

CREATIVE CRESCENDO

Within the spirals of its shell-shaped floor plan, this Rocky Mountain home unfurls artistic treasures at every turn.



Inspired by classical music, architect Alice Starek designed her family's house in the shape of a chambered nautilus shell with curves and swirls throughout.

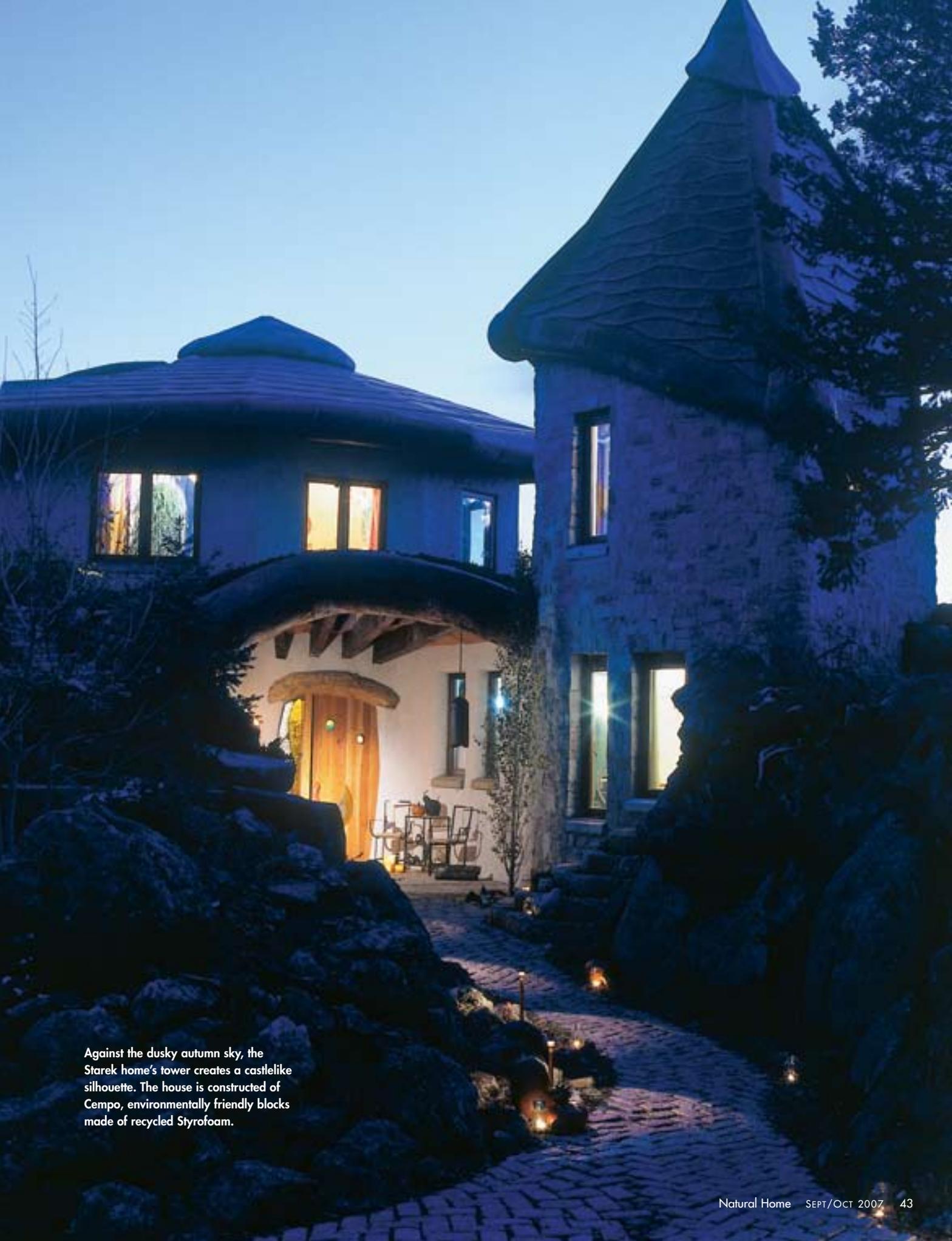


The master bedroom has just enough space to sleep. "Small sleep areas save a lot of square footage," Alice says. Artist Matt Bezark hand-poured the recycled glass window.

