



The Hilo Homestead Story

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Its been two years two months and 22 days since we saw the Redfin listing for a desert hoarder landfill of a property smack dab in the middle of a dirt road town on the outskirts of the mojave. We were at a beautiful gathering on a magical land tucked into the boulder fields overlooking pipes canyon and pioneer town of neighboring Joshua Tree. That same day, almost immediately we hopped in my truck, drove down the 2 miles of dirt road, 4 miles of windy pavement, and 10 miles of Highway 247 into the desolate, dystopian, and divinely charming town of Landers, California. More of a sprawling neighborhood than an actual town. Landers is made up of 5 acre lots. Divided and conquered in the 50's by "the Homesteaders act" an american movement to get people into the area. 5 acre parcels of Land were essentially given away to anyone who would hunker down and build a 400 sqft "homesteader cabin" Many chapters of the area have come and gone, from the mining rush of gold and silver, to the bleak promise of it becoming the next palm springs. It is currently in the midsts of closing a chapter of meth, packrat dwellings, and crime, with a rebirth of creative youthful energy as likeminded individuals see an opportunity to own land for the first time, and to forge a life they want to live. Its a land of endless vistas, howling coyotes, and 3 hours pastel sunsets that will leave you with a pride immeasurable by societal standards. Those who manage to make the move do so by a form of intentional accident. the story has happened time and time again, a few visits, and next thing you know your living full time in a place you thought would be some second home fantasy. But it ain't easy. If its not hot its windy. there's spiders, ants, snakes, a wifi drought, and a dryness that will suck the saliva off your tongue. Its a strange phenomena that as these elements beat on you they also grow on you and you find yourself missing more and more while traveling to more temperate, "normal" climates. ...apologies, Im getting side tracked. where were we...

As we pulled into the driveway of this strange abandoned desert trash kingdom our jaws were likely hanging on their hinges. Just enough room for my truck to get thru between piles of debris sprawling as far as the eye could see in every direction. It looked like the house had puked up a decade of un wanted household items. as we



stopped in front of the burnt out, windowless, waste buried house Mieka looked at me, and I at her, and we grinned. It was a guilty pleasure we both shared to take on such a project. We got out and walked around. We hadn't made it 10 steps before a lady pulled in behind us and jumped out of her car. "Hey! What are you guys doing?" "hi, were thinking of buying this place." "oh! That'd be great! theres been so many

tweakers coming by and taking things I had to check and see who you were. My name's Barbie, Im the neighbor that way." She pointed to the nearest house to the north a good quarter mile away. "Well, I'll let you kids at it. Ohhhhh it'd be so exciting to have some new neighbors!" we grinned told her goodbye, and thanked her for looking out. That was the beginning of our great relationship with the first of our quirky and charismatic neighbors. A desert family that we have grown to love.



google maps view

We Called the realtor on the listing, set up a meeting and returned later that day with Mieka's Mom Lori to get one more set of eyes on this utterly ridiculous idea we were actually taking interest towards. Deb was a sweet chipper lady in her 50's with a British accent. She showed us in the locked door of the house and as if everything were normal gave us the tour of the place. We chatted about the potential that could be, that the previous owner had died, (not on the property but a nearby motel) and how the bank had repossessed it and were wanting to get it off their hands as soon as possible for as cheap as possible. They had been appraised 30k for the cleanup of the property so they essentially cut that number off the land value and were selling it for 20k. As is. She told us we could easily get water and power hooked up and she would help with any other questions we might have. all the while we wander thru the ocean of trailers, trash, auto parts, metal scraps, clothing piles, and



construction waste. With one more check in with each other eye to eye and a verified nod of acceptance for what we were signing ourselves up for Mieka, and I sealed the



pact of a many year project to come. And with that, I called my dad and told him about it. Showed him the listing and asked for a loan. We came up with a 7 year 4% interest loan that he would carry. With a transfer of funds, and a mountain of paperwork to sign I was the owners of 5 acres of trash covered desert and a new home by my 27th birthday. May 4th 2016. We returned to the event we were attending at the time and in a fair amount of disbelief we told people what we had just done. We

