

A WINTER VISIT TO TAOS PUEBLO

# NATIVE

PEOPLES

WAMPUM  
JEWELRY

*Power of the Purple*

BATTLE  
OF WASHITA  
& BLACK KETTLE

TWILIGHT  
ACTRESS  
TINSEL KOREY

ANNUAL  
HOLIDAY  
GIFT  
GUIDE

Giving Back  
IN HOLLYWOOD

GREEN HOMES  
ON THE NAVA  
RESERVATION

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# HOMES

for Human Beings



## DesignBuildBLUFF

BY WIN BUEVING

On the sprawling Navajo Nation spanning the Arizona-Utah border, ramshackle trailers and meandering hogans without electricity, plumbing or other routine amenities of American homes are the common housing of the people. Jobs are few and far between out here in this pocket of poverty and isolation. Unbelievably beautiful, it is also a harsh land, with bitter winters and scorching summers. However, a new house is working over the rocky mesa and plateau under the bluish skies. University students drawn from Utah and Colorado are designing and building innovative "green," culturally adapted and comfortable homes for local families, at no cost to the fortunate recipients, in a program run by the non-profit educational organization DesignBuildBLUFF.

"It's an absolute dream come true," says Janet Yoniss, tearing up during a recent visit my wife and I made to her new residence south of Bluff, Utah. "My kids laugh at them, grandkids and great-grandkids will be able to live here and walk the land I walked as a child. They don't have to be in town living in trailers anymore. The whole thing changed my life. Now Melvin (her partner) and I can be full-time artists. This is a wonderful studio the students made for us. I feel very blessed."

Over the past decade, DesignBuildBLUFF (DBB) has completed 10 residences that now house more than 35 people, at an average cost of only \$95,000 per home. Another four were scheduled to be completed in 2011. The homes have won 28 awards, including honors from the Utah Arts Council and the American Institute of Architects. As 2011 winds down, some 250 students of the University of Colorado and the University of Utah have completed the program, working shoulder-to-shoulder, while sharing living quarters on a three-acre Bluff "campus."

Above (clockwise from top left): View out of Janet Yoniss's house. She played on this land as a little girl, making animals out of clay from the riverbanks. Southeast facade of Susan Caroline house (2008). Students view DPT panel for wall of main building (home) of Studio 23. Hands of students, who worked on Janet Yoniss's home. Facing page: Recycled lumber makes a road wall.



Clockwise from top left: Timber wall system made of rammed earth for the Sweet Caroline house (2006); Hank Louis, the founder of DesignbuildUP, tests SPF panel of a wall for Studio 23; Living space and central fire place of Sweet Caroline house (2006); Students build frame for a rammed earth wall for a passive solar system for the Rose Joe House.

## Brainchild of Hank Louis

The program is the brainchild of architect Hank Louis. In a recent conversation, Louis explained to me how a phrase—"It is better to be good than great"—turned his life around. These words, written by a professor of architecture he'd never met, set him onto a new life path.

"We architects are partly responsible for building monstrous second homes in the mountains of the resort towns where I once lived—20,000 square feet of the most expensive space that might be used four to six weeks a year," he explained. "Meanwhile, in another part of town, the Hispanics who had arrived to do the real work were living 10 to 20 people in single, run-down apartments."

Thus, Louis decided to immerse himself in compassion for the millions, or billions, of people who don't have decent housing. He would focus on creating homes for human beings, not becoming a big star of the architecture world; he would be good, not great. And more. He wanted to discover ways to build sustainable houses approaching zero energy use, or even ones creating more energy than they use, and teach those methods to budding architects.

Louis, a middle-aged, olive man, is gentle, witty and fun to talk to. When I first met him, I thought he might be a do-gooder who would get blamed by one conservative candidate and hauled back to his comfortable, upscale hometown. But, he caught me the author of that key phrase, Sam Macklin, who ran a program at Auburn University called the Rural Studio. Macklin's architecture students were designing, and themselves building, unique residences that embodied all of the empathetic notions of how for people living in one of the poorest areas in the country, the leaders of Alabama and Mississippi. Louis dropped everything and went to see just how this program worked. He loved it. And, he had another border area in mind where he wanted to see if he could duplicate the Rural Studio's success.

It would help architecture students learn to respect the needs and humanity of the disenfranchised of the earth, he decided, and the requirements of the planet to conserve its own energy. And because he wanted to teach students to be practical architects, he needed them to know what general construction and building tradesmen encounter daily—the necessity of adapting to circumstances in the field as they build the houses with their own hands.

The students would find themselves in essentially a Third World region. They would be immersed in the high-desert environment and its severe weather—great fluctuations in temperature, high winds, extreme aridity and other circumstances that would force them to be inventive in their designs and sturdy in their workmanship. Though Louis wanted a high standard for the houses, the lack of building codes in the reservation would also open doors to experimentation, and so to making mistakes, which are the cradle of creativity and learning.

There were hurdles. The houses had to be provided free of charge to Navajo families. The tribe and the University of Utah would come up with some funds, but not enough. (Material donations and tuition have provided about 40 percent of the program's budget; the rest has been raised from outside sources.) Louis wanted to build a lot of houses, enough to make an impact. The

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tribe encouraged Navajo families to apply, and Louis asked the students themselves to interview the families and choose the ones they wanted to work with. The process was tricky. Navajo are naturally reserved, still more reserved with people they don't know, and distrustful of promises. The students had trouble getting families to speak up about exactly what they wanted for a house. "We ended up choosing Navajo who were better educated," he explained. "The needier families, especially those who didn't speak English, and so would require use of interpreters, got left out." He'll still be trying to get around that obstacle.

