

The Valverde Voice

News and Views of Valverde Commons Co-Housing Community
In Beautiful Taos, New Mexico

VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT
www.valverdecommons.com

Volume 1

Spring 2011

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Welcome Commoners and Prospective Commoners:

This Newsletter brings you news of our community, photos of our progress, and comments from many involved in the project. Please send your suggestions on future articles, photos, articles, messages, and letters to Carolyn Schlam @ carolynschlam@aol.com and Barbara Zaring @ barbarazaring@gmail.com. We are happy to publish them. Also please send names and email addresses of folks you would like us to send the newsletter to. Or just forward to your friends and relations.....Enjoy!!!! If you don't want to continue receiving our newsletter, just drop Barbara a note and she will take your name off the mailing list.

Call to the Commoners



Our Newsletter will be a quarterly event to keep members and prospective members up to date on VC developments.

We will also be updating our website to reflect these changes.

We welcome your ideas and contributions for future issues. Humor, interviews, photos, impressions, all are appreciated!

We also welcome personal news from members who would like to share, well, just about anything.....a new grandchild perhaps, a major career accomplishment, a funny story...just keep it coming!



Waiting for Spring: Valverde Commons, March 24, 2011



We love winter!



We love summer!



TAKING THE PLUNGE

by Carolyn Schlam

This article goes out to prospective members who are considering the community and are understandably hesitant about “taking the plunge.” As a recent “plunger” I am here to give you a dose of courage. I have already hit the water and can testify that it’s warmer than you think. Swim along with me.....

I’ve been thinking of co-housing for a while. I’m divorced and have lived alone for a number of years and decided enough was enough. I was living in yes, Miami, Florida, and looking for a community in California. I was part of a meetup forum for 2 years with lots of other folks wanting to move to Northern California. Then last summer I decided to come out to New Mexico for a visit. Searching on the intentional community website, I stumbled on Valverde Commons. I liked the look of the place and was captivated by the idea that I could build a house and studio. I’m a professional artist and the lack of studio space was always a stumbling block in any community I’d considered.

On July 4 I came up to Taos for the very first time to visit Valverde Commons and the members put on a splendid potluck (something they do inordinately well I might add) to welcome me. Suffice it to say I was totally blown away by the beauty of the site and the kindness, generosity and friendliness of the members.

I left New Mexico on August 9 driving back to Florida and arrived on August 13. I began interviewing brokers to sell my house the following week. On Friday, Sept. 10 my house went on multiple listing. On Sunday it was shown 4 times to prospective buyers and I got an offer. I signed a contract to sell on Sept. 15, had the inspection on the 23rd and closed the sale on October 22. During those 4 weeks from inspection to closing, I packed every piece of my art, sold all my possessions and had a 2 day garage sale which netted me \$3000. On November 9, movers came and took all my art to a storage warehouse in Santa Fe, and on Nov. 14 my little dog Bailey and I piled into the car and drove west.

It was done, no home, no possessions, no way to turn back. I shivered at what I had done. But I also felt exhilarated. My future life lay before me and it was an open book. I could write a new script. It was up to me and me alone.

So I am here in Taos, renting a furnished townhouse a few blocks from Valverde Commons. I am introducing myself to this sweet town. I am making new friends and beginning to build not only a house, but a foundation for a new life. And I am receiving help and confidence from all quarters: from the good people at Valverde Commons, the art community here in Taos, from strangers who are becoming friends.

My little dog Bailey has made the adjustment beautifully. He seems to have decided this is his new home and has discovered a new passion— “the prairie dog”

I invite all of you who are considering Valverde Commons to contact me, ask me anything, and let me share my experience with you. I will tell you that “taking the plunge” isn’t nearly as scary as it may seem, and if I can make it any easier for you, I’ll be happy to oblige. Call 786-897-2276 or email carolynschlam@aol.com.

And I send you best wishes that you may land in your own right place in the world. Plunge away!

