

# Simounet's Earth Building

## Crafts centre made of earth, Berrias (Ardèche) France.

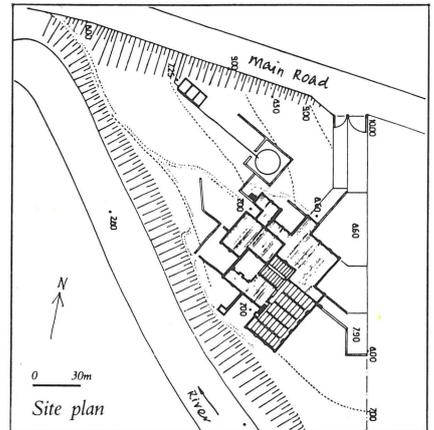
Project by Roland Simounet, 1980.

Algerian by birth (1927), sentiment and devotion until 1968 when he left, Roland Simounet became an architect essentially through building and not schooling. Son of a worker of the land, he has always been particularly sensitive to the use of natural building materials, earth, brick, wood, in their appropriate settings — which has not precluded his employing reinforced concrete for its strength (where needed on difficult or seismically vulnerable sites) or its formal expressiveness. Simounet, who participated in the CIAM/Algiers group as a young architect, strongly influenced by Le Corbusier, has built low-cost housing in Algiers and Timgad, monasteries in Upper Volta, and student residences in Tananarivo, Madagascar. As a French national living and working in Paris, he has devoted his talents primarily to housing and recently to museum construction, including the Picasso Museum. Simounet won the Grand Prix d'Architecture for France in 1977.

The project presented here is a supremely appropriate answer to an unusual brief and client, but one which is potentially applicable in numerous parts of the developing world. It proposes the construction of a kind of crafts training centre out of pressed and dried bricks of stabilised earth. The ecologically-oriented activities, yet limited budget of the Atelier Maladroit, sponsor of the new centre, encouraged the architect to seek a solution in harmony with the Atelier's resources (human and material) and overall objectives.

"Maladroit" which means unskillful or awkward in French, was the name adopted by the association created in 1973 whose programme of activities focused on environmental themes such as economy and ecology, botanical inventories and research into plants for dyeing and medicinal purposes, bee-keeping, pottery, weaving, solar energy and construction. Membership is open to those, particularly in the surrounding villages who desire knowledge and training in these realms, in order to bring themselves into a profounder, more satisfying relationship with their natural surroundings. Research is carried out empirically, with discovery and self-reliance as key factors in a kind of permanent apprenticeship.

Hence, Simounet felt justified, after carefully studying the groups' needs, the local climate, and soil composition, in proposing a structure of pressed adobe bricks, stabilised with cement, lime, or gypsum, constituting loadbearing walls (approximately 70 cm. thick) and low barrel vaults. The bricks

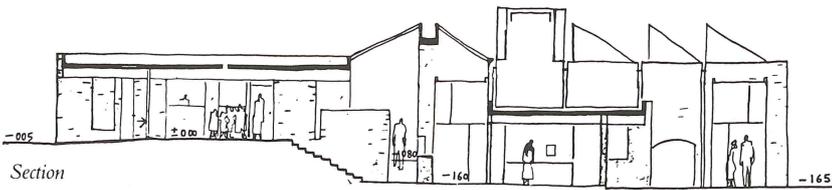


(size: 15 × 15 × 30 cm.) could be made on site, cured for several weeks or months — the longer the better — and laid without mortar, or with only a minimum. Similarly, the vaulting is to be constructed of the same bricks as the walls, using lightweight mobile centering comparable to that employed for the Daara school in Senegal (see Mimar 1). There would be no need whatsoever for outer (or inner) surface coating; at most, a thin greasy substance might be applied.

