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## SCALES & CIRCLES OF RELATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

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*“[Architecture is] a human expression which helps reveal the interrelationships of life.”*

—Rina Swentzell

This quote is from a 1982 letter proposing an architecture program for the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), describing philosophy & courses (1).

Adobe and earthen building are embodiments and conduits of relational infrastructure.

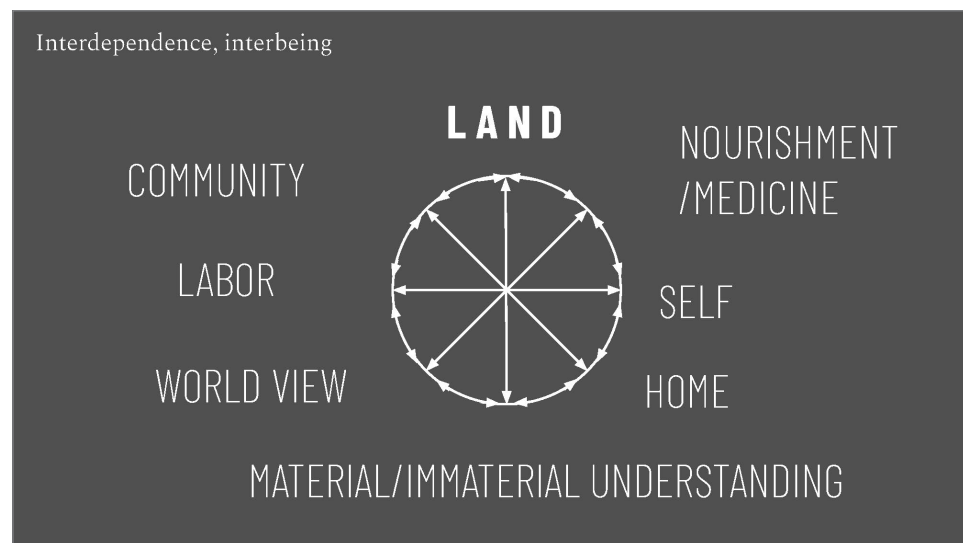
In the next paragraphs, I will describe seven scales or circles of relationships that working with adobe & earthen building has given me a deeper understanding of.

### 1 My relationship to self and purpose

Reflecting on my background, as well as the places & people I’ve learned with and from, has given me a sense of my lens, responsibilities, gifts & challenges, which are all woven together. These reflections (written in the book: Adobe Building, Ritual & Healing (2)) explain a bit of how I was led to this work, why it is important & purposeful for me, and my relationship to earthen building, home, belonging and social environmental healing.

### 2 The relationship of the materials adobe consists of, and the elemental relationships in the process of adobe making

Adobe consists of water, clay, sand (or another type of aggregate), and straw (or another type of fiber). Each material has a specific property. They tell us how to interact with them and how they will interact with each other. There is also the relationship between elements of earth (clay+sand+fiber), water, fire (sun), wind (climate dryness or moisture). Taking into account the alchemy that happens between materials and environmental conditions, adobe mixing isn’t a formulaic process but one that relies on observing and feeling into how each part, condition & process are relating & affecting another.



**Figure 1.** Land shapes culture. Culture shapes beauty, resilience and resistance.

### **3 The relationship of builder to soil, land and respectful harvesting**

The global history of building with mud & adobe is dependent on relating with the land & elements, knowing where to harvest suitable clay, and doing so in a respectful & reciprocal way. In Rina Swentzell's book "Children of Clay", she described a process of honorable harvest, which involved speaking to Clay Old Woman, asking permission, offering gratitude, and stating intentions (3). I was personally taught to leave an offering and never take more than needed. In essence, this care work is a part of land stewardship, which allows the perpetuation of lifeways.

### **4 The relationships formed with people & community that have enabled, encouraged, and deepened my consciousness & understanding of earthen building**

For these living traditions, the most relevant knowledge exists within relationships and not archives. There are so many people, meaningful experiences and generous conversations that were shared with me, that have deepened my consciousness and widened my understanding of myself, of others and of what it means to work & build with the earth.

### **5 The relationship of the many hands & labor this work asks for**

The work of building an adobe structure or home, as well as its maintenance, is work that requires community. The physical nature of moving, mixing and shaping earth is one that is demanding, yet joyful and natural when done communally. If we are to understand labor through a social and environmental justice lens, we will observe that labor is always happening. However, in capitalist structures, labor is divided into valued vs. unvalued. The latter is typically invisibilized, gendered, classed, racialized, or not always public - such as spiritual, domestic & emotional labor. Much of the adobe & earthen work done by both indigenous and migrant women in the Southwest is not uplifted outside the region.

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## 6 The relationships of building and maintaining physical vessels for living & nourishing the body, home & community

This work at its core is cyclic & ritualistic. All our vessels are in deep relationship with the sun & moon. The simple necessary act of seasonal adobe replastering & maintenance can be very healing.

*All that you touch you Change.*

*All that you Change Changes you.*

*The only lasting truth is Change. God Is Change.*

—Octavia Butler, *The Book of The Living*

This is an active living form of reciprocity: what we build, builds us. What we care for, cares for us. What we maintain, maintains us.

## 7 The relationship with what is bigger than us, the creative force, cosmos, time & space, and the cycles of life, death and transformation

Working with the earth is simultaneously grounding and uplifting. When I place my hands in the soil to plant seeds, watch them grow, when I mix clay, and mold it to make or repair a vessel, I feel direct contact with & nourishment of these essential relationships. There is mystery, magic and miracle in earth work. I feel a connection to ancestors: human, plant, elemental and beyond. I feel contact with descendants praying me into this commitment, this sacred work for all our continuation.

### References:

1. Rina Swentzell, "1982 Architecture program proposal for the Institute of American Indian Arts, philosophy & courses", Jeremiah Iowa Architectural Collection (AC358), Fray Angélico Chávez History Library/New Mexico History Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico.
2. Sarah Sao Mai Habib, "Adobe Building, Ritual, and Healing", Mushroom Books 2022.
3. Rina Swentzell, "Children of Clay: A Family of Pueblo Potters", Lerner Publications Company 1992.

**Sarah Sao Mai Habib** (she/they) is a multidisciplinary artist, builder, writer and cultural worker based in O'ga P'ogeh, New Mexico. Habib works at the intersections of healing, social ecological justice, and contemplative practice. Habib is the creator of Home Sovereignty Studio, a practice dedicated to remembering ancestral, spiritual & land based wisdoms as a path towards liberation.