Interview with Hank and Gaia

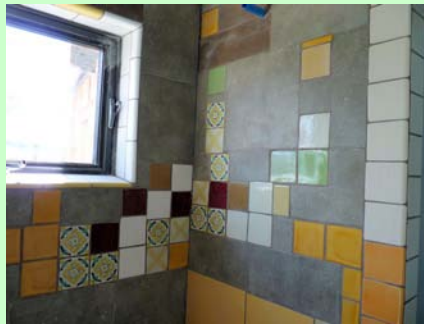
Hank & Gaia gave us this wonderful interview about their concept and process for building their house. They are VC pioneers along with Kristina, of course, who have built our first 2 houses. Here are some photos of the manse which is nearing completion. Absolutely inspirational you two!



From here



To today!



To here.....



Q: We're talking to Hank and Gaia about their new house at Valverde Commons. When did you start the process and what did you have in mind?

A: Well let's see. We started the process probably about 12 years ago with an earlier home in Dixon and which we intended to make a very energy efficient and yet sensual outlandish kind of artistic house. Then we decided on trying it again and by the time we decided to move to Taos there were many concepts already in place but the actual shape of it depended on which lot we chose. I fell for the lot we're on right now (we were wrestling between 2 or 3 lots) but the trees a lot of people think are just scraggly little painful weeds actually seduced me. I like trees.

Q: What was your concept for the design of the house?

A: Hank: The house actually designed itself because the property was a certain shape and so we knew that we couldn't run it east-west very easily and make a simple little passive solar house, and we also knew we wanted some privacy and I wanted to have a studio detached from the house. Lots of limitations gave us sort of sensual curves and it ended up being a blend of a yurt from Afghanistan, and something French country, castle.

Gaia: The style was also determined by wanting to try this zero energy loss house, forgetting as close to a zero loss energy house as we could get and that meant not building something long and skinny but building something compact and concentrated and that's different from the houses we have built in the past which are much more passive solar oriented as opposed to really trying to hold in the energy.

Hank: Ours have been kind of passive solar houses... We have sort of a religious belief in pitched roofed houses so you take a house and clump it all together in an almost circular form and you want to have some kind of pitched roof over it. There are limits here of 17 feet... you almost have a house designed right there. Then one Christmas we were on Ledoux Street and we went into that wonderful little gallery- The Rain Gallery- and they have an enclosed courtyard where they had a little fireplace and people were waxing eloquent about Christmas, and I hooked into the idea of a little courtyard. That's how it ended up becoming a shape that's called a "Crab Nebula."

Gaia: But I think I always wanted that courtyard. Just the idea of having an inner courtyard... We've traveled so much in Latin America where the outside is just a wall and then you get to go inside and it's magical. You can't tell what's there from the outside... This is not like that but at least it has that inner courtyard, that inner space. And I think in a community it's really nice to have a little private space like that too. Where you're outside but everyone can see you but it's not like your front porch...

Hank: And it allowed us to have 2 south walls which was really kind of special in that configuration. My studio has a row of south walls and then our master bedroom and living room have south windows.

Q: About that zero energy thing you mentioned. What does it constitute and how do you get to it?

Hank: And it allowed us to have 2 south walls which was really kind of special in that configuration. My studio has a row of south walls and then our master bedroom and living room have south windows.

Q: About that zero energy thing you mentioned. What does it constitute and how do you get to it?

Hank: A zero energy house is sometimes called a passive house. In Germany they developed the most extreme versions of passive houses. I have a good friend in Boulder who's also made zero energy houses which means that after the extreme dose of energy used in making the house, if you try to set that aside... it's like buying a new Prius....it costs a lot of energy to actually build that car but then theoretically you're cruisin'. The same thing is true with a house. The three most important factors in a zero energy house are extreme insulation, extreme air tightness and an air ventilation system that saves the heat as it recycles the air. You've got to have that kind of air system because you've made a house that's like a thermos bottle and the extreme insulation sort of goes against the wisdom of just five years ago even in which 3" of foam on the outside of a building was considered overkill in a regularly insulated minimum house. These days a zero energy or passive house has at least R-50 in the walls and R-70 in the ceiling and say 6 to 10" of foam underneath the slab which is extremely unusual for standard construction. These things plus the two critical things in a zero energy house as far as air tightness goes- where the roof hits the walls and where the slab hits the walls. These are the two connections that if you can find a way to completely seal and insulate those 2 joints, you've made a most amazing house. Along with the window thing...if you're willing to spend a ridiculous amount of money on a window it will be ridiculously more efficient. Like changing from an R3 or 4 to an R9 will cost you a fortune but then you'll end up in this very very sealed house.

