

# the future of living

by saskia vogel

photography by jasper johal

## venice beach eco-cottages

If Los Angeles were a poet slumbering in a concrete tenement block, she'd dream of traveling to the misty seaside neighborhood of Venice Beach and finishing her chapbook in a 1920s Craftsman bungalow. This side of town embodies the ideals that got the City of Angels her bohemian, eco-activist, beach bunny reputation—traits that captured the imagination of actress Cynthia Foster and her husband Karel Samsom, a professor of sustainable entrepreneurship and environmental business.

The couple saw modern, concrete houses quickly replacing the area's signature morning-glory-covered bungalows; a building choice that is less eco-friendly than renovating the older structures. Marrying a mutual love of sustainable living and style, they snapped up three worn-down, one-bedroom cottages and turned them into eco-fabulous vacation homes. The just-opened rooms seem impossibly clean and smell like linen and fresh-cut wood, rather than that "new house smell" of plastic and drying paint.

Karel explains the theory behind this passion project: "Ecology means 'the science of the home' and economy means the 'management of the home.' Economy can never exceed ecology. The only thing that separates the two is the time. In time, we will see the negative effects of our economy exceeding ecology."

### the science and management of the home

There are so many clever eco-friendly ideas for design and renovation, from modular carpets to a birdcage converted into an easy chair; it is impossible to describe them all. Listening to Karel and Cynthia excitedly recount the thought and process behind each detail makes it clear that living sustainably, comfortably and with style is as simple as making the choice to do so. Yes, it may cost a little more, but the science and management of the home of the future is less about cutting corners and more about giving back to ourselves and the earth. These cottages are model examples.

"We wanted to provide a place where people can experience living in this way without burden, without sacrificing style or comfort," Cynthia says. Karel adds, "You also have to consider the triple bottom line: people, profit and planet. With almost every product we buy, we do not pay the real cost. If you do something in an ecological way, you take into account the side effects of your actions. We didn't want to do business with people who knowingly abuse people and pollute."

