



# The Little House Stands on the Prairie

---

*Beli Liu describes a site-specific installation/sculpture project in Nebraska, USA*

---



*Top: The morning of the final day of construction on the little house.*

*Above: Adobe bricks being made by pressing the mixture of clay, sand and straw into a four-brick mould of metal-lined wood frame.*

TWO DAYS BEFORE I LEFT THE ART FARM in 2004, I sat in the moonlight – behind me was the little house, near completion, created using hand-made adobe bricks. Scaffolding, the tractor, hammers, drills, and empty pallets that once held the bricks surrounded the house. In the silence of the night, my memory took me back to years ago, to a small village in the northern province of Jilin in China. The houses there were made of clay and straw; the side of the house looked like the shape of a mountain, which we called the ‘mountain wall’. In one of these houses, I was born to my young parents, who were among the youth sent to rural villages for the cause of China’s Cultural Revolution. The little house that stands on the prairie at Art Farm in Nebraska is a replica of my parents’ handbuilt home.

When I received the artist residency brochure from Art Farm in Marquette, Nebraska, one image in the brochure caught my eye – a clay mountain that is more than 5m (20 ft tall), and its caption saying “370 tons of free clay for artists who enjoy working with it.” A soil and straw house, like the one I was born in, came to my mind right there and then, after years of carrying it in my mind while I traveled across the globe, unconscious of its existence. I immediately started a conversation with my father about the building of a clay and straw house on the prairie of Art Farm. As an engineer and having built many houses of this kind in the village including our own, his knowledge and experience was my most valuable resource for the engineering of the little house: from the



recipe of the bricks – the ratio of yellow soil (clay), sand, straw, to the traditional wood framework, to roof construction and thatching.

There is really no word like ‘adobe’ in the Chinese language. People from the northern Chinese villages called clay ‘yellow soil’ or ‘sticky soil’. The bricks made from clay and straw are called ‘soil/mud bricks’. A house made of these bricks has no specialised name such as ‘adobe house’, but merely a soil and straw house. A rectangular-shaped house with overhanging eaves traces back to the Neolithic site of Banpo, YangShao culture of approximately 6000 BC in northern China. These structures already show evidence of the use of mortise and tendon, and the use of mud/clay surrounding a wooden structure.

Because of the materials scarcity during periods of political climate shifts in China, people in villages depended on whatever humble materials were available locally and easily accessible to build their homes. It is similar to the pioneer’s experience when they first ventured into the Great Plains of America. With no trees to harvest for lumber or stones to collect as building material, the need of shelter and home led them to discover the use of sod. Known as ‘Nebraska bricks,’ slabs of soil held together by the dense roots of prairie grasses was ploughed from the ground in long strips, then cut into 1 m (3 ft) long sections, and used as bricks for building the sod houses.

An early sod house was no larger than 2.1 x 4.2 m (7 x 14 ft), close in size to the little house at Art Farm. These similarities brought the little house closer to the foreign land it is standing on. This is maybe why so many people came to watch, examine, experience, and even lend their hands for the building. Many came with their stories of sod houses of the frontier. Many asked questions about the Chinese house and its people.

Many drew a comparison about the physical characteristic of sod houses and the little house, but also the needs for shelter of people from different lands, times and cultures, and their efforts of building a home. The little house brought much curiosity about other cultures, and for their own heritage. And I wondered how it was being viewed by an audience beyond the traditional art community – as an architectural structure, a foreign dwelling, an aesthetic experience or an universal symbol that is familiar and intrinsic to people?

The first six weeks of my two months’ stay at Art Farm were dedicated to adobe brick making. The variety and quantity of available materials at Art Farm provided all I needed for making the bricks: the worksite was set right next to the clay mountain; 60 7.2 m (24 ft) long wooden planks, from Art Farm’s collection of reclaimed building materials, were transported to the site to be used as support for the bricks; multiple-brick moulds with sheet metal



*Top: The clay mountain at Art Farm – 370 tons of excavated clay for artists who enjoy working with it.*

*Centre: Bricks are stored on covered wood planks to control the drying process.*

*Above: A traditional Chinese wood pole framework constructed to provide a reference for laying the bricks and for supporting the roof. Also installed is the window and doorframe.*





*Salvaged lath from old barns is used to provide a base for applying the grass thatching roofing.*