If Alice and Karel Starek's Colorado mountain home were music, it would be a Beethoven symphony. If it were a creature, it would be a snail. If it were a meal, it would be a slow-roasted feast. From its fairytale tower to its onion-shaped colored-glass windows, the Starek home is a magical place featuring dozens of artists' creations. With delightful surprises in every nook and cranny, the home embodies the family's values: Live artfully, play, develop your soul, connect to the earth.

LAUREL KALLENBACH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY POVY KENDAL ATCHISON



Against the dusky autumn sky, the Starek home's tower creates a castlelike silhouette. The house is constructed of Cempo, environmentally friendly blocks made of recycled Styrofoam.

A CONVERSATION WITH THE HOME CREATORS

What do you love most about your home?

KAREL STAREK: This house feels very alive, and I love how it evokes whimsical habitats in nature. I also like that it appeals to children's sensibility with all of its nooks, level changes and labyrinthlike floor plan.

If you did it again, what would you change?

ALICE STAREK: I prefer to explore new things, so if I designed another house for ourselves, I'd create something completely different.

KAREL: Each of our projects has been quite unique, and we always take some old ideas with us into future projects—although they may be modified significantly. This house has an "outdoor room" that's like a walled courtyard with a hot tub. This is an idea I'd definitely explore again.

What advice would you offer new home builders?

ALICE: Use your home to build community. Hire local people you can trust and who you'll enjoy working with. Pay fair wages, and treat people well. Their friendship and loyalty will be worth much more than the money spent—it will come back to you in ways you're unlikely to imagine.

KAREL: Take your time during the planning phase to imagine how you want your lifestyle to be. Problems that arise during construction can be opportunities. Be skeptical of compromise solutions put forth by anyone who doesn't understand your objectives or who may disagree with them.



The hub of the Starek home, the kitchen is surrounded by a free-form sculpture. The cast-iron Aga stove has two ovens, perfect for slow-roasting meats and vegetables. "I like a simple, old-fashioned kitchen," Alice says. "I don't use gadgets; there's no microwave or toaster."

Alice, an architect, designed the home to reflect her family's interests. Her son Adam, 16, plays guitar and drums and sleeps in a loft bedroom in the tower. Peter, 14, is a budding naturalist and makes boomerangs. Emma, 10, plays piano and stages theatrical performances in her room. "In many ways, our house is a canvas for experimenting artistically and philosophically," says Karel, an investor and stay-at-home dad. "We tailored its design around our lifestyle, interests and values. It has a playful quality, and we have fun living in it."

