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COMMUNITY
ISSUE

Living in the Round: A Kiva-Style Dwelling

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A Fine Romance

A photograph of a dining table. In the foreground, a dark bowl sits on a matching saucer with two wooden chopsticks resting across it. To the left, a tall, dark, cylindrical vase holds a bouquet of purple and white orchids. In the background, a lit candle in a white holder provides a warm, soft glow. The overall atmosphere is intimate and elegant.

Ecology meets technology in this Los Angeles home, and the lucky couple who resides there finds it a match made in heaven.

Jana Montgomery and Claudio Santini wield a soft touch within the hard edges of their modern home. Setting the table with the elegant Sasaki dishes, for example, transforms the simplest fare (even Chinese takeout) into an idyllic meal.



An abundance of natural light makes the main room an ideal spot for Claudio to work on his paintings. The huge south-facing window is also a natural passive solar collector.

Designer John Picard installed light-toned bamboo flooring for environmental reasons (it matures quickly and grows like a weed); but Jana loves its durability and low maintenance. "We had a Christmas tree whose container leaked for three days before we discovered the problem," she recalls. "It would have ruined any other floor—in this case, the water just sat on the surface."

The 3,200-square-foot home is made of steel recycled from junked cars, cans, and washing machines. Picard believes he saved at least 100 trees by using this material instead of wood. (A steel-framed house, like any other, can be finished in brick, stucco, or other veneer.) Twenty-one roof-mounted photovoltaic panels provide 80 percent of the homeowners' electricity needs.



WHEN COLORADO-BORN Jana Montgomery pictured owning a home, a two-story corrugated-metal cube capped by a roof made from recycled petroleum waste wasn't exactly what came to mind. "I'm a little more of a cottage person," Jana confesses.

But Jana and her spouse, Italian architectural photographer and artist Claudio Santini, also harbored dreams of living in an environmentally friendly house large enough to provide a work and display space for Claudio's art. The Los Angeles-based couple lucked out when they heard about a quirky 3,200-square-foot eco-techno home located on a side street in Marina del Rey. "We snatched it up before the house even went on the market," recalls Claudio. He, Jana, and their rabbit, Chipper, have been living there happily for nearly three years.

Claudio's idea of home sweet home has always been inextricably tied up with the concept of living in a manner respectful of the planet and its limited resources. And by those standards, this is a dream home, to be sure.

The Montgomery-Santini residence was constructed in 1991 by and for John Picard, a renovator of multi-million dollar Hollywood mansions whose ecological epiphany came while watching an MTV public service announcement on the decimation of Earth's rain forests. "That was the first time I had ever thought for one second that I had something to do with the world's environmental problems," he says.

As a result, Picard changed careers and began planning a personal residence that would become a poster child for environmentally sustainable living in Southern California. Bucking building trends, Picard constructed his home from recycled steel. "The house can be disassembled with a quarter-inch screw gun and recycled again," he explains.

Claudio, a professional photographer, and Jana, his manager, share the office adjoining the home, which runs completely on solar electricity.



Jana and Claudio have made use of nearly every inch of their urban lot to grow food and fresh flowers, creating a lush oasis in the city. Gardenia trees and a honeysuckle vine perfume the entryway; lavender and old-fashioned roses provide romance. Rosemary is essential for the Italian dishes Jana makes, and a productive vegetable garden behind the home keeps the kitchen well-stocked. A slow-growing hybrid dwarf grass (Bonsai) lawn and drought-resistant landscaping help foster an atmosphere of calm.





In the high-ceilinged living room, Jana and Claudio create intimacy by clustering the living room furniture around a super-efficient Rais woodburning stove and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, creating a room within a room.



Located in a loft overlooking the main living area, above the kitchen and the guestroom, the bedroom space is small and intimate. From their bed, Jana and Claudio can watch movies projected from a ceiling projector onto a huge screen that drops in front of the southern windows.



A reproduction bathtub provides romantic relief to the hard edges and techno-feel of the rest of the home.