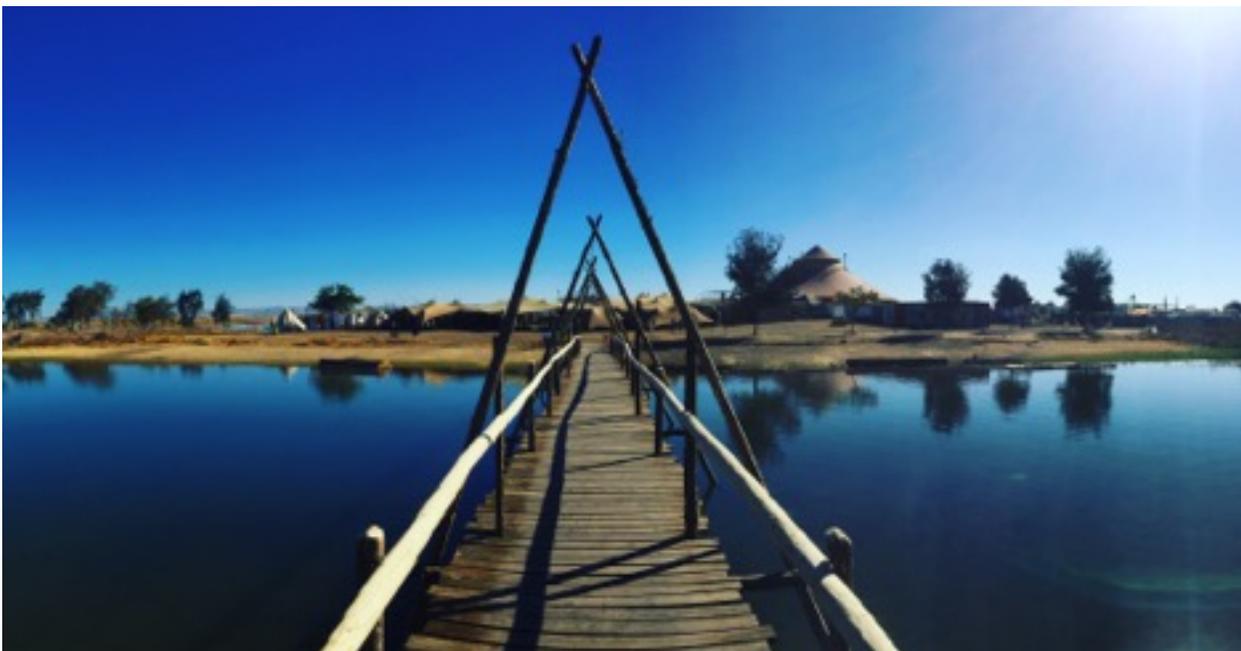
stayed on the land for a few days while we gutted the inside, tore out carpets replaced the cracked in half toilet, ripped out grease smeared cabinets, appliances, and linoleum. Patched the dozens of holes in the drywall, and did our best to clean out the funk from 20+ years of... who knows what. Not long after this first push, Mieka went back to LA (where we were living at the time)

and I was off on a previously planned work trip to Eden, Utah. While in eden I ended up purchasing another property, this time 1.1 acres, with a quaint cabin, and no trash... but thats another story...



I returned to Landers August 1 to meet up with a 4 man crew I had rallied together, not to clean the property but rather build 3 installations over the course of the month for Symbiosis, a festival in September. AKA my day job. Within the first few days we made haste to clear a 40x60 zone in the middle of the piles right in front of the house that would become our workspace for the rest of the sweltering hot month of August. we unscrewed the plywood from the broken windows of the house, built a makeshift sink, fired up the barb-q, cleared out a few of the camper trailers to be suitable for living, set up a 240sqft shade structure Mieka sewed together for us and began work. The task at hand was to fabricate a beautiful asian inspired pagoda, engineer and build a 220ft pine bridge, and get a 1956 tug boat into working order all in 1 months time. All In 100-110 midsummer desert heat... but thats

another story. Fast forward to the end of September and all of these missions were accomplished, all was a success except one minor detail, despite the 40k budget I