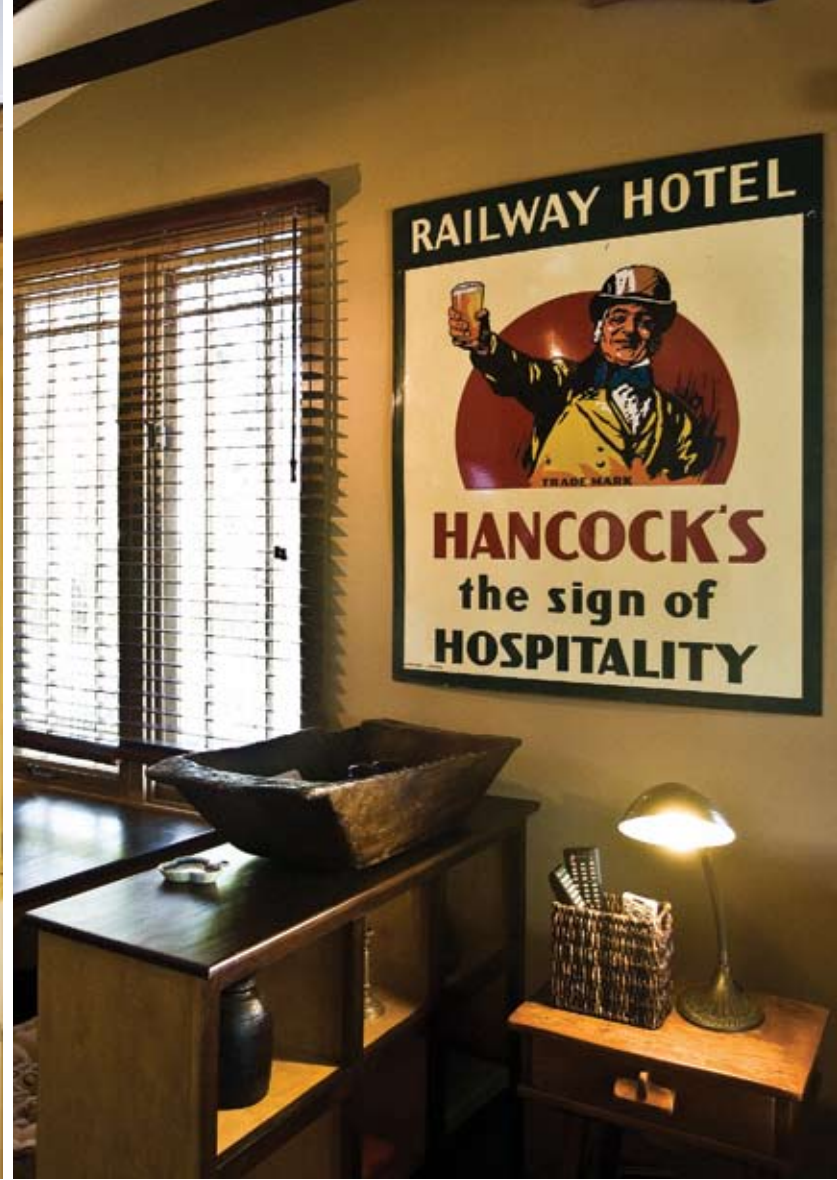


Thus, salvage yards, antique malls and thrift stores were their home improvement destinations. Karel and Cynthia knew they could get inexpensive windows from any home improvement center, but what kind of labor practices would they be supporting and what would the impact of manufacturing and transporting these windows be on the environment? Instead, the intrepid idealists found original Craftsman windows that matched the architectural style of the houses.

Instead of attacking the inherited mold problem in the bathrooms with chemicals, they used an all-natural enzyme that eradicated the nasty spores. For insulation, instead of using the industry-standard fiberglass composite that requires workers to wear protective gear from head to toe, they installed reused denim fiber insulation (imagine the world's largest collection of blue dryer lint) with bare hands.

Cynthia let as little as possible go to waste. Discarded ceramic pieces found in dumpsters provided decorative details in the borders of the floors and along the iron fireplaces. Vintage table cloths became one-of-a-kind curtains, countertops were made from "plyboo" (plywood made from the quick-growing bamboo plant), the decks separating each cottage are fifty percent sawdust, fifty percent recycled plastic and are promised to "outlast us all." When they bought new wood for the fences along the perimeter, they chose FSC-certified Douglas fir.

Cynthia's favorite details are the eucalyptus mantles above each gas-lit fireplace. The ancient trees surrounding the property had to be significantly trimmed to accommodate the solar energy panels on the roof. Instead of mulching the branches, she refinished the gnarled, golden-hued wood. "I tried to keep the energy of the area and the cottages in tact," she says. And although they made their best effort to reuse and recycle, they purchased new, state-of-the-art kitchen appliances and entertainment systems from the most eco-friendly manufacturers they could find.



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### the neighborhood

The units are located a few blocks from the beach and Windward Circle, where in the days of Abbot Kinney, the gondoliers would linger with their gondolas, waiting for pleasure-seekers. The history of the area and the bungalows, which were also around in those days, inspired Cynthia to connect with local community to create the interior designs of the cottages.

Cynthia worked with local designer Kelly LaPlante of Organic Interior Design to make her design ideas a reality. They created three distinct, kitsch-free cottages. The first, a North Woods-inspired retreat; the second, a modern take on your first generation Hungarian grandmother's summer cottage in Montauk; and the third, a neo-baroque statement that honors creatures who soar. Though the liners of thermoses were used to create decorative pieces, the mattresses are organic and all the cottages are welcoming and warm. There is nothing shabby about this chic.

The work of local artists hangs in each cottage and all the art is for sale. "If someone really connects with a piece, I want them to be able to take it home," Cynthia says. "This art also gives back to the community." In the Bebe suite, the most playful and vibrant bungalow decorated in sky blues and lipstick reds, hang self-portraits of homeless and at-risk youth. Artists working with Venice Arts, a local nonprofit organization, are mentoring these children through photography. Proceeds of the sale of these works go directly back to that charity. In addition, three percent the gross revenue from these vacation rentals will be donated to charities of the guests' choosing.

Cynthia's favorite finds are painter Ané Vecchione's misty seascapes, a Matryoshka doll, and the multimedia canvases of artist Frederick Fulmer, a Joshua Tree resident who teaches yoga in Venice and makes his work from glass, iron ore and charcoal that he finds in the desert. These oeuvres, like the project itself, embody the overall commitment to community and the creative use of resources—two major themes in sustainable living. ●

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