

Home tour proves life is thriving in Angora burn area

Publisher's note: *See the Voices section to read about reporter Susan Wood's experience three years ago covering the Angora Fire.*

By Kathryn Reed

Windows to a world that changed their lives are everywhere.

This is one of the common themes of the seven houses on the AAUW's biennial home tour – openness in design, with natural light filtering in from all corners, and sometimes the ceiling. “From the Ashes” was the appropriate name of Saturday's event, as all houses and the demonstration garden have been rebuilt because the 2007 Angora Fire reduced the original structures to ash.

These houses represent the 86 that have been completely rebuilt. Fourteen are ready for their final inspection. Another 86 are in some stage of the application or rebuilding process, while 68 of the 254 homeowners who lost their houses are letting their lot sit idle for now.



Driveway
paving stones
survived the
Angora Fire to
be used as a

patio.

Photos/Kathryn

Reed

Though each of the homes is clearly distinct and reflects the individual owners, a few similarities can be found. Granite is used extensively in many of the homes – from kitchens, to bathrooms, to fireplaces.

Wood floors are everywhere. Plenty of carpet exists, but so do a lot of throw rugs and tile flooring. Some have heated floors.

Islands in the kitchen are almost a given. Some have a utility sink, the gas range, and many have stools to belly up to the counter in what is so often the main congregating area.

Decks and outdoor stairs are made of non-flammable products. Depending on when building permits were filed, wood decking was not permitted based on fire code changes that took effect Jan. 1, 2008.

Wide staircases that would make it easy to haul furniture without marring the walls are the norm.

Master bedrooms mostly come with walk-in closets – some the size of a small bedroom. Master bathrooms accommodate three at once, with the shower, bathtub and toilet (often in a cubbyhole) as separate entities.

Behind the home tour

The American Association of University Women's South Lake Tahoe chapter has been putting on a home tour for decades. Every two years they try to pick a different area of the South Shore to feature. This year's tour came three years, and two days after the Angora Fire wiped out a large swath of homes lived in mostly by full-time middle class residents, burning more than 3,100 acres and bringing "defensible space" into the

vocabulary of many, and the realization insurance policies should be reviewed annually.

“The focus is on the care, thought and love all the people in the neighborhood put in. Some houses are small, but all contain interesting features,” Kay Henderson, one of the organizers, said.

More of the \$25 tickets were sold this year than for some of the more recent tours.

Proceeds from the tour stay in the community to help locals. Scholarships are given to two female graduates of Lake Tahoe Community College to continue their education, with \$1,500 being given to each in recent years. The money also pays for two or three middle school girls to go to California’s Tech Trek each summer, which is designed to encourage them to consider careers in science and math.

The homes

Some of the homeowners stayed to greet people. Names of local contractors and businesses that were used were available. Most who rebuilt tried to spend their money locally or regionally.

The Granite Mountain Circle house was a 1974 A-frame the family had lived in since 1991. The design is much more modern and larger by about 500 square feet.

A dumbwaiter carries items from the garage to the kitchen.

Some of the pictures on the walls were saved when the two teenage daughters grabbed what they could in the 15 minutes they had to evacuate.

Designed to be the family gathering spot, the couple never thought twice about rebuilding. It’s where their children and grandchildren can call home. A wrap-around deck gives views of everything but the rawest part of the devastation leading to Angora ridge.

A couple on Mule Deer Circle built their dream home twice. Days before they were to move into the home, it burned to the ground in the Angora Fire. The good thing was their belongings were not inside.

The rebuild allowed them to do some things differently. The master suite is upstairs instead of down, and the spiral staircase – which is a focal point of the main room – is smaller.

A European feel is throughout. Clearly the owners like to cook based on the attention to detail in the kitchen, the appliances and unique hood with its glass and stainless steel design.

High ceilings and large windows offer views of the blackened forest, with trees that are a combo of white and black – signifying just how hot the fire burned in this area.

Norma and Warren Sprague were some of the first people to move back to the burn area – doing so a week before the one-year anniversary of the fire, and months before celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary.

Views from their Lake Tahoe Boulevard house are designed to direct the eye above the burn area.

“I looked at this and it was not the worst thing that could happen to me,” Norma Sprague said of losing everything.

With a smile and laugh, she can talk about her 40-year-old house that needed a lot of work.

Capturing her ancestry, certificates from her Italian parents and grandparents coming to the United States via Ellis Island are in one room.

The single-story home on Pyramid Circle is the most modest of the ones on the tour. A glass display case in the entry has the bottom two shelves filled with items that were retrieved

from the rubble. Pottery, a hose sprayer, candleholder and teapot are some of the memorabilia.

Tube or tunnel lights have been installed on the roof to provide sunlight into various rooms. One bedroom looks like a light is on, when in fact it is natural light filtering in from this type of skylight.

Hopefully, the next owners like dogs because a paw print has been designed into the front entry's rock pattern.

Despite the back yard being the destroyed forest, the owner has chosen an open fence that allows that area to seem larger than it is – though it is already a nice size lot.

Driving up to the house on Snow Mountain Drive the windows are most prominent, then the deck area above the entrance that is like a mini garden this time of year. It's easy to stop before the front door because a small, covered deck beckons one to sit and enjoy summer in Tahoe.

Angles of the roofline are eye-catching. The nooks of the interior create an architectural design not often found in Tahoe.

A major difference in this home is the kitchen is distinctly separate from the great room.

The master bedroom, bath and office are on the first floor. Upstairs is what could be a mother-in-law unit with efficiency kitchen, bath and bedroom.

On the other end of the second floor is a sewing room that any seamstress, in this case embroiderer, could find inspiration from working in.

With 45 minutes to evacuate, all the pictures in the Mount Olympia Circle home were saved.

As the fire passed by it cooled a bit, with flowers on one

side able to be saved. Creating a garden was their first priority – having brought water in to begin the rebirth process.

Looking out the upstairs bedroom windows that front the street a row of green, healthy looking pine trees is in the foreground. Farther up is another row – on the ridge – where the fire stopped.

The family started working on plans to rebuild two weeks after the fire, and moved in in October 2008.

The wood burning fireplace is one of the few in the new homes – most people went with gas. This one can heat the whole house.

Around the corner on this street is a demonstration garden. The lot belonged to Owen Evans. His daughter, Leona Allen, also lost her house in the fire. To honor her father, who has since died, and her mother, Esther, Allen donated this parcel to be a resource for the neighborhood and community at-large.

Jennifer Cressy with the Tahoe Resource Conservation District was giving tours of the lot on Saturday, explaining vegetation that is good for wet soil, infiltration basins, native wildflowers, erosion control techniques and other nuances to landscaping in the mountains.

The garden is still a work in progress, with the hopes of developing a community vegetable and herb garden and other aspects. Volunteers are always needed to help – call (530) 543.1501, ext. 118 for information.

The last house on the tour belongs to Solange Schwalbe, one of the more vocal residents during the community meetings three years ago. On this day she is welcoming everyone to her home, talking about what it was like then compared to today.

A boulder in the back yard was part of the foundation for the

old deck. The Willy Jeep survived the fire, while the newer one essentially melted into the heap of debris.

Upstairs is all new, while downstairs is where she spends most of her time. Furniture she picked up from the community center that was set up for Angora survivors fills this living area.

One day she might rent that section out. Upstairs most of the walls are yellow -- inspiration from Miami, with an accent wall in black. It works. The gold Emmy she earned for her sound work on "Black Hawk Down" sits on the mantle above the gas fireplace -- a striking contrast to the black wall.

She looks around and tells the visitors, "Nothing here is mine."

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