

SuCasa

Southwestern homes

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**green and
grounded**

in Santa Fe

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builders + remodelers



green and grounded

by Amy Gross

Photographs by Chris Corrie



Walled on all sides and with another house sharing the same lot, the home is “as infill as it gets,” say the homeowners. Just off the entryway in the reading room is an 8-foot walnut bench (opposite) made by Gries from wood he cut down himself.

A Santa Fe homebuilder dug deep when building his ultra-green home—and the awards started pouring in.

Jesse Gries didn’t blink when he heard a professional’s quote to remove a dying tree on Palace Avenue in downtown Santa Fe was more than \$4,000. “I told them, ‘I’ll cut it down for free, but I get to keep the wood,’” he says. Before his wife could object, Gries had disappeared with climbing gear and a chainsaw, muttering something about a “70-footer.” He appeared later that day, limbs intact, with an impressive stack of walnut in tow—wood which became an integral part of the home he was building for himself.

No doubt about it: Gries is a hands-on kind of guy. As principal of Green Star Builders, a design/build firm specializing in green and eco-friendly homes, he takes no chances when it comes to details and quality, snapping all lines and doing much of the installation work himself. When he and his wife, teacher Karla Helland, decided to build their own home, they bought a lot a couple of doors down from where they were living on Cordova Road. Tucked behind a short wall among similarly styled, nondescript adobes, Gries and Helland’s home is the very definition of infill. It’s easy to miss on the busy street—which is just fine with the owners.

“The best way to be hidden is to be right in the middle,” Gries says. “We have the best of both worlds: The lots are more affordable in this area, which allowed us to take advantage of the central location.” It was a tight fit, however, so to make the most of the one-tenth of an acre the home occupies, Gries and Helland got creative.

“We didn’t want to go to two stories because it would change the neighborhood,” says Helland, “so we decided to go down.” A



Green Star Builders, greenstarsantafe.com



Heavy, curved steel gates grace the entry courtyard (left) and patio (above), which features a handmade light built of steel and greenhouse glass to brighten the outdoor space.



Her eyes as green as the hydroponic wall behind her, Olive, an Abyssinian, checks out the visitors in her home.

basement suddenly made so much sense: It solved storage issues, created a place where daughter Leina and her teenage friends could hang out, and very affordably doubled the size of the house, from 1,500 to 3,000 square feet. Built without insulation or sheetrock, the 12-inch-thick concrete walls come directly into contact with the ground to keep the basement a cool 68 degrees, on average, during the summer. A heat recovery ventilation system is set to recirculate, taking warm air from upstairs and putting it downstairs in winter, or taking it outside during warmer months.

As the build neared completion in the summer of 2012, Gries knew in his heart he had a special home. He entered



Leina Gries, 12, wrangles Misschief, a blonde Buff Orpington hen, one of the family's five pet chickens.



Gries rounded the sleek, stainless steel double railing above the stairwell and reworked it with modern corners.

Right: Helland and Gries in their award-winning kitchen. Daniel Gries, Jesse's father, made the natural bleached walnut cabinets.

his just-completed house in Haciendas—A Parade of Homes, competing against 15 other entries and, arguably, considerably more seasoned Santa Fe builders.

And knocked it out of the park.

Green Star Builders earned seven awards in that Parade, including the coveted top award, the Grand Hacienda, as well as the *Su Casa* Award for Best Design, the awards for best kitchen and best craftsmanship in its category, and three green awards for excellence in water efficiency, resource efficiency, and indoor air quality. The most meaningful to Gries: “Best craftsmanship,” he says without hesitation. “If you build a house well, that’s what makes it proud.”


His wife was gratified to win Best Kitchen. A former restaurant chef, Helland is currently a food educator for the nonprofit Cooking with Kids program at Turquoise Trail Charter School. A top-notch kitchen was the number one item on her list of must-haves, and like most chefs, she had clear opinions as to what truly makes up a great cooking space. “It had to be super-workable,” she says, noting the extra-wide counter space and the refrigerator wide enough to fit a full-size sheet pan. In Helland’s kitchen, the stove, sink, and most of the granite-covered



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Jesse Gries, supervised here by Lucky, at the drafting table in his basement home office. Ivy thrives in the 6-foot light well behind him, while the frosted glass closet doors, he says, "glow beautifully at night."



"I think furniture design is a natural continuation of the creative process of a home," says Gries. He made the walnut and steel bed in the master (an antique sabino beam from Mexico hangs above it), as well as the dining room table (below).

prep areas are recessed to afford the cook plenty of space. The fridge, easily accessible toward the front of the room, allows guests to grab their own drinks while it gently corrals them out of the cook's way.

Gries and Helland call their home a contemporary, but distinctly Southwestern influences abound in this green masterpiece: the walnut bench in the entryway/reading room, reclaimed Mexican sabino beams, a floating and cantilevered kiva fireplace, *canales* on the roof. "For me, real luxury is found in exquisitely crafted details which come together and make a home stand out," says Gries. "And I love steel fabrication." In his own shop, he produced the handsome steel entry and gate doors, the steel beam frame on the patio that Helland decorates with lights, and the curved railing of the stairwell, among other tasteful accents. Combining steel with the walnut from his tree-felling venture, Gries also constructed the gorgeous bed in the master bedroom.

Then there are the features that reinforce the homebuilder's green mission, such as the organic hydroponic green wall. Positioned strategically over the stairway leading to the basement, the wall waters itself three times a day and removes most of the envi-

Twenty-seven linear feet of bookshelves house Helland's collection of cookbooks (right). Soft scroll lights add the perfect contemporary touch to the dining space.





In the patio, one of two removable murals by photographer Anne Staveley adorns the north-facing wall. Helland calls this one the "yardbird" and the other the "guardbird." Steel frame sculptures add form and visual interest to the relatively small space.



"Seeing treetops in such a tight little neighborhood makes such a difference," says Helland of the clerestory windows in the living room. To the left, a comfortable Eames lounge chair and ottoman in the light-filled reading room.

ronmental pollutants in the house and replaces them with oxygen. A whole-house heat recovery ventilator/HEPA filtration system also helps to keep the air incredibly clean. Even without the benefit of solar or geothermal, the home initially earned Emerald status from Build Green New Mexico, but the recent addition of a full PV solar array now ensures the house produces more energy than it uses. Gries installed an electric heat pump that heats and cools

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a green machine

Green Star Builders utilized a slew of eco-friendly features and green building tactics in the design of the home. Here are just a few:

- Initial Emerald rating; currently exceeding Emerald
- Build Green NM certified
- Energy Star rated
- Gray water system
- 330-gallon rain catchment system
- Natural cooling system in basement
- Recycled tubs in bathrooms
- Scrap granite in bathrooms
- Light wells in basement
- Heat recovery ventilation system
- Small footprint (1,500 square feet sitting on .1 acre of land)
- Antique Mexican sabino beams
- Kiva door seals with magnetic latches
- Hydroponic green wall
- Furniture made from wood of dying walnut tree
- Skylights and natural light throughout
- Sereno stone in patio (poured concrete product with no waste)
- Canales made of 1/4" powder-coated steel (Gries calls them "canales for life")

The self-watering hydroponic wall removes manmade pollutants from the home and replaces them with oxygen.

