

EARTHSHIPS

The Optimum in Green-Building, Lush Living



Text and photos by Tara Somerville

The six white domes are like a cluster of mushrooms bursting through the cracked desert earth. An archway marks the path to their cool, lush interior.

Inside the Earthship, circular pastel rooms open into a multi-level atrium with a spiral staircase rising from its center. I peer through the wall of south-facing windows – saguaro cactuses speckle the landscape, a reminder that we’re not in Taos anymore.

Just four hours ago, Earthship pioneer Mike Reynolds and Dreamcatcher realtors John Kejr and Pavel Lukes, and myself, climbed into a private plane at Taos Municipal Airport. With Pavel in the pilot’s seat, we were bound for Phoenix, Ariz.

The reason for this adventure was to bring Mike to an on-site consultation with a group of investors, who acquired the unfinished Earthship in Wickenburg, Ariz., when the builder ran out of money. John Kejr represents the property, located 50 miles northwest of Phoenix, along with Phoenix-based realtor Tony Fernicola.



John Kejr and Mike Reynolds stand silhouetted by the arched entrance.

‘Much like the automobile, every aspect keeps evolving to perform better.’

Pavel has flown private planes since 1973 and has used them to expand his real estate market for almost as long. "I fly all seasons. In winter, flying is beautiful," he says, as we soar over the shadowy Río Grande Gorge. He has flown clients as far as Panama.

"Earthships make all the land you see out there available," says Mike. "It opens up the world and the most beautiful land – that has no access to utilities – and makes it available."

Earthships are the ultimate in green-building and Mike has been at the forefront of their development since the first one was constructed 30 years ago.

The homes combine various earth-friendly building principles in one self-sustaining structure. Walls are often constructed from used car tires filled with rammed earth. Inserted into the mortar might be decorative configurations of reclaimed beverage cans and bottles. Rainwater is collected and stored for use in cisterns.

Solar power provides electricity and thermal mass provides heating. Thermal mass is achieved when walls consist of substances, like rammed earth, that absorb the heat from sun and slowly release the warmth inside after the sun goes down.

Earthships' microclimates are perfect for growing food. Mike and his wife grow grapes, bananas, watermelons, corn, artichokes and a whole assortment of produce in their 2,000-square-foot Earthship. He defines Earthships most simply as buildings that get all their utilities from natural phenomena.

John specializes in the sale of Earthships and in the last year his business has swelled beyond Taos to Tennessee, Colorado and even Spain and France.

"A lot of people want to do their part for the environment but they don't want to be cold all night," John explains. "I show them how simple it is — it's not by any means roughing it. I encourage them to do a nightly rental and see what it's like and they'll realize how comfortable Earthship living is."

According to Mike, the only additional upkeep Earthships require is changing and cleaning of water filters and checking the battery and water every few months.

"They are all automated now with computer chips set up to maintain power systems," he explains.

When we arrived at the Wickenburg Earthship, Mike's face lit up. He trotted up the stairs to inspect the skylights, around back to examine the cisterns, battery shed and other systems.

"This is easily 80 percent done and very close to a functional situation," he concluded. "Two hundred thousand would get



The multi-level atrium with a spiral staircase rising from its center showcases many architectural details.



Walls are often constructed from used car tires filled with rammed earth and inserted with decorative elements made from reclaimed bottles.

the legalities and the building sorted so you'll have a million-dollar home." The investors beamed.

Mike also saw the property's potential as a monthly rental/educational tool, much like his Taos Earthship, The Phoenix, which has doubled in occupancy each year since it opened in 2006.

"This could be an educational cash cow," he says. "The Phoenix is raking in money. It has artwork and fish and birds flying around but this is inches away from that."

As we flew home, Mike reflected on the evolution of Earthships. "Each year all systems and computers keep improving – water systems, roofing, pumps. Much like the automobile, every aspect keeps evolving to perform better." ☐

For more information, visit www.taosearthships.com or call John Kejr at (575) 779-1209.