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The Logless Log Home



CABIN FEVER For John and Mary Beth Cook, living in a log house is a dream come true, even if the logs are made of concrete.

By **JIM ROBBINS**
Published: January 21, 2009

MISSOULA, Mont.

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KNOTS AND ALL Not all faux logs are concrete. E-logs made by Pine River, are pine veneer on hardboard over foam.

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 from 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 Mr. 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 Mr. 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,” Mr. Cook said.

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When most people dream of a rustic log cabin getaway in the mountains, it's 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.

Concrete logs, he says, are "worry free." "They're sturdier than real logs so there's no settling or structural instability," he said. "That means no broken windows or doors that won't open." 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 the climate is warming, homes are increasingly being built in forests and wildfires pose a growing threat across the West.

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 home 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 quickly 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."

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., and a proponent of "architecture that represents Montana" and "that says 'I belong here.'"

"Material should represent itself and not another material," Mr. Campeau said. "Simply put, they're fake."

But this view hasn't dissuaded a number of companies around the country from trying to capture the essence of log construction with materials that get around the downside.

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. This produces a milled log look-alike, complete with saddle-notch ends, that is close to indistinguishable, once installed, from the walls of actual milled log homes (milled logs are cut to be uniform, unlike the varying logs used in most log homes). "It's white pine," said the company president and founder, Mike Way. "I can also create cherry, hickory, walnut or maple logs," he said, "depending the on the kind of veneer I can get."

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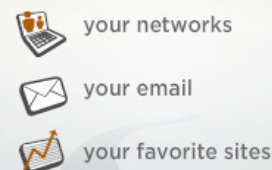
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The Logless Log Home

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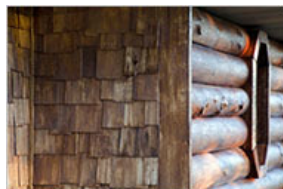
If the inside and outside of a home are done, the look is complete, and the surface even feels authentic to the touch — although tapping them yields a hollow thud. Siding for a 3,000-square-foot house would cost \$15,000 to \$18,000, Mr. Way estimated, plus \$4,000 to \$7,000 for installation; saddle-notch ends would add about \$3,000.

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Janie Osborne for The New York Times
NO TREES DIED The logs in this Montana house, which look real but are made of concrete, are by EverLog.

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Logs from CRC, used at Jim McIntire's house are made of fiberglass siding.

In Thorp, Wisc., CRC Inc., founded in 2000, has 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.” He added that they are fire resistant, durable and, weighing a pound per foot, easy to install.

So far only one home has been done, for Mr. McIntire himself. He said that enough fake logs to cover a 3,000-square-foot house would cost \$17,000 to \$20,000, and that installation would be another \$10,000 or so.

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 three- to six-foot-long rubber stamps in wood-grain patterns (one molded from an old fence post on a farm, another with distinctive knot holes), along with any of 12 stamps used for shaping log ends. Mr. Pace colors the fake logs either by adding coloring to the concrete before it sets or by painting it with a water-based concrete paint. They can look quite realistic, though they also fail the tap test.

“I love real logs, but I could never afford to build a real log home,” he said. “I can afford this.” Mr. Pace founded the Fossil Crete Company, in Oklahoma City, to make the facades. He later sold it and now works independently, using the same techniques. A 3,000-square-foot house, he estimated, would cost less than \$10,000 to cover.

Building a house of the same size with EverLog concrete logs, on the other hand, could cost as much as \$600,000, Mr. Hansen said, which is close to the cost of a real log

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home, and about 25 percent more than traditional construction. EverLog's product is unusual in the world of fake logs in that each cast log is not just decorative but structural; houses are not just covered with but made of the artificial logs.

The logs are cast using 40-foot-long steel forms the width of a log, which were fitted with rubber molds in eight styles, from hand-hewn to round, each made from a real log. Concrete is poured into the mold and heat cured; the roof of the manufacturing shed opens; the mold tips and a crane lifts the log and loads it onto a truck. The logs weigh 100 pounds a foot.

Water-based paint is applied on-site with brushes and sponges, producing a color that cannot quite match nature, though it comes close. The logs do look authentic — without knowing, it is hard to tell they're not. "A plumber tried to drill a hole in one for a hose bib and broke his drill bit because he thought it was wood," Mr. Hansen said.

Besides their realistic looks and low maintenance requirements, Mr. Hansen maintains, homes built from his logs are more environmentally friendly than those made from real ones. He acknowledges that the logs are made from an energy-intensive product, cement, and says the company is looking for a greener alternative, perhaps a concrete made from a waste product such as fly ash. But he points out that concrete logs don't require the cutting of trees, whereas construction of the average log home requires 100 large logs.

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

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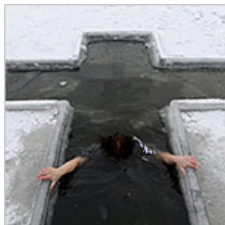


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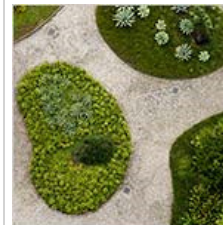
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