



## Another Bale in the Wall: Professional Straw Bale Building Education Opens Up A World Of Possibility.

Kit Jones has been taking part in STEP - a certified straw bale building course for European professionals. He reports back on what is on offer in the course.

The global pandemic may not have many upsides, but one big one is that it has reduced the barriers to broadening our education. Many courses have moved to being online by default, which opens up literally a world of possibilities for learning about how things are done beyond our usual horizons.

It's auspicious timing for the development of a European curriculum for professional straw bale training - STEP (**S**trawbale **T**raining for **E**uropean **P**rofessionals). Work started on developing this in-depth course well before the pandemic. It draws on the knowledge of some of the leading straw builders in Europe, including the UK. Led by Herbert Gruber of the Austrian Straw Bale Network, the course is now available in a variety of predominantly online formats. You can access all of the materials and recorded lectures in your own time, or join a more intensive zoom course - where one of the eight modules is taught over five days on Zoom.

I opted for the more intensive version. Before it started I felt a little apprehensive about the idea of spending 6 hours a day on zoom, but I was relieved to find the course was run in a very interactive way, with a great deal of discussion and involvement as well as practical exercises.

There are 8 online theory modules plus some practical on-site sessions, which are being run in Austria, Czech Republic and Portugal this year. We're hoping to be able to run them in the UK through SBUK in the future. If you do all the modules, demonstrate a level of practical experience and then pass an exam then you become a certified straw bale builder. Alternatively you can pick and choose which modules you want to participate in for your own interest. The course is Bilingual in English and German but in practice almost everything was taught in English in the module I took part in.

I signed up for the module on planning and design, which covers all of the things that need to happen before construction can begin. There were about half a dozen others on this module covering a range of backgrounds and locations including an architect in Germany, a real estate project manager in Istanbul, a carpenter in the Czech Republic and a self builder

in Bulgaria. As the only participant from the UK, I found myself the butt of most of the jokes - whether that was about our cold houses, our warm beer or our broken political system and housing market!

The course began on the first day covering broader concepts around sustainable design, including a focus on the history of solar architecture. These presentations were made interactive by taking it in turn to present the slides - which is actually a much less scary experience than it sounds! And it kept us all on our toes as well as making it feel very discursive. Day two took us deeper into technical detailing. This was particularly fascinating for me because it showed the broad range of methods for building with straw which are used in other countries - many of which are still uncommon in a UK context. On days 3 to 5 we started to look more at design, with some workshops about the approach of the architect as well as practical sessions on using SketchUp - a free 3D design programme. As someone who has made rudimentary attempts to use Sketchup by myself (and often felt a bit lost with it) in the past, I was astonished to find how much progress I could make with a little bit of guidance. Sketchup was always something that felt clunky and laborious before, but with Herbert's help I glimpsed how I can use it for rapidly visualising buildings and working out technical details. Other extremely helpful sessions looked at things like:

- how to set budgets and calculate costs,
- how to plan heating, water and ventilation systems
- common design pitfalls and repair

It is sessions like these that make it useful learning whatever your level. I am a relatively experienced straw bale builder, having worked professionally in about 5 or 6 projects plus a few others as a course participant. I still found there was a lot to learn, both in the sense of the depth of technical detail we covered and the breadth of unfamiliar approaches to straw bale building.

I wondered how much of the content would be directly transferable to the UK. There were certainly some differences. Some of the construction systems we discussed would need to be adapted for the UK because we simply don't have timber available in such large dimensions as continental Europe (the reasons for this would be another interesting topic!). There were also some particular products that are either not widely available or not available at all in the UK - such as straw fiberboard insulation, reed stucco and some particular kinds of breathable sarking boards. Likewise the precise details of our planning system differ from other countries. But I ended up feeling like those differences did not make a great deal of difference to the core skills and principles the course was teaching. And being able to reflect on the differences was in itself interesting.

If anybody is interested in joining future modules of the course, it would be great to increase the UK contingent (not least so we can share being the butt of jokes about the UK!) The next zoom module is on infill (non-load bearing straw bale building) in the first week of March, and other modules follow on after that. It's also very affordable: for example the cost of doing all the theory modules is 10 instalments of 170 euros (reduced to 130 euros if you are a student or unemployed) or you can pay individually module by module. You can find full details about the costs, curriculum and upcoming dates on the Austrian Straw Bale Network website:

<https://baubiologie.at/strohballenbau/step-straw-bale-training/>