Gaia: I just wanted to say you make it sound like there's one way to do it and everyone knows exactly how, but the process of doing this was complex. Hank talked to many people who had a lot of expertise and got a lot of contradictory advice. So it's not as if everyone knows yet or agrees yet about how to do it. I think that's really important for people who are thinking about doing it. Because it's so experimental and we will find out things we can pass on to others. There are people who are building after us and this may not work as well as we hoped. It may even work better than we hoped.

Hank: A little bit more about what Gaia was saying ... The issue is really a values question and when you start thinking about things you really care about ...to have a zero energy house that is super energy efficient may be very important but it may not be the most important thing. Where were those windows that cost a fortune, where were they built, what kind of materials were used, what kind of plutonium was used in those windows....Questions like that are really important. Or do you really want to spend x percent of the money you'll have for the rest of your life in making a house that is like 5% more efficient but it will cost you another \$50,000. There are many value questions that are really critical and we had a lot of time and a lot of discussion about the nuances of those values that many solar engineers around here could sit down and say, "Yes, the most efficient" x" is this and the most desirable in a perfect world is "y" but that doesn't mean you choose that. It might not be the most significant thing...I had many debates with some of our members about energy efficiency and I had to admit that I really wanted to make a sculpture and a curving piece of work and I wanted it to be efficient but I also wanted it to make me smile when I walked inside. That might reduce the efficiency and I would say that as long as it was OK with Gaia... We're going to make something that is whimsical and satisfying and sensual and feels like it's holding you and nurturing you because of its shape, not just because it heats itself. That's nice but I'm not just a technician, that's for sure.

Gaia: But another thing that came up was in terms of...in studying things like fracking and how we get natural gas and knowing the incredibly poisonous nature of that process for human beings, plants and animals, I knew that even though it might not be cost effective, that I wanted to make our use of things like natural gas as little as possible. Just because again it's a value issue ... It's also an issue about energy and how are we going to survive when we don't have any gas or any petroleum, but more that the processes that are being used now for those things are horrendous, and they're poisoning people and destroying environments and so Hank's kind of concerned about the beauty of it, which I am too, but also I'm very concerned that we're not contributing further to those kinds of things that are going on. So we decided to use mostly solar electric, to use photo voltaics, not even to use gas to heat our water. And maybe we'll find out whether that was a good decision in terms of the practicality, but we're going to try it because I want to use as little natural gas as possible.

Q: So are you making a conscious house?

Gaia: Yes, As much as we can afford; it depends so much on what you can afford.

Hank: I am very taken with the concept of building a house out of recycled materials. That would be exciting. It's a different project totally. There are many things that intrigue me about building. What we're doing is certainly not the be-all.... It's loaded with value very complex, very expensive, and prone to leakage and problems that photo voltaics are not and after just endless amounts of ups and downs and saying we will take the south facing pitch and fill it with half solar and half pv's...

judgments and difficult decisions throughout the whole thing. As far as the heating system goes, one of the judgments I developed after researching for months and months and trying to research and simplify a solar thermal system, hydronics, say using the sun to heat some liquid on the roof and running it through the house and heating domestic hot water or heating your house, it's all very doable, but now we'll change it and do 1/3 solar, ok we're going to have a 350 gallon super-insulated tank in the middle of the mechanical room, my God, until one day it came to me in a funny little dream that if we have this magically super-insulated, super-tight house and we're going to have say a heating system that costs \$25,000, then a backup system with gas, what is wrong with this picture? So I decided forget the back-up system, we're going to have an electric radiant floor heating system, electric domestic and photo voltaics to run all this and grid tied, which means we don't have batteries which is another big expense and they wear out. It's a complicated question and a complicated answer but that was our conclusion. Lots of people say "you can't do that" but since we're making the solar electricity, we get to flaunt it. We decide.

