

The Yurt: Survival and Revival

Judy Keefe

The yurt is a round, portable, self-supporting structure, used originally in Central Asia. The basic arrangement is the oldest form of prefabricated structure, indigenous architecture still in use today and manufactured worldwide.

Inspiration

The revival of the yurt in ski areas, vacation spots, and our own White Mountains prompted New Boston Central School to organize a yurt-building artist residency with Rachel Lehr. This experience heightened artistic and cultural awareness by engaging students, teachers, and townspeople in exploring the history of this structure. New Boston Central School plans to utilize the yurt in their three-year art plan: year one to build it, year two to use it in the school library as a focus for their writing residency, and year three in the outdoor garden classroom.

Construction

We began by cutting about 100 birch, maple, and cherry saplings that were about six feet high and between one to two inches in diameter. We used about sixty saplings for the lattice frame wall and just over thirty saplings for the roof. We stripped off all the bark to help keep the saplings from rotting. We used many old tools: spoke shaves, shave horses, and draw shaves. Students did all this with adult supervision.

We then had to drill five holes in each sapling to be used for the wall. We made a template to help us be consistent in the location of the holes. We then laid out the saplings on the floor in a lattice pattern (not only does this make the walls portable, but the diagonal direction of the saplings increases the strength and stability of the walls) and began to tie the saplings together using tra-

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ditional rawhide as well as string. The wall, when complete, can be easily folded up and carried by an adult. To set up the yurt, we worked with circumference with the kids and figured out a circle with a ten-foot diameter. We then marked it out with a rock in the dirt and set up our lattice wall. A parent made the doorframe and the roof ring. The lattice wall connects to the door frame. After the wall is standing, one of our tall teachers (or someone could stand on a step stool) stood in the center and held up the roof ring. The roof ring has holes in it to fit in the roof saplings as they connect from the roof ring to the top of the crisscross of the lattice wall. With a whole class doing this, it was put together in no time! The felt walls and roof are then laid on the frame. The walls of the yurt are created to provide a portable framework to support a felt tent cover.

Felt Making

Felt making is an ancient craft and a simple process: wool is fluffed, spread out on a flat surface, sprinkled with water, and rolled, beaten, and stomped until the fibers mat together. The process is repeated, adding more water and rolling, beating, and stomping until the felt is made thick and strong. Felt is unsur-

passed as protection against cold, wind and rain. We made some felt pouches to learn the process and then the walls of our yurt consisted of three pieces of felt that measured 6 x 5', and the roof consisted of two more pieces the same size.

Many people helped with this project: staff, parents, and community members. Also, funding was provided from our New Boston PTA, School Board, and the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts. We built the frame in the fall and made the felt in the spring. Rachel Lehr, the artist-in-residence, spent twenty-five days with students. This project involves working with someone knowledgeable in yurt building and felt making, along with a lot of helping hands.

Throughout this project, students experienced architecture as art and history, learning that artistic process and human relations change as a result of cultural connections. As designers and builders, students were able to explore the science of structure and technology of design, enhancing their math, science, social studies, art, and history curricula. ☺

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students demonstrate how history, culture, and the visual arts can influence each other in making and studying works of art.

WEB LINKS

www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/yurt.htm/

www.holmecastle.com/feltmaking.htm