

The background of the page is a photograph of an architectural drawing board. A yellow ruler with black markings is positioned diagonally across the top left. Several rolls of white architectural blueprints are scattered across the board, showing various technical drawings and measurements. The scene is lit from above, creating soft shadows and highlighting the textures of the paper and the ruler.

## THE DRAWING BOARD: architecture up close and personal

IN THE FIRST OF A NEW SERIES OF COLUMNS LOOKING AT ARCHITECTURE  
IN CORNWALL, JOHN BRYANT ASKS: WHAT IS AN ECO-HOUSE?

It seems as if eco-related products and information are everywhere at the moment. You don't have to walk very far on the high street before you see something in a shop window that is advertising eco-credentials. But what is your personal perception of an 'eco-house' or an 'environmentally-friendly' building?

To some of us it is simply a building that requires little heating, compared with that 1950s' house which, albeit that double glazing and loft insulation have been installed, is still costing you a fortune in gas to heat in the winter months. To others it means a house made from natural ecological materials such as straw and replenished timber resources, so that the whole building breathes naturally.


Others of us probably lie somewhere between these two opinions. And in truth there isn't, right now, a right or wrong answer. However, there are more and more self-build eco-projects which are being built for a similar cost to that of a traditional build.

The other perception is that people generally seem to feel that if they have an eco-new build or extension it will look whacky in some way due to the materials used. In reality, though, you can design a house to look as standard or more architecturally interesting as you like. What's required is letting your designer help and guide you on the materials you can use to create your desired look, feel and style.

If you really want to build more traditionally then there are other materials available now with lower embodied energy, including recycled concrete blocks. Using recycled concrete blocks could mean that potentially four houses could be built with the same embodied energy, compared with one house using conventional methods. This is not a full eco-option for building but, if people were at least starting to consider these options (which are easily implemented by local trusted builders), it is at least a step in the right direction.

The main thing is that we consider new eco-technologies, because these have better environmental credentials than traditionally-built buildings. All new buildings have the opportunity to be built as cheaply as they are now using more environmentally-friendly techniques.

Everyone is aware of the problems we face with greenhouse gases and fossil fuels and we should try and take responsibility where we can. Better yet, doing so can save you money, particularly in the heating of these buildings given the seemingly constant increase in fuel prices. And remember, self-sufficiency is not a new way of living or thinking. Tom and Barbara in the 1970s TV show *The Good Life* were not as crazy as their next door neighbours thought. Speaking personally, my own father recently opined: "All this organic stuff and self-sufficiency talk is something my grandfather did naturally. He didn't think twice about it."

It's also useful to think of unusual materials, which we can use in an eco-build. Take straw, for example, of which there is an abundance. It is claimed in the farming community in the UK that nearly half a million buildings could be made from straw, if we bothered to consider this material for building. So consider this when you first thought of straw bale as a construction method you once saw on *Grand Designs* all those years back. Sure, you may have thought, 'that will never catch on'. But now think of those people who have successfully built from straw, right here in Cornwall. Think of our grandfathers and their fathers, who were building using cob, a not dissimilar natural building technique. Was this such a crazy way to build? And if not, why not look at alternative possibilities yourself? 

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