

San Diego Union-Tribune

July 12, 2004

DEHESA -- Iseppi Diliberti is a man of the elements. All he needs to build the mud houses on his tree-covered property are earth, air, fire and water.

From the earth, he gets clay, sand and straw with which he builds his dome-shaped structures. Water is mixed with the clay and then he fashions by hand the honeycomb bricks that form the walls. Each brick is dried in the air, then fired over a huge open flame.

But San Diego County officials put a stop to that after Diliberti's neighbors complained about the fires and the structures. Although his structures were declared to be art and allowed to stand, he can't live in them or have a fire without a burn permit. He lives instead in a camper truck on the property, next to his mud sculptures.

Up the hill from Diliberti's home on Dehesa Ranch Road, Jimmy Valentine sits outside his cramped motor home. Valentine lost his home of 10 years in the October wildfires and is waiting for work to be completed on its replacement.

Valentine, producer of Roger Hedgecock's radio show, has had several confrontations with Diliberti over the fires, fearing that a blaze could spread through the canyon where they live. But Valentine said he has a certain empathy for Diliberti.

"He's a man of the land," Valentine said. "What's happening is that civilization is coming to his doorstep."

Diliberti's salt-and-pepper hair hangs down in dreadlocks, and his shaggy beard reaches the middle of his chest. He's missing some of his front teeth, and often goes barefoot as he works on his property. Diliberti said he has no use for a comb, scissors or mirror.

He has owned his four acres of property in rural East County since 1979. He said he changed his lifestyle after he injured his back in 1966 while serving as a Marine in Vietnam.

"I decided I didn't have to work. The things I was working for I didn't need," he said. "I was living a conventional lifestyle and I decided to switch. It was getting too toxic."

He now lives simply. He has no phone, electricity or toilet on his property. He is a vegetarian, and he said he gets much of his food from his fruit trees.

He is a Rastafarian, the faith associated with Jamaican reggae artist Bob Marley.

"We don't believe in church. We believe our temple is right here," Diliberti said, putting his hand on his heart.

He declined to say how old he is, other than to note that he can still ride his mountain bicycle from here to Yosemite National Park.

"I don't deal with age," he said. "I gave that up a long time ago."

Diliberti has five children ranging in age from two months to 37 years old. None of his children live with him at the property. He said his grown children have a modern lifestyle.

"They prefer to have the modern amenities -- the washer and dryer and water heater that breaks every three years. It's funny -- my water heater never breaks," he said, as he pointed to the sun.

He built his first house out of clay and straw 13 years ago, with no training other than his experience as a carpenter. Diliberti had no blueprint or plans and said he made a million mistakes during the nine months he worked on the project.

"My challenge was not to go to the store for anything and to do it as simply as I could from what I had here," he said. "We don't need to go to Timbuktu to get our building materials when it's right under our feet."

He said he carried water from his well in a five-gallon bucket he placed on his head.

"If I went from the well to the clay with my bucket and I didn't spill any water, then I had a good day," he said.

The dome collapsed, but Diliberti said he learned from his mistakes. He's since built a three-room building out of clay, a 14-foot-high dome and a smaller structure he uses as a sweat lodge.

The clay structures have tiled floors that Diliberti said were given by friends or he collected from scrap. Inside the dome, each 4-inch-thick mud brick has a swirled design or an occasional child's handprint on its face. Arched windows and two 4-foot-high arched doors let in light and a cool breeze.

Diliberti sees the buildings as the ultimate in safe construction -- fireproof, waterproof and earthquake-proof -- and he wants to build a village of them somewhere.

He also constructed a treehouse with windows on all sides and a hardwood floor. He said he used to have a pagoda that he built, but he was ordered to take it down.

Diliberti didn't get building permits for any of his constructions, and that got him in trouble with his neighbors and county officials. He was charged with violating county building codes, a misdemeanor.

"I'm at a crossroads in my life where I don't know what to do. Going through red tape really disturbs my creativity," he said. "If I get a permit, the permit cramps my style."

In January, Diliberti pleaded no contest and was allowed to keep his mud structures and the tree house. He can sculpt and sleep in his camper truck, but he can't live in the buildings, which were declared to be "nonhabitable recreation (art) structures."

Pam Elias, chief of county code enforcement, said the county went to court against Diliberti after he failed to respond to the citations that were issued against him.

Diliberti considered the case a victory because he still has the mud houses. Valentine, who spearheaded the neighborhood complaints, said he's also satisfied because Diliberti no longer has fires and has not been hostile to his neighbors.

"He's a creative, artistic kind of guy," Valentine said. "As long as he'll stay mellow, it's fine."

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