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Sierra Vista, AZ

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## "Like a kingdom with magnificent scenery."

### Modest-size home built from straw bales

By Shar Porier


Herald/Review

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BISBEE — "How much space does it take to be happy?" asks author Shay Salomon in the introduction of her book, "Little House on a Small Planet".

The small house building coach came down from Tucson this past weekend to offer her advise and experience with straw bale building at a home under construction northwest of Bisbee in the Mule Mountains.

Jean Hodgson, a Sierra Vistan who is ready to escape to the wildlands, bought the 40-acre, off-the-grid spread two years ago. "The land is so beautiful, like a kingdom with magnificent scenery. You can't find anything like that in town or near town,"  Hodgson said.

For her, being without commercial electrical power is a blessing. It generally dissuades people from building in the wide open spaces.

“I had some property in Hereford, but shortly after I bought it, three new homes were built. That was disappointing. Out here I won’t have to worry about that,” she added.

She spent a lot of time looking into alternative construction and thought of going with papercrete (made from recycled paper and cement or clay), but chose straw bale instead. Since she participates in a straw bale group, she is familiar with the building technique and the simplicity of it.

“It’s hard work,” said Salomon as she glanced at the work done on Saturday by a small team of volunteers.

They had succeeded in installing almost all of the bales on three walls. The bales are stacked 10 feet high and each one had to be carried, shoved and lifted into place by hand. The back wall is done conventionally and will be covered with cedar.

The 900-square-foot house holds one bedroom, one bath, a kitchen, utility room and an office for her work. All the building materials will be non-toxic and environmentally safe.

Salomon is a believer in building small, for environmental reasons as well as financial ones. The smaller the home, the more energy efficient and environmentally friendly it will be.

Nigel Valdez, Salomon’s partner and photographer for her book, says, “Most builders have nature deficit disorder. When you build your own home, you get to see just how much of the environment is destroyed. The mesquites and creosotes that get destroyed. The lizards and insects ... When you kill a food source it affects others down the line.”

“And when you buy a house you don’t see the labor that goes into it,” added Salomon. “You have to work hard to build your own house.”

Though things are coming together now, in the beginning Hodgson had a hard time finding a contractor who would work with her and fulfill her nontraditional dream.

“I looked for contractors who would do what I wanted, but they kept steering me toward traditional building and tried to tell me what I wanted. Now that I’m building my own home, I’ll finally get what I want,” she explained.

In her mind’s eye, she saw her dream house — one made of alternative building materials, solar-powered, and sized to her needs. With Salomon’s help and after “about a 100 floor plans,” she hit on the one that would work for her in just a little over 900 square feet.

“When you have no experience at what you are doing, and you’re designing, you don’t really know if



On Sunday, Nigel Valdez hammers wooden pegs through the window frames into the straw bales of a house located off Highway 80 between Tombstone and Bisbee. The bales, which form the exterior walls of the 900-square-foot house, were set in place the day before with the help of volunteers. The walls will later be covered with a lime plaster. (Vera Davis•Herald/Review) On Sunday, Nigel Valdez hammers wooden pegs through the window frames into the straw bales of a house located off Highway 80 between Tombstone and Bisbee. The bales, which form the exterior walls of the 900-square-foot house, were set in place the day before with the help of volunteers. The walls will later be covered with a lime plaster. (Vera Davis•Herald/Review)



(Use arrows above to view more photos)

it's going to work or not," Hodgson said. "It's a very creative process. I'd submit plans to Shay, and she'd tell me whether it was do-able and why it wouldn't work. She has been a big help in the process."

Hodgson finally found carpenter Ray Martinez, from Tucson, who was willing to give straw bale building a try. He did all the framing of the home and helped with stabilizing the straw bale walls with dowels that connected them together.

Another strengthening part of straw bale building is to corset-stitch the bales together, explained Valdez. Bamboo poles are tied to the bales which bring them into line and helps hold them securely.

There were jokes when she started with the straw bale idea — think three little pigs and I'll blow your house down, Hodgson said.

"Not this house," Hodgson emphasized.

Finding a builder wasn't her only problem. Banks and mortgage companies don't give out loans for straw bale house. She's had to lay out money for the home as she goes.

One problem lies in finding a comparable home in the area on which to base the loan amount, Hodgson explained.

"I found out they just don't finance these homes. They're stuck in traditional home building," she said. "It doesn't matter how well built it is; they just won't finance it."

In her future, she sees her raising some farm animals — chickens, for example — and has already started a garden for her own veggies and fruits.

"There's all kinds of fun you can have out in the country," Hodgson added.

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waldo pepper wrote on Nov 12, 2008 10:06 AM:

" Mention of the Three Little Pigs and the straw house brings to life my nightmares as a child. My little brother Bobby and I were alone in the house and the Big Bad Wolf was pounding on the front door, which was always locked and bloted. Then I would race to the back door just in the nick of time to throw the catch as Wolf, his great jaws salivating and his wicked red eyes gleaming at me through the window, licked his chops and waited in the darkness. "

Independent wrote on Nov 11, 2008 12:00 AM:

" Hey, neat article. Thanks. "

Laura Bartels GreenWeaver Inc. wrote on Nov 10, 2008 10:04 PM:

" It's great to see another example of straw bale technology being used for an energy efficient home with a space efficient design. I do consulting on straw bale projects in many states and wanted to comment that most straw bale projects do obtain bank financing and get homeowner's insurance. A great resource for locating banks and ins. co's is the International Straw Bale Registry project at <http://sbregistry.greenbuilder.com/>. Regarding fire, straw bale walls have passed 1- and 2- hour ASTM fire ratings. You can get test results at [www.ecobuildnetwork.org](http://www.ecobuildnetwork.org). "

Eliot wrote on Nov 10, 2008 1:41 PM:

" Many banks are in fact offering traditional mortgages on straw bale homes. I personally financed my straw bale home through CountryWide on a 30-year fixed plan. Just check with various lenders if you're seeking a mortgage. "

interesting wrote on Nov 10, 2008 12:44 PM:

" I swa a house like this on HGTV-- very interesting, but isn't it a fire hazard? "



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- Dasher
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- Comet
- Cupid
- Donder
- Blitzen
- Rudolph

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