

"BACK TO THE LAND"

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By Keith Hamm

Winding west along the Gaviota Coast is like visiting a California of a better, vanished time. The views are full of mountain and sea. The pounding surf is part of the big silence. And the neighbors are few and far between. The area's most recent homeowner, Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia, outdoor clothing and equipment company, considers himself a blacksmith by trade. He used to travel with an anvil in his truck and pound out prototype rock climbing gear, selling it to fellow climbers. His craftsmanship changed the face of climbing, his company- arguably one of the most socially and environmentally responsible on the planet- aims to change the face of doing business, and his new house, well, he prefers to let it speak for itself.

Chouinard is always tinkering, always trying to improve on the way things are done. In fact, 95 percent of his new home is a departure from traditional building practices. He wanted a house that wouldn't be a drain on natural resources, neither during the building process nor in day-to-day water and power consumption. Santa Barbara architect who specializes in green building design, sketched in Chouinard's desires; and with the help of Kit Boise-Cossart, they produced a dwelling that Mehl calls more than just a home for the Chouinard's; this is a house that can teach.

Touring the house is a lesson in common sense. The design follows simple, down-to-earth ideas that become evident even before your turn down the driveway. The first thing you notice about Chouinard's house is that you can't. His dwelling- all 1,400 square feet- is nestled in a gentle swale, out of sight from the road. The next thing that you notice is that everything is more than meets the eye. While most gravel driveways consist of limestone gravel or asphalt poured in a direct route to the garage, Chouinard's driveway follows the natural contours of the coastal slope and is composed of recycled road base- gravel sized chunks of concrete, brick, tile and asphalt. Granite Construction Company has a surplus of the stuff from the Northridge Earthquake. Not only is it affordable, it does the job without contributing to the large-scale impact of mining quarries.

The driveway ends at a modest, but substantial, but home overlooking the blue Pacific. The plastered cement walls and timer roof are situated under the sun's path so that they capture the warming rays by day and release the solar energy at night. Its low profile, tucked behind a lift in the land, hides it from prevailing winds that would otherwise, through convection, peel away-trapped heat. A wall further deflects the wind and also shields unsightly solar panels located adjacent to, not on top of, the house. The sun's energy is transformed into DC power through state-of-the-art photovoltaic cells, then again to AC, fueling lights, pumps, and the washer and dryer. Another solar system performs all the water heating. As far as green buildings go, solar power is nothing new, nor is recycled road rubble. Many of the ideas and technologies forming Chouinard's house have been used before. The difference is quantity. Where

most environmental homes showcase a few low impact approaches, Chouinard gave Mehl and Boise-Cossart the green light to go all out.

Mehl's firm, Robert Peale Mehl, or RPM, Architects is committed to this kind of approach. Whether we like it or not, architects are stewards, he said. We can accept that responsibility or ignore it. Just as mountaineers on unfamiliar ranges often hire a guide, Chouinard contracted Mehl not only for his architectural artwork, but also to lead him through the backcountries of green design. Mehl opened a map and introduced Chouinard to the available options, covering everything from power sources and building materials to landscaping and climate. To get a feel for new building sites, Mehl typically camps out on the property. On Chouinard's land, Mehl was stirred from sleep at 3 a.m. by icy northwesterlies, which prompted him to suggest situating the house behind natural windbreaks.

The walkway to the front door is a welcome layout of patio and landscaping, at night lit by an energy efficient light bulb that burns 10-13 times longer than a conventional bulb, using one quarter of the energy and cutting costs by 75 percent. They cost more up front, but in the long run they more than pay for themselves. They shine throughout the house. Most of the conspicuous lighting and plumbing fixtures are secondhand antiques from garage sales. The front door is a thick plane of redwood, salvaged from a demolished Ojai bridge and refinished with the least toxic sealant Boise-Cossart could find. It swings on iron hinges hand-crafted by Chouinard- personal touches to the place where he plans to hole up.

A House with Spirit: The house is a reflection of the owner; Chouinard is an original. He routinely laps the globe to rock climb, surf, fly fish, lead mountaineering expeditions, and soak up diverse cultures. Travel, he said, has been his education. Quite frequently he slams headfirst into problems like overpopulation, corruption and a creeping monoculture. This dismays him he said, he said, humankind's fate will soon be sealed, were dragging plants and animals and other natural miracles down with us.

Wanting nothing to do with humankind's preposterous tendencies to live beyond its resources, Chouinard practices what he preaches. He blended his ideals and ideas and founded a model company. From providing flexible schedules and day care to making clothing from recycled material and organically grown cotton, Patagonia's path strays from the status quo corporate America- and still makes a profit. Whether he's running a business, scaling Yosemite's monolithic granite slabs (he has pioneered many routes since his first ascents in the 60s), or building a home in Santa Barbara, few of Chouinard's ideas and actions are typical.

