plumbing beneath the slab so the space could be converted into a two bedroom, two bath home without having to break out large areas of the concrete floor. We took careful measurements and made schematics so someone could hammer out the concrete in very precise spots to find hookups for drains. When we installed the tubing for radiant heat in the slab, we kept it well clear of these drain areas so the tubing would not be damaged if there was a future conversion.

We both thought the pre plumbing was a good idea but it did delay pouring the slab by another month, not the plumbing work itself, but the time waiting for things to dry out so we could do the work.

At two different times Billy and I spent about three hours building a tent using the poles from our show tent and plastic salvaged from the greenhouse to protect the pad from rain. It was a huge relief to finally have the floor poured in early October. The Faswall block arrived on a semi truck from Oregon two days after the slab was done.

At this point we were a good three months behind and the time we had set aside specifically for this project was long gone. Working at the studio, Christmas shows, an ice storm topped by ten inches of snow followed by another ice storm further delayed construction.

By Christmas, however, we had a good start on stacking the block. From the time we had decided on the Faswall block for the shop, I had fantasized about working with Billy stacking block, watching the walls go up and define the space. For me, all of that other stuff was just madness and frustration. Work hard all day on plumbing then work hard the next day to cover it in dirt, acchh! But work hard all day stacking block and your effort sits right there in front of you; very satisfying.

We finished stacking the block and had the walls filled with concrete on January 16. The shop was now a very real and solid thing. Twenty-five roof trusses, weighing 200 pounds each, were delivered the next day. Our efforts since have been devoted to erecting trusses. This has been a huge educational eye-opener for me. I had no idea how physically difficult and time consuming this phase would be. I was expressing my frustration at the slow pace one evening when Billy rightly pointed out, "If we were a four or five man, experienced, framing crew this would be slow, but we are two clueless, middle-aged people, learning as we go. We are doing great!".

I imagine our main job will always be making and selling pottery, but we anticipate a time when we will begin to work our land more to its potential. We'll harvest timber, raise livestock and crops to sell, including bamboo. That is when the true value of the shop will be realized. We see another full year in my current studio, but when all the building and moving is done, having a studio on our place will be the fulfilment of a long held dream.

Photos of the shop are in the HOUSE section of the web site. We added a few updated photos of the house, though we still need to build kitchen cabinets (first project in the new shop) and finish the storage unit for the house to be completed.

You can find our show schedule on our web site under the SHOWS heading. The HOUSE section lets you see the progress of our construction projects, and the GALLERY has photos of our pottery.

We are looking forward to this year's show season. We hope to see you soon and we love hearing from you any time.

Sincerely,

Rebecca & Billy

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