

Down under

Architects deep-six new housing

By TOM LONERGAN

Few underground houses have been built in the Detroit metropolitan area. But if more are built in the future, you'll have no trouble spotting them.

The houses aren't literally underground.

Generally they will follow the same earth sheltered style as the unconventional Oakland Community College campus under construction in Southfield. Three sides and the roof of the structure are covered by dirt and grass, which will provide better insulation than above-ground buildings. The fourth side is open for natural light.

In Oakland County, there are a few underground houses in the area between Novi and the Brighton area, and in Springfield Township. There have been no requests to build underground in Plymouth and Canton townships in Wayne County.

HAROLD VAN DINE, partner in a Troy architectural firm which designed OCC's Southfield campus between Nine Mile Road and the Lodge Expressway, said earth sheltering would be "terrific in a home."

Underground housing construction "lends itself more to suburban and rural areas," he added. "You'd be hard-pressed to do it in a subdivision."

Van Dine appears convinced that "going underground can truly be a saving."

That is the precise reason OCC decid-

ed to build the first "underground" college building in the state. While investing \$600,000 more than for a conventional building, OCC will recover the cost in 15 years or less, Van Dine said, thanks to cheaper heating and operating expenses.

He said heating costs for the Southfield campus will be two-thirds of a similar size conventional building.

WITH HOME heating costs expected to continue upward, Detroit area underground home promoter James Konarske said the idea will catch on.

"They're difficult things to build and still meet the (building) codes," said Steve Board, plan examiner for Avon Township. He reported only one inquiry recently about building underground in the township.

West Bloomfield Township has "had a couple of inquiries," said building manager Russell Crites. Crites said he's "not adverse" to earth sheltered housing and has "been trying to keep abreast of it."

Building underground is more expensive, Crites said, because the house is "one of a kind."

"It's like how much is it to build a Cadillac. If you're only building one — \$100,000?"

Crites said he'd "be glad to look at plans" for building underground, but added the builder has "got to get around some problems in the code." He said variances could be granted to

meet codes designed for conventional houses.

MOST UNDERGROUND homes have been "predominantly built for the well-to-do because they wanted something different," said Konarske, who recently began Cave Enterprises, of Southgate, to promote earth-sheltered housing.

"I don't build 'em; all I do is talk about them," he said.

The "underground" promoter said it costs an average \$800 annually to heat a conventional home, which he says is causing people to have "second thoughts about making their home energy efficient."

Konarske said there were an estimated 2,000 underground homes in the country last year, including 200 in Michigan.

An underground house has earth and grass on three sides and is open to the sun on the fourth side. (Copy-right Cave Enterprises, Inc., reprinted with permission)



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