Living lightly

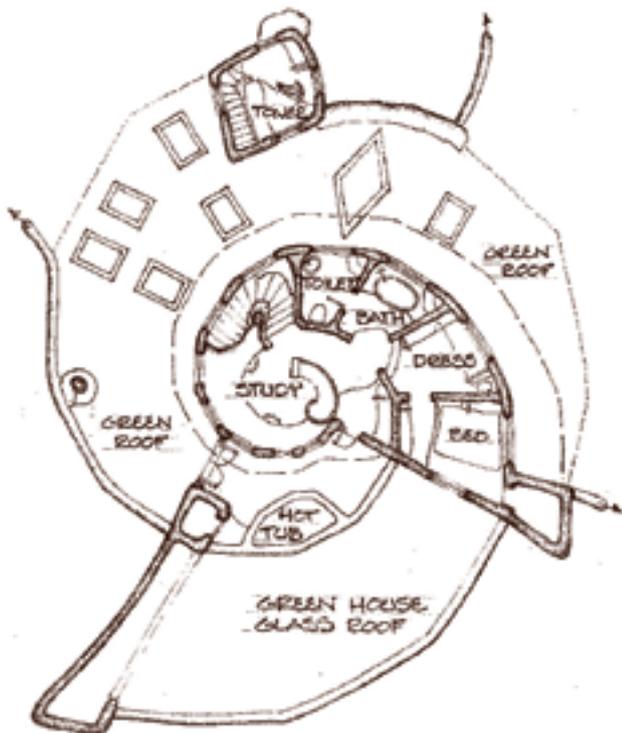
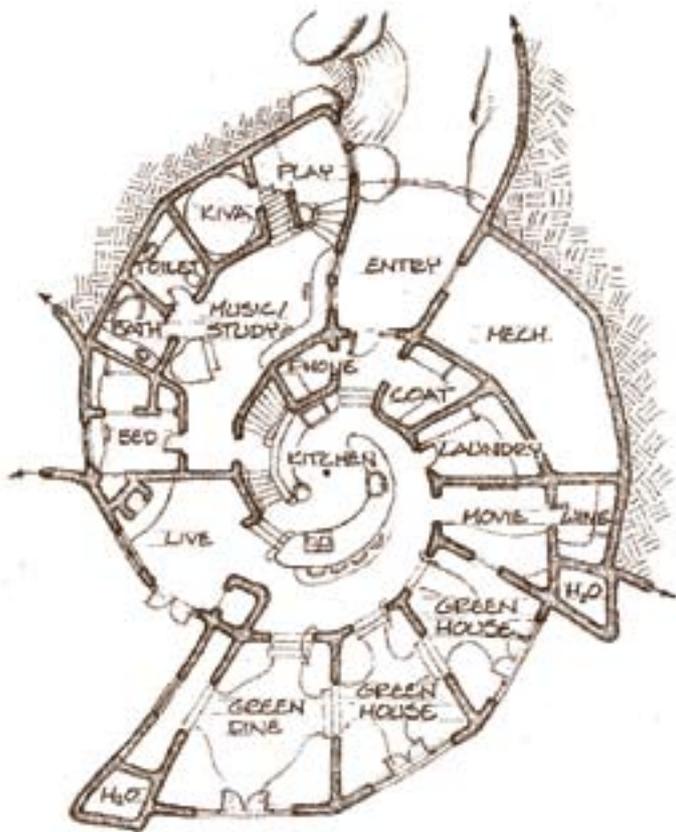
Banked into the slope of an acre in the Gold Hill area west of Boulder, the home's design takes advantage of the earth's thermal mass and passive solar energy gain from the high-altitude sun. Solar panels provide hot water and in-floor radiant heat. Future plans call for a solar-electric grid-tied system.

The walls are constructed from energy-efficient Cempo, concrete forms made from Portland cement and recycled-polystyrene mixture. "Cempo," short for CEMent POLystyrene, diverts Styrofoam from the landfill and creates highly insulated walls that are stronger than stick-frame construction, without using wood.

The Stareks used local yellow sandstone for many of the downstairs walls—including the living room, dining room and kitchen. Reclaimed wood (much of it from storm-felled or beetle-killed trees) shows up in the ceiling beams and furniture, including cabinets, bed platforms and shelves. The downstairs clay floors are made of local mud that cracked as it dried; finished with nontoxic linseed oil, it looks more like leather than dirt. Upstairs, the floors are covered with sound-absorbing, sustainable cork. "Natural materials and light bring life into a home," Alice says.



The brilliant colors of Boulder artist Matt Bezar's hand-poured glass window contrast with the yellow Colorado sandstone. Woodworker Rick Maddox fashioned the tables and chairs from cast-off cottonwood.



Geometric cut-outs in the study's cork floor act as skylights for the kitchen below—and let Karel check on dinner's progress. Woodworker Brent Applegit created the curl-armed walnut sofa and the built-in desk.