*Native grasses are cut and bundled into approximately 60 cm (2 ft) square shingles for thatching the roof. They are layered using a wet clay and lime mortar over the lath. This long strip is about to be raised for the ridge.*



*American newspaper articles on China are pasted on to interior walls. The horizontal platform is the adobe brick bed, (Kang), also covered with paper.*

lining was fabricated in the woodshop; straw was harvested from the neighbour's wheat field; 12 tonnes of sand was delivered from the Platte River three miles away. The brick-making session began – a mixture of clay, sand and chopped straw was mixed in a mortar mixer then scooped into the brick molds, packed by hand, and released on to the stacked planks to dry. Many volunteers helped with the making of the first batch of bricks over a weekend with an exiting production of nearly 400 bricks, each 29 x 29 cm (11.5 x 11.5 in) 11 cm (4.5 in) in thickness. Following that weekend, I started my solo brick making days, with an average production of 25 bricks per day. I soon learnt that the first few days of newly made bricks needed intensive care – direct exposure to sunlight caused cracking, too much wind will dry the bricks too rapidly and caused cracking, too much moisture trapped under cover also caused cracking. As the brick making continued, earlier made bricks were simultaneously transferred on to pallets and lined up on edge to allow air circulation, and gently turned from side to side several times during the drying process. Each evening I ended the day with a couple of hours of covering and adjusting the sun shades and plastic sheets over the newly made bricks as well as the drier bricks; each morning I started the day with uncovering and checking to see if frequent night rains caused any stress to these precious bricks.

In China's villages, the building of a new house is the most celebrated event in one's life; an effort of an entire family's many years' hard work and savings. A new house is usually built for a young son of the household, in preparation for his new family. Young men all around the village would be invited to work on the building of a new house, and every man would have the chance to build many of their neighbour's homes until they saved enough for their own to be built. In a distant land across the ocean, I, as a woman and a daughter, was about to build a house of my own.

The building of the little house at Art Farm took about two weeks. Like my parents and ancestors in northern China, I was fortunate to have the help of many on the building of the little house – from fellow artists to Art Farm staff; to a family that came from a two hour drive away; to teachers and their elementary students. I would rise with the sun, walk across the field through grass damp with morning dew, and start a day's work in the bright summer sun, much like



Nebraska pioneers and my ancestors on their Northern China farm. At dusk, I would gather tools and water jugs and return with mud covered arms and shoes. Each day as I worked alongside people who came to help, laying bricks, mixing clay mortar, weaving the grass shingles and thatching the roof, I thought of how my parents built their first soil and straw house with their neighbours, and how the whole village shared the joy of creating a new home.

In these rural northern Chinese homes, people pasted newspaper as wallpaper to brighten the interior, and to prevent dust from falling from the wall surface. Following this tradition, I collected American newspaper articles on China from papers such as *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and local newspapers. The articles give glimpses of how the US views China today, now preserved in the little house as long as it stands on the prairie of Nebraska. After pasting these newspaper articles, I spent my last night at Art Farm on the platform bed (kang) in the house, and I was home.

The simple double-sloped rectangular houses are found all over the world, from ancient to modern, from east to west. Despite the difference of time, geography and culture, this simple structure stands as shelter for people: an archetypal symbol of place – a home. The house stands on the prairie as I travel on. It is my home that I created and then left behind, yet it completed my journey from China to the US. This is my gift to my parents who had to leave their house behind when they left the village and returned to the city. The little house stands on the prairie on its own, facing south to the cornfield, and begins its approximately 30-year life span in the weather of the Great Plains as it slowly returns to the earth that it came from.

#### REFERENCES:

1. Knapp, Ronald G. *China's Old Dwellings*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2000.
2. Knapp, Ronald G. *China's Traditional Rural Architecture*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1986.
3. Dick, Everett Newfon. *The Sod-House Frontier*, University of Nebraska Press, 1979
4. Luebke, Frederick C. *Nebraska, An Illustrated History*, University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

---

Beili Liu is an installation artist. She moved from China to the US in 1995, and now works and lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA.



*The little house has one door and one window, facing south and turns its back to the north winter wind and storm. It is created using handmade adobe bricks and measures 2.1 x 4.2 x 3 m. Above: The sidewall of the traditional Chinese adobe house would be called 'mountain wall', its reference to its shape resembling a mountain peak.*