



*“I listen to Mother Nature;  
she’s the boss.”*

*The Garden House, built over 30 years ago, is  
framed with unmilled windfall logs from the  
surrounding woods.*

## Garden House

I’D HEARD OF SUNRAY KELLEY and seen photos of his buildings, but never seen them in person. So on one of my photo-shooting trips to Canada for this book, I found my way to his collection of buildings on 10 acres of

woods and meadows in north-western Washington. The sun was rising and I parked my truck and started walking around. It seemed I’d wandered into a land of giants. Not only were these buildings wildly imaginative,

but they were *big*. Bold, powerful, competent. Here was a builder who could bring his visions into reality, and on a large scale.

I walked around (with cameras) in sheer delight for hours. These buildings embodied the spirit of

nature, of the earth — hand-split shakes, cob, straw bale, and glass assembled in soaring, sculptural buildings that complemented the surrounding natural world. It was a utopia.

On the following pages are

some of SunRay’s creations. I say *some* because there are many more. I can’t keep up with him, he’s so prolific and productive. The buildings shown on the first 12 pages are all on his homestead in Washington.







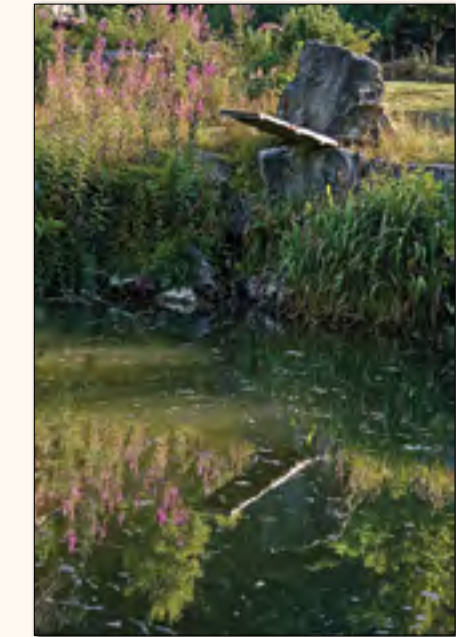
SunRay comes from a logging family; his dad was a mechanic in a shake mill. He studied architecture in high school, learning to draw blueprints. He was a star football player (linebacker) and got a football scholarship to West Washington University. For two years he was voted “Tiger of the Year” by his teammates. By the third year he lost interest in football. “People were getting hurt, you know, seriously busted up, things that never heal right.” He quit college and started designing buildings. He showed his designs of sculptural, curved buildings to a local builder, who looked at them and said, “You better get a hammer, boy, because nobody is going to build this stuff for you.” SunRay got a hammer and “... the learning curve began.”

*“You better get a hammer, boy, because nobody is going to build this stuff for you.”*

*“It’s a scene right out of Tolkien. Elves and gnomes must have come out of the mist to create these dwellings — curved cottages of tree poles and cedar shakes, sculpted earthen walls, convoluted stone foundations. Roofs curve and soar like fronds or bird wings: some are topped by grass or moss.*

*They rise like mushrooms in a 12-acre meadow on a ridge in northwest Washington, surrounded by a fir and cedar forest that looks west across the Skagit River Valley to Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains beyond. Amidst conifers, apple orchards, berry patches and vegetable gardens, the structures in this Ecotopian fantasy world were not built by elves and dwarves at all, but by SunRay Kelley and various crews of volunteers and apprentices over the years. SunRay has lived on this land all his life, as did his father and grandfather before him....”*

*The above is excerpted from The Art of Natural Building, by Gregg Marchese, © NetWorks Productions, Inc., 1997. [www.NetWorkEarth.org/NaturalBuilding/magic.html](http://www.NetWorkEarth.org/NaturalBuilding/magic.html)*



*Another view of the Garden House, shown on previous two pages, these two pages, and the following page*

*Pool next to sauna. Diving board is held in place by large boulder.*



“Life is motion.  
Life is movement.  
The life force is always  
moving through us.”