Gaia: And since the house is tight enough....

Hank: Then there's another little detail. It doesn't stick up on the roof. There's a whole lot of nice things that are bonuses....

Q: So when is the move-in?

Gaia: I was gone for a week and when I came back I asked Hank "What's the timeline? What do you think? He said middle of April...I was totally shocked. I said "Maybe the end of April." When you go into the house there's starting to be tile and colors on the wall, floors and cabinets in the kitchen...

Q: Are you happy with the way it's turned out?

Gaia: Oh, yes, I'm very happy. And some of the things...I didn't think I wanted a brick floor but I really like it. I go in there and say "Hank this is taking up too much space." And they figure out ways to take up less space. Things get changed in the process which is one of the nice things about having your partner be the builder and the general contractor.

Q: Hank, was it fun?

Hank: It's been super fun and exhausting. I'm just strung out but I would love to do this again...There's these value questions and you can hold up each of these values like you hold up a mouse by its tail and you look between his legs and say "Where's the real truth in this value?" And you play around with that and there's nothing more pure than recycling materials and there might be 500 values like that you can hold up and look at and say "Wait a minute. How important is this?"

Gaia: I remember we were talking and we were really out of money. We were talking about where we could cut and Hank was suggesting we cut the photo voltaics. And then I started talking about fracking and the consequences so I turned him back into not cutting. I think that's the example...

Q: How did your budget work out? Did you stick to it?

Gaia: Well we sold our house and thought we would build this house for the amount we got and I think we're over, not like twice as much...

Hank: I think we're about 25% over.

Gaia: which is not great and we could decide not to do photo voltaics and that would change that hugely...

Hank: That would change the game. But again if that value of it being a cheap house were higher on our list, if it were number 2 or number 3 instead of number 6, then that would be different. Then we wouldn't have bricks on the floor. We wouldn't get diamond finished plaster on the sexy curves and that would be fine too....

Alice: This house is basically a sculpture. It's not just a standard house. So your costs are higher....

Gaia: yes, if you didn't have to have a roof with 17 different pitches. I married this guy and that's what he does.

Hank: Even if the pitches were flat planes it would be a lot. There's always rules you have in your head like at least the roof pitch needs to be a flat pitch...No, it doesn't; it could twist!

Ross...When the earthquake comes, yours is already twisted...