somehow managed to find myself 7k in debt which would take me 2 years to pay off, and actually has me still playing the game of credit card payments. Rolling right into another festival build mid October a new batch of crew came thru and we rebuilt the pagoda, along with a stage, shade structure, and 2 art installations for local fest 15 minutes away in Joshua tree. (Desert daze, a wonderful event) It took until January to finally be done with events for a little while aside from a February flight to florida for two week where I would meet my commendable comrade, the one and only John Michael. He happened to move to the desert the same time I did and was my sole assistant in taking on the enormous task of cleaning acres worth of another mans landfill. Day in and day out for the rest of that winter We would fill trailer load after trailer load of trash. 1500lbs at a time, driving each load the 10 mile journey to the local dump. The Landers Landfill. A fine vista atop a westerly facing hillside in our little desert town.



Often times we would manage to pull off two dumps per day. Nearly 2 tons of garbage. a day! Our savior was the Landers dump card. a free punch card we get for living in a town with no trash pickup. They allow you 4 500lb dumps per week. thats 1 ton a month. normally a staggeringly large amount of household refuse but for us they were going quick. By the end of the winter I used all of mine, and two others neighbors cards. By now May was rolling around which meant our 1 year anniversary of the property, and also festival season. So I would have to shift gears from working on the cleanup to paying the bills. Those who are accustomed to the insanity that is Festie season know that it is essentially a whirlwind of creating and destroying utopian societies in far off dreamy locations for weeks on end back to back until your body and mind can't take anymore blissful creative expression, or brain bruising electronic music. It takes over your life for the better part of the summer into fall and you forget that the real world exists out there beyond the ticket gate, commissary, and hoards of

coming of age 20 year olds looking for the answers to life thru psychoactive plants, human connection, and dance music. But, that was my day job, and I loved it. By this time I was more than ready to leave it, but it's what dotted the t's and crossed the i's.



As the season slowed to its usual dissolve in the late fall I was able to focus on the property again. pick an area, fill up a trailer, sort out items to keep that interested me, (mostly the metal objects, unique trinkets, or items of repetition) bring load to the dump, punch the dump card, empty the trailer, come home. repeat. wax on, wax off. wax on, wax off. The haze of where I was, what I was

doing, and what I had become became very blurry lines. My usual seasonal depression would find me second guessing my existence and wondering if I was in fact an artist with a vision of a beautiful property, or just a hoarder with a love of trash, terrible taste, and inability to throw anything away. -

There is no way you can feel the depths of this despair unless you find yourself knee deep in such a project with no one around but yourself and the occasional helper who all the while verifies your concerns by wondering the same things himself. "we're getting closer" I'd say, "Nope. looks like the same shit pile it did yesterday, last week, and last month." John Michael would reply with his deep southern accent. but we would trudge on. during the nights we'd burn the wood. mountains of decayed 2x4s, ply, brush, and anything else burnable. We stayed away from the plastics, and rubbers, but if it seemed semi natural we'd throw it in one



of our two burn pits or many burn barrels. Those nights were the best of the cleanup. walking around in the cool winter air in tee shirts (JM shirtless) with two 10ft tall walls of flame on either side of us raging like hell itself. We learned early on that the burns had to happen at night after trying to light a pile on fire midday only to watch as the black smoke rose hundreds of feet into the air becoming visible from every house in the whole 12 mile valley. throwing water on it would only make it smoke more and it was like standing on the highest building yelling Its me! Im putting your house in danger!! Neighbors came over to shun us with their concerns of burning down the desert. We apologized and only burned under the cover of darkness after that. (side note* I've had close to 100 fires on the land by now 80% for utility purposes 20% for pleasure, and I can say, it is extremely difficult to catch the desert on fire. Not to say you shouldn't be careful. you absolutely should. Ive heard of many large fires in the area, they happen in the foothills where there's more foliage. However, as far as trying to light this barren wasteland ablaze myself, I've yet to succeed...)



We were now a year and a half in and if you squinted at it just right you could almost see the progress we'd made. Actually, if you had been there since the beginning it was rather impressive, but without fail it was always difficult for me having friends out for the first time because without knowing how far it'd come you could only see that it was still a burt out crack house looking property with scattered piles of slightly more organized trash everywhere. And time after time again I'd explain the story of cleaning, restoring, sorting, organizing, where it had come from, and my idea of where it was headed. Always Painting a picture on top of the tattered and beat up existing canvas. But when the people would go home and it was just Mieka and I the doubt bugs would crawl into my ears and fill my head with all the self conscious worries of existential failure.