Yurts

SUNRAY HAS BUILT EIGHT 12- DIAMETER YURTS. It’s a good size for a sauna, guest room, or studio. They are 9-sided (40° angles). They have a conventional plexiglas skylight dome at center. The compression ring framing the skylight is built with 20° miters. Studs are 2×4s, rafters 2×6s. He says you could put a cable around the perimeter, but it’s not necessary.

One day he said to me: “The life spirit moves through us all the time.”

I asked, “Did you say light?”

“Well, they’re both the same, light or life. They shine through the body.”

“The life spirit moves  
through us all the time.”



Kai’s straw bale house uses pond liners under the sod roofs.



Cabin built by apprentices





Sky House

THE FOUR-STORY SKY HOUSE IS SHOWN ON THESE TWO PAGES. It has radiant heating in the floor, and a woodworking shop and greenhouse on the bottom level.



Kitchen on second story



Door to shop

Wood-fired boiler for radiant heating



Improvised spiral staircase with curved log



Little cabin next to Sky House







Foundation anchor: tractor tire filled with concrete

SunRay's swing built out of three 43-foot perfectly bowed logs



SunRay's Homestead

Lumber shed with canvas roof is 50' long, 25' tall.



Sculpture as corner post is 25' wide from hand to hand (shot during construction).



John Knudson's House



Door for John Knudson's house is wood glued to sheets of glass.





**Yoga Studio**

THIS LITTLE COB COTTAGE IS SCULPTURAL inside and out, with unusual-shaped windows reflecting the surrounding woods. The pink walls contain mica flakes that sparkle in the sunlight. The doorway is, um, feminine.

SunRay talks about watching how energy moves. “I want my buildings to sing and dance. I don’t want them to be static. Life is motion. Life is movement. The life force is always moving through us.”



*“I want my buildings to sing and dance.”*







“We need to open up and let our light shine.”



“The life force is a never-ending stream of energy. I can see energy moving sometimes.”



**Timber/Straw Bale in New Mexico**

THE PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE ARE FROM the booklet *The Tree House in Winter* by Chris McClellan. This building was built by SunRay at the Lama Foundation near Taos, New Mexico, using timbers salvaged from a massive forest fire. The thick straw walls, along with solar heat from south-facing windows, keep the inside temperature above 50° without supplemental heat. To obtain this book, go to: [www.IndustrialRustic.com](http://www.IndustrialRustic.com).







SunRay during construction of Buddha House

The Buddha House

THE BUDDHA HOUSE, BUILT IN NORTHWEST Washington for Corwin Fergus and Cynthia Novotny in 1995, has a garden that cascades down to a reflective pond and gazebo. Corwin says the design came from a dream in which he saw a person sitting in meditation. In his dream, the person morphed into a house and back to human form. He went looking for a builder and when he first visited SunRay’s homestead, knew he’d found the right man. Except for the 2×4s and 2×6s in the walls, all the framing lumber was scavenged from the woods and from clear-cut land. The exterior is stucco. For a small book on the Buddha House by Chris McClellan, go to: [www.IndustrialRustic.com](http://www.IndustrialRustic.com).



Buddha in tile was influenced by Thai temples, where a Buddha figure in the foreground is backed by a larger one behind. (Note the eyes of the larger Buddha here.)



“Every building has a spirit. When you’re building, you tune into the spirit of the place.”







*When I finally met SunRay he was working on doors for the temple in a wood shop. Even though barefoot and wearing purple pants, he somehow looked like a medieval craftsman. Except for the power tools, this could have been the 1500s in Europe.*

### Temple

**T**HIS BUILDING, SET IN THE NORTHERN CALIFORNIA hills, is a masterpiece: in design, execution, and use of natural materials. It's SunRay's "sweet spot in time," bringing together 20+ years' experience into a spiraling form of earth, cedar, and energy. There's a sure touch to this building. Nothing is unresolved. It's finished to a "T."

