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Unusual home building material is sturdy, attractive and easy on the environment

Concrete haven

By Sara Anne Corrigan (Contact)
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Provided by Dick Kuhn Workers cut LEGO-like pieces to fit in the wall of a home under construction. The pieces — Insulated Concrete Forms — have steel rebar in the middle, and will be filled with concrete.



The exterior of an Evansville home built with Insulated Concrete Forms by Cravens Construction Co.

"You can't miss it," Jeff Cravens said recently, in giving directions to the home he is building in St. Philip, Ind. "It's the only Styrofoam house on the block."

Although technically not true — Styrofoam is a brand — Cravens' description is apt. The home is being built out of concrete. But the polystyrene building blocks, called Insulated Concrete Forms, Cravens suggests, "look like giant white LEGOs." They are stacked in much the same interlocking way that toy LEGOs are stacked. They are embedded with rebar, then filled with concrete.

When complete, however, a concrete home looks no different from any other finished structure built with more traditional materials. Architectural styles are not particularly limited: Cravens Construction Co.'s concrete homes have been included in the Tri-State's annual Parade of Homes, and one took top honors as Home of the Year in its price range last year, he notes with pride.

People who live in concrete houses tend to sing their praises: Chris and Lynn Deig have been living in their 5,000-square-foot concrete home for four years and "you could stand two feet in front of it and never know it was made of concrete," Lynn Deig says.

Chris Deig says they built it for safety against violent storms, but there have been many other advantages: "I work on a rotating shift, so quiet is very important to me when I need to sleep.

"And of course we use so much less energy."

The only downside Lynn Deig could think of is "hanging pictures (on exterior walls)."

"You can't just hammer a nail into a concrete wall," Chris Deig explains.

Randy and Zoe Conner have lived in their concrete home for more than four years. They are near enough to Evansville Regional Airport that the noise of approaching planes would be intrusive in a conventionally built home, but "unless we are sitting near the glass doorway to the deck, no. We don't even notice them," Conner says.

Although the technology and materials have been around for decades, Cravens currently is the only AMVIC (brand) Insulated Concrete Form builder in the Tri-State, he says.



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The concept is still relatively unknown locally, and finished homes are rare.

But he predicts that will change — and soon.

It's all about energy savings, he says: When the St. Philip project is complete, it will be as close to airtight as a structure can be and still have doors and windows. It will be so airtight that a special fresh-air system is a required feature.

It will be so well insulated that noise from outdoors will be muffled entirely. Its exterior walls will be so sturdy they will withstand winds up to 200 mph.

"You could build this house on Miami Beach," Cravens says, "and other than maybe some broken windows, it would stand up to a direct hit by a hurricane." Concrete homes are fire-resistant, mold- and rot-resistant, termite-proof, draft-free and, ultimately, very energy-efficient.

Of the latter, Cravens says, heating and air-conditioning savings of 40 percent to 50 percent over standard construction are not uncommon.

"I had the opportunity to build two identical houses, side by side. Only one of them is concrete. So we were able to compare apples to apples on that," he says, noting that on average a concrete home is going to cost no more than 8 percent to 10 percent more, per square foot, than a conventional frame house, but the heating and air-conditioning savings are immediate — and permanent.

Of the St. Philip project, homeowner Dick Kuhn says, "This whole house will be a wine cooler." Kuhn, owner of Efficient Energy Technologies, a consultant group, is building the home with his wife, Dona Bergmann, director of the Evansville Environmental Protection Agency. Given their respective careers, it came as no surprise to Cravens when they approached him about building a concrete home. They were perfect candidates, he says.

"I'm evangelical about conservation," Bergmann says, explaining that she is impressed with how "green" concrete construction is.

Concrete homes are prized among environmentalists for their energy efficiency, minimal construction waste and reduction in the use of trees to frame them. Statistically, a concrete home uses 10 fewer trees than standard construction.

When Kuhn and Bergmann approached Cravens, they had 15 months of research, an architect (Jack Faber of Hafer and Associates in Evansville) and a five-page list of priorities in hand. Their concerns, they say, are largely about the environmental impact their home will have — both on their heavily wooded lot and the wildlife they will share it with, and on the planet in general.

Their mission statement is to "Build the most energy-efficient house in Indiana."

"This is the wave of the future," Kuhn says. "This is the highest quality home you can build right now."

"We want to live here for the rest of our lives, as efficiently as we can and with as little (negative) impact on the environment as possible," Bergmann says.

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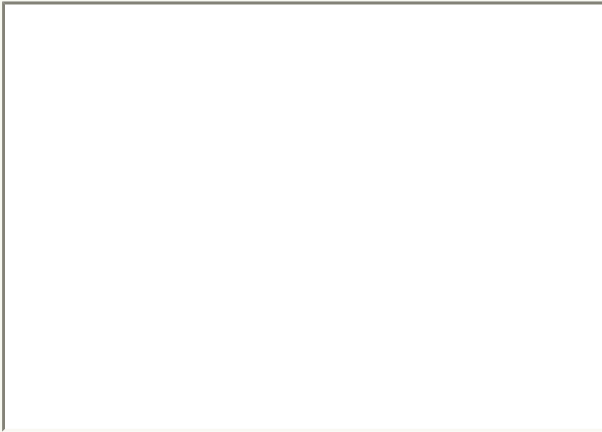
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