Solar Power

Twenty-one roof-mounted sun-tracking photovoltaic panels allow the house to generate up to 80 percent of its electricity needs, independent of the city-supplied power grid. (The residence's adjoining home office is 100 percent solar-powered.) On overcast days in winter when the solar panels produce less electricity, the Montgomery-Santini residence taps into the city's power grid and consumes conventional energy. On days when Claudio and Jana's home produces a surplus of electricity, that cycle is reversed by a system that allows the grid to "buy back" energy from them.

"People are really impressed with the solar panels right off," Jana observes. "But when they learn that they can make their electric meter run backward, they always say, 'We'd like to build a house like this.' We feel like the lifestyle we've chosen is encouraging for everyone."

Thanks to Picard (a self-taught techie), Jana and Claudio's home is largely computer operated. The shades automatically open and close to maintain interior temperatures, and the coffee maker goes on about 8 a.m. Shortly after that, the couple's aquarium pump switches on. Used to its fullest, the elaborate computer system controls the home's lighting, security, appliances, mechanical, heating, and air conditioning systems. Sensors monitor the occupancy and temperature of each room, opening and closing vents and putting on the air conditioning only where needed. A solar-powered, motorized gate controls street access to the residence.

Picard points out that his paeon to the marriage of ecology and technology (a far better match than many people would suspect, he says) is even easier to obtain today. "What was then a \$15,000 computer system investment can now be purchased for \$500 or less and operated by remote control," he marvels.

Claudio and Jana readily admit that the system is far more sophisticated than they need. "If you wanted to, you could program the computer to run the dishwasher, but we just turn it on manually," Claudio confesses. Conventional on-and-off switches allow them to bypass the computer and operate their appliances the old-fashioned way.

Low Maintenance

In addition to being fireproof, termite proof, and seismically sound (the recycled heavy-duty steel frame has an earthquake seismic rating of ten), the home's exterior



Jana loves the charcoal-poured kitchen floor, which acts as a passive solar collector, because it hides crumbs. Picard selected the floor for its ability to absorb solar radiation and help naturally heat the house.



Butcher-block countertops are a cook's dream—practical yet beautiful. Jana and Claudio have amassed an eclectic collection of pottery from their many trips to Italy. Views from the kitchen window include an ever-flowering bougainvillea bush and squirrels and birds feeding at the fence.

In the mild Los Angeles climate, outdoor living space is essential. Several times a week, Claudio and Jana eat dinner on the covered patio behind their office, and they often entertain there as well. The outdoor room adjoins the couples *giardino segreto* (secret garden), which is protected on all sides.



NORTH



LOWER LEVEL



UPPER LEVEL

remains virtually maintenance-free. "Most houses need to be painted or treated periodically," says Jana. "This one takes care of itself. We just let the rain wash the outside clean—it's made of galvanized metal, so it won't rust." The home's iron window frames do need periodic maintenance, however, and are painted with a non-toxic sealer to keep them from rusting.

Features such as R-21.5 batt super insulation and a south-facing wall of sixteen giant steel-framed window panes help reduce energy consumption in the home's 2,400-square-foot main living area, which doubles as Claudio's art studio. In the shower, a recovery system captures water that literally would be going down the drain while someone waits for a shower to heat up. The system diverts the water into a special plumbing line that feeds into an outdoor barrel storing water for the garden.

A Soulful Dwelling

A house made of metal may sound like it lacks heart, but nothing could be further from the truth. The interior walls are made of drywall composed of recycled materials and covered with non-toxic paints and finishes. Naturally felled wood coated with non-toxic stains and paints was used to construct the kitchen and bathroom cabinets. A restored antique ball and clawfoot tub graces the downstairs bathroom; porcelain tile flooring lends character to the upstairs bathroom. Two full walls of thermal-paned windows make the attached honeysuckle-draped office (built in lieu of a garage) light, airy, and inviting.

"This is the perfect combination for me," says Jana. Despite its ecological correctness and technological gadgets (such as a recessed Cineplex-style movie screen that hangs from the living room ceiling) the house is "not so contemporary that you can't do romantic things in it," she notes.

Neither Claudio nor Jana can identify much in the way of tradeoffs involved in leading a sustainable lifestyle. "The refrigerator doesn't produce its own ice like most contemporary models do," shrugs Claudio. Adds Jana, "I don't know if there is a downside to an energy efficient home. It's very rewarding to know that you're doing something good for the planet." ■