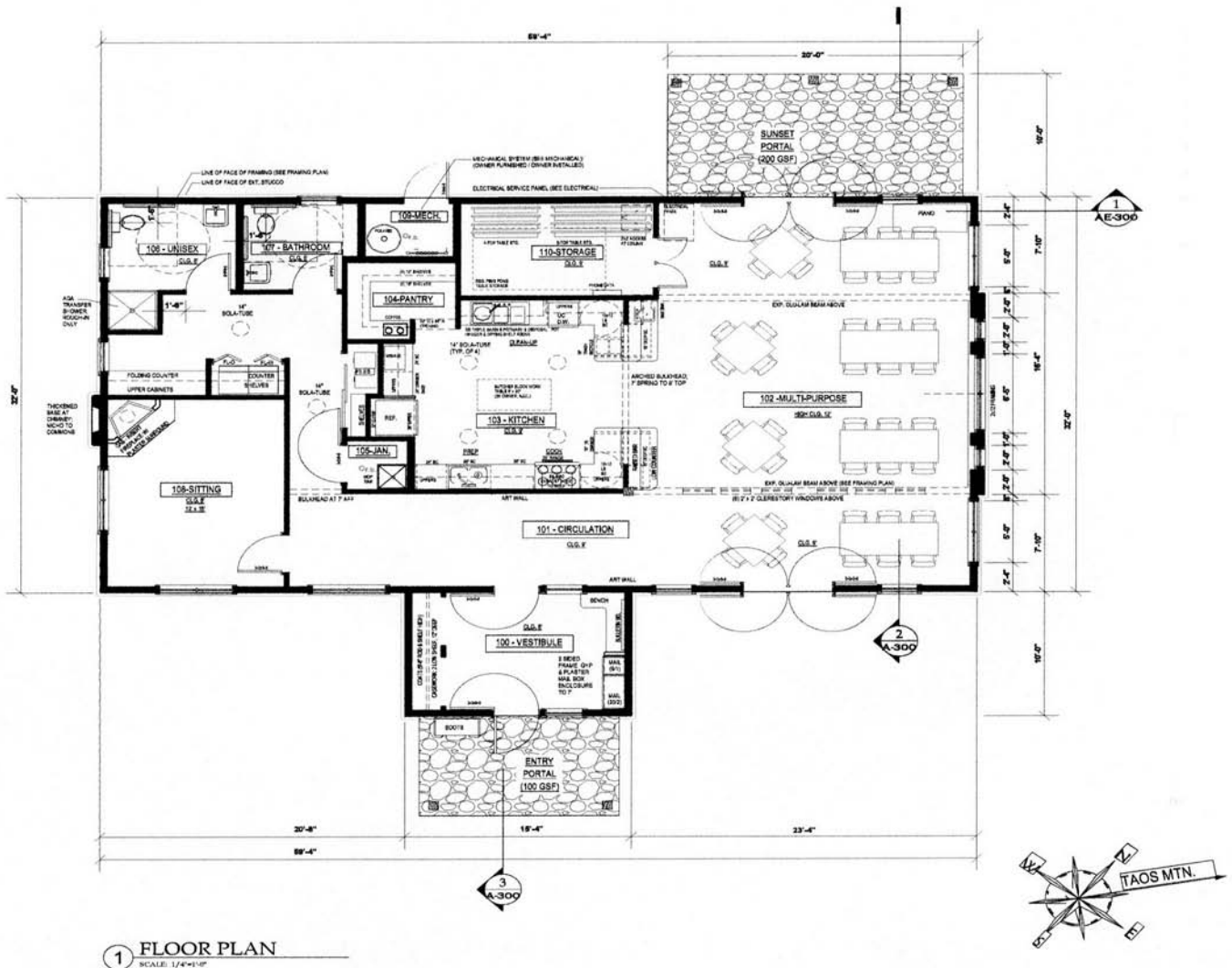
Laughter....

Thank you Hank and Gaia. We'll all be there for the house-warming.

OUR COMMON HOUSE

We are breaking ground for the 2000 square foot Common House this spring. After a number of lively meetings we agreed on a floor plan and design that is beautiful and suits our needs. We will each collect our mail at the Common House and hopefully stop from time to time for a visit with a friend and a cup of tea. In the great room we will have moveable tables so that we can all share meals together every couple of weeks, and dance, make music, maybe do yoga and tai chi, have family reunions, whatever we need. We will have access to this “party space” when we need it, and thus we can build smaller houses. Our ample kitchen will have everything for cooking the fabulous meals we all seem to love. There is a quiet/ private room for visiting with friends and for small events such as reading groups and meditation. Two bathrooms and a washer and dryer/ laundry area complete the building. Outside we have a patio facing Taos Mountain. Aesthetically I would call it Southwest Pueblo style. There is a beautiful large window facing the mountain and many south facing windows for solar gain. It will have a clerestory for more sun and light and the entire structure will be well insulated.

Matt Worswick of Synergy Design in Golden, Colorado, who lives in cohousing (Harmony Village) and is experienced in designing common houses, drew up the basic design, and the Living Design Group of Taos, especially Johannes Kolshorn, have developed the idea and drawn up the plans. As we go to press, we are awaiting issuance of the building permit so that the contractor, Albert Anglada, can break ground..