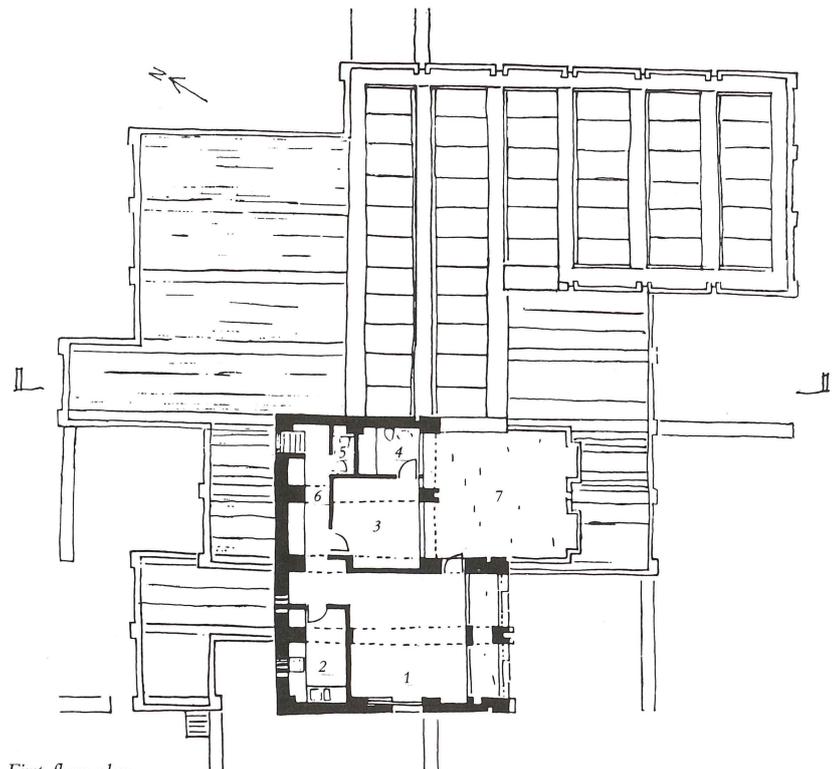
The structural system, aside from offering advantages such as room for mistakes to those 'awkward' souls who will be learning to build while actually doing it, defines and articulates interior spaces in a simple but rich manner. Thickness of walls (70 cm) permits the builders to create niches or alcoves where desired, by omitting material where it is not needed; only those points carrying the loads of the vaults retain their original thickness. Moreover, the thermal insulation obtained by such walls should be evident. From an architectural point of view, the potential for appropriate integration into the rural landscape, as well as the rugged, irregular finishes of workshop areas are in keeping with the underlying aims of the Atelier Maladroit.

When it is finally built, the centre will have a total surface area of 345 m<sup>2</sup>, including the common-room of 80 m<sup>2</sup> for research, slide projection and meetings, the archives area where prototypes produced by the members are documented and exhibited, and the workshops for pottery, 35 m<sup>2</sup>. A small lodging (67 m<sup>2</sup>) for a full-time grounds-keeper is provided on the upper floor. With these new spaces the prime movers of the Atelier feel confident that they will be better equipped to pursue their research programmes with inhabitants of the region, whether they be children or adults, with active cooperation from local and national government agencies. Worth noting in closing is one particular programme which is devoted to aiding women of North African origin living in the region to adapt natural resources of the Ardeche to their traditional life-styles in homemaking.

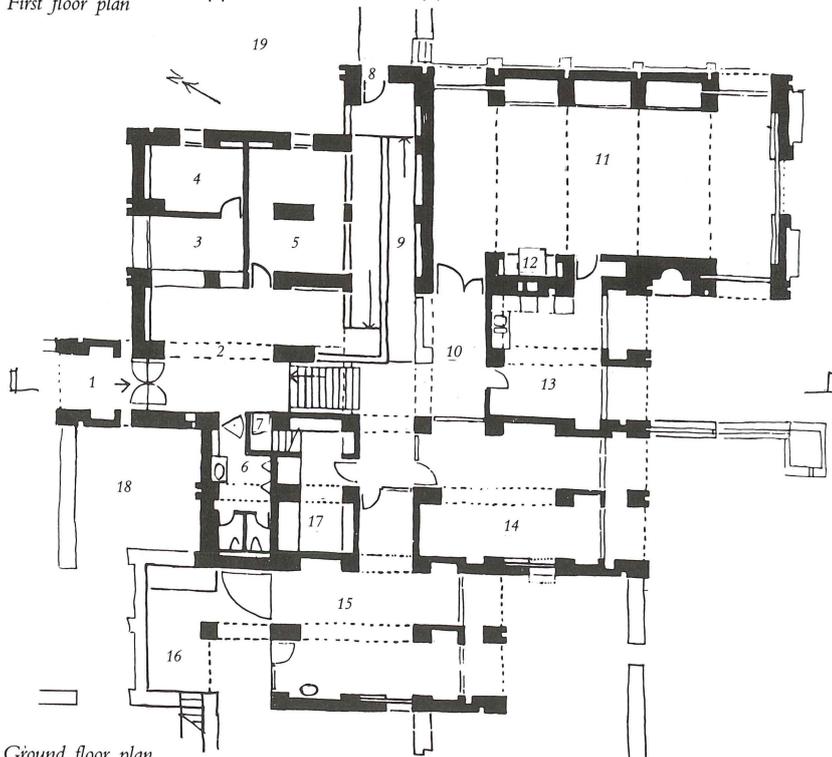
Article by Brian Brace Taylor.  
Drawings courtesy of the architect.



Section



First floor plan



Ground floor plan

*First floor plan*

1. Living room
2. Kitchen
3. Bedroom
4. Bathroom
5. W.C.
6. Passageway
7. Terrace

*Ground floor plan*

1. Porch
2. Reception
3. Telephone operator
4. Office
5. Documentation office
6. Toilets
7. Entry to guardian's residence
8. Service entrance
9. Ramp
10. Passageway to workshops
11. Common room
12. Fireplace
13. Kitchen
14. Nature workshop
15. Pottery workshop
16. Shelter
17. Storage
18. Protected area
19. Protected area

