

# 10 Homes Made of the DARNDEST Things

Green buildings come in many shapes and sizes—including recycled shipping containers, airplanes and treehouses.

BY BRIAN CLARK HOWARD

Regular folks can green their residences in many ways, from swapping light bulbs to planting shade trees. But this article isn't about those things. It's also not about the latest green dream homes. This article is about combining the practical elements of the old-fashioned prairie sod house with a whimsical, aspirational attitude of "why not?"

We don't expect most people will be moving into reclaimed planes or building a home out of beer bottles anytime soon. But we do think these home designs are a lot of fun. They show what's possible if we think outside the ticky-tacky box and dream of something different. You may not be reusing an airplane wing today, but maybe you can reuse some lumber or corrugated metal, or buy some secondhand furniture or salvaged architectural elements. As these homes show, when it comes to repurposing, your imagination is your only limitation.



## 1. Golden Globes

Emerging from the rainforest of Canada's Vancouver Island are futuristic designs known as Free Spirit Spheres ([freespiritspheres.com](http://freespiritspheres.com)). The "treehouses for adults" are handmade from local wood and suspended from the tree canopy. The spheres are recommended for meditation, photography, canopy research, game watching and other activities. Some are available for rent, and DIY kits are offered.

PHOTO BY MALLORY OWEN

## 2. Special Delivery

Architects and homeowners are discovering the benefits of shipping container homes. It turns out that the strong, cheap freight boxes make pretty useful building blocks. They can be loaded with creature comforts and stacked to create modular, efficient spaces for a fraction of the cost, labor and resources of more conventional materials. Shipping containers can be insulated and climate controlled easily, and they are being deployed as disaster relief shelters and modest vacation homes.

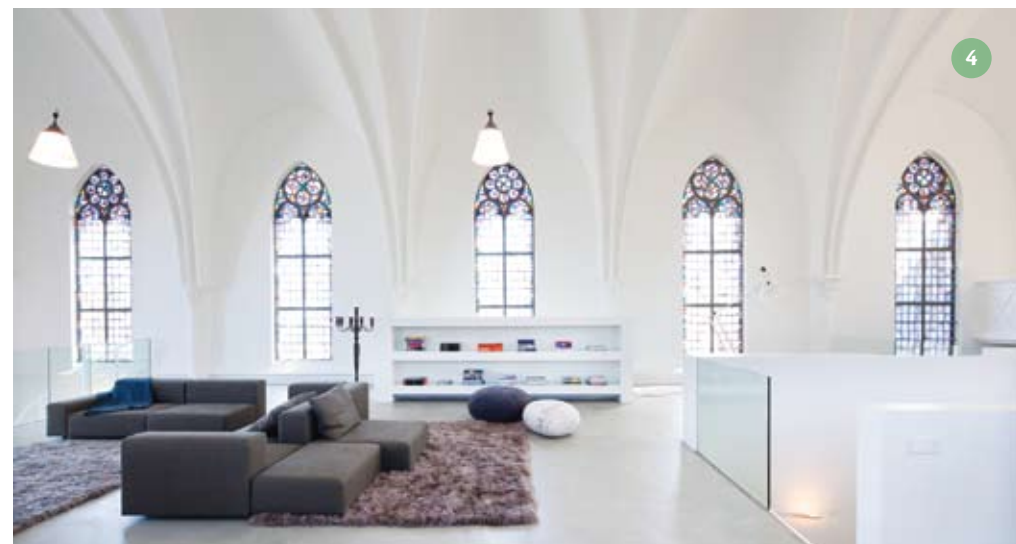
But you don't have to sacrifice style for substance. Infiniski ([infiniski.com](http://infiniski.com)), a design, architecture and construction firm with offices in Madrid and Chile, artfully combines used train rails; recycled aluminum, iron and wood; and repurposed pallets to create mod structures with a hip sensibility. PHOTO BY ANTONIO CORCUERA



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## 3. Earth Angel

Earthships are Mad Max-looking structures made of mud and reused materials such as old tires, bottles and tile. Earthships take advantage of cheap, readily available building materials. The thick earth walls mean they are well-insulated, and many include solar panels or other renewable energy sources, as well as water recycling systems and green roofs. They are surprisingly cozy and even beautiful inside, with ornate detailing and a high degree of customization and expandability.

The building method, pioneered by Michael Reynolds, has been evolving for more than 40 years. You can tour or rent several Earthships, eat at the Tortoise Market (pictured) or take hands-on building workshops at the Earthship World Headquarters in Taos, New Mexico ([earthship.org](http://earthship.org)).

PHOTO BY KIRSTEN JACOBSEN

## 4. Divine Inspiration

Churches have been re-imagined in all sorts of new ways, from thumping nightclubs to modern homes. In East Cambridgeshire, England, Adrian Wright converted an 1870s Anglican church into a beautiful living space. The traditional "cross" footprint now features an open living,

dining and kitchen area under oak beam rafters and leaded glass windows. A master bedroom floats above on a mezzanine gallery, and the home still features the original church bell and pull rope!

