Djenne (pron. Jennay) in the nation of Mali on the continent of Africa. A 2,000 year old mud brick city about the same population as Mount Gambier, down the river from the legendary Timbuktu – which is also a mud brick city. Djenne is home to an annual international spring mud festival where local residents re-plaster the walls of their giant, central mosque. The 4 quarters of each side of this “village-opolis” have playful competitions showing of their teamwork skills to each other while the others are the audience. It all starts around midnight with a countdown and drums and flutes and continues on till lunch time the following day. In this part of the world there are two seasons: a wet season and a dry season. The festival takes place after the rain has cracked the outside layer.

Taos Pueblo, in the state of New Mexico, in the USA, North America. A 1,000 year old Native American settlement made of mud brick “adobe”. Nestled high up in the mountains where it freezes and snows in the winter and is very hot in the summer, the thick walls protect against temperature extremes. All teenagers in this community are trained how to build these homes. A large cemetery is situated behind the community where ancestors have been buried, including many who have fallen in various battles to protect their freedom. Among the very poorest (financially) Americans, they are in various, ongoing (centuries old) land rights battles with the US government.

The mud brick village-opolis of Shibam in the nation of Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula featuring “skyscrapers” up to 11 stories high – all made with sun dried earthen mud mixtures (no steel or concrete). This place is also called Wadi Hadramat which gets a mention in the Old Testament, and it is believed to be more than 2,000 years old. The white caps of the buildings are made with burnt limestone which is painted on the outside of the mud bricks for added protection against weather.

A new natural building revival is taking place in various places around the world, breathing new life into these ancient, tried and true methods. This project here at North Primary, Mount Gambier can be considered part of that revival. In the beginning of this journey we met John and Fiona Flett a couple from Glencoe, who built their own mud brick home there 20 years ago. Let your imagination run wild with these images. Imagine what is possible when the human spirit is unleashed to its fullest capacity. Perhaps all the freedom and security we could ever need is much closer within our reach…..um, it might be right beneath our feet.

The only known downside to building with unfired or sundried earthen mud mixtures is that it is considered very labor intensive and therefore cost prohibitive. But if we are transforming this “hard labor” into “joyous play” or letting our children do it naturally for us, then what we do we have to lose (from letting them do so and joining them) except the shackles (of environmental and financial debt) that we have all been raised to believe are a necessary part of life?