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# Cabin tradition gets a makeover in concrete logs

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*THE NEW YORK TIMES*

Published: Thursday, January 22, 2009 at 1:20 a.m.

MISSOULA, Mont.

In the snowy woods of a valley west of this college town, John and Mary Beth Cook have taken up a version of mountain living amended for the modern world.

Last year, they completed and moved into a house that looks like many others here in Big Sky Country, with exterior walls formed by logs stripped of their bark. Except that in their case, the logs are made of precast concrete shaped and painted to look like the real thing.

"We like the look and feel of logs because they look like the forest, they look like they belong," said Cook, a historian, teacher and outdoorsman who also installed a climbing wall on his rock chimney. "But we didn't want the maintenance."

Maintenance is something Cook knows about. His previous home, where he and his wife lived for nine years, was a real log house several miles away.

"Every year you go out to stain it," he said, "and the building gets a little bigger." The couple, whose property still has charred trees from a forest fire several decades ago, were also drawn to the idea that a concrete house would be less susceptible to such disasters.

"It would take a flame-thrower to start this place on fire," Cook said.

When most people dream of a rustic cabin in the mountains, it is probably not built of concrete logs. But Stewart Hansen, a co-founder and the president of EverLog Systems, the Missoula-based company that has been selling concrete logs since 2004 and that made the logs for the Cooks' house, thinks it should be.



NEW YORK TIMES PHOTOS / JANIE OSBORNE For John and Mary Beth Cook, living in a log house is a dream come true, even if the logs are concrete. The idea for a realistic concrete log came in 2000, when Dick Morgenstern, a founder of EverLog, watched more than a million acres of forest and hundreds of homes go up in flames.

Concrete logs, he says, are "worry free."

"They're sturdier than real logs so there's no settling or structural instability," he said.

No filling the cracks between logs, or chinking, either (most log homes need re-chinking every 20 years or so); no need to stain the logs themselves (generally required at least once in five years); and no worrying about insects boring into the wood.

Moreover, he added, the fact that they are fireproof makes them particularly appropriate at a time when homes are increasingly being built in forests. The idea for a realistic concrete log came about in 2000, when Dick Morgenstern, another founder of EverLog, watched more than a million acres of the Bitterroot National Forest and hundreds of homes go up in flames.

"Insurance rates went up on homes in the woods," he said. "Or they stopped insuring them."

Some 40 homes have been built with logs from EverLog, about 30 of them erected by the company itself.

Products like EverLog's have won adherents in the homebuilding world.

"It looks good, there's no shifting or movement of the logs, no need to chink and re-chink," said Pat Supplee, the architect in Missoula who designed the Cook house. "The downside of real logs is gone."

But not that everyone agrees, especially here in western Montana, where there are five national log home companies and many more small outfits, and where logs, the staple of Western construction for more than a century, remain the trendiest material. For many here, the idea of artificial logs is heretical.

"Architecture 101 says respect the integrity of the materials," said Joe Campeau, an architect in Helena, Mont.

"Simply put, they're fake," he said.

But this view has not dissuaded a number of companies from trying to capture the essence of log construction with other materials.

In Charlevoix, Mich., for example, a company called Pine River has been manufacturing a log-siding system called E-log for four years, in which a thick wood veneer -- typically pine -- on a hardboard backing is wrapped around a half-cylinder foam core.

In Thorp, Wisc., CRC Inc. just started marketing a half-log siding that it describes as environmentally friendly because it is made from a fiberglass that, the company says, emits very low levels of volatile organic compounds. The half logs are molded and hollow, with a look that the company owner, Jim McIntire, described as "Wisconsin hardwood, with raised knots and wood grain."

And in Tecumseh, Okla., Stanton Pace, a contractor, has been creating sprayed concrete facades with fake log finishes since 2003. Styrofoam sheets shaped like stacked logs are screwed to a house's exterior walls, and a concrete mixture is sprayed

over the surface and then repeatedly pressed with various 3- to 6-foot-long rubber stamps in wood-grain patterns.

Even the most practical arguments for artificial logs, though, are treated with skepticism by some in western Montana.

Jon Sellers, the vice president for marketing for Rocky Mountain Log Homes, a builder of real log houses based in Hamilton, takes issue with a fundamental premise of the concrete-log camp, that wood logs are highly flammable. Concrete may be fireproof, he allowed, but logs are fire resistant: A frame house would burn quickly in a wildfire because of air in its walls, but logs are dense and burn slowly, which means they can often be extinguished long before serious damage is done.

But the argument against fake logs that he seems to take more seriously is an aesthetic one.

"Logs look more natural, and in a log house every log is different, like a fingerprint," Sellers said. In the end, "they're building a concrete house that looks like a log house and isn't."

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