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God gave the fish the seas, the birds the trees. Did he give us 30-year mortgages? Did he intend that for us? No way! -- Joseph the Builder

Lots of people were intrigued by the classified ad Joseph placed this spring in the newspaper.

Joseph, a former building contractor who now wears dreadlocks and rails against "meat eaters," was looking for a tenant. His rental had no running water, no electricity, no bathroom. And a visitor would have to stoop or crawl to get through the tear-shaped front door.

Joseph built the primitive house from orange clay dug from a hill on his remote property in East San Diego County. The one-room dwelling, which looks like a dried-up igloo, is an important part of Joseph's ultimate dream.

He wants to see his no-cost clay houses dotting savannas, deserts and rain forests in Third World countries, where many impoverished people are living without shelter.

To spread the word, the Brooklyn native, who has as much use for shoes as he does his last name, needs cash. So he began renting out some of the curious dwellings he's built on his four acres of tangled brush, wildflowers and dry creekbed.

He became a landlord 1 1/2 years ago when he rented his four-story wooden "pagoda" to a married couple who had grown weary of their apartment near University Towne Centre. (Joseph told the couple to pay whatever amount they felt comfortable with.)

After placing the ad for the clay hut this spring, he turned away several serious applicants before selecting Dawn, a 19-year-old, junior-college student from San Carlos (Like Joseph, Dawn didn't want her last name used, to protect her privacy.)

"The clay house is like a nest," marveled Dawn, who wanted to move out of her parents' home when she became pregnant. "As soon as I saw it, I knew this is the way to live."

The couple who rent the pagoda are equally thrilled with their modest glass and wood house, which sits in a nest of trees. David Kern, a respiratory therapist, and his wife, Brenda, a former dental assistant, sold their stereo, television, bikes, furniture and just about everything else before the move.

"We've adjusted really well," said Brenda, 30, who has learned to grow wheat grass and weave bulrush mats since moving to her version of Walden's Pond. "We can do whatever we want to out here."

Joseph intentionally left out the creature comforts in his five dwellings. Mismatched candles and kerosene lamps are scattered throughout the rustic hideaways, and showers are taken outside under water pouches hanging from tree limbs.

The tenants are just some of the eclectic admirers who've been attracted by Joseph's secluded laboratory of alternative living. He is teaching some of them how to make dwellings from fermented clay mixed with straw and dashes of aloe vera and cactus. In exchange, his students donate a little money to his cause.

"Hopefully with the proceeds," Joseph said, "we can go around the world building villages of wind, earth and fire."

Selling the idea

So far, however, Joseph has had trouble selling his ideas on low- cost housing for the poor to the world beyond. He took his message to Jamaica and he visited Israel during the Persian Gulf War.

He believed the clay houses were the answer for a nation struggling to house the overwhelming number of Russian and Ethiopian Jews who have poured into Israel in recent years.

Joseph arrived in Jamaica hauling sacks of beans and grain, fishing hooks and line for the poor. He lived in the bush and dressed as the peasants did, barefoot and bare-chested.

He didn't change his attire when he met with Jamaica housing authorities and Peace Corps volunteers. Joseph recalls with disdain that they were replacing destroyed homes with structures made of concrete and steel. Joseph's arguments didn't convert any officials.

"They didn't want to hear me," Joseph complained. "It's very frustrating. I really believe if I found the answer for cancer, I'd have to go out of my way" to convince people.

The reception wasn't much better in Israel, where workers were assembling prefabricated houses shipped from the United States. Government housing officials never responded to him, but the mayor of Arad offered to give him a plot of land and two workers for two months, Joseph recalled. He turned down the offer, saying it would take six months to build a clay house.

Nonetheless, Joseph has set new sights on Costa Rica, a progressive Central American country known for its pacifism and a former president who won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Joseph would like volunteers to help him with his Costa Rica project. (For information, write 1751 W. Citracado, Escondido, CA 92024).

Global passion

With Joseph, whose tan is as dark as a grocery bag, looks can be deceiving. He lets squirrels and hummingbirds scamper and flit through his cabin of recycled wood, and he seems to favor wearing what appears to be faded pajama bottoms. But he is a driven man who is passionate

about his causes. Whether it be about the sins of society, which he calls Babylon, or restaurants that serve vegetarian pizza without soy cheese.

"He will lecture until your ears melt," said Kazim Konyar, an assistant economics professor at California State University in San Bernardino, who had dropped in for a visit.

Konyar knew Joseph when he was an intense businessman, smoking three packs of cigarettes a day. He worked for Joseph during college, building room additions, patio covers and retaining walls. He recalled that Joseph always bid higher than other contractors, but he inevitably got the job because of his craftsmanship.

It was while Joseph was constructing a luxury home overlooking Lake Hodges in Escondido more than 10 years ago that he decided to bail out of society. It happened, Joseph remembers, while he waited for a bulldozer to arrive.

"I sat with the squirrels and heard the sounds of the birds and I said to myself, `This is crazy, Joe!' "

With the proceeds from the sale of the home, Joseph bought the acreage in East County.

Today, he has no use for places like Home Depot when he dreams about his clay global villages. His building materials are in the ground; in fact, he ferments the watered down clay in pits near his front door. The concoctions covered with boards smell like cow dung.

Last month, he had a hut-warming party for his latest clay structure. Joseph and his friends slathered themselves with wet clay to protect themselves as they stoked an intense fire inside the house to turn the clay into ceramic. To feed the hungry volunteers, Joseph cooked tofu hot dogs, eggplant pancakes and potato fritattas on the piping-hot exterior.

"I'm going to be doing more everywhere in the world," Joseph promised. "Nothing is going to stop me."

Credit: LYNN O'SHAUGHNESSY is a San Diego free-lance writer.