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Clockwise from above: Colored panels atop the Phoenix Earthship, near Taos, New Mexico, are made from discarded appliances; a bedroom has a wall fashioned from mud and bottles; a view from the two-story greenhouse; a close-up of a bottle wall.

Ships in the Desert

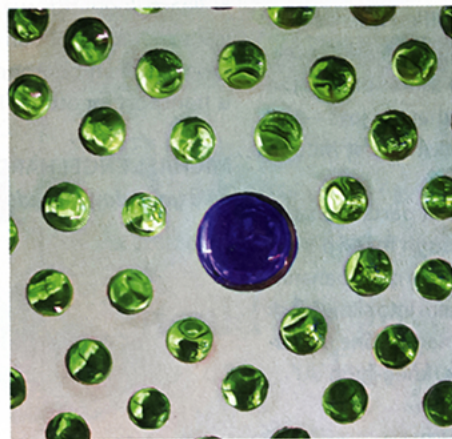
NEARLY THREE DECADES HAVE PASSED since Michael Reynolds built his first “radically sustainable” Earthship dwellings out of cast-off materials such as tires and beer bottles on the high mesas near Taos, New Mexico. His Earthship mantra, however, remains the same: “Live free.” That is, off the grid and without power bills.

Earthships have evolved from simple structures lacking flush toilets into multifloor homes with flat-screen TVs, wi-fi, and greenhouses brimming with crops. And they’ve gone from fringe to 53,000 Facebook fans as a new generation tunes in to Reynolds’s alt-sustainable message. Today, there’s also a school, the Earthship Biotechnology Academy, which teaches design principles and philosophy.

Visitors to the 360-acre Greater World Earthship Community can even stay in one for the night. The rental options range from

a bare-bones survival design to the 5,300-square-foot, eco-luxe Phoenix, which has classic Earthship elements like U-shaped rooms, solar power, and a rainwater-harvesting system. It also has a two-story greenhouse alive with hibiscus, kale, chard, bananas, and even tilapia. The plants filter graywater coming in from the shower and washing machine before it’s used to flush waste to septic tanks. An interior waterfall adds a sublime soundtrack reminiscent of a tropical oasis.

The panes of glass fronting the greenhouse and the structure’s massive insulating berm, made of rammed earth encased in recycled tires, ensure that, winter or summer, the Phoenix can maintain an ambient temperature of 70 degrees with small adjustments to cooling tubes and vents. “Think about how a cave is cool in summer and warm in winter,” says Earthship spokesperson Jessica Gaddis.



The decor of the three-bedroom Phoenix is eclectic: walls ornamented with swirls of functional “bricks” made of discarded bottles, door handles rendered from kerosene can tops, and a Gaudí-esque bathtub constructed from river rock and plaster. Such touches reveal the simple genius of Reynolds’s thinking: Our sustainable future might hinge on not just the latest technology but also existing materials that we don’t have to drill, mine, or saw to acquire.

▶ **ON THE WEB** Tell us your idea of a green living space at sierraclub.org/sierra/shelter.

WHAT I LIKE

“I like a building that can take care of a family of four with no public utilities and makes you feel like you’re living in a jungle,” Earthship founder Michael Reynolds says.

LESSONS LEARNED

“Compared to compost toilets, graywater toilets are good for the planet and easier on your sense of smell,” says Earthship Biotechnology Academy graduate Kelley Budding.