

## Thermal mass housing

*Garbage Warrior* (2007), directed by Oliver Hodge **Jay Bernard**

Architect **Michael Reynolds** wants to save the world and believes he can do this through ‘*self-heating, self-regulating*’ houses. The film is a welcome breath of fresh air in a climate that collocates any discussion about alternative approaches to the environment with pointless schemes such as ‘offsetting’ your carbon footprint or scratchy handwriting that appeals to tweedy, green-wellied middle Englanders.



*Garbage Warrior* begins with **Michael Reynolds** digging in the middle of the desert, packing mud into a tyre. This is one of the methods he has come up with for harnessing one of the central concepts in the film: thermal mass. Reynolds believes that by mastering it, he can set himself and others free. He builds houses using beer cans, empty petrol cans, tyres and borrowed trucks. In the middle of the desert, he has created a collection of quirky houses, each

an improvement on the last.

There is no reason for Reynolds' vision to be limited to hippies – which is a recurring concern, when his major point is so pertinent. As I write, the papers are filled with bleak forecasts about the housing shortage, about the property boom coming to an end, about young people not being able to get on to the ladder, about the possibility of people losing their homes. Most of us have nothing to do with the economic forces that determine our livelihoods. It is largely accepted that faceless traders, brokers and other businessmen create – or at least stimulate – the conditions in which the rest of us must survive. The question *Garbage Warrior* is asking is **'why should I be tied to this system?'**

It is a question that is frequently met with all manner of pernickety jargon, which is lucidly demonstrated when Reynolds attempts to contend with the law. The issue that most of the lawyers had was not so much the idea or the principles Reynolds was trying to discuss, but the language used, the form and whether or not the right procedures had been undertaken. I felt genuine irritation on his behalf; whilst it is difficult to take his apocalyptic language seriously, those of us who are all for social justice might see through the green jargon and realise that this sort of innovation, whilst unlikely to save the world, puts forward a powerful argument: there ought to be more experimentation when it comes to housing. There are powerful natural forces that are being wasted because nobody wants to be sued.

*Garbage Warrior* avoids typecasting by being consciously cinematic. The New Mexican desert is perfect for sweeping shots and dramatic, azure skies. However, the professional sheen makes it seem more akin to *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) or *Super Size Me* (2004), than any serious investigation. For example, whilst it was nice to see Reynolds and his team in Little Andama after the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, I could not help wondering whether this was yet another venture in to the third world to assuage Western guilt. Yet on the other hand, the subtitles translating the conversations of the locals were witty and amusing, far from the doom and gloom we usually see in charity appeals. But again, Reynolds claims to be doing this because he is 'only trying to save his ass' which makes his actions a little suspect. Similarly, the [Earthsh](#)

[ip](#) website encourages people to stay at the Phoenix Hotel, for the tidy sum of \$135 per night. Everyone must make a living, but it is disingenuous when this urge is wrapped up and sold as a sincere attempt to save the world.

*Garbage Warrior* does better than most because the central idea is a good one. It would have

been better had there been a serious analysis of Thermal Mass and a discussion about Reynolds' genuinely interesting architectural vision, rather than the focus being on his dull, ecological one.

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