SunRay describes it as a "big yurt." It's about 50 x 70 feet, has a steel compression ring in the center, and a steel tension ring around the perimeter. The walls are timber-framed, with large (2' x 4') straw bales as in-fill. The bales are then covered with SunRay's special cob mix, composed of straw and fire clay. This is different from the typical cob formula, which has a lot of sand in it. Here there is no aggregate, just straw and clay: For this building, they had a truckload of mortar clay delivered (in 100 lb. sacks).





**“I work for the spirits. My clients think I’m working for them (laughter).”**

*These three photos show SunRay in a sling hanging from a boom, positioning the cupola roof.*

“It’s basically a yurt. I love yurts, there is no waste. It’s the most practical and efficient use of materials.” He adds, “I like the way energy moves inside, there’s an ascending spiral of energy. It’s the way energy wants to move. The yurt enhances it.”



*Rocking chair made from construction scrap*



*SunRay doesn’t wear shoes. Ever. He calls it “barefootism.” There are photos of him chain sawing, climbing on top of booms high in the air. No shoes. “It’s how I stay connected to the earth. It’s a direct connection.”*





Note that the central steel tension ring not only holds the rafters securely in place (they're bolted), but creates a large circular skylight, a light-infused mandala.



Interior paneling is cedar. "It's the fire, the sun trapped in the wood, solar energy manifesting itself in wood." The wood was milled by a friend of SunRay's in Washington. It is installed sequentially, that is, in the same order as it grew in the trees.

**Construction Details**

- Size: 50-foot-diameter yurt, with 20-foot addition
- Foundation is 18" x 18" grade beam with 4 pieces of #6 rebar.
- Height inside: 22 feet to the skylight ring; the cupola adds another 27 feet.
- Floor construction: 4" gravel, on top of which is a mixture of 90% sand, 10% Lincoln fire clay, and straw for binding put down in two pours, the first 3½", the second ¾".
- Floor heating is Pex® plastic polymer piping laid in concentric circles shaped like a garden maze, with the heat flowing in a spiral pattern. "You can bend this stuff to any shape."
- Walls are Simpson Strong-Wall® shearwalls, consisting of 2 x 4s and 4 x 4s sheathed both sides with with OSB (oriented strand board), with steel hold-downs.
- Inner roof compression ring is ¼" x 4" x 8" steel tubing welded together. It's 16-sided, with "ears" that the beams bolt to. The outer tension ring is made from ¼" x 2" x 3" angle iron. "We were going to use cables, but we found out they'd have to be too large."
- Roof has R-35 insulation rating (very high). Covered with Eco-Shakes, which are recycled plastic with wood fiber and have a 50-year guarantee.
- Center compression ring is 16-sided and welded from 4" x 8" rectangular steel tubing.



"There's an ascending spiral of energy. It's the way energy wants to move."

At the apex of the temple is a 16-sided cupola, with outward-slanting walls. There are motors that open every other window





*“It’s all about fiber; if you want strength, you need fiber.”*

*The floor was done by Tim Owen-Kennedy of Vital Systems, Ukiah, Calif. The last time I was at the temple, it was a cold day and the floor was warm. There is radiant heating with hot water pipes under the floor. It has a surprising bounce when you walk on it. It’s all sand, clay and straw, no cement at all. Bare feet, please.*



SunRay’s cob is different from most cob mixes in that it has a lot less sand and a lot more straw. “It’s all about fiber,” he says. “If you want strength, you need fiber.” This high-fiber cob is highly sculptural. SunRay and I were standing in the temple, running our hands over the cob wall. “It’s so inviting,” he said, “so human.”