It was Christmas time this year when two integral things happened. First, we signed the lease on a roadside storefront in our neighboring community Flamingo Heights. Taking on a new and exciting project, opening a retail store for hand crafted goods, art, and apothecary. It would be Miekas new baby, a committing project that would, over the next year, anchor our existence in the desert, and intertwine a large contingent of the desert creative community we now call family. It meant Mieka would move to the property full time with our two cats, and two dogs. (She was still back and forth from LA up until this point) And she would now have a business to run, which she has done such an impressively professional job at Im so proud of her every day. The second of the noteworthy incidence to happen that christmas was a man by

the name of Tim Mezin stopped by the property for the first time. He stepped out of his shiny white official San Bernardino county SUV with his clipboard and started poking around. "Im a county citation officer" he explained, and I smiled and greeted him welcomingly, unaware of the maniacal inhuman, robotic, droidian plans this man had in store for me and the property. He walked around slowly nodding and smiling as i told him the usual story, He was aware of the property as it had been on the books for close to a decade getting innumerable citations year after year for the trash, inoperable vehicles, illegal power chords running out to all the trailers, and many others. None of which were ever paid. Michael Craft claimed he couldn't read, and that was that.

"You've done an impressive job here." he said. "Wow, this is a lot of work you've done!" I smiled, and thanked him. it felt good being commended by a county official! He hopped back in his car joining another woman officer who never got out of the passenger seat. He typed on his dashboard computer for a few minutes and came back out. "Looks like the house isn't permitted" he said. "What does that mean?" "well, you'll have to get it permitted." My smile had left but I still wasn't too concerned. At this time I didn't at all comprehend the absurd can of bureaucratic nightmares this man just opened in my lap.

About 2 weeks later I got a letter from the county in the mailbox, the first of many more to come. I opened it. and in bright red all caps letters it read

CITATION 1 TRASH ON THE PROPERTY \$100
CITATION 2 INOPERABLE VEHICLES ON THE PROPERTY \$100
CITATION 3 UNPERMITTED HOUSE \$100

FINES PAYABLE TO SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY
IF UNPAID IN 30 DAYS ALL FINES WILL DOUBLE

As it turns out, the trash pile that I had purchased in a dirt road town in the middle of nowhere for the purpose of creating an artistic ranch with the freedom to build and dream and shoot for the stars was actually within the jurisdiction of the largest county in america. San Bernardino. The land of sprawling suburbs, a decaying metropolis with a long history of crime, corruption, and the american dream. I mean heck, McDonalds was invented here, this place is all bad. And the county headquarters is located in the middle of the million person city. A city which has absolutely nothing in common with my 2000 person dirt road town. But the county doesn't care, they sent Tim Mezin to my doorstep to collect my dues. To fine me for revitalizing a desert landfill, and beautifying a neighborhood with a project that will inevitably raise property values and in turn get them more money in the long run anyways! But \$300 bucks wasn't so bad, so I paid it and continued on my way. pick up trash, put in trailer, click click click punches on the dump card... my usual meditation. A few months past and Tim came back. Once again

congratulating me on the hard work I'm doing, and again a few weeks after that I received another letter in the mail. Only this time the fines had doubled.

CITATION 1 TRASH ON THE PROPERTY \$200
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\$600!!! This time I was pissed. I called the county, listened to their terrible hold music, tried to dispute it, nothing. Talked to building and safety, talked to code enforcement, talked to planning. It always the same go around: You wait 5-10 minutes listening to the same song. (I know this song by heart) then a low level desk jokey answers and asked for your parcel number, Then I ask a few questions, something like: hi, Im getting fined for my house not being permitted can you tell me what I do in order to permit my house? then they say "um, I'm not sure, I can have a BS (building and safety) officer call you back in 48-72 hours. then I say ok. Hang up. Then I may or may not get a call back. and even when I do I live in a desert town with aggravatingly poor cell service so the call either drops or never gets to me in the first place. Over and over I do this. hours of culminated hold music, countless unknown answers to my unanswered questions.

