

# home edition

## Building Straw Houses the Homemakers' Way

BY ROBERT AUGMAN

Many Vermonters take pride in the unique lifestyle our state offers, typified by an environmentally conscious culture. Small towns and villages foster engagement and participation. The self-sufficient lifestyle of many farmers and others who find innovative solutions to problems represents an empowered and sustainable lifestyle.

According to one native Vermonter, Amber Wiggett, it's difficult to separate the many different parts of sustainable living. For her it's not just the foods you eat, or the things you stand for. For Wiggett, it also includes the way you work.

The former co-director of Spiralworks, a project that develops "sustainable community living solu-

tions," Wiggett founded Homemakers Ecological Construction in 2003 to "create healthy, sustainable projects for owners, workers, communities, and the environment; prioritizing education, accessibility, affordability, and quality; and blending the best of Vermont traditions with the innovations of natural building."

Homemakers stands out among other construction companies in a variety of ways. Against the stereotype of construction as "men's work," the Homemakers crew is made up of women and transgendered people. Rather than specialization of skills, it strives to empower each crewmember and others who work with them on collaborative projects by sharing knowledge and skills. And rather than being solely profit-oriented, Homemakers also participates in community projects

that they find socially meaningful or progressive.

As an ecological construction company, Homemakers employs a "natural building" practice. Natural building integrates sustainability into construction work. Aimed at low-impact living, natural building relies on local, natural, and recycled materials.

Their most recent project is a beautiful timberframe house with strawbale wall systems in Tunbridge. Materials came from the local or regional area: wood from local sawmills, bales from New York state, clay from the site itself, and so forth. "The reliance on local resources reduces the energy to manufacture or move them, and strengthens local networks who work and buy locally," says Wiggett. And it cuts down on the amount of toxins involved in the manufacturing process.

The timber frame provides the structural, load-bearing element of the home; while the strawbale wall systems offer excellent insulation (with R-values of 35-40). The clay for the walls, plaster, and adobe floor was harvested during the excavation of the foundation. The roof is shingled with Ecoshakes, an alternative to asphalt shingles made from recycled tires compressed with sawdust. The walls are painted with milk-paint, custom-made by Homemakers, as a

non-toxic alternative to traditional latex and oil-based paints.

"We built some of our own windows using locally salvaged barn beams," says Ace McArleton, one of the workers on the crew. All aspects of the house took into account the available resources, especially whatever could be reused. "My dream was to build homes for people that are beautiful, unique, energy-efficient, and ecological," Wiggett explains.

The craftsmanship of the house may make one assume that these experts are long-time, experienced natural builders. Wiggett has solid credentials and experience, but rather than hiring seasoned specialists for her crew, she wanted "to empower people who feel disempowered when faced with a hammer or the idea of building a house."

Homemakers 2004 included a young mother with a toddler, young women excited to learn to build, and a transperson new to natural building. Not only did Wiggett want to build wonderful homes. She wanted to contribute something socially as well.

Wiggett herself learned to build by her own initiative. She bought a book, participated in intensive workshops, and shortly after, began building her own home, a small cob house in the Northeast

Kingdom. For her it came naturally. "I wanted to offer other women the opportunity to do something they usually are excluded from," Wiggett explains.

Homemakers makes inclusiveness a priority in their projects: "Women, mothers, trans and gay people, low-income people, young people, small people, building is for anyone with desire to do so."

Each crewmember has gained a broad knowledge and skill level through on-the-job training and the sharing and rotation of tasks. Every worker can give detailed explanations of how they built the walls or what the environmental quality of the adobe floors with radiant heating below.

Empowerment includes the crew's attention to communication. "It's important for us to create a safe and supportive environment," Wiggett says. "We check in about how each of us are doing, to be honest about our insecurities on that particular day, so as to support and care for each other when we need it, and to be able to work more effectively."

Homemakers includes people from the communities they work in, to help raise strawbale and cob walls. Community members sew, shape, and place bales, learning a natural building technique while making connections with new people.

Homemakers supported the newly opened Langdon Street Cafe in Montpelier by painting the place with three types of custom-mixed natural paints. The Café, a worker-owned collective, has become a significant social hub, hosting live music and political discussions, and offering organic teas and locally baked foods. It was an obvious partner for the kind of connections Homemakers works to build.

Homemakers has found a way to incorporate a variety of sustainable and progressive values into their company, making an enriching experience for both their workers and the communities they are part of. They have integrated the best of Vermont traditions with some of the newest ideas in natural building. ▼

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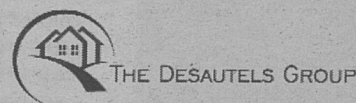


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