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### Working

## Faux log homes

By JILL FITZSIMMONS for the Missoulian



If you like the look of a log home, but not the hassles that come with owning one, concrete logs might be the ticket. Dick Morgenstern, who heads Concrete Log Systems in Missoula, built his new office and show home using the concrete logs he designed.

TIM THOMPSON/Missoulian

Missoula company creates concrete houses with rustic appeal

Robin Miland has been watching the concrete home going up on Deschamps Road for a few months now. The building was once ugly and gray, Robin said. He wondered what someone was going to do with the home.

Then, one day, there was a beautiful log home standing in its place.

One recent Saturday afternoon, Robin took his wife, Mitzi Miland, for a drive so she could see the transformation for herself. The building has drawn many people like the Milands, people who can't help but stop to touch the concrete logs or peer in the windows. They all want to see for themselves - is it really concrete?

On this day, the Milands were clearly impressed.

"I've always wanted a log house. But all the bad things with log homes Š," Mitzi said, her voice trailing off. "This would be the answer."

"If you like log homes, this is the way to go," Robin said. "We may end up having to build a new home."

Concrete Log Systems is a new business that's creating some excitement in the local building community. The company has developed patented technology to build a home from concrete logs. Not only that, the concrete homes have the appearance of real log homes, minus the hassles that typically come with log homes.

Among those hassles, a big one here in western Montana - is the fear of a home being destroyed by a wildfire. Insurance companies don't want combustible homes built in wooded areas, but people still want the rustic look of log homes, said Dick Morgenstern, the company's founder and the man who came up with this idea. Morgenstern believes his innovation will solve that problem.

Concrete logs also can't become infested with bugs, they won't shrink, they withstand high winds and they

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hold paint or stain better than wood. Morgenstern has a concrete shop at home. In 18 years, it's been painted once. His stick-built home, on the other hand, has been painted three times in that period.

"I can take just about any floor plan and produce it in concrete," he said.

Morgenstern, who graduated from Missoula County High School in 1962, has long been a successful businessman in the community. He started Missoula Concrete Construction in 1975, selling that business in 2000. He stayed on as a general manager but retired earlier this year. However, retirement didn't last long. At 60, he's starting this new business, because, in his words, "I'm having fun."

His idea came to him several years ago, when Morgenstern was asked to replace a large irrigation structure on Bass Lake. Heavy equipment couldn't be taken into the wooded area, so Morgenstern precast a structure of concrete logs. The logs were taken by helicopter and fitted together. Then in 2000, when wildfires were raging in western Montana and threatening homes, Morgenstern began to wonder if homes made of concrete logs were the answer. Joining him in the business are partners Stewart Hansen and Craig Brewerton.

Concrete technology since Morgenstern started in the business almost 30 years ago has changed drastically. So taking concrete and making it look like something else isn't a new idea. The difference is Morgenstern has developed a building system that's unique. These are individual concrete logs pieced together to make a home or structure.

When Morgenstern came to him with this idea, he thought it was kind of crazy, said Douglas Bauer, who bought Missoula Concrete Construction in 2000 and will produce the logs for the new business. Now, after seeing all this interest, Bauer is feeling apprehensive, but in a good way.

"I think there are going to be an awful lot of these built every year," Bauer said. "I am just going to be buried with phone calls."

The concrete building off of Old Highway 10 is Morgenstern's first. An office for nearby Missoula Concrete Construction as well as a show home for Concrete Log Systems, the building is about 2,700 square feet at the base. The concrete logs it's made of, stacked on top of one other by a crane, weigh 100 pounds per foot (Morgenstern limits the logs to 28 feet at the most). The concrete logs take about two days to assemble.

You have to really get up close to the logs, or even touch them, to see that they are not made of wood. The logs have a rich texture and depth to them. Even the log's end rings are visible. Each has been stained by a local faux painter to add to that real-wood appearance. The "wooden" posts at the front of the building are also made of concrete.

To build the office and show home, Morgenstern used molds he made from real wood logs. The molds are just an imprint of the logs.

"I cut one tree down at my home - to my wife's dismay," Morgenstern said.

From those logs came four separate patterns. So, when you turn those over, you have eight different logs. You really have to look well at the building to find any repetition in the logs.

Morgenstern has some trouble convincing people of how comfortable the home is. However, once inside it, you wouldn't know this building was made of concrete. It looks like a typical home on the inside, with walls that have been sheet-rocked. In fact, this building has an airy, light feel to it, whereas many log homes can be dark. Morgenstern used real wood on the inside of the home, in the trim and staircase, to give it even more of a log home feel.

The home also is insulated. These concrete buildings heat or cool at about 60 percent of a normal stick-built home, Morgenstern said. So, in an identical stick-built home, a \$100 heating bill would come to \$60 in the concrete home, he said.

Morgenstern will have pricing available in the next few weeks but anticipates it will be less per square foot than that of a log home.

"It will be affordable to the average homebuyer," he said.

Concrete Log Systems will market production rights to companies around the nation. In Missoula will be the main office and a warehouse that will ship accessories that are unique to the product. The company will provide the specialized equipment and accessories as well as its engineering services.

Bauer has confidence in Morgenstern and Concrete Log Systems. Morgenstern invented a concrete toilet many years ago that's being used throughout the nation. His concrete work also is all over the area, from the kiosk in front of the Missoula County Courthouse to the downtown parking garage on Main Street.

"It's proven that Dick is a man of ideas that work," Bauer said. "He's remarkable. He can invent things and they take off. And this is one of those - it's just going to take off."

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Concrete Log Systems:

<http://www.concretelogs.com>

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