

## 'Hay and clay' builder expands on Lansing Street

by Amy Janczy

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Construction always attracts attention in a residential neighborhood. But the crowd that gathered at 30 Lansing Street on a beautiful Saturday in late October was a bit more inquisitive than usual. Unlike the stacks of wood or bricks you'd expect to find, nearly 400 bales of hay had been piled at the site. And the crew looked more like they belonged at the Farmers Market than atop staging.

Emboldened by the odd materials and the friendliness of the workers, neighbors stopped by, asking questions and checking out the work. Children played on top of the hay bales and posed for pictures. Lou Jablonski was nonplussed about it all. After all, this was not his first "hay and clay" house.

Yet Jablonski, head of Design Coalition Inc., Architects, has more at stake here than his professional reputation. When the house at 30 Lansing Street is completed, Jablonski will be its first resident. The house is actually an addition to the lot's existing structure, a one-bedroom house built in the 1930s that has just 440 square feet. The new addition will have 1,300 square feet of floor area and two bedrooms, and a 380-square-foot family/work room connector in between. There will be a small basement and no garage. "Our goal is to have the main part of the house closed in to the weather by the end of the year," says Jablonski. "We'll continue to live there and finish off the interior, with completion hopefully by next summer."

Why this building method? "I want to live in a natural, healthy, low-toxin and energy efficient home," says Jablonski. "I want to continue to live on the great East Side, where I and my family have lived for 20-some year—and come March, I'll be only 3 blocks away from a new grandchild. I want to put in to practice things I've learned about ecological design and construction. I'm using this project to add to my own knowledge about natural building techniques, and hopefully extend the state of the art." Gesturing towards the young woman working behind him, he added, "Also, this project is an opportunity for me and my daughter Day to work together to teach ecological design and building to others."

While visions of the disaster that befell the second of the Three Little Pigs come immediately to mind, in fact this "Midwestern adobe" technique of mixing wheat-straw and clay produces a very strong, well-insulated wall when it dries. This takes about three months in the summer, longer in cold weather. When the walls are completed and the wood framing is taken away, the walls will be plastered with an earth-plaster mix containing clay, sand, a little chopped straw and a small amount of linseed oil, lime and caein, which act to retard water. The outside of the home will then be sided.



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The pace of the work is indicative of Jablonski's preference for process over speed. It appears to be a mostly-weekend endeavor relying heavily on the help of friends and family, much like an old-fashioned barn raising. On the weekend of October 20-21, the Lansing Street site served as a classroom for Jablonski's hands-on workshop on straw and clay construction. "At Design Coalition we have used these and other 'green' building techniques in many home projects," he explains. "Design Coalition sponsored the workshop to teach these techniques to people who are considering building their own homes and who are searching for ways to build more ecologically."

The 10 workshop participants ranged in age from just 10 to somewhere in their 50s, assisted by Jablonski and four other paid workshop staff and about 8 working volunteers and neighbors. Participants paid \$70 for the full 2-½ days, including meals, protective equipment, a speaker honorarium and rental of the Wil-Mar Center for two free evening public presentations. Design Coalition, 2020 Atwood Avenue, is considering offering another workshop in the spring.

While the workshop appeared to be a rousing success, it was clear that the technique is very time-consuming. Asked if the process is simply too labor-intensive to be economically feasible, Jablonski replies that he is unsure of the man-hours needed for the project, but is keeping track of it for future comparisons with conventional construction. "Besides being a home, this house is also a research project for me in my architectural practice. For that reason there are a number of other unique and innovative aspects of it, such as ongoing monitoring of energy and indoor air quality, various forms of movable insulation, roof-integrated/skylight solar collectors, and so on. So this research aspect makes the project non-typical in terms of the amount of hours spent. Also, the hands-on workshop format takes a lot of time, and is a very effective method for learning. However, it's not—nor is it intended to be—an especially time-efficient means of construction."

However, the architect contends that this type of construction generally costs about the same as conventional custom construction, since while straw-clay walls are more labor-intensive, the materials themselves are very inexpensive. "The method is well suited to the owner-builder," Jablonski says.

For details on "hay and clay" housing and other "socially conscious and ecologically responsible design techniques," see the Design Coalition's web site at <http://designcoalition.org>.

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