

A House That Any Tree Would Hug

By Amanda Griscom

“BUCKLE up,” said Julia Louis-Dreyfus, punching a small square button in the hallway of her newly renovated beach house. Above her a vaulted skylight ribbed with steel slid open with a mechanical hum. “How James Bond is that!” she said, as sunlight and salt air poured in through an eight-foot-square opening.

The retractable roof is one of dozens of energy-efficient contrivances in the oceanfront home north of Santa Barbara, Calif., that Ms. Louis-Dreyfus and her husband, Brad Hall, finished remodeling in November.

For eco-conscious Hollywood, central air-conditioning simply won't do: up-to-the-minute “green” design calls for a motorized sunroof, or “thermal chimney,” which exhausts hot air naturally; rooftop solar panels that generate electricity and heat the house and a chemical-free hot tub; wall-to-wall windows with “heat mirror” treatments for insulation; and, to top it all off, an electric car parked in the driveway.

With its ocean views and rich palette of tropical hardwoods (certified, of course, as having come from sustainable forests), the house is a study in haute green, an earnest beachside do-gooder with movie-star gloss.

Ms. Louis-Dreyfus, 40, and Mr. Hall, 45, are presumably not energy conscious simply for the penny-pinching advantage. (Variety estimated

that she made \$13.2 million from “Seinfeld” for the 1997-98 season alone, and together, they now earn about \$350,000 for each episode of their sitcom “Watching Ellie.”) Rather, their outspoken intention is to promote one of Hollywood's pet causes.

“Oh, absolutely,” she said last month, dressed in an apricot cashmere sweater, hoop earrings and a high ponytail crowned with Jackie O shades. “I'm a devout environmentalist and a bleeding-heart liberal.”

Over the past year, the couple have been remodeling their beach house while revamping “Watching Ellie.” Written by Mr. Hall and starring Ms. Louis-Dreyfus as a Los Angeles lounge singer, the show had a brief run on NBC last year and will return to the network on Tuesday.

Like the show, the house - a small two-story 1930's bungalow - is in its second incarnation. The couple commissioned David Hertz, whose architecture firm, Syndesis, of Santa Monica, Calif., is known for green design, to renovate the house, which they bought seven years ago and use for weekend retreats from their main home in Los Angeles. “Let's face it,” Mr. Hall said. “Having a second home is itself an appalling excess, so we figured if we're going to do it, we better be as environmentally responsible as we can.”

Like many renovations, theirs began modestly, with a simple plan to add a bathroom and two bedrooms for their sons, Henry, 10, and Charlie, 5, who had been bunking with their parents in the master bedroom at the beach house. But a larger project emerged after Mr. Hall saw Mr. Hertz's own house in Venice, Calif., which is something of a laboratory for green design.

It includes a natural-ventilation system, developed in part by setting off smoke bombs to study indoor air patterns, and countertops made of Syndecrete, a lightweight concrete invented by Mr. Hertz that integrates recycled ash and



carpet fiber and is sanded smooth. “Our kids are friends,” Mr. Hall said, “and when I dropped my son off at his house one day, my jaw dropped.”

While softwoods like pine tend to buckle or warp in humid beach settings, the tropical hardwoods from sustainable forests selected by Mr. Hertz and the couple's contractor, Jed Hirsch, are warm and durable: mahogany from Guatemala for kitchen cabinets, doors and window frames (\$3.85 a board foot), and ipe, a dense, chocolate-colored wood from Brazil (\$4.90 a square foot) for the decks and a kitchen island. The exterior paneling is Northern California cedar (\$2.40 a square foot). The flooring is bamboo (\$10 a square foot), a material that green architects favor because it is sturdy and, once harvested, grows back quickly.

“We selected the materials for their natural weathering properties, so like a piece of driftwood, the house would get better with age,” Mr. Hertz said. “It is the woods that bring the feeling of warmth and texture.”

Of course, high-end environmental correctness has a price. Mr. Hertz estimated that the renovation cost 10 to 15 percent more than it would have without any green features. The retractable roof cost \$15,000. The mahogany from sustainable stands cost about 10 percent more than conventional mahogany, and the solar thermal and electric systems came to about \$25,000.



