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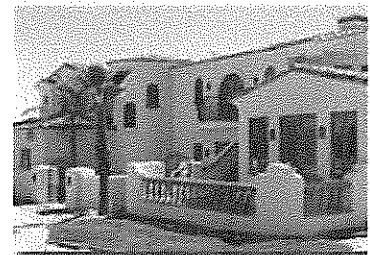
A 'Green Builder' Uses Cutting-Edge Materials in Mainstream Homes

As a charter member of NAHB's Environmental Issues Committee, home builder Ron Jones was instrumental in establishing that group's Green Building Subcommittee in 1999 under then-NAHB President Charlie Ruma. He is the founder of Sierra Custom Builders in Placitas, NM, and an enthusiastic proponent of innovative and energy-efficient home construction. We recently asked him to share his perspectives on the marketplace for environmentally sensitive homes, particularly with regard to the use of Insulated Concrete Forms (ICFs).

Q: You have a reputation as a "green builder" who frequently employs alternative building materials. Could you tell us a little about that, and about what kind of homes you build?

A: We just celebrated our 20th year in business, and "GREEN BUILDER" is my U.S. registered trademark.

The truth of it is, I'm a mainstream builder who likes to push the envelope. I like to say we're a lot more interested in what we don't know than what we do — that's what being alive is all about, isn't it? For example, I have very little interest in going in and building on prepared sites — it's not a challenge to me or to my people. So from the start we're almost always in some sort of challenging environment. And it just makes sense in those situations to incorporate some innovative elements in the building process.



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I want to be clear that we don't do "fringe" construction. We build homes starting in the \$400,000-\$500,000 range and going up to well over \$2 million. Most of these wind up being "hybrids" where we use a combination of traditional and alternative materials. We definitely use a good percentage of forest products (a renewable resource), including engineered wood, dimensional lumber and reclaimed timbers that have been salvaged from other structures, and we do traditional masonry using block construction, adobe or brick. But we also employ a variety of other materials — particularly light-gauge steel and insulated concrete forms (ICFs). The fact of the matter is, I use and endorse all of these products. We don't limit ourselves — we determine what works best for each application.

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Q: Tell us about your experience with ICFs.

A: I've been building with Insulated Concrete Forms (ICFs) for a long time. I've used a brand of ICF system that was made in Canada 30-35 years ago, from a company now called American Polysteel® that's headquartered here in New Mexico. Over the last several years, I've also been using a product called RASTRA®. I like it because it's made with recycled material (polystyrene) and also because it's available in larger units — you're working with a "bigger Lego." Most ICFs come in four-foot lengths, but RASTRA elements come in 12.5 square-foot segments. This product also provides outstanding sound and temperature insulation. It's easy to work with, saves time and comes in a variety of thicknesses. Plus, the load capacity can be adapted to any requirement. The core is filled with concrete and provides excellent structural integrity, and homes built with this material have good R values. The product is also very "carve-able," allowing for artistic touches.

Q: How many homes does your company build per year, and are these mostly custom or spec?

A: It depends on the year. Some individual houses take two years to build! In the coming 18 months, we plan to do only two homes — one using RASTRA and another using a variety of light gauge steel framing and possibly some ICFs, depending on the soil condition.

I actually build more spec homes than custom ones. At one point several years ago we had a six-year waiting list for custom homes, and I decided we should stop taking orders. What's important to realize is that custom work is essentially portrait work. You are the expression or vehicle for your customer's vision, and the result needs to be something that expresses that vision. And when customers are designing their own places, they are very careful to avoid making a mistake — besides a few minor details, they aren't willing to take chances to be on the "cutting edge." But once the cutting-edge product is built and they see it in action, they want it. The last two RASTRA homes I built were on spec, and one of them sold for \$1.3 million before I even had it plastered before I was really ready to sell!

Q: What are the cost benefits of ICF construction, and what are its main selling points?

A: The product itself and the concrete that goes into it actually costs you a bit more — the efficiencies come because you can stucco directly to the exterior, plaster directly to the interior, and you get a very durable building with an exterior that should last at least a couple hundred years without major repairs. For the buyer, ICFs have all kinds of benefits, too: improved energy efficiency that can result in much smaller utility bills; resistance to hurricane-strength winds and seismic factors (ICFs are made with concrete and are steel-reinforced); they're fire-resistant; they make for a very quiet home because of their sound-dampening quality; plus they're resistant to mold, termites and rodents.

I'm about to start a house using RASTRA that's about 2,800 square feet, which for us is fairly small. The customers opted for ICF construction when we told them it was the way to go, even though it will cost them about \$12,000 more than it would to build their house with traditional framing. Up front there is an extra investment, but it pays off in the long run because of the really impressive performance and creative freedom it allows.

Many of my buyers who are interested in homes with ICFs or adobe construction fall into the category that's been termed "cultural creatives." Their perception of a company's environmental responsibility weighs heavily in their buying decisions, even when it means what they choose will cost more. In the case of ICFs, the fill material is recycled foam plastic that would otherwise have gone to a landfill. Plus, the high R values of the structure allow for greater energy conservation. These are primary selling points.

Q: What percentage of your homes are built using ICFs?

A: In the last three years, at least 50%. It's a toss-up for me between adobe and ICF materials. In fact, I would refer to ICFs as "the thinking person's adobe."

Q: In your opinion, why aren't more U.S. builders employing ICFs?

A: We're in a very conservative industry. You have to look at it in very basic terms when you're

the business of constructing homes, which is one of the last bastions of true American opportunity. If you're willing to work hard, you can succeed in this industry. But many builders who are just starting out potentially have a lot to lose by trying something new. Even a small mistake is a big deal when you're building someone's home. So the industry's been slow to change, and not particularly aggressive about embracing new technologies. On the other hand, there are a lot of builders who feel like I do about forging ahead.

New Mexico is a good example of a market that's well-suited to ICFs. It's rich in labor, but not in technology. It's also subject to climate extremes and seismic activity. That's why a simple build-it system like this, which has good structural integrity and doesn't require a huge amount of skilled labor to put in place, can be a good alternative to the traditional stick-built approach. But ICFs have also long been in use across Europe and in other markets around the world.

Q: One reason you've cited for building with insulated concrete forms is energy conservation. Is there any tax or business incentive for building energy-efficient dwelling in your market?



A: We don't have any special incentives at this point. Like every other U.S. market, our solar credits dried up in the 1990s. But I am highly involved in NAHB's lobbying efforts to get resident energy-efficiency tax credits passed as part of the comprehensive energy legislation that Congress is now considering. With the East Coast power failure fresh in congressmen's minds, hopefully there's good momentum for energy-conservation incentives like this going forward.

Ron Jones will appear as a featured speaker at NAHB's first International Housing Conference in Mexico City in mid-October.

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