

:: Today is September 16, 2005

**Development**

**Gobi adobe** (TheUBPost, 08 Sep 2005 01:40 pm. 0 comments)



By Ch.Sumiya

From steel and concrete, the last twenty years has seen a subtle yet important shift to adobe mud bricks in many parts of the world. It is no longer the architecture for the poor, the poetics of mud is finding converts in the both developing and developed countries. The ubiquitous material - 70 percent sand and 30 percent clay - has been used for centuries throughout the world.

Even in Mongolia, adobe had a handsome presence in early Buddhist monasteries before they were razed to the ground in the Soviet era. There are also many old existing structures in a need of repair and many adobe ruins can be seen as one drives to Bayanlig soum of Bayankhongor aimag, about 700 km southwest of Ulaanbaatar and right in the heart of Gobi desert. Adobe was used there not just because it was available but also because of its very good thermal quality. It is warm in winter and cool in summer, if it is built with the right alignment to the sun.

Amidst all the old adobe ruins in Bayanlig soum, a father and son team from Nepal is working to introduce adobe, known locally as shavar ger (mud ger) housing. Their specific approach uses no wood in the structure of the building, which is an important factor in this part of the country, where there is very little timber.

Basanta Adhikary, an agronomist from DED (German Development Service) with funding from IPECON/NZNI (Initiative for People-Centered Conservation/New Zealand Nature Institute) and Nripal Adhikary, a designer-builder who has worked with adobe in New Mexico, United States, are initiating an adobe revival project. This two-person team is building a community center seven kilometers from the center of Bayanlig soum, to be used by local vegetable farmers.

The Nepalese team is teaching the farming community how to make dome-shaped adobe buildings. Structures like this have been used in Africa, West Asia and Europe for centuries and work by utilizing the compressive strength of adobe bricks built in a catenary shape. This project seems to be very successful in the community, because it preserves the integrity of the principal shape of a ger and once learnt, the construction technique is easy to repeat.

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Public participation has been phenomenal, as in three days the local people made 1,500 bricks. People came from other soums and rural areas just to see how a roof can be built without a single piece of wood. "In the beginning, when Basanta said he would build a ger with a woodless roof, we hardly believed it. Now, we know that a woodless roof can work" said Ts.Gerel, a vegetable farmer from the community.

The community's participation became even more festive as people plastered the adobe building with camel manure, straw, sand and clay. The finished building is five meters in diameter, and three meters in height. Despite initial skepticism about the construction method, the community is now planning on building another adobe dome themselves.

There are a number of reasons why people are interested in this technique. As Mongolia has opened up to the market economy, felt (the traditional material used for insulation of gers) is being exported to the world market, thus making it very expensive for many Mongolians. If this trend continues, in a few years gers may no longer be affordable for those on lower incomes.

As well as constructing the adobe building, the community farmers are working hard to make themselves self-sufficient in farming. Mr. Basanta Adhikary has worked in this area for the last three years, using many innovative techniques to improve yields. Among the many things he is proud of is the planting of seabuckthorn in Bayankhongor aimag, which is expected to be harvested for the first time next year.

"It is really hard to farm in the Gobi, it is like pouring water on to the sand. However, the seabuckthorn is showing very encouraging signs and we are very excited about it. These berries are very appropriate to the terrain, because they have a high nutritional value. They are a perennial crop, needless to say organic and importantly they are marketable. This has been possible because of the drip irrigation system we introduced last year," said Mr. Adhikary.

Last year, Mr. Basanta Adhikary traveled together with farmers from the community to the western aimags of Khovd and Uvs, where seabuckthorn is one of the locally grown crops that has been sold successfully. From Uvs aimag, they bought several hundred seabuckthorn seedlings and planted them in Bayanlig soum.

"I heard that the sought-after seabuckthorn juice, especially made in Uvs aimag, can seldom be found in the capital city Ulaanbaatar. From next year, we hope that we can provide Ulaanbaatar with 100 percent [pure] seabuckthorn juice. Bayankhongor has the great advantage of being closer to Ulaanbaatar than Uvs aimag," said Gerel.

Local residents also have ambitious ideas inspired by the adobe revival. Once the Bayanlig farmers had learnt how to make adobe bricks, they started thinking about making them for commercial sale. "We can start producing adobe bricks here and sell them to people. I believe that there is good market for it because it will be cheaper than bricks brought from the city [Ulaanbaatar]," said J.Purevsambu, a local farmer.

In the winter, when the farmers have less work to do, there will be training sessions hosted in the adobe ger they built. "We would like to learn how to make pickled vegetables, shoes and mattresses to improve our living standards," said Gerel.

The local people hope eventually to build a model adobe village with proper sanitation, good quality storage for the produce and a reliable water supply, to complement their farming so that Bayanlig soum center becomes a self-sustaining and affluent settlement.

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Ulaanbaatar, MN

30 °F / -1 °C

Light Snow  
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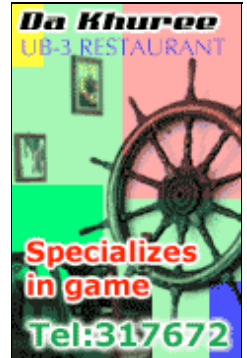
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