A Klondike Case commercial refrigerator lets cooks peek in to assess supplies without opening the doors. Cabinets are all made of rescued wood, and the countertops are slices cut from a quartzite boulder.

A creative collaboration

Scores of local artists contributed to the house, which Alice describes as a collaborative work in progress. "Being in such a creative space makes you more creative," says local artist Jean Pless, who is painting a free-form sculpture that winds around the kitchen. "Alice's house has helped a lot of us artists think outside the box."

"I love community," Alice says, "so I hire artists to share something special. Their creativity enriches the life of our family."

The house's architecture is likewise eclectically inspired. "It follows universal laws of harmony and balance: patterns found in mathematics, music and the natural world," Alice



The family spends wintry evenings playing games and talking by the fire in the cozy living room, just off the kitchen hub. "Seeker of Harmony," a shamanic metal sculpture by Santa Fe, New Mexico, artist Bill Worrell, presides over the space.

THE GOOD STUFF

- Solar heat and power (passive and photovoltaic)
- House banked into the earth, so it retains heat in a cold climate
- In-floor radiant heat
- Cempo walls made of recycled Styrofoam
- Doors and windows locally made
- Low-emissions wood-burning fireplace
- Crafted by local artisans
- Local reclaimed wood from beetle-killed pine and an old barn and house
- Use of Colorado stone in walls, recycled cobblestones in landscaping
- Floors made of renewable cork and local clay (sealed with nontoxic linseed oil)
- Nontoxic, tinted, gypsum-plaster walls
- Energy-efficient appliances
- Green, living roof



Peter and Snowball perch in Adam's bedroom loft, which is supported by a cottonwood trunk and accessed by a ladder created by local artist Peter Kettle.



In this magical princess room, Emma's platform bed is tucked into a nook—and when the curtains are drawn, its arch is ideal for performing plays.

says. “It loosely follows the Golden Mean, the form of a chambered nautilus and the shape of our galaxy.”

Alice's floor plan evolved out of an architecture school project in which the instructor told the class to build a song. “Most students ran for the door,” Alice recalls. “She suggested I use a movement from Beethoven's Third Symphony, and that semester I explored music's shapes and rhythms. I believe architecture affects your psyche in a way that's just as profound as music.”

Alice created asymmetrical rooms that open onto each other and spiral toward the kitchen. “We wanted a central, high-energy kitchen, an inspirational study, a comforting living room, cozy bedrooms and a dining room that's sensual and alive,” Alice says. The dining room is part of an attached greenhouse where the Stareks grow figs, lemons, herbs, bougainvillea and night-blooming jasmine. “Every meal is a special event, surrounded by living things,” Alice says. “With the scent of the night jasmine and the music of the fountain, it feels like dinner in a tropical paradise.”

“Our floor plan is a little like an M.C. Escher drawing,” Karel adds. “People sometimes find all the levels and turns disorienting, but it makes me smile to watch them explore the house.”

Slow architecture

Alice spends hours each day in the open kitchen, so it's not surprising that she and Karel are proponents of Slow Food, an international movement devoted to savoring meals prepared from local, healthy ingredients. “Enjoying a cooked meal is a thing of beauty, and I feel the same about creating a home,” Alice says.

Alice envisions a Slow Architecture movement that employs local materials, builders and artists. Instead of McMansions designed to impress, Alice thinks homes should fit into their landscape and community. And she believes in building a “slow” house in an engaged, creative way. “It's not about having it done yesterday; it's about the process,” she says, adding that the Starek home was six years in the making.

For all its consciousness and artistry, the Stareks say it's the home's spirit that's most important to them. “Alice used to work for a firm that designed churches, and this house feels somewhat like a chapel to me,” Karel says. “Our home provides a nurturing environment for us. We feel grounded here.” 



WEB EXTRA: To find items used in this house, visit www.NaturalHomeMagazine.com

The master bathroom's recycled-copper tub has a soothing mountain view.

