

HOME DESIGN AND FURNISHINGS: TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF

STEVE AND LAURIE WEYMANN'S STRAW-BALE HOME IN ATASCADERO IS IN HARMONY WITH ITS SURROUNDINGS AND WAS BUILT USING ECO-FRIENDLY METHODS TO MINIMIZE ENERGY USE

Written by Rebecca Juretic

Long before eco-consciousness was trendy, Steve and Laurie Weymann were studying sustainable building. Fifteen years ago, they took a course in permaculture, which embraces both sustainable agriculture and an eco-friendly lifestyle.

An idea sparked and finally manifested in 2002 when they purchased nearly 24 acres in Atascadero. Their original intent was to build an eco-friendly bed and breakfast.

"We wanted to do a green, sustainable B&B so that people could see that you can have a comfortable, aesthetically pleasing space and still build with green principles," said Laurie. All but three-quarters of an acre of their oak-covered property would have to be preserved as a scenic easement—something the environmentally sensitive couple was happy to comply with. The previous owner had planted the remaining three-quarter acres with fruit trees and grape vines. The couple was pleased to build their home there, beside the orchard with its good southern exposure, which would allow them to use both passive and active solar in the design of the inn.

They began plans for a straw-bale structure with the help of two local companies that specialize in sustainable building: San Luis Sustainability Group Architects and **Semmes & Co. Builders**.

Straw bale construction uses bales of compressed rice straw that are stacked, wrapped in wire mesh, then covered with stucco. Straw bales are an excellent insulator. And because straw is a waste product of the agriculture industry, it offers a sustainable alternative to wood.

Unfortunately, by the time construction was set to begin in 2005, the rising cost of building materials had put the concept of a bed and breakfast out of reach. The couple instead selected two rooms from their blueprint for the inn and set about building a modest, 1,044-square-foot, single-family residence.

A straw-bale home is traditionally more than just a choice of materials; it is a hands-on experience for the homeowner. The couple assisted with nearly every phase of construction and handled finish work like laying their bamboo floors and finishing interior woodwork. Steve, who is a computer

engineer, and Laurie, a nurse practitioner, worked on the house nearly every weekend and vacation day from October 2005 until its completion in April 2006. "It's not a kind of construction where you pay people to do everything and are distanced from the process," said Laurie. "You get intimately involved in your house."

The architecture of the house is modern, "but not the glass and steel kind of modern," said Laurie. Straw bale construction lends itself to a sculptural look as the thick straw walls are literally sculpted before stucco is in place. The couple made clay models to work out the nuances of the structure, including the placement of interior niches and the sinuous curves of their fluted exterior wing walls that they carved themselves.

Many of the home's attributes contribute to its passive solar design, which is intended to minimize energy use, primarily by taking advantage of the sun's natural heating capabilities. Its deep overhangs not only protect the structure from rain, they keep out direct sunlight in summer, yet allow the winter sun to angle in and warm the concrete floors. Clerestory windows allow for air circulation in the summer and reduce the need for artificial light.

The Weymanns wanted their house to harmonize with the natural surroundings, so they chose colors and materials from the earth. The exterior stucco is a rich, café-au-lait hue and interior walls are covered with sand-colored natural clay plaster. Flooring is a combination of bamboo, slate and stained concrete. Most of the home's interior woodwork is Douglas-fir reclaimed from cherry brine tanks in Oregon. And, as a finishing touch, the couple commissioned a friend, local artist Eric Krever, to create ocean-themed glass mosaics throughout the house.

Built-in furniture and hidden storage make best use of limited space. To avoid clutter, the couple scrutinized every possession, only retaining the pieces that they loved and knew would function well in the space. "We had been downsizing for few years," said Laurie. "We became committed to losing the excess baggage, living a sustainable life where we live comfortably but don't have more than we need."

Although continuously rising building costs make a B&B less likely, the Weymanns decided to retain New Leaf Inn as the name of their house. They even had the leaf logo emblazoned on the front of the structure. "It's the idea of turning over a new leaf and creating a sustainable life," Laurie explained. "And it's also the idea that leaves drop off in the fall but come again in the spring. It's about constant renewal."

RESOURCES:

Architect: Scott Clark, San Luis Sustainability Group

<http://www.slosustainability.com>

Builder: **Semmes** and Co. [semmesco.com](http://www.semmesco.com)

Original Mosaics: Eric Krever <http://www.erickrever.com>

Cabinetry, reclaimed woods: Green Goods,

<http://www.slogreengoods.com>

Quilted day bed covers: Diane Mason

Stained concrete floor: B&L Concrete Staining (Chris Bailey)

Bathroom tile: Colony Tile, Atascadero

PV Grid Tie Solar Power: Travis Semmes, Mobile Solar Power, www.mobilesolarpower.com

DESIGN TIPS FROM THE WEYMANN HOME:

TRY A DAYBED - A built-in daybed is an excellent multifunctional solution in a small space. Put comfortable cushions on it, and it becomes extra seating or a spare bed. Add a hinged seat, and you've got loads of extra storage space. If possible, add a curtain that guests can close for privacy.

GO NATURAL - Natural finishes are gaining favor over dark stains and high-gloss finishes that mask wood's natural grain. Instead of a stain and sealer, try treating wood with a light linseed oil stain. It warms up the color slightly and creates a protective seal. Exterior wood, like doors, will need to be resealed every one to two years. Interior wood will need it less often.

FOOL THE EYE - Make a small space seem larger by choosing furniture and fixtures that allow you to see a greater expanse of floor. Select a sofa with exposed legs and a glass coffee table. In the bathroom, opt for a wall-mounted sink and shelving instead of a bulky vanity.