

# FUNKY N.M.14

Fun and fanciful homes  
on the Turquoise Trail

**THE TURQUOISE TRAIL, ON N.M. 14,** has always appealed to seekers—of gold, silver, turquoise, coal and, today, a simpler lifestyle. Now, like a beaded turquoise necklace, interesting historical and cultural nuggets are strung along the route. Today's residents have also discovered that water and a sense of community are their greatest treasures.

Cerrillos and Madrid have seen their share of booms and busts, from the mining eras to a resurgence in building since the mid-'70s, as more folks have headed "back to the land."

Dozens of unusual homes—as fun and funky as their creators—have sprouted up along the Turquoise Trail. Let's take a peek inside two—one built from scratch and the other an interesting remodel.

Glen Neff and Eliane Allegre's straw-bale home takes on a glow as the sun sets. Neff says building the portal with its "wings" was the trickiest part.



**Above**—Neff says installing the flagstone floor was like putting together a giant jigsaw puzzle. The tiled counter separates the kitchen area from the living room. **Below**—Eliane Allegre and Glen Neff in their home in the foothills of the Ortiz Mountains.



A wooden staircase leads to the mezzanine with office space and a reading area above the bedroom. Neff's watercolor paintings line the shelf over the bed. Other shelves display treasures gathered from around the world. **Below**—Rocks from the Heron Lake area were used to create a waterfall effect in the bathroom.

## A Moroccan Straw-bale

Atop a sage-covered and juniper-studded hill, midway between Cerrillos and Madrid, the circular straw-bale home of Eliane Allegre and Glen Neff appears to be another natural earthen addition to the foothills in the Ortiz Mountains.

Allegre, a nurse at the Veterans Hospital in Albuquerque, lived along N.M. 14 for many years before she decided to buy land in the early '90s to build her dream home. Her partner, Glen Neff, a musician/artist and builder, helped her attain her dream. First, they built a small cabin and dance studio, where Allegre teaches Middle Eastern dance. Finally, in 2005, they decided it was time "to go for it" and build their spacious straw-bale home. Neff credits Allegre for having faith in his design and building abilities.

Inside and out, the home spirals like a sensual sculpture. The circular design embraces the 2,300-square-foot home yet retains a cozy feel. Allegre has added many of the decorative touches that reflect her international roots. The home, often filled with the scent of lavender from Provence, reminds her of her childhood growing up in Marseille, France. The eclectic decor draws inspiration from her mother's Assyrian heritage, as well as her travels to Morocco and throughout the Middle East.



Neff says years spent on building, art and design projects in California gave him the skills to build the home. The 59-year-old originally sketched a long, rectangular hacienda. "I went to the flattest spot on the top of the hill, put in a stake and started making a circle of how far out I might build," he says. When he looked at the large circle he had drawn, he said, "Wow. That's it. I realized I should go ahead and build a circular house, which really suited the land."

The couple secured a \$70,000 construction loan, and they were resourceful in

stretching those dollars. They traded and scrounged materials and ultimately drove to Oklahoma City to find "slightly irregular windows" to make ends meet. The largest expense (\$25,000) was to get the structure stuccoed with three coats inside and out. "This house is really solid, there's virtually no movement in the wind. And it's quite warm because of the solar gain in the windows."

"The portal design was the trickiest part with the wings (slanted roof)," he explains. But he was able to angle the ends of the portal so that their roof drains water from a single point, and then it flows into a huge storage tank and holding pond. They only use this water in their greenhouse and for their landscaping.

Although they have a well, they are extremely frugal with water—recognizing its scarcity. The focal point of their spacious bathroom is an elaborate open shower that's lined with flat rocks from the Heron Lake area (near Tierra Amarilla). The illusion is of a cascading waterfall, yet it actually is a low-flow shower. Allegre's exotic ethnic necklaces and another collection of old combs from around the world accentuate the aquamarine walls.

Large Moroccan-style lights dangle from the tall ceiling in the main part of the house. The spacious living area easily

accommodates Neff's grand piano, keyboards and recording equipment, while still leaving room for conversation areas and of course, dancing. The big open space embraces the kitchen area, which is separated only by a waist-high tiled counter, and a dining area as well. Perhaps most astounding is that they rarely have to put wood in their small, efficient woodstove, since their home is primarily heated by passive solar energy.

To complete his home, Neff received help from neighbors, particularly Art Welter, and engineering consultation from Red Mountain Engineering, who aided him in determining the size and span of the posts and beams.

The couple, who enjoys entertaining, often offers their home for community potlucks—particularly for fundraisers. Allegre has always donated her time. The 62-year-old regularly dances for Santa Fe's Outside/In, a nonprofit that brings entertainment to those who are confined. Her Middle Eastern dance troupe, Azadeh, also performs for a variety of Madrid and Cerrillos events.

Neff created an overhead circular mezzanine that serves as an office and reading area. Their bedroom is spacious but simple and features a bed with driftwood



Neff's art studio is open by appointment, (505) 474-0033, [www.glenneff.com](http://www.glenneff.com).

## Madrid Winch House

Sculptor and designer Michael Wright, 44, and photography instructor Joyce Roetter, 41, understand Neff's caution about never-ending building projects. They've worked hard to renovate an old Madrid house—which they describe as having been "a disaster"—into a cozy, yet funky roadside bungalow. Also, on their land they've converted a Santa Fe Railroad boxcar into Wright's design studio and office, built a cozy casita and created a small hoganlike structure for spiritual reflection.

