

Safe in a Secluded Valley

by Andrew Eriksen



Chuck and Sherri built their safe house in a remote valley of southeastern Arizona, near the town of Rodeo, New Mexico. The pristine air, free of pollution from traffic, industry and mining has attracted a small community of people with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (“MCS”). The valley is also one of the few places left without cell phone service, which has also attracted a few people with Electromagnetic Hypersensitivity (“EHS”).

The married couple first built a small one-room house with a tiny bathroom to live in while building the rest of the house. This original house is now the kitchen.

The rest of the house was added later, with a large living room, a bedroom, a den and a large bathroom. The ceiling in the living room is slanted, with the highest point 12 feet above the floor, and the lowest part 10-1/2 feet above the floor. This allows hot air to rise during the summer and naturally vent out through a row of clerestory windows at the top of the wall.

The high ceiling also adds more volume to the room, making it more forgiving to bring in things that are not completely non-toxic.

The outer walls are built of hollow-core concrete blocks (“cinder blocks”) with no

insulation. The exterior is stuccoed with a regular cement-and-sand mix.

The interior walls in some rooms are covered with drywall, over steel studs with two layers of Astro Foil insulation behind them. Chuck called the manufacturing plants of the two largest drywall companies, US Gypsum and American Gypsum. They assured him that they did not use formaldehyde in their process, which some manufacturers apparently do. He called in 2006, and this may have changed since.

The drywall sheets were aired outside for several months, stacked with dividers so air could get to all sides of them.

The living room has no drywall on the exterior walls. Instead, the walls are plastered with a home-made mix of white Portland cement and some very fine golden sand they were able to find in California. This produces a pleasant beige color. There is nothing else in the mix.

The core of the house has adobe walls, while the remaining interior walls are made with steel studs covered with either drywall or corrugated steel. All the steel has been scrubbed with a well-tolerated soap to remove oils.

Murco M-100 is used both as joint compound and also to paint the drywall. When used as a paint, the M-100 was slightly tinted with the materials normally used to tint cement. It was then applied in three thin coats. No real paint is used in the house, except on a few birch wood cabinets in the kitchen. These cabinets have two coats of Glidden Lifestyle paint over the AFM wood sealer. The cabinets were then offgassed outside for a couple of months.

In the bathroom, the two exterior walls are concrete block with a plaster of white cement and silica sand, like in the living room.

One interior wall in the kitchen is adobe, while the remaining interior wall is drywall with M-100 as both joint compound and paint.

There is no wood in the house, except for the door frames and the few kitchen cabinets. The doors are of steel, manufactured by Stanley, which has since been bought by Samsonite. Their doors are now produced with edges of manufactured wood and are no longer as good for people with MCS.

The doors are left with just the white primer, and not painted. Some of the doors have trim made out of galvanized steel flashing, while a few doors are trimmed with Douglas fir covered with stucco. Some have the wood covered with aluminum tape.

The floor is a mono-poured cement slab, with ceramic floor tiles throughout the

house.

The roof is corrugated steel, held up by steel trusses. Before they were mounted, the steel plates were washed with hot water to remove oils left from the manufacturing.

The attic is insulated with two layers of Astro Foil insulation. The ceilings are drywall throughout the house. They are coated with three layers of Murco M-100, with the final layer textured.

The heat pump/air conditioner is installed at the far exterior side of the house, furthest from the bedroom. The bedroom has a kill switch, which disconnects both the phase and neutral wires in the bedroom walls, so the room can be truly electrically free at night.

This is Chuck and Sherri's second safe house. When the first was built elsewhere in Arizona, there was only one other house in the neighborhood. Less than ten years later, there were 26 and they had to move. This time they live on 80 acres (30 hectares) of land, in an area with only such large lots. One next-door neighbor also has MCS and EHS. They have now started ranching, with a few goats, sheep, a donkey, cows and some free range chickens.



The Osgood's house, when only the first phase was completed.