

Lamorinda OUR HOMES

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Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

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Building a house of straw

By John T. Miller



Amber and Norman Remer smile inside their house of straw, while under construction.

Photo John T. Miller

While Norman and Amber Remer of Saranap are feeling no threats from the Big Bad Wolf, their efforts to build a house of straw have been beset by many obstacles, including county permits, the recent winter monsoons, concerns of neighbors, and the stress of time and space constraints.

When the Remers moved back to the Bay Area after spending five years in Washington, D.C., they

realized they could not afford to live in the community of their choice on the teacher salaries they both earn. Norman is a high school English teacher and Amber teaches elementary school. The couple are also expecting their first child in January.

Norman's creative solution was to call on Mom and Dad – Lilli and Nick Remer – who were willing to take out a loan on their existing home and transfer the mortgage payments to their son and daugh-

ter-in-law so they could build a living quarters in their backyard.

They first began planning in July, 2015.

“We realized we could take advantage of this amazing opportunity to build something unique, beautiful and eco-friendly,” said Norman Remer. “I researched adobe structures but realized it wouldn't work in earthquake country. My research led me to straw bale construction and I fell in love with the soft curves and undulating walls of the design. Luckily, Amber was willing to go along with my crazy scheme.”

Straw bale homes have thick walls like adobe, are insulated with an agricultural waste product, and are perfectly suited to California's earthquakes and hot summers. Once the tightly packed bales are enclosed, there is no room for oxygen, rendering the house practically fireproof.

An advantage to the straw insulation is efficiency in heating and cooling. Amber Remer points out, “It takes 12 hours for changes in outside temperature to reach the inside. The house stays cool without air conditioning even on 100-degree days.” The house can also support a green roof, with over 500 square feet of potential garden outside the upstairs bedroom window.

“When we first went in for the permitting process, the county officials were like deer in headlights with the concept of a building with straw walls,” said Norman Remer. “Despite the fact that people have built like this for hundreds of years, the county wasn't sure how to deal with it. They worried that the house might collapse.”

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