The creative couple saw potential, as well as historical significance, in the old Madrid winch house. Yes, it sheltered the giant winch mechanism that strung across the road to the old Madrid coal-mine shaft. If you have any doubt, Wright will be glad to open the big trap door in their sunny living room. On the lemon-colored wall they've hung an old photograph of the former mine shaft, which serves as a reminder of their home's place in history.

The coal-mining town of Madrid, founded circa 1890, thrived at the turn of the 20th century and filled the heavy

posts. Allegre's doll collection peers from a dresser and her eclectic assortment of purses perches on a shelf above the bed.

What tips does Neff offer others pursuing a similar project? He says:

"If you're building with straw bale only go with the largest and densest bales. Read everything you can about the material or take a class. Get help where you need it most. If you go it alone, you might never finish it or even experience some disasters."

And he cautions that a home-building project never really ends, since there's always something more to do.



The owners of the Madrid Winch House say it's a work in progress. At left, they created a fake entry (it opens to the porch) reminiscent of an entry gate to a Japanese Shinto shrine. Below—Michael Austin Wright and Joyce Roetter with their daughter, Maya, and dog, Luna.



The family enjoys spending time in the sunroom, which serves as Maya's spacious play area. Right—Wright's sculpture, *Blue Horse*, outside of his office (a converted railroad car). Below—The bedroom features a fireplace with shelves built into the hard-trowel plastered wall.



demand for coal used to produce electricity. At the end of World War II the need waned, and the village had become a ghost town by 1959. When the owner of the town tried to sell it, he had no takers and later sold the individual wood-frame homes for a song in the 1970s. Today, Madrid boasts galleries, a museum, tavern and lively spirits.

"We often think about how in the '40s the coal generated here was used to power the work going on in Los Alamos to develop the bomb. Because of that, some residents called the mine 'the tail of the dragon.' It's amazing when you think about it," Wright says. He also shares the sad story of Damiano Sandoval, who died tragically when his shirtsleeve got caught in the powerful winch back in 1947. Sandoval's family members sometimes visit on Memorial Day to bring flowers to the house, which years ago served as an Am-Vets center, complete with a pool table.

But today the house bustles with artistic activities, as well as the energy of the couple's towheaded 4-year-old daughter, Maya. The latest home addition, an enclosed sunroom, has become Maya's light-filled playroom. But for a quiet retreat the couple enjoys spending time reading or meditating in their earthen—almost cavelike—bedroom. A rock ledge borders



one side, and Wright worked with several builders from Santo Domingo Pueblo to hard-trowel plaster the walls and shape the fireplace. "It's not perfect, but that's what we love about it. It's free-flowing, and we loved getting to know those guys. I don't think anyone else would have come up with such a beautiful fireplace," Wright says. He points to the adjacent circular window, "It's great. On a winter's night we can see the three stars from Orion's belt." When the sun shines, rainbows dance across the room from the hanging crystals. Besides working as a photographer, his wife is also an alternative healer.

Their lives had brought them to both

U.S. coasts—first to a big loft in the East and then to a rather small space in Hollywood, Calif.—before they arrived in Madrid.


Their tall living-room ceilings in Madrid remind them of their years living in a loft. Wright considers himself a member of the world community. Because of his father's work, he spent his childhood in India and Turkey, and says his greatest culture shock was moving to Westport, Conn., at the age of 15. But he and Roetter have found their home in Madrid. Although they've lived there for only a little more than a decade, the two actively serve their community. Wright is director of the Madrid Land Owners Association and Roetter has helped set up a nonprofit organization, Madrid Cultural Project, to assist with historic preservation and community cultural undertakings. Proceeds earned from projects such as the rental of the ballfield by the movie company filming *Wild Hogs* last year will also help the less fortunate.

In Wright's metal-sculpting shop, he has a fairly open-door policy. He literally has a few open odds-and-ends drawers for the locals to rummage through for their building projects. "It just works out. They pick up what they need and they keep an eye

out for the types of metal scraps I'm seeking for my work."

Wright and Roetter not only love the town and desert landscape, they also thoroughly enjoy what they call the Madrid cast of characters—a full range of artists and leftovers from the counterculture movement of the '60s.

From the road, their property looks like a scrapper's paradise—an assortment of metal sculptures, odd metal bases and scraps greets visitors. But keeping sculptures out near the road has its advantages. Last year, an "interesting character with a horse trailer," stopped by to purchase one of Wright's largest pieces, *Buffalo Hunter*. That character was radio personality Don Imus, who has built his home and ranch for kids with cancer near Las Vegas.

But Imus is just one of many travelers they've welcomed. When Joyce was pregnant, they built a sweet casita where her mother stayed. Now that her mother has moved back East, they offer lodging to modern seekers on the Turquoise Trail. 

**To find out more about Wright's work log on to [www.michaelaustinwright.com](http://www.michaelaustinwright.com) or to see the casita at [www.madridcasita.com](http://www.madridcasita.com).**

**For more information about the Turquoise Trail, log on to [www.turquoisetrail.org](http://www.turquoisetrail.org).**