Perhaps driving in is easier to talk to someone in person, well they've decided that our far off corner of the county jurisdiction can only be open on Wednesdays, so for Wednesday We wait. along with everyone else who they've slapped with big all caps red letters and we sit in uncomfortable chairs patiently waiting out turns to talk to a fellow human finally to help us answer our questions. There is a bit of digression here as I can fall down this dark rabbit hole for a long time as it has held up a substantial part of my life for the better part of the past two years. but your going to have to continue reading more of it because the absurdity of their requests get worse before they can get better...

By my fourth letter I was able to find, and mount axels on the truck that had been sitting on cinder blocks, which took care of the INOPERABLE VEHICLES ON THE



PROPERTY fine, and I was able to contact permit research and have them find the original homesteader cabin permit after 3 months of looking for it in their archival file banks, and I had (what I thought was) cleaned the property to a state where you could actually see sand instead of trash. I figured it was to a point that they would accept it as an exceptionally, and unconditionally impressive cleaned up from where it had been 2 years before. Awarding me a blue ribbon of community good doing for my services... Or at least stop fining me. But this was not the case.

The first of my accomplishments worked but latter two not so

much. I had rented a tractor to do some earth moving on the property, building a terraced garden in our front yard, and leveling a couple of man made hills on the property. However as it turned out, as above, so below. He had buried trash in the hills.



Without even the curtesy of digging down to keep them level to the ground they were just dirt mounds of buried trash. Without the energy, finances, or means to dispose of these piles properly I pushed them to the far south east side of the property behind my shipping containers to focus on other project for a while. Ones that didn't entail me sifting thru trash. well, this last lone mound of trash sat exposed for a little too long for ol' tim's liking and aside from the fact that I had turned a hoarder landfill nightmare into a seemingly respectable desert rancho he felt the need to snoop around, take some pics, and slap me with a big fat TRASH ON THE PROPERTY \$500. Five hundred dollars!! Bull shit! I was so pissed. But paid the fine immediately, which i learned from a past letter where I had felt like saying "screw the man!" to one of my previous citations only to receive another irreversible, indisputable letter a month later telling me it had doubled, then a third a month after that saying it would go to collections, then later present issues on my taxes. So I paid my doubled fines and continued. Pick up trash, drive to dump, click, click, click... As for the house, there had been a 200sqft add on to the homesteader cabin at some point in the past 20 years and therefore the UNPERMITTED HOUSE fine converted to a ILLEGAL ADD ON fine and once again raised to \$500



Let me just state that I am very good with my hands, I can build, fabricate, and execute most any physical project... What I am not good at, and never have been is paperwork. School just wasn't for me, and adult school is no different. But I pushed my distain aside, and learned how to blueprint a house from scratch, i read a few books, looked at some other plans, and started on my own. I designed the house first in Sketchup, then later converted it to photoshop as those were the programs I understood. I submitted them the the county and on a second or third rendition was granted approval! or at least approval for them to accept my \$1500 and take a look at what I'd come up with. Tho this didn't mean much, i would learn, for advancing the ability for the powers that be to actually allow me to remodel my own house, but what it did mean is they couldn't fine me anymore because i had submitted plans and was now in a safe zone and holding pattern. The thing with these holding patterns is you must have a new update back and forth from the county every 6 months or else the permit will lapse and the money paid will not be refunded. Well apparently the plans that I submitted are actually not at all what they want to see. Lets just say there are some issues with bringing a 1954 homesteader cabin up to 2016 California building codes for a single family residence. To start: the walls are 2x4 studs. structurally this is ok, but the issue lies in the insulation. Code requires R-19 insulation and 2x4s can only fit R-13. so I gave it some thought and came up with ripping off the exterior, wrapping the house in ply, then a layer on R-5 rigid foam insulation then stuccoing on top of that. this would totally work for meeting our R-19 goal. Next is the concrete pad and footings. they must be 18" deep below ground level. So I dug a hole at the north side of the house till i reached the bottom. 15-18ish... yeah, I think that could work if the right inspector looked at it from the right angle... ok. next: windows, I put in new double pane windows early on. check. Electric and plumbing: all seems like it will work, and if not I can replace when I rip off the exterior walls. check. This leaves us with... the roof. firstly it has to have R-39 insulation. this would mean covering the exterior of the roof in 2 layers of the thickest most robust rigid foam they make. I did the math and technically this would work even if it would look a bit funny. But then they sent an email back saying they would need to see structural engineered stamp of the existing roof rafters because they are 2x4's and lower than a 1' in 3' pitch. sigh. ok its pretty much official. I will have to tear off the existing roof of this house that has been standing fine and dandy since 1954. Ok, thats a bummer but I can get thru that. So I wait for Wednesday our holy county sabbath to return to the church of building and safety 25 miles away on the east side of Joshua Tree to discuss my new plans. I write my name on the usual clipboard, and wait in the usual line, Its a new face I haven't seen before but he seems friendly. We chat about the situation and I re-explain my dilemmas and scenario to this city dwelling BS officer who drove two hours from San Bernardino (city) to listen to us simple minded desert folks. We chat about the usual things I've heard many times before, and as usual i get similar but varying answers to my usual

