

Stuffed with straw: Ecologically sound inn has 'sandwich' walls

Montreal Gazette
Thu Jul 11 1996
Page: C1 / BREAK
Section: Living: Homes
Byline: ANNABELLE KING
Source: The Gazette

If the big bad wolf ever came huffing and puffing at a straw-stuffed house in the village of La Conception, near Mount Tremblant, his nasty efforts wouldn't work. Unlike the pig's shaky little hut, this one is strong enough to withstand the wintry blasts that whip through the mountainous region.

The reason l'Auberge a la Croisee des Chemins is so sturdy is its triple-layered walls, put together like a straw sandwich layered on the outside with rough-cut pine and on the inside with plaster. The walls are 22 inches thick and that's about as sturdy as a wall can get, according to a Montreal architect whose specialty is designing healthy environments.

"The walls of a conventional structure are usually around 9 to 12 inches thick and the use of straw bales is like wrapping a house in a cozy duvet," said Maryse Leduc-Cummings. She said straw is a natural for construction - it has more than twice the heat retention of traditional insulation, it is non-toxic and is a slow burner.

"In case of fire it takes four hours to destroy this type of wall as compared to 20 minutes for those found in standard construction," said the architect, who guided do-it-yourselfers Bob Bourdon and Johanne Parent in building the inn.

Another benefit of straw, according to Leduc-Cummings, is that this

type of house can cost 20 per cent to 40 per cent less to build than a conventional one.

According to the book *The Straw Bale House*, straw is a quickly renewable resource, unlike the wood conventionally used in home construction.

Straw has been used for housing for centuries in Asia, Europe and United States. In their eagerness to save the planet, environmentalists and architects are giving it a second look and designing houses using this natural material as an important component.

The straw filler is only a part of Bourdon and Parent's plans to establish a totally healthy habitat, from construction to cuisine, in their seven-bedroom inn.

"This was going to be our home and it was important to be ecologically responsible to ourselves and to the environment. Starting new gave us the chance to incorporate all the ideas we believed in," said Bourdon, a master carpenter and a wilderness guide. Parent, a herbalist and horticulturist, has worked on a completely vegetarian menu for themselves and guests.

Despite warnings from friends about taking financial risks in a weakened economy they were convinced they were doing the right thing. Both had done their homework on straw-bale construction and had worked out the design of the house. Although Bourdon was confident that he had the expertise to do the work, he wanted to make sure his plans were feasible and sought out Leduc-Cummings.

"For the past 10 years I had been watching the development of straw-bale construction and was anxious to work on one," the architect said. After a set of blueprints were drawn up, the couple moved quickly to get the project under way. Before it could get off the ground it had to be checked out by a local building inspector to qualify for a permit saying that it met local codes.

In March last year, when all the the legal and design paperwork was finished, the formidable task of making room for the inn on a densely treed 5-acre site began.

"We had to move fast in cutting down the trees before the sap set in, which would make the wood too gooey to cut properly," said Bourdon who, with the help of Parent's brother, chopped down 60 pines on the site. All the wood was used on the house as beams, window frames and decorative exterior finishing. "The support beams are standing up the way they did in the forest," Bourdon said. And one with a pregnant bulge was placed at the heart of the house to signify the birth of their new lifestyle. Since then trees have been planted to replace the ones that were used for construction.

In August, when they were ready to build, a large tepee and outhouse were erected and the couple camped on the site until the project was finished. "In February of 1996 we welcomed our first paying guest," Bourdon said.

Putting up the house resembled a pioneer barn-raising at which friends and neighbors pitched in.

"At one time there could be 15 pairs of hands helping us out and

all we did was feed them," Parent said. Her mother was always there, cooking up lunches for the labor crew, and her father prepared the foundation. The couple was overwhelmed by the support from friends and family and every now and then strangers would appear and offer help.

"One evening a young carpenter materialized saying that he wanted to work for us so he could learn the post-and-beam construction," Bourdon recalled. The next day he arrived with a sleeping bag and stayed until the work was finished. "Then he just disappeared and we never saw him again. We think he was an angel," Parent said. They only called upon professionals to install the electricals and plumbing.

The inn has the feeling of an old farmhouse with its pine cladding, post-and-beam construction, a galvanized aluminum mansard roof and dormered windows. The couple wanted guests to feel as though they were coming home to a comfortable cocoon and avoided sterile hotel furnishings. Instead they scouted antiques shops in the area looking for beds, tables, chairs and sofas that expressed the 1920s and 1930s.

"We even found old cast-iron tubs and recycled them with new enamel finishes. They are wonderful to use because they retain the heat much longer," Parent said.

Warmth emanates from the ceramic-tiled main floor laid over a network of pipes circulating a steady stream of heated water.

The heart of the house is the adjoining dining room and kitchen,

where guests can watch Parent preparing breakfast and smell baked bread or freshly made dandelion molasses.

There is a friendly down-home feeling in this glass-walled area where nothing seems to be hidden behind closed doors. Displayed on open shelving are large jars filled with beans, nuts, cereals, legumes, popcorn and herbs.

"We planned the kitchen as a food lab where I could experiment with our vegetarian cuisine," said Parent, who will eventually grow everything eaten at the inn. Right now the soil is too acidic and it will take a couple of years to prepare it properly. "We want to stimulate the life forces in the earth and we won't do it with chemicals and that takes time," Parent said.

For now all their food supplies come from biological growers and a typical dinner can include avocados in raspberry sauce, three salads, vegetable pie, lentils au gratin and a house specialty pie made of dates and nuts.

- L'Auberge a la Croisee des Chemins (The Inn at the Crossroads),

4273 Chemin des Tulips, La Conception, phone and fax (819) 686-5289.

- For more information and history of straw bale construction,

read The Straw Bale House by Athena Swentzell Steen, Bill Steen,

David Bainbridge with David Eisenberg, \$40, available through

Sustainable Development Resource Centre, 1875 Rene Levesque Blvd.,

939-0809 or 482-5033.

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Illustration:

• Photo: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, GAZETTE / Detail from the outhouse door. Color Photo: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, GAZETTE / There's always work to be done. Photo: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, GAZETTE / Bedrooms have furniture from the 1920s and 1930s. Color Photo: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, GAZETTE / "Pregnant" tree trunk and fireplace made out of recycled bricks provide a natural warm look to the house. Color Photo: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, GAZETTE / Johanne Parent and Bob Bourdon cook up a vegetarian meal in their open kitchen. Photo: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, GAZETTE / Dining room with view of outdoors. Color Photo: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, GAZETTE / Opening in the wall shows the straw-bale filling.