The idea is that those costs will be recouped in energy savings within nine years. (Without the energy rebates that are available in Southern California, it would take about 23 years.) “This is a prototype house, an early adopter of emerging technologies,” said Daniel E. Williams, chairman of the committee on the environment for the American Institute of Architects. “It has some high first costs that will get cheaper down the line,” he said, as the technologies come into general use.

Ms. Louis-Dreyfus said the energy bills at the beach house are less than half what they were before the renovation, when the house had poor insulation and no solar panels.

With the rooftop thermal panels and a water-heating system that operates at 98 percent efficiency, the family rarely has to draw from its propane-powered backup. During the week, when the house is empty, the rooftop panels pump electricity back to the local utility company, creating a credit. Though the solar electric system is relatively small (it was installed in a day), it manages with its two-way grid connection to meet the electrical needs of the house.

All the engineered gadgetry is necessary for the house’s efficiency, but it is largely invisible. What visitors notice instead are the dark woods - left unlacquered to show their textures - and the trowel marks on the plaster walls, which are coated with a smooth wax.

The couple’s interior designer, Kathryn Ireland, used linens, cottons and hemp in colors of sand, sage and aquamarine



for furniture coverings and curtains. The living room has dishes of sea glass, shells and other detritus found on beach walks.

“What surprised me most was that every surface in this house feels so good to touch,” Mr. Hall said. “The experience of the house is like that of the beach - you put your feet in the hot sand, you jump in the cold water, you want to roll around in it.”

Mr. Hertz designed the house to resemble a ship, and he used steel-cable railings and hardware from the Furling and Rigging Corporation, of Newport Beach, Calif., which also supplies sailboat manufacturers. One railing runs up a stairwell at the center of an expansive space that merges the living and dining areas, with ceilings rising to the second floor; the upstairs bedrooms and office are arranged around this space, as if it were a courtyard. The few walls that do separate rooms have internal transom windows opening onto the rest of the house.

“The feeling of connectedness in this house is what’s most important to me,” Ms. Louis-Dreyfus said, “especially when we’re here as a family, because the whole house, and everyone in it, feel of a piece.”

To underline the point, she flung open the shutters of a transom window connecting the master bedroom to the living room - her “Eva Peron balcony” - and sang, “Don’t cry for me, Orange County!” in full operatic voice. “We’re always playing games in the living room - poker, Lego, crazy eights, Monopoly - so between dice rolls I can pop into the kitchen to cook the dinner or run upstairs to grab a book, and the whole time I’m

within seeing and talking distance to tell them my next move.”

Mr. Hall can also keep tabs on the family from a slender walkway, made of slats of ipe, that hangs above the living room. It leads from his office to a little cantilevered porch that he calls the “bowsprit” and uses often during the day to check the surf. “I grew up in Santa Barbara during the 70’s,” said Mr. Hall, a lifelong surfer, “so you might say I’m in touch with my inner hippie.”

Mr. Hertz also created outdoor living spaces for indoor activities. A second-floor terrace directly off the master bedroom is a sleeping porch equipped with a stucco fireplace, a daybed, built-in stereo speakers and storage for linens. The first-floor terrace is designed as an outdoor dining room, with a Syndecrete banquet table, a fireplace and an overhead heat lamp for chilly nights.

For all her environmental commitment, Ms. Louis-Dreyfus cannot repress flashes of Elaine, the high-strung New Yorker she played on “Seinfeld.”

“Oh my God, check it out - we’ve got an ant infestation!” she shouted, crouching for a closer look at a colony that had migrated from the terrace into the living room. “They’re absolutely fascinating, if you really follow where each one is headed, how they communicate and all that. But I say, Get the damn Raid!”

“That’s an endocrine disrupter,” Mr. Hertz objected. “And remember, they’ve been here a lot longer than we have.”

“Yeah,” she said, scoffing. “Well, there’s a limit to all this activism.”