questions. Im feeling confident in the ability to pull off this big kid homework assignment. Carlos (we will call him) does the usual typing on the computer I cannot see the screen of. But this time he replies with a new and not so usual statement... "uh, oh." he says. "...you should probably just sell this property." "excuse me?" i say. Spinning the screen around he points. "your on the fault line." his finger slides across the screen along a red line that cuts thru the south west corner of my 5 acre parcel. Whats this? i ask. "Thats a fault line. Your going to have to get geological testing done." "ok... and what does that entail?" "well, The permit is \$1500 and the surveyor is at least 3k." Of course it is. I later learn more from a local architect that this is no small matter. He too told me, "its time to sell the property." And that he's dealing with one now that has the owner 20k in the hole and he's not even finished yet. I'll line this out for you to understand...

in 1992 the largest earthquake ever recorded in america took place in our fine little town. It split the highway in half and sent underground cracks out in a multitude of directions. the county recently took these cracks and drew a big red bubble around them in all directions. They then decided that if you have a property within this big red bubble you would not be aloud to build a house (or remodel an existing one) until you have geological testing done. easy right?

Heres what geological testing entails: you need to have three 15 foot deep trenches dug on the property. 15 feet! thats 1 and a half times deeper than our house is tall. You then need to find a county approved geologist. (no easy feat) to climb down into those holes and look at the soil lines assessing weather or not there are fractures in the sediment layers. This Procedure can cost 5-30 thousand dollars. and at the end of the day mr.Geologist might find a crack, and you are now not only out that money, but no longer aloud to build your dream home because, tho it may be long after your dead and gone, another 100 year earthquake might hit this small desert town again and your house might shake. Well our House survived the last one just fine and we're having no problems living in it now. aside from the fact that the county is fining for it. As your starting to see, this is a rather enraging story, and one that has yet to come to an end. This is where we find ourself today. Stuck in a limbo, with a countdown to an expired permit, a seemingly criminal citation officer, and one highly paid geologist short of a humble desert existence for ourselves, our soon to be child, and a few of our friends, and extended family to come visit and make art from time to time.

I am not writing this as a call for help, I am writing it as an eye opening reality check of how this corrupt system works, and how if we can't create a our dreams, especially in a barren desert, on a dirt road, far from any stop lights, Walmarts, and fast food joints, then Im not sure what the point of any of it is.

If you think you may know someone who could assist in green lighting our little project in the desert please let us know. We are simply looking for the means to an end of this nightmare. One that will allow us to live the life we want in peace.

In all this instability, and thru every curveball that come our way theres one thing that feels for sure, we're not throwing in the towel. The vision is as strong as ever and there is always a way to get there. i think. I thank all my frineds who have helped us along the journey with all their their physical labor, moral support, contracted projects intern funding this endeavor, idea sessions, art creations, stories of property back history, and so many other gifts. When we get thru this we will celebrate. And your all invited to join in the fun. Desert style.

thank you for reading.