This house is spirited; it has a heart, Mehl said, and I feel a lot of new buildings don't have that. The walls are built from different shapes and sizes of concrete blocks smashed from the old pathways of closed down Bulletin dairy barns. The walls are coated smoothly with plaster- functional, affordable, nontoxic, and easy to work with- creating a unique, slightly undulating surface. As far as green buildings go, this is the most unusual aspect of Chouinard's

place. New lumber wasn't even on the drawing board. Within the stout walls, a grid of rebar redoubles their strength, meeting building codes for California's quake lands. A two-inch thick spray coat of Air Krete insulates the walls beneath the plaster finish. Boise-Cossart describes Air Krete as a nontoxic, cement like, foam insulation, with no formaldehyde, fiberglass, asbestos, or fluorocarbons. You can practically eat the stuff, he said. The living room is spacious and well lit through broad double paned windows.

Gary Bulla, a Santa Paula cabinetmaker, crafted the kitchen cupboards and drawers from dead trees and the fallen branches of Southern California black walnut and coast live oak. Slotted within his works of art, energy efficient appliances mimic modern equipment in all respects except price and power consumption. Expect to pay more for these energy misers, but count on saving a pretty penny in the future. The super-insulated refrigerator uses about as much electricity as a night light.

Before the dawn of shingled roofs, slate was the preferred overhead building material. In Chouinard's home, though, it's underfoot. Secondhand slate forms the floor. thick shards of whole pieces fit together in a random mosaic. Beneath the floor, pipes and coils flow with solar heated water. When the outside temperature drops, the pump kicks in and the heat radiates up through the floor, warming the house comfortably and uniformly. A recent energy audit of the home revealed that Chouinard's total monthly energy bill, even during the stretches of cold and fog, will never break \$11.

The bathrooms are equipped with low flow toilets, showers and sinks (required fixtures in Santa Barbara County) surrounded by counter-top slabs of granite and marble. Plumbing is PVC pipe joined with nontoxic glue.

The whole house is capped by Jeffrey pine timbers milled from fallen trees and salvaged from a North County residential area recently ravaged by fire. Some of the crossbeams measure 8 by 10 inches; a mighty thick cut for Boise-Cossart, who was first told to use only hand tools. On this aspect, the purist approach was compromised in favor of the 20th century power tools. Even with modern equipment, the house took two and a half years to build; much of that time was spent searching for materials, preferably from local sources. Boise-Cossart was hired for his building experience, but was also paid to research the materials: For example, is this sealant nontoxic? And if not, what's a better alternative, and where do I get it without having it shipped from across state?

Sustainable Building Materials: Boise-Cossart has been building in Santa Barbara for the past 20 years, specializing in small scale homes that are off the electrical grid, several of which belong to his neighbors living on the Hollister Ranch. During work on Chouinard's home, Boise-Cossart made a network of connections with people selling salvaged and benign building materials. And he wants to apply some of what he learned to future projects. While researching products, he began to see bigger issues than the immediate project. The project was an attempt to set aside compulsive, consumptive urges and find a solution, he said. The three Rs- reduce, reuse, recycle- is a cliché, but its a mantra; its

what we are trying to get at. Many minority issues are becoming more mainstream.

The reality of modern home building is inextricably tied to modern forestry. More often than not, people want new, wood houses. Can current forestry practices meet that demand? Typical forestry is being reexamined, now that issues such as biodiversity, wildlife habitat, water and soil health, and climatic stability have reached the forefront. As contractors concerned with these issues, we seek to support the logging companies that are rated as sustainably managed operations, Boise-Cossart said. This is more than the Chouinard's building a house by the beach; it's about moving toward a day when everyone can readily get these building materials.

Chouinard's pad is at once a future dwelling, a modern home, and a throwback. It's also affordable. Solar photovoltaic systems are expensive, but aside from that (and the oceanfront acreage), the house would carry a reasonable price tag. If I was poor and had a lot of time, Boise-Cossart said, I would build a house out of salvaged materials. Contractors cannot simply phone the lumberyard or the quarry and order truckloads of salvaged wood and rock. They have to dig a little, but usually something turns up, and at a cheaper cost. In a resourceful (and wasteful) country of 264 million, there's bound to be leftovers lying around. Chouinard made a point of building with these throwaways- and approach not only reflecting our resourceful, vanished days, when homesteaders fabricated houses from whatever they could find and afford, but also a step into the future. It's built to last, with foresight and awareness, representing a solution more than a problem. In 200 years there's going to be someone from The Independent doing a story on this house, Mehl said, triggering a story about himself and Chouinard watering seedling sycamores they had recently planted on the property. Chouinard called them gone-to-heaven trees, said Mehl, meaning that the sycamores would be there long after Mehl and Chouinard had died and gone to heaven. Well, finished Mehl, this is a gone-to-heaven house.