



The bathhouse that became a house: Rear (left) and front (right) views of HOPE's recycled-materials house.



TALE OF A TUB

WHEN YOU BUILD YOUR OWN HOUSE, YOU ALSO BUILD CONNECTIONS

OUT ON A LONELY STRETCH of farm-to-market road just outside Huntsville, where suburbs begin to encroach on horse pastures and a sky-blue mobile home rests not far from a brick-clad ranch home, Catherine Kueffer and Jason Blumenkamp are building a house. It's not a very noticeable house, which may be one of its virtues; it tends to blend into the land on which it sits, a seeming part of its surroundings. It's also not a very big house, which may be another of its virtues; its compactness tends to send people out onto its wraparound porch and into the fresh air.

But perhaps the house's chief virtue is that it cost almost nothing. Granted, that was made possible in part because Blumenkamp's family already owned the ten acres the barely 600-square-foot structure perches on. But more important has been the fact that Kueffer and Blumenkamp provided much of the construction work themselves, and that much of the material they used is material they could get for free — end pieces of wood scrounged from lumber yards and construction sites, plastic from signs, brick piers from a trash pile.

Despite the seemingly random nature of the building supplies, and the admitted detours the design sometimes had to take to accommodate what was available, Kueffer's and Blumenkamp's home looks anything but thrown together. And that, the pair says, is the point. With a little time, a little effort, a little imagination, and a considerable amount of flexibility, almost anybody can build something that's not just serviceable, but also attractive. It's not necessary to turn your housing needs over to outside professionals. Others can do what they've done.

To help prove the truth of that, beginning in early 2003 Kueffer and

Blumenkamp intend to hold workshops to teach others what, through trial and error as well as considerable reading, they've managed to teach themselves. With the help of workshop participants, the recycled materials house will be followed by a cob house, an adobe house, and perhaps a bamboo house, all to be grouped together in a complex under the rubric of Housing Options for Planet Earth, otherwise known as HOPE.

For those who might wince at the starry-eyed appellation, Blumenkamp points out that it came from his mother. Her first name is Dilek, which means hope in Turkish. And since his mother is, in a roundabout way, responsible for the housing workshops settling into Huntsville, Blumenkamp and Kueffer felt it only proper to name the organization that would host those workshops in her honor.

Actually, a bathtub fits into the equation as well, though that comes later. What came first was Blumenkamp's mother falling ill, and Blumenkamp deciding that he should move back to Huntsville from Houston to be nearer to her. A graduate of Sam Houston University with a degree in chemistry and biology, Blumenkamp worked as an engineer with a biotech company. But he had also worked as a sculptor and jewelry designer, and traveled to Nicaragua and Mexico, where he'd been intrigued by how the poorer residents of those countries managed to build houses out of the detritus of the rich.

If he was going to return to Huntsville, he decided, he should build his own house. He began looking into alternative building options, and ran across information about a cob workshop being held

in Terlingua. It was there that he met Kueffer, who'd grown up in New Mexico and upstate New York, and had an anthropology degree from Columbia University. Kueffer had moved to Texas to apprentice with Simone Swan, the founder of the Swan Group in Presidio County. Swan is a disciple of the late Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, who was renowned for his use of adobe and his advocacy of inexpensive building techniques. Kueffer, too, is an admirer of Fathy, and hoped to learn more about him and his ideas. Since the hand-formed lumps of earth, sand, and straw that make up cob are a cousin to adobe's bricks of dried clay, a cob workshop seemed to Kueffer a reasonable extension of her research.

In meeting, Kueffer and Blumenkamp made both a personal connection and a philosophic one. Kueffer decided to move to Huntsville with Blumenkamp, and Blumenkamp decided to expand his idea of building a house for himself to the idea of showing others how to build houses for themselves.

"I don't like the stigma that's attached to sustainable building, that it's either for the extremely poor or the extremely wealthy," Kueffer says. "It's either shanty towns or straw-built houses that are comparable in cost to a conventional house. I thought we could help point people to something in between, to something that's inexpensive while still being interesting."

Before that could happen, however, the couple needed a bathroom. Though greater Huntsville has little in the way of building codes to impede the do-it-yourselfer, it does have a regulation against outhouses or permanent port-o-johns. If Kueffer and Blumenkamp were going to hold workshops in sustainable building techniques, they had to have a place for workshop attendees to bathe and use the toilet. The bathhouse, they decided, would be made of recycled materials, and would be near their cob house, giving them examples of two types of sustainable building patterns. In honor of their resolution, an artist friend gifted them with a claw-foot bathtub, and told them to fit that in if they could.

Blumenkamp and Kueffer did so by making their bathhouse a trapezoid, with the narrower end being just big enough for the bathtub and the wider end having room for showers. It was the tub that helped define the look of the structure, something Blumenkamp enjoys pointing out, as if to emphasize the adaptive nature

of building on your own. The approach is so adaptive, in fact, that as the bathhouse grew, Kueffer and Blumenkamp decided to eliminate the "bath" part of its designation and just make it their house. "We were doing most of our work on weekends, and we ended up camping inside once we got the walls and roof up," Blumenkamp says. "Then we realized we could put a loft in the highest part of the bathroom and actually live here. And that's what we did."

As Blumenkamp says this, he is holding a cup of hot tea on the porch of his still-under-construction residence. Kueffer sits near him, looking out into a light rain. It has taken them more months than they thought to get to this point, and there is still a ways to go: shingling to be done, interior walls to complete, the tub — which now rests in the yard — yet to install. But the house is livable, and the pair is already thinking ahead to the next addition to their compound, a communal cob house that will be sited just a short distance away from where they sip their afternoon drinks and consider the future.

None of what they're doing is new or novel, Blumenkamp admits. There are plenty of other sustainable building workshops around, even if east Texas isn't brimming with them. And making your own house from scratch, if not exactly the norm today, isn't unheard of either. People have been doing that sort of thing since the pioneers and before. Still, their experience has been unusual enough that they hope others can learn something from it. "Not everybody has the time to devote to building their own house that we've been able to manage," Kueffer says. "And so I think it's important that we're able to refine it enough that we can teach others how to make it feasible."

"To some degree, what I'd like is to have workshops that are like barn raisings," Blumenkamp adds. "We get people to help and learn here, and in turn that creates a community that can help somewhere else."

Community, he notes, is an almost inescapable result of building your own house, especially if you build with recycled material. It's not just that people inevitably ask what you're doing, though they do, nor that if you're scrounging supplies it helps to be friendly with those you scrounge from, though it does. It's also that the time and effort involved in creating your own living quarters invests you in them in a way that simply shelling out money can't.

Or, for that matter, simply moving a trailer onto your property can. "If there's one question we get more than any other, it's why don't we just buy a trailer?" Kueffer says, rolling her eyes over toward Blumenkamp. "And really, sometimes it's just a hard thing to explain." — *Mitchell J. Shields*

(For more information on HOPE, go to www.homestead.com/terrahope.)