But all the talk in the world can't compare to seeing things with one's own eyes, so I decided to visit two of the houses, the homes of Caroline Lammeman (built in 2006) and Janet Yonin (built in 2005).

## Utopian Home Tour

Both had their houses built south of the San Juan River, on the reservation—a region of spread-out homesteads, grazing land and meandering dirt roads with no signs or addresses. It's easy even for a local person to get lost, which I did on the way to see Lammeman. She is a warm, jovial, talkative person, glad to show off her house. It stands directly behind the trailer where her parents live, and it reflects her life history and lifestyle directly. She has one teenage daughter left at home, Audrey, so the house is built for two. Since her parents are very elderly, either she or Audrey must stay with the two every moment. But for a quarter-century, Caroline and her family lived in Denver, far from home. She taught for Catholic Charities. Then she wanted to come home.



Clockwise from top: Student plasters local sand and clay on half-bearing strawbale wall of studio project; studio 22; Janet Yantis now has plenty of room to make pots outside. Recycled plastic light fixtures inside Yantis's home.



Does she like her new house? She points to a sign that stands in front. It proclaims, "UTOPIA," "The students really listened to what I wanted," Lameman said. "I had dreamed of so many things. See how the house is divided into two parts, like my life here and my life in the city?" Half of the house takes the shape of the traditional Navajo round dwelling, a hogun, and the other half is an Anglo rectangle. There are two covered walls, one curved and the other straight, separating the modern home from the traditional. Between the walls the two worlds merge around a wood stove.

The builders were bold with use of innovative materials. For example, a new product called Fibre board is used for siding, in comparison to more traditional carbon plaster used to cover and strengthen walls. Another material used throughout the building is a product called Navajo FlyCrete, a fly-ash by-product given building block eyes produced on the Navajo Nation that provides a unique combination of mass and insulation. Even the rectangular part of the house is nothing like conventional housing structures. The roof takes the shape of half-raised wings of a butterfly, so that rainwater runs to the center and then off into a collection barrel. She uses this water for her garden.

Inside, heat comes from a wood stove that hangs from the ceiling. It doesn't touch the floor, and so can be turned to open in any direction. The floors are something Lameman was especially eager for: fugonite quarried from a nearby dry creek bed. She wanted the doors and cabinet doors faced with long, straight sassafras timbers, and they are—another distinctive, lovely touch.

#### An Artists' Abode

Next, my wife and I visited Janet Yantis and her partner Merlin in their new DBB home. Janet is an old friend—her father David Yantis performed the blessing ceremony for our own house. She grows up with hogs and waterfalls of woods. "When I was a child, I used to play on this land. We walked barefoot over every inch of it." She and her siblings also walked five miles to the wooden ferry-bridge and crossed the San Juan River to go to school. At the store they made clay horses and toys—her first experience with making pottery, now the mainstay of her art. Later they moved into Huff and lived in a trailer, so that she could get a part-time job and have a chance to create her art and sell it.

Yantis interviewed twice with DBB to get a house through the program, but had no hope. Though she is a cherry person, she thought, "I've never had nothing but bad luck." When the university staffer came by, she said, "Give me the bad news now. I can't stand waiting." He said, "But Janet, they've chosen you." She and Merlin, a sparkling, inquisitive man who is also a storyteller and does leatherwork and wood carving, both emphasize that, though they are well-educated and widely read, "We are very traditional Navajos." The son of a medicine man, Merlin sings some of the major songs in the great ceremonies like the Blessing Way and Enemy Way.

The art studio is a combination of shade house and straw-bale building—the bales provide extraordinary insulation for residents in the 100-plus-degree summers and warmth in the frigid winters. At



Janet Yantis stands in front of Studio 22 (2/12/13).

least 100 pots are scattered across the tables in the studio, molded but unglazed. Yantis also paints, does beadwork and makes jewelry.

And she is succeeding. At the Four Corners Indian Arts Festival last June, featuring artists from the neighboring areas of Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado, she was best of show. Each week she and Merlin work on their art for four days and then travel widely for those days to sell it, usually in Taos City, Arizona; Shiprock, New Mexico; Gallup, New Mexico.

The first part of the house they pointed out to us is the Four Directions front door. The wood has glass inset in a traditional design they created. It opens extra to the sun in a way that makes a four-direction pattern move across the floor from west to east during the day. "Everything in the house supports our beliefs. Everyone who enters here is blessed," Yantis said.

Big enough for the couple and two teenage kids, the house is an engaging combination of quirky and artistic, and it honors their past and traditions. The wood of the exterior walls was salvaged from an old barn on the property. It covers thicker walls than wood salvaged from metal and wood unsalvaged around Shiprock. Most windows are lavender plastic, recycled and layered 1 inch high and several inches thick. They give a lovely luminousness. "I don't like swinging doors because they take too much room," said Yantis, so all the doors are sliding, elegant designs in wrought iron.

She walks us through the studio to show us a special wall. Here she and Merlin asked all the students who collaborated on building the home to put their palm prints in the plaster. These 24 modern signatures are reminiscent of the thousands of handprints in the ruins of the ancients who lived on this land a thousand years ago, before the Navajos came. "I told the students they are always welcome in our home," concluded Yantis. "They had fun building the house. They are family. This is their home too." ❦

*Win and Meredith Blivins of Bluff, Utah, on the border of the Navajo Reservation, describe their lives as writing books. Blivins alone, they've published 25. Win, of Cherokee and Anglo descent, has also been a New York best-seller, a teacher and journalist. He wrote "Return of the Buffalo Nation" for our March/April 2008 issue.*