*“Cob is so inviting, so human.”*



Cob mixing trough

Some of the people who worked on the temple: Avi, Richard Boch, Teo Briseño, Jerry Frazier (project supervisor), Gabor, Scott Hunter (engineer of record), David Lansdown, Kodiak Walsh (architect), Jim Stihlman, and Daniel Walsh. *Note: a lot of people worked on this building. Please let us know if we’ve missed any major contributors and we’ll add names in the second printing of this book.*

*“The Earth is not dirty,” SunRay often says, grinning through his typical end-of-day mask of dirt, hair tangled with straw, hands waving emphatically in mud-coated gestures. He must be some kind of magical creature... an elf, dwarf or gnome. Perhaps such an Earth-loving, home-building creature lives in every one of us, just waiting to come out.*

*—Gregg Marchese*

**The Phrase “Natural Materials”**

It’s like being “self-sufficient.” You can’t be 100% self-sufficient, you can only move in that direction. SunRay, like other seasoned builders, realizes a building like this can’t be 100% wood, straw, and earth. It’s got plastic pipe under the earthen floor for radiant heating. It’s got prefabricated Simpson Strong-Wall® panels with OSB inside the cob and straw bale walls. But most of the building is natural, that is, materials used as nature produced them, with no processing other than mixing. For a building this large, it’s a uniquely high percentage of natural materials.

“Straw is basically what you’re building with,” SunRay says. This type of cob is creamy and pliable, easy to sculpt with. It was mixed in troughs made out of half-sections of corrugated pipe, first adding water and clay to make mud, then throwing in chopped straw. Workers then jumped in (nude — yahoo!) and stomped around, mixing the ingredients with their feet.

*SunRay made doors of black walnut. Handles gleaned from what he calls “Nature’s hardware store.”*



Tile work by Teo Briseño of Encinitas, Calif.







People standing here give you an idea of scale.

**Straw Bale Spirit Lodge**

Spirit Lodge in eastern Washington is 60 feet in diameter. Bales are 4' x 4' x 8' and weigh a ton each.

**Pavilion**



Pavilion, 20' long, 16' high, is on Whidbey Island, Washington. All framing was fir from property.

**Timber Frame/Straw Bale**



Timber frame of fir and hemlock, wrapped with plastered straw bales

**Stairs**



Madrone stairs

**SunRay's Scrapbook**

ON THESE TWO PAGES ARE photos of projects SunRay has worked on since the large temple on pp. 64-71 — sent in by various people.

Loft in geodesic dome. Live oak supports loft, with manzanita railing harvested from property

**Loft in Dome**



**Music Stage**



Music stage at Kerrville Folk Festival, Kerrville, Texas. SunRay had a broken foot, so he could not climb. The woman who was driving him around watched him get a bunch of novices to build this structure: "He situated himself in the energy vortex and people got caught up in it and produced this building. None of them knew what they were building until it was finished."



**Meditation Center**



Meditation center at Peaceweavers Community Farm in New York State.

**Samadhi Temple**



Temple under construction in Northern California hills, a small version of the temple on pp. 64-71. Twelve-sided, 33 feet in diameter. Entrance will be to the east, fireplace to west; walls will be straw bales and cob.

**SunRay, the moving target:** In June of 2007, I went to New York for the annual Book Expo America. I took a side trip with Chris McClellan to see my friend Bill Castle, master builder, in the Alleghenies. Chris, who has followed SunRay's career, said there was a nearby building by SunRay. Here I was, 3000 miles from the Pacific Coast, no connection with SunRay, and one of his buildings happens to be in the immediate neighborhood. This was a meditation center on a community farm (above). Covering SunRay's work is like trying to catch a speeding train.

**Contacting SunRay**

In 2007, SunRay fell off a roof on two occasions and broke bones in both feet. In fact, he directed building the music stage (photos at top of page) from the ground for a change. He's now recovered, living at his homestead in Washington, and looking for his next project. Anyone in Brazil need a temple? Have cob, will travel.

Email: [SunRay@SunRayKelley.com](mailto:SunRay@SunRayKelley.com)  
Address: 13470 Janicki Rd., Cedro Woolley, WA 98284  
Phone: 360-854-9038  
Web: [www.SunRayKelley.com](http://www.SunRayKelley.com)