CO-HOUSING CORNER

**A PLACE FOR INTERESTING
IDEAS AND INFORMATION**

Please send your suggestions for this section of the newsletter.....



Our friend, Mr. Sun:

Q: You might be interested to know how many people use solar energy or even how many homes use solar energy?

A: See below

Here are some tips for making best use of the sun:

1. Orient your living areas to the south side of the house, which receives most of the sun throughout the day
2. Make sure your walls, roof and floors are insulated and fill any gaps where draughts might come through.
3. Position doors and windows opposite each other to allow for a cooling breeze to flow through the house when the air cools down in the evening of a hot summers day.
4. Windows on the south side of the house should be bigger to allow more sun to penetrate the house during the day and windows on the north side smaller to prevent heat lost at night.
5. Position trees and plants to direct a cooling breeze into your house, while shading it during summer. Plant trees that shed their leaves in winter.
6. Make sure external shading structures are wide enough to block out the sun in summer, while still allowing the low winter sun to enter.
7. Polished concrete, tile or slate floors and brick walls will absorb the heat throughout the day and release it slowly at night, reducing the need to run expensive heaters. Carpet acts as an insulator and will not retain the heat.



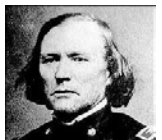
Co-Housing Stats: As per the co-housing Association of the U.S., the state with the highest number of co-housing communities is California with a whopping 51, followed by Washington with 21, Massachusetts 18, Colorado 16, Texas and North Carolina, 11 each and New York and Oregon 10 each.



Adobe: “a kind of clay used as a building material, typically in the form of sun-dried bricks; a brick of such a type or a building constructed from such material.” Origin: “mid-18th century: from Spanish, adobar meaning ‘to plaster.’” Adobe has long been the traditional building material of the Southwest. Structures made from it are undulating and sculptural in nature, yet their mass gives them a sense of permanence and timelessness. The word adobe originated

in the Arabic language and was brought to America by Spanish colonists at the end of the 15th century. It is used to refer to the earth from which structures are built, the structures themselves, and the unbaked clay bricks made from the earth.

Notable residents of Taos, past and present



include [Lynn Anderson](#), country/pop singer; [Ross Anderson](#), skier; [Charles Bent](#), first Territorial Governor of New Mexico; [Oscar E. Berninghaus](#), artist; [Emil Bistram](#), artist; [Ernest L. Blumenschein](#), founding member, [Taos Society of Artists](#); [Dorothy Brett](#), artist and personality; [Julia Cameron](#), author of *The Artist's Way*; [Kit Carson](#), frontiersman; [E. Irving Couse](#), artist; [Judson Crews](#), poet and publisher; [Andrew Dasburg](#), artist; [Ronald Davis](#), artist; [W. Herbert Dunton](#), artist; [Nicolai Fechin](#), artist; [R. C. Gorman](#), artist; [William Victor Higgins](#), artist; [Dennis Hopper](#), actor, director, artist; [Aldous Huxley](#), author; [Gary E. Johnson](#), former two-term governor of New Mexico; [Brandie Knight](#), author, film producer; [D. H. Lawrence](#), author; [Mabel Dodge Luhan](#), patron of the arts; [Agnes Martin](#), artist; [Thomas "Doc" Martin](#), physician; [Antonio José Martínez](#), priest; [John Nichols](#), writer; [Bror Julius Olsson Nordfeldt](#), artist; [Bert Geer Phillips](#), artist; [Julia Roberts](#), actress; [Julius Rolshoven](#), artist; [Donald Rumsfeld](#), former Secretary of Defense of the United States (part-time resident); [Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant](#), journalist and writer; [Joseph Henry Sharp](#), artist; [Larry Torres](#), foreign language professor; [Walter Ufer](#), artist; [Danelle Umstead](#), Paralympic skier

A: Each and every one of us uses solar energy and each and every house on the planet uses solar energy! It's called passive solar energy and as long as the sun shines it will provide us with an abundance of heat and light for free!

Remember to visit our website at www.valverdecommons.com