

INSPIRED BY HOUSES MADE OF EARTHEN MATERIAL
IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE, THE STRUBLES BUILT A
DWELLING NEAR AVILA VALLEY THAT'S
ECOLOGICALLY FRIENDLY

Written by Rebecca Juretic

They had seen them in Napa and tucked among the hills of Provence: houses intimately connected to the earth -- because they were made from the earth. So inspired, Don and Lonny **Struble** set about building their own earthen dwelling in Baron Canyon in the mountains east of Avila Valley.

The Strubles were impressed by the strength and safety of the earthen homes that have been built for centuries in the south of France. "They live in a very steep hilly area, prone to fire, much like we are here," Don said. There was also the desire to build an environmentally friendly house.

"We wanted something ecologically responsible. Something that wouldn't use a lot of nonrenewable materials," Lonny said. Earthen homes not only use significantly less lumber than conventional homes, but their thick walls are extremely energy-efficient.

The construction method the Strubles chose is called pise, which is short for the French phrase pise de terre or "rammed earth." The exterior walls of the home are constructed from an earthen material, in this case decomposed granite mixed with concrete and water.

Unlike the centuries-old process of rammed earth construction where the material is hand-compacted, PISE applies the earthen mixture to forms pneumatically. The result is a structure that is nearly as strong as concrete.

The aesthetic quality of a pise home is nearly as significant as its unique engineering. The technique renders a rough exterior surface. More striking, however, is the interior surface of those exterior walls. Impressions from the forms used to create them and the natural irregularities of the material create a surface that is highly textured and full of character.

At first, the Strubles were tempted to plaster over those walls. "Our architect and contractor convinced us the walls were beautiful as-is," said Don, referring to architect Thom Brajkovich and general contractor Turko Semmes of Semmes and Co. In the end, the Strubles simply gave the walls a warm color wash to accentuate their natural texture.

The complexity of the pise building technique lends itself to simple structures, such as the boxy, multi-level Mediterranean-style villas in Napa where the technique is prevalent. The Strubles, however, were partial to the low, elongated profile of ranch homes. With a little ingenuity, Brajkovich was able to comply. "It's basically four boxes put together," Don explained. "We hadn't seen anything like it, so in that respect, the house is really unique."

Inspired by their earthen home, the Strubles made an effort to use natural materials whenever possible: limestone floors, silk and wool sisal rugs, wood windows, silk draperies and a grand quartz fireplace. Even the color palette is borrowed from the earth.

"I used to decorate with lots of color before this house," recalls Lonny, who worked mainly from a palette of browns, reds and blacks. Lonny furnished the house in an eclectic style, freely combining family heirlooms with Asian pieces and farmhouse-style antiques with contemporary furnishings. "It's just a conglomeration of things I liked," she said. The most striking contrast, however, is the interplay of the rustic, natural materials with pieces more refined and formal. The raw, earthen walls seem to bring out the sheen of silk draperies and are a surprisingly beautiful counterpoint to subtly iridescent glass tiles in the master bathroom. Limestone floors are a warm backdrop for formal furnishings and silk Turkish rugs.

What the Strubles have achieved is balance: a home that is elegant but down-to-earth, spacious but not ostentatious, new yet seemingly timeless. "The house looks like it belongs here," said Lonny. "It just fits with its environment, and that's what we wanted."

TIPS FOR BUILDING AN EARTHEN HOME FROM
DON AND LONNY STRUBLE:

* Try earthen materials: If you like the look of pise, there are other ways to use earthen materials in your home. Consider adding pise pavers to a porch or even installing earthen flooring in your home. Or, on a smaller scale, you can decorate with pottery made from natural clay.

* Find beauty in contrast: Accessories are a simple way to enjoy the contrast of natural and elegant materials. In the summer, a collection of shells look stunning on a silver tray. In the winter, place acorns in a crystal bowl.

* Use native woods: Salvaged native woods can add a beautiful, rustic touch to your home. The Strubles used pieces of Manzanita to craft drawer pulls. They also had custom patio furniture made from oak stumps.