

# Eco-Conscious Nesting



A yurt marks the beginning of Seane Corn's adventures in green building.

Like many people who've shopped for a home in the Los Angeles area, Seane Corn was dismayed at how much you pay for so little—until last June, when she saw a 14-acre property that made her heart beat faster. “I feel like I’m going to live here for the rest of my life,” she told her fiancé as they stood on a sandstone boulder, gazing at the ocean from 2,200

feet above sea level. Just a few weeks later, they closed on the Topanga property. Only one thing stood in the way of their moving immediately: There’s no house.

The globe-trotting yoga teacher and activist had set out to buy a house, not build one. “I’ve never been a part of building anything, and I’m on the road

over 200 days out of the year,” she says. “But something in my heart told me this is an opportunity to really create a sanctuary for my family, and maybe learn something along the way about how to develop a space that’s not only sacred to us but that’s mindful and respectful to the planet.” She hopes to keep the land out of developers’ hands, not just in her lifetime, but for generations to come. “I didn’t want it becoming one of those tract communities.”

Corn’s vision for the land, which serves as a winter home for monarch butterflies, is ambitious. It includes an eco-friendly house, a permaculture garden and fruit grove, a sandstone labyrinth, and a system of trails that follow existing deer paths. She can see teaching yoga in the house, teaching people about organic eating in the garden. “I’m about to find out how hard it is, when you’re a normal person on a normal budget, trying to create a conscious environment. I recognize that I’m going to make some mistakes and that there are going to be some compromises. My hope is that I can make the mistakes and share the information, so that someone else doesn’t have to.”

Corn’s most valuable asset may well be patience. In no rush to break ground

## RECOMMENDED READING

Corn has been poring through books devoted to eco-conscious living. Here are a few of her favorites:

*The Sustainable Home: The Essential Guide to Eco Building, Renovation and Decoration* by Cathy Strongman: This generously illustrated book covers a broad range of topics, including insulation, solar panels, lightbulbs, and kitchen counter-tops. “It’s specific but easy to follow,” Corn says.

*GreenSense for the Home: Rating the Real Payoff from 50 Green Home Projects* by Eric Corey Freed and Kevin Daum: “An excellent book for those who want a reality check when determining the balance between eco-sustainability and financial practicality,” according to Corn.

*The Self-Sufficient Life and How to Live It* by John Seymour: The lifestyle and attitude shift needed to live in harmony with nature can be challenging, Corn says. Seymour’s guide breaks down all the intricacies of “back to basics.”

on a house, she has set about building a yurt, a tent-like dwelling usually associated with nomads in central Asia. The temporary structure will have many of the green features she hopes to incorporate into her future house, including solar power, cisterns for collecting rainwater, and a graywater system that recycles wash water for garden irrigation. It's a test lab of sorts; if an experiment blows up in her face, she won't repeat it on a larger scale. When the yurt is complete, it will serve as a guesthouse, personal yoga studio, and office for Off the Mat, Into the World, the activist training program Corn founded in 2007.

The process has already presented difficult choices. Corn would have liked to cover the yurt with natural textiles but settled on vinyl because it will better withstand the elements, and the yurt manufacturer will recycle it when it's no longer usable. But when a builder recommended Styrofoam for insulation, she dug in her heels. Her father, who owned a Styrofoam factory like his father before him, died of kidney cancer last August. "Whether or not he got it from the factory is undetermined, but it's hard for me to believe that inhaling polystyrene for 40 years doesn't have an adverse effect on your kidneys. I don't want to contribute to that kind of toxic burden." Corn and the builder threw themselves into research and discovered an ecofriendly alternative that costs no more than Styrofoam.

Corn has also discovered things about her relationship with her fiancé. "When you're building a home, it's your foundation, your stability, your life force, in a way. A lot of stuff has come up that we never had to talk about before. It's definitely deepened our relationship, although I'm sure there will be moments when it stresses our relationship. We're learning about our values, what we're committed to, the places in which we're willing to compromise and the places in which we are not. For me, this is a spiritual practice." —*Anna Dubrovsky* >>