Another heavenly home (pictured) is on the market in the Netherlands. Zecc Architects ([zecc.nl](http://zecc.nl)), a Utrecht-based firm, renovated the historic Saint Jakobus Church with respect for the original design and an eye for modern tastes. Original interior features such as the 46-foot tall nave and stained glass windows dating to 1911 are juxtaposed with contemporary art and furnishings. For more ethereal views, visit [woonkerkxl.nl](http://woonkerkxl.nl). PHOTO BY FRANK HANSWIJK

## 5. 100 Bottles of Beer

Speaking of religion, Buddhist monks have long been known for their considerable patience and diligence, though they are not typically known for beer drinking. Still, Buddhist monks in Thailand recently built an entire temple out of used beer bottles. Holy men in Sisaket province collected 1 million green Heineken and brown Chang beer bottles for their Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew temple, which is replete with washrooms and a crematorium. PHOTO BY MARK FISCHER

## 6. Out on a Limb

What kid and kid-at-heart doesn't want to live in a treehouse? Well now you can, thanks to a number of enterprising architects and builders.

Britain's Blue Forest ([blueforest.com](http://blueforest.com)) builds fanciful structures high above the ground all across Europe. The company makes the gorgeous treehouses for play, shelter and gardens, using sustainably sourced wood, traditional water-reed thatch roofs and hand-split shingles. The work doesn't come cheap, but it can be customized to your dreams and inspire your friends and family for a lifetime.

With a little research and the right materials, you could build your own treehouse. Consider making it out of reclaimed or Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood. PHOTO COURTESY BLUE FOREST

## 7. Agrarian Lifestyle

Belgian architectural and planning firm Buro II & Arch I+I ([buro2.be](http://buro2.be)) forged a unique farmhouse in Flanders in 2005, based on an existing barn. According to the firm, "The client was emphatic that tradition, innovation and respect for the landscape be combined in a single project. The structure of the landscape and research into rural building in Flanders stand in reciprocity to the design process and the final built environment."

The Barn House, as the structure is known, combines old materials with new design sensibilities such as ample daylighting and sweeping views of the picturesque rural landscape. Of course, one need not travel to Europe to see examples of old barns converted into comfortable living spaces. They're popping up all over the place here in North America (watch for an upcoming article in *Natural Home & Garden*).

PHOTO BY KRIS VANDAMME

## 8. Frequent Flyer

A number of creative people around the country have taken to converting used airplanes into living spaces. Some relish the novelty and connection to aviation, while others trumpet the toughness of the frames themselves. In 1994, hairstylist JoAnn Ussery of Benoit, Mississippi, lost her 1,400-square-foot house to an ice storm. Ussery had a relative who worked in aviation, and the two came up with the idea to salvage a Continental Airlines 727. It cost her \$2,000 to buy the plane, \$4,000 to move it to her lake-side lot, and about \$24,000 to outfit it comfortably. Ussery did much of the renovation herself and took advantage of the ample windows and storage bins, as well as the lavatory. Ussery told reporters that she was mainly attracted to the idea because of the plane's low cost and durability.

If you want to give living in an airplane a spin, check out Hotel Costa Verde (pictured; [costaverde.com/727.html](http://costaverde.com/727.html)) in Costa Rica, where you can relax in a two-bedroom Boeing 727. The plane is perched on a 50-foot pedestal and offers stunning ocean and jungle views. PHOTO BY VINCENT COSTELLO

## 9. Fine Print

Made of more than 85,000 rolled up newspapers, the Newspaper House ([newspaperhouse.blogspot.com](http://newspaperhouse.blogspot.com)) was an art installation created by Sumer Ere in London's Gillet Square in 2008. Fed up with the scads of free newspapers that littered the streets, he built a simple wooden shell in the square and invited people to bring him their unwanted papers. Ere and his team of volunteers meticulously rolled and arranged the papers to form the 16-foot structure—complete with two windows, a door and a pitched roof. The week-long, interactive exhibit raised awareness about waste and was so successful it was reassembled in Liverpool with more than 100,000 discarded newspapers.

PHOTO BY SUMER EREK



## 10. Captain's Quarters

Lots of resourceful people have converted boats into living quarters on dry land. One outstanding example can be found on South Bass Island in Lake Erie at Put-in-Bay, Ohio. After 50 years of service on the Great Lakes, the Henry Ford-built Benson Ford was transformed by an enterprising Ohio couple, Frank and Lydia Sullivan, who turned the most elegant cabins into a private residence.

Some reclaimed boat houses aren't boats at all. In the 1920s, Southern California architect and recycler Miles Kellogg built two distinctive homes (pictured) in the shape of boats out of bits of material he found locally.

PHOTO BY TOM HARNISH

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