

# SUSTAINABLE CERAMICS: THE FOUNDATION OF MY WORK

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Potter's Shrine foundation

Two roads diverged in a wood and I took the one less travelled by,  
and that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost

*It seems to me that I have always worked sustainably.* My interests in sustainable practices go way back. As a child of the post Depression generation, I grew up in a working class family that practiced recycling before it was identified as a *green practice*. Like many others, my family carefully considered their consumption and manufactured goods were repaired when broken and used until they were non-operational. *Waste not; want not* was a commonly used expression. Little did I know at the time that growing up with that understanding had planted the *seeds of sustainability*. This ethical and ecological responsibility was so deeply instilled, that I now find it hard to conceive of any other approach.

My career path in the arts, with a focus on ceramics was instilled and nurtured from childhood. The earth-based nature of the ceramics medium, the malleability of the material and endless potential of form and function and the elemental allure of *fire* drew me to the ceramics studio. Like many, I also found a strong sense of collegiality or *familial* presence in the ceramics studio.

I *came of age* during the 1960's and 1970's when established *norms* in life and work were challenged in many western cultures. The *back to the land* movement gained a following and many individuals left the so called *rat race* to pursue a more relevant life style in the country, closer to the earth and its natural cycles. Graduating from a university art school program in the mid-1970's I was full of energy and idealistic enthusiasm, but without materials, tools and facilities. I researched alternative making and firing techniques learning a great deal in the process. I dug my own clay, hand built my pieces and after numerous failed attempts, learned to pit-fire my work successfully and appreciate the results from natural, local materials and the organic firing process.

Subsequently, I transitioned into wheel-thrown low-temperature glazed terra cotta vessels and small sculptural pieces. I applied for and received research and travel funding that allowed travel to Central and South America. My vessel-oriented work of that time was heavily informed by these adventures and experiences. Little did I know that the ancient architecture of Mezzo America, with its temple structures and complexes would so decisively influence my creative development. I soon found myself challenged with building large-scale architectural installations.

## Big Mud: Adobe, an ancient and totally underutilized sculptural material

Clay is one of, if not, the oldest building materials on earth. Between one-half and two-thirds of the world's population, in traditional societies as well as developed countries, still live or work in a building made with clay as an essential part of its load-bearing structure. A primary ingredient in natural building techniques, clay is used to create *adobe* bricks and rammed earth structures as well as building elements such as clay floors and paints, and plaster facades and embellishment.



Tex-As-X

The word *adobe* has existed for at least 4,000 years with relatively little change in pronunciation or meaning. It can be traced to Egypt then Arabic, next assimilated into Spanish, and finally English in the 18th Century, and from the beginning is translated as *mud brick*.

I began working with this elemental building material over 25 years ago, and have used it in a wide variety of my large-scale outdoor and indoor installations. I have used it in temporal installations where the sculpture deteriorates naturally with wind/sun/rain eroding the surface over a period of time depending on environmental activity. I have also added a stabilizer like Portland cement to the mix to harden and toughen the material, which extends the life of the structure considerably. The more stabilizer you add the tougher the material is. I have also used a lime/cement/sand *stucco* to coat and seal the adobe surface and add texture and colour.

I continue to profess that adobe is one of the most underutilized art making materials in existence. It has been used globally for as long as the human species has been building and creating. It is a local and sustainable material, which is relatively inexpensive, durable and natural.

## Out of Necessity: Art making with repurposed, reclaimed or recycled materials

There is nothing new about repurposing discarded or found materials. This practice has been prevalent since the beginning of time. Human-made necessities and structures of every shape and description have been deconstructed and the materials repurposed for millennia.

My own use of repurposed material came *out of necessity*. In the late 1970's I was working towards a Masters degree in ceramics and transitioning from vessel oriented to sculptural work. Intrigued with how increasing the scale of my architectural sculpture would affect the experience of the work I researched appropriate materials. The kiln yard containing an abundance of discarded bricks waiting to be taken to the landfill was a great resource. So began my journey into large-scale site-specific installation activity.

Tilex



In 1984 I was an artist-in-residence at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts and found *myself in the right place at the right time*. The Archie Bray Foundation had just purchased the old Western Clay Manufacturing Company (a nineteenth century brick factory on 26 acres of property) adjacent to the existing pottery. I was like *a kid in a candy store* with acres of brick and tile production, along with space to site large-scale work.

The details of my first installation, *Tilex*, are important because during the **process of moving and handling**, the historic factory produced extruded drain tile, I reflected on the repurposing of this fired ceramic material. This project literally laid the foundation for a three-decade plus career in the large-scale site-specific sculpture realm. The fact



Potter's Shrine

The process of repurposing material for art making not only keeps the material out of the landfills, but brings a renewed appreciation for the particular material, perhaps to a new audience. One can look at this activity as a type of social activism, resurrecting the specific material to a higher order, now defined as *upcycling*.

I choose to work with primarily earth-based materials (ceramic, stone, wood, steel). I am intrigued with and inspired by utilizing historic industrially produced materials (brick and tile) to create my ceramic-based site-specific architectural sculpture. *Repurposed, reclaimed and recycled* materials along with a sustainable philosophy will remain at the *heart* of my work.

## The Lowly Brick: Endless Possibilities

‘Architecture starts when you carefully put two bricks together. There it begins.’

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

Aruina



that the material had been made for more conventional purposes and had historical significance certainly added a *philosophical patina* to the work. The iconic Potters Shrine literally *cemented* my involvement with reclaimed, recycled and repurposed materials.

Since those first opportunities on the grounds of the Bray Foundation, I am continually searching for art making materials *that have had another life*. Incorporating materials that have acquired a *historical patina* and reference to *the place* makes the work that much more relevant to *that particular place and community*.



Bray Timeline Arch

A brick is a block, or a single unit of a ceramic material used in masonry construction, usually stacked together, or laid using various kinds of mortar to hold the bricks together and make a permanent structure. They have been regarded as one of the longest lasting and strongest building materials used throughout history.



Ironbridge Archway

In the summer of 1999 Gwen Heeneey organized a conference and symposium at the University of Wolverhampton in the UK called: *Creating the Yellow Brick Road*. The concept of this groundbreaking event was to bring together artists, architects and brick producers to focus on the contemporary applications and uses of brick in the 21st Century. The event was a great success and an exhibition at the Rufford Craft Centre in Nottinghamshire, UK along with the publication *Shaping Earth* documenting the conference and symposium was subsequently produced. The wealth of documentation and information gathered inspired Gwen to write her seminal book *Brickworks*, which was published by A&C Black in 2003.

*Creating the Yellow Brick Road* also produced a wealth of passionate

Sonderborg House

discussion among the attending artists who resolved to meet and work together again. It took some time, but after numerous conversations the concept of a world body of brick artists or the *World Association of Brick Artists (WABA)* was born. The founding members are all members of the International Academy of Ceramics (IAC) and are artists who use and are passionate about brick as a sculptural medium.

In August 2011 WABA held it's first symposium in southern Denmark with the generous support of Christian Petersen of the Petersen TEGL brick factory. During this meeting the founding principles of the organization were developed and sustainable, ecological brick practices were identified as one of the ideals of WABA. As with any of the other facets of working with clay, using brick provides a forum to educate and promote sustainable practices. Artists working with brick engage manufacturers, architects, builders and the public and have an opportunity to espouse the benefits of sustainable practices and open doors to new possibilities with the material.

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