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Down and Dirty

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Alan S. Weiner for The New York Times

Sukita Crimmel, a "natural builder" in Portland, Ore., installs a dirt floor for a homeowner willing to forgo more traditional floorings like carpet or hardwood.

By DAVID GELLES Published: February 8, 2007

EL CERRITO, Calif.

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EARLY one Saturday morning in January, Kevin Rowell dumped a bucket of dark mud on the floor of his big south-facing bedroom. It landed with a plop, spreading out and merging with a blanket of wet earth that already extended across much of the room. On his knees, Mr. Rowell took a trowel to the pile, nudging it this way and that until the mud was roughly level and about an inch and a half deep.

As Mr. Rowell finished smoothing that section, his wife,

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Michael Brands for The New York Times

Talmath Lakai put a dirt floor in a multimillion-dollar house in Aspen, Colo.

Marisha Farnsworth, appeared at the door and handed him another bucket of mud. A moment later, another plop, and the process continued. The mud was expanding, and would soon cover the entire floor .

“It’s beautiful,” said Mr. Rowell, 28, as he stood back to take in the whole room. “It’s just what we wanted.”

Mr. Rowell and Ms. Farnsworth, 26, were working with a dozen friends to install a dirt floor — an “earthen floor,” as it is known — in their newly purchased 50-year-old home in this Oakland suburb.

The floor — which, in addition to the basic ingredient, included lime and sand, two classic components of concrete — would take a few weeks to dry, a period when the couple would camp out in their living room. But once sealed with a mixture of linseed oil and beeswax, it would theoretically be firm and water-repellent. Fans of such floors say that soapy water will clean them without turning them to mud, and that another coat of oil can renew the shine.

The couple are part of a new breed of environmentally conscious homeowners who are willing to forgo traditional floorings like hardwood, carpeting and concrete for the supposed benefits of earthen floors: a reduction in heating costs and environmental impact and, at least in the eyes of some, an improvement in looks.

They are part of a small movement interested in “natural building” on the fringes of green architecture. But they consider green architecture to be overly focused on energy efficiency, while they are concerned with the eco-friendliness of the entire process. The idea, according to Lloyd Kahn, a former shelter editor of the Whole Earth Catalog, is to use “materials that have as little processing as possible, like dirt, straw and bamboo.”

It is hardly a new or chic movement: millions of poor people around the globe use natural materials like dirt for their homes whether they want to or not. But with the growing environmental awareness in this country, Mr. Kahn said, there is greater interest in natural building materials like dirt.

Aesthetically, earthen floors are “really special,” said Frank Meyer, a natural builder who has installed 15 in Austin, Tex. “After a while they look like an old cracked leather couch,” he said. “When people walk in, they don’t say, ‘Oh, nice floor.’ Everyone gets down on their hands and knees to admire it.” Mr. Meyer has used natural pigment to create designs in some floors, and he said some builders add the blood of oxen for maroon coloration.

Some aficionados see a spiritual aspect to earthen floors, too. Mr. Rowell said his floor would help create a “sacred space.” Mr. Meyer agreed. “I think people are craving the

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earth," he said. "They want to be more primal. How much more primal can you get than dirt?"

Michael G. Smith, a natural builder who teaches workshops on installing earthen floors at the Emerald Earth Sanctuary in Boonville, Calif., said that demand for dirt floors is growing quickly. Of course, they are still extremely rare. He estimated that a few hundred, or perhaps a few thousand, have been installed around the country.

He has installed a dozen himself for clients over several years, and said that the number of earthen building workshops like his have increased. Ten years ago, there were at most four people offering them in California, he said, and "now there are 20-plus."

Jack Stephens, the executive director of the Natural Building Network, which was founded in 2005, said that its database now includes several thousand builders.

In Portland, Ore., Sukita Crimmel is focusing her natural building firm, From These Hands, on the design and construction of earthen floors. After installing just one or two each year over a seven-year period, she already has contracts to do at least four in 2007. And in Crestone, Colo., Erin and Talmath Lakai, who run a natural building company called MudCrafters, say they have gone from installing four or five floors a year to a planned 12 in 2007. "We're fully booked," Ms. Lakai said, "and we're booking two years out from now."

But lest anyone get the wrong impression, dirt is neither easy nor trouble-free — nor is it entirely practical, as women who wear pointy four-inch heels will find.

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