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Glamorized Mud Huts

Whitney Sager
Iowa State University

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Imagine taking a mud hut and glamorizing it—transforming what used to be a simple, one-room dwelling into a multi-story home with modern appliances and decorations. That's what companies such as Earth Block, Inc. and Midwest Earth Builders aim to do. In keeping with the sustainability trend that is spreading across the United States, these companies build houses, barns, storage buildings and other structures out of Compressed Earth Blocks (CEBs). The blocks are composed of the clay and sand in the surrounding area where the structure is being built, according to Midwest Earth Builders' website.

"These masonry blocks are hydraulically pressed instead of fired like a traditional brick and therefore require less energy to manufacture," says Dan Johnson, owner and operator of Midwest Earth Builders.

Some of the advantages these modern mud huts have over the typical wood-frame house include being fire- and pest-resistant, virtually soundproof, non-toxic, and environmentally friendly. "CEBs allow for a great deal of architectural freedom and can be used in walls, arches, curved walls, domes, and vaults," Johnson says. "They can be left unfinished or finished with beautiful plasters and paints." As with many other building products, CEBs come with some disadvantages. For one, they take longer to build than a typical wood-frame structure. For another, they cost more to build than a wood-frame structure.

"We often stabilize our blocks with approximately six percent Portland cement to make the blocks more water resistant," Johnson says.

Due to the increased amount of labor required to build a CEB structure, they typically cost more to build than a wood-frame structure. "Compressed Earth Block construction typically costs about fifteen to twenty percent more on wall cost than standard wood frame," Johnson says.

CEB structures can be built almost anywhere. Johnson said as long as the CEB structures are built properly, they can withstand both hot and cold climates.

"You can build good CEB homes and you can build bad ones, just like any other type of building. For a CEB home to perform well in a cold climate like Iowa and Wisconsin, you need to include insulation into the wall design," Johnson said.

For more information on Midwest Earth Builders, visit midwestearthbuilders.com.