Structural Testing of Straw Bales in Axial Compression

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Straw Bale Construction

• Began ~ 100 years ago in western Nebraska
• Utilizes a waste material to construct well-insulated walls ~ relatively high R-value
• Constructed from large blocks and then rendered or plastered with a finish to weatherproof the building
• Natural material, no industrial/polluting processes
Resurgence of straw bale building in recent years derives largely from our concerns for the degradation of the environment and sustainability of human activities on earth, in particular the impact of the unsustainable nature of current building practices.
Straw as a Building Material

• Waste products from food consumption
• Timber has a regeneration cycle of at least 20 years
• Straw is regenerated once or twice a year

• Sustainable: as long as humans produce grains for food, straw will be a by product

• Logging of native forests for building products has had a devastating effect on the natural environment
Straw as a Building Material

- Understanding of straw bale properties is limited
- Straw bales offer excellent thermal insulation
- Straw bale buildings promote energy efficiency
Straw as a Building Material

• **Drawbacks for straw:**
  - Peoples’ perception
  - Conventional “wisdom”
  - Lack of understanding of the material often scares the so-called building professional
  - The bewildered reaction of layman when straw bale building is mentioned
Straw as a Building Material

The dramatization of the big bad wolf and the three little pigs has planted deeply into peoples’ minds that one cannot build houses with straw.
The lack of understanding on how straw bales behave in a built environment when exposed to various natural effects deters its wider application.

• Our Project: axial compression tests of straw bales, both plastered and unplastered

• This information can prove to local building officials that straw bales can meet and exceed the safety requirements for buildings
Straw Bale Samples

- Six identical bales, the same as used in the class workshop
- Two string bales
- Avg. density = 8.3 pcf
Plaster

- 3 bales
- Clay slip: clay, water
- Plaster: 1 sand, 1 subsoil, straw, water
  - Two formulas tested
- Finish coat: 9 crushed refine, 1 clay, small straw, water
Test Preparation

- Pre-compress plastered bales
- Give bales time to dry
- Build wood frame
- Obtain metal plates
Test Configuration

- ½” Steel Plate
- 4x4 Wood Frame
- Cam Straps w/ Buckles
- ½” Plywood
- ½” Plywood
- Plastered Straw bale
- ½” Plywood
- 2” Aluminum Plate
Plastered Axial Compression Test
Unplastered Axial Compression Test
Plastered Bale Results

Plastered Bale #2 - Load and Displacement

Time [min]  Load [kip]  Displacement [in]

Graph showing the load and displacement over time for Plastered Bale #2.
Plastered Bale Results

Plastered Bale #2 - Stress Strain Diagram
Unplastered Bale Results

Unplastered Bale #1b - Load and Displacement

Time (minutes)

Load [kip]  Displacement [in]
Unplastered Bale Results

Unplastered Bale #1b - Stress Strain Diagram

Stress [psi] vs. Strain
Analysis of Test Results

\[ \sigma = \frac{\text{Load}}{\text{Area}} \]

\[ \varepsilon = \frac{\Delta L}{L_0} \]

\[ E = \frac{\sigma}{\varepsilon} \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bale</th>
<th>( E ) [psi]</th>
<th>Failure Load [kips]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion of Results

• The load at which the first bale string ruptured is the failure load
• Mostly linear stress strain curves ~ Elastic
• All six bales continued to exhibit elastic behavior even after rupture of a bale string
• Plastered bales performed well below expectations
  • Plastered bales basically expand in two dimensions under compression
  • Increased stress on the bale strings
  • Testing bales vs. a wall
  • Moisture content of the bales
## Comparison to Previous Test Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Info.</th>
<th>Density (pcf)</th>
<th>Ultimate Compressive Load (psi)</th>
<th>E (psi)</th>
<th>Assembly</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bou-Ali, 1993, AZ</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>78-211</td>
<td>Indiv. Bale, flat</td>
<td>Wheat, 3-string, all elastic, unplastered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thompson, 1995, Canada</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>18-26</td>
<td></td>
<td>Indiv. Bale, flat</td>
<td>Wheat, oat, barley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephens, 2000, WA</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>992</td>
<td></td>
<td>Indiv. Bale, on edge</td>
<td>“Supercompressed” bales, 6 strings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar, 2003, EBNet</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Two half-bales, stacked vertically</td>
<td>High straw fiber earthen plaster with coconut fiber mesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar, 2003, EBNet</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Two half-bales, stacked vertically</td>
<td>Low straw fiber earthen plaster with coconut fiber mesh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comparison to Previous Test Results

- Bou-Ali’s $E = 78-211$ psi
  - Our modulus of elasticity $= 60-68$ psi
- Bou-Ali ultimate load $= 84$ psi
  - Our “failure” load $= 10.8-25.7$ psi
- Bou-Ali used three string bales
  - We used two string bales
- Bou-Ali bale density $= 8.5$ pcf
  - Our bale density $= 8.3$ pcf
Comparison to Previous Test Results

• Thompson ultimate load = 6-10 psi
  • Our “failure” load = 10.8-25.7 psi
• Thompson E = 18-26 psi
  • Our modulus of elasticity = 60-68 psi

• Major differences reflect the potential for variation between different bale sources
Lessons Learned

- More common in the United States in recent years
- Hard to get permits to build load bearing straw bale structures
- Keep moisture out of the straw bales
- Three string bales or higher density bales recommended for large loads
Lessons Learned

• Studied structures must support between 636 and 800 plf
• Our bales can support approximately 3000 plf
• With good test data officials can plainly see how safe a straw bale structure can be
• Promote straw bale as an alternative to conventional building materials
Conclusion

• Due to the compressive strength of straw bales and thus their ability to support typical roof loads and their exceptional thermal characteristics, straw bale technology is very well suited for residential and small commercial construction.
Any Questions?