

# Introduction

Our homes are the most intimate of spaces; the backdrops of our lives. The need and desire to create a shelter for family and self is as ancient as human civilization itself.

For most of human history, we have created our homes with our hands, out of the materials available to us where we live. We've altered our homes as our families have changed. We've designed them for ourselves and our lives. We've formed communities around them.

Since the Industrial Revolution, our homes have become increasingly alienated from us, and we have alienated ourselves from them. As our professions have become more specialized and our lives more compartmentalized, mass production, increased access to credit and layers of bureaucracy have carried us farther and farther from the path of self-sufficiency. Today, our food is shipped from thousands of miles away, and our homes, especially our low-income ones, are quickly constructed, uniform boxes designed for everyone, not anyone in particular, using often-toxic, low-quality materials.

At the same time, the invention and standardization of the 30-year mortgage and our ever-increasing reliance on the credit system has come to mean that most of us never own our homes outright. In many cases, all we pay is interest to the bank, confident that ever-rising home values will eventually lead to a financial gain in the risky housing market. Rather than investments in one's family and future, houses have become financial investments, valuable not as a place but as a commodity.

The need for home prices to climb continuously has edged out many low-income families, who simply can't afford even the lowest-cost homes on the market. The need for home prices to climb continuously was also the underpinning of the subprime mortgage crisis of 2006 to 2008 — and proof that participation in the conventional home market is riskier than most homeowners believed. The value of housing, having become a stock market commodity, was allowed and encouraged by the free market to increase in

value far beyond its worth in wood, concrete and nails. Irresponsible lending, greed, ignorance and government deregulation worked together to ruin the financial lives of millions of Americans and to cause millions of others to lose their homes.

And as home quality has gone down and home prices have gone up, our throwaway culture and the throwaway housing market have increased our waste to astronomical levels. We demolish more than 250,000 homes a year, according to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory.<sup>1</sup> Almost all of the building supplies in those homes are bulldozed, crushing everything inside and sending it to the landfill. We send more than 135 million tons of construction site debris to landfills every year, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.<sup>2</sup> Of that, half is demolition waste, and 40 percent is from renovation and remodeling. Meanwhile, every urban area in the nation, as well as many suburban and rural areas, has shortages of affordable housing. In 2010, the National Low Income Housing Coalition released a study<sup>3</sup> that showed that, from 2007 to 2008, growing demand and shrinking supply of affordable and available rental units for extremely low-income households led to an increase in the absolute shortage from 2.7 million to 3.1 million homes.

It's time we begin thinking differently about housing, in terms of what our shelters are and should be made of, and of how we create and inhabit them. Housing isn't meant to be a one-size-fits-all, bigger-is-better proposition. Today, all over America and the world, individuals and groups are creating homes that don't fit the mold. Homeowners in Alabama, Idaho and Colorado are creating small, artful homes using salvaged materials, never taking out construction loans. In Texas and North Carolina, people are working together to reclaim building supplies and whole houses before they go to the landfill, using them to create new homes and neighborhoods for hardworking families. In Reno, a pair of designers, sick of seeing their inner city crumble, is revitalizing old buildings and blighted neighborhoods.

The individuals and homes featured in this book show the ways that regular people have extricated their homes and their communities from the standard model. Rather than designing their homes for the real estate market,

these brave individuals designed their homes for their own lifestyle. They reject the “bigger is better” mantra. They reject “resell value.” Their methods of simplicity, reuse and community-building engage our deepest connections and relationships with our homes. In place of mortgages, they invested time and love. Instead of connecting over a shared desire for three bedrooms and two-and-a-half baths, they connected over their shared desire for community. Rather than hosting housewarming parties, they hosted mudding parties.

In this book, I hope to show that building homes out of reclaimed materials is an idea that applies to a whole lot of people. You can do this if you are the type of person who wants to get involved and build your own home. Building your own home isn't crazy. It's something nearly every person used to do not so long ago. It's not impossible today, and it doesn't have to be intimidating, even in the city. The skills required to build a home are, for the most part, simple and easy to learn. It makes good financial sense to create homes that cost less, too. It makes even more sense to use all the quality building materials we currently send to the landfill simply because we haven't figured out a better destination for them. Programs featured in this book model the ways we can access used building supplies and unconventional building methods to provide low-cost housing and improve communities.

We face challenges today that have never existed in the past. Our growing world population means the need to provide low-cost housing will expand each year. Our serious environmental crisis means we must be vigilant about creating homes that run efficiently. But we also have many advantages. Technological advances, design evolution and resourceful, out-of-the-box thinking in terms of materials and efficiency can help prepare us to meet challenges never before faced.

With challenges comes the opportunity for great growth. Our history is one of great, almost unthinkable advances in times of need. Great revolutions in thinking and practice enable us to create new realities when it seems we've hit a dead end. Our recent economic crisis can light the fire to change the commoditization and depersonalization of our homes. It's clear to see our system needs change. By changing the way we conceive of and demand our homes, we could start to change the system.

We are not slaves to the machine of mass-market housing. The skills that enabled our great-grandparents to build their own homes are still buried within us. The desire to create safe, beautiful homes for ourselves and others is strong. And it is our human nature to work together and help one another better our lives. We have plenty of materials and many examples. In this book, I hope to inspire you with views of amazing homes, lists of resources, stories of intense human spirit and practical examples that prove we can take back our right to housing. We can make our homes places we value because of the lives lived within them, not places we value because of the mortgage that hangs over our heads. We can connect with our homes more deeply because we know how they were built and where every building material came from. We can provide more for ourselves and our families because we own our homes, mortgage-free. We can use all the quality building materials available to us to build homes for our neighbors and our communities. And we can also use all those valuable supplies to reinvigorate urban centers and provide the very low-cost housing we need in increasing numbers. We can reclaim our right to housing.