

Earth sheltered housing proponents want chance to prove concept's merit

By ARLENE FUNKE

Earth sheltered housing sparks images of a damp, cave-like dwelling, complete with flickering candle and spiders.

Fledgling entrepreneurs Paul Seul and Fred Van Vurst — engineers by profession — are trying to change that image. Seul, of Canton, and Van Vurst, of Northville, have been partners since July 1979 in Challenge Engineering and Construction Co.

They spend most of their time as subcontractors on construction jobs. But the pair also have a keen interest in building earth sheltered homes.

The houses Seul and Van Vurst propose to build would be nestled into the natural terrain, surrounded on three sides by earth.

There is a "lot of misconception about dampness" associated with the concept, Seul said.

"There is nothing dripping from the

ceiling," said Seul, 27. "There are no spiders, and you don't need boots.

"The earth modifies the outside temperature — keeps it more constant. If you go down further into the earth, it reaches a constant temperature."

THE HOUSE would be built of waterproofed concrete. It would contain insulation of rigid materials that could hold up against acid or dampness in the soil.

By building the house with a southern exposure, the house could take advantage of passive solar energy, Van Vurst said. Heat from the sun would be absorbed through large glass panes in the house.

The roof would be covered with two feet of dirt. And heat could be provided by a wood-burning stove and passive solar energy, with forced-air natural gas heat as a backup.

"YOU LOOK five years down the

road at energy (costs)," said Van Vurst, 30.

The concept is based roughly on sod houses, which were built in prairie states during the 19th century, said Kathleen Vadnais, editor of Earth Shelter Digest and Energy Report. The magazine is published by Webco Publishing Co. of St. Paul, Minn.

Ms. Vadnais said earth sheltered housing began to catch on after the oil embargo of the 1970s. People began to realize that most existing housing loses heat "like a sieve."

She said that interest often develops as a result of research projects, which often are associated with colleges and universities.

For example, there are several earth sheltered houses in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, Ohio and Michigan, she said.

The partners' interest in earth sheltered housing has evolved as an adjunct to their main role as subcontractors on remodeling and construction projects.

Seul has a bachelor of science degree in engineering and applied science from University of Wisconsin. Van Vurst has a similar degree from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and a master's degree from University of Alaska.

The pair had been working for the same construction company when

they decided to strike out on their own in 1979.

The interest in the energy-saving housing style came as a result of some consulting work for an earth sheltered project in Monroe, Michigan has perhaps a dozen earth-berm and earth-covered houses, said Van Vurst.

Most are in Traverse City, Monroe, Port Huron, Howell and Lapeer, said Van Vurst.

The chief problem is finding willing lenders, so "Most build with cash," said Ms. Vadnais. Other obstacles are zoning restrictions and finding knowledgeable and experienced contractors.

"Since this is new, (people) aren't geared up for it," said Van Vurst, a native of Bloomfield Hills and a former Canton resident.

"A model is imperative," said Seul. The partners have bought 33 acres between Plymouth and Ann Arbor and hope to build at least one model.

"It's like trying to sell a car without seeing it," said Van Vurst. "You have to educate a whole lot of people."

SO FAR, Seul and Van Vurst have sold their idea to two clients. Construction of both houses is slated for 1981.

Thursday, December 18, 1980

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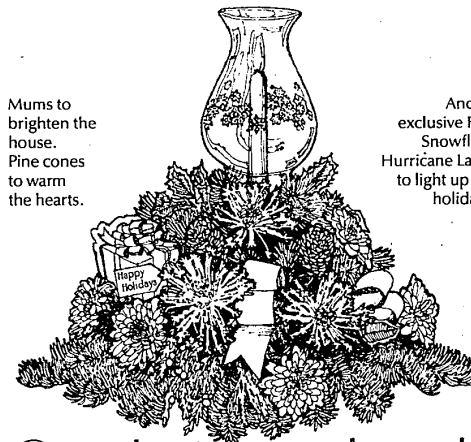
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