

# Home Sweet Home

by Julie Genser

All language is a longing for home

*Rumi*

The concept of home is universal, shared among not only the cultures of the world but much of the animal world as well, from nesting birds to burrowing rodents, to sea creatures to snails that are born with a home on their back. For most of us, animals included, home is a place to rest our weary heads, raise our young, and stay protected from the elements.

It is human nature to create a sense of home, even when transient or homeless. When I backpacked the world, a photo from home, a colorful scarf, and a small cup with a flower were enough to mark my new territory as home. Our sense of home makes us feel safe, comfortable, and grounded in our identity. Without it, we can feel uncertain, vulnerable, uncomfortable, unsettled. Nothing in life will feel exactly right if we don't have that home base to start from.

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So what about the growing sector of our population—now estimated to be between 12.6 percent and 33 percent that suffers from some form of environmental illness, which can include sensitivities to chemicals found in everyday products and building materials, mold, sound, light, electricity, vibrations, and extremes of temperature? Reported as the "new homeless," those with severe chemical sensitivity often find themselves living on the fringes of a chemically addicted society—in refurbished Airstream trailers, tents, and cars, in long-forgotten fields, miles from civilization.

What most people don't realize, unless they get sick themselves and feel the effects firsthand, is that the typical American home is built with materials laden with toxic chemicals. The most common are formaldehyde (found in plywood, particle board, and other pressed wood products that are used to make furniture, cabinets, shelves, and counter tops) and solvents (used in oil-based paints, stains, wood preservatives, carpet

glue, and other adhesives that release dangerous fumes containing volatile organic compounds). Many homes are full of electrical pollution caused by problems with wiring, large appliances, cordless phones, and the now-ubiquitous WiFi and other computer and cable TV transmission systems. Homes that are designed to be hermetically sealed trap indoor pollutants and create an environment ripe for mold growth.

Even if a person with chemical sensitivities were to have sufficient resources—the finances, knowledge, energy, time, and wherewithal—to build a "safe" house for him- or her-self, there is the persistent problem of neighbors. Wafts of their fabric softeners, air-polluting particulates in smoke from fireplaces and wood stoves, ambient pesticide drifts, gas-powered exhaust-spewing lawn appliances, and those Sunday barbecues all threaten the safety and health of those with allergies and other environmental sensitivities.

What others may perceive as mere complaining is, to a person with chemical and environmental sensitivities, an actual physical—and, for that matter, emotional—threat to their well-being with each exposure to someone else's chemicals. Reactions can range from the uncomfortable—fleeting headaches, nausea, and/or dizziness—to the near fatal. Some even go into seizure, others experience a profound brain fog that can last for days, weeks, or even months, and still others have suffered heart failure when exposed to a specific trigger. We are not talking about simple allergies here; we are talking about brain inflammation, failure of enzyme detoxification systems, and profound immune-mediated responses. There are some who have even died from the progression of chemical sensitivity, which typically affects several organ systems and can eventually lead to organ failure.

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The most common response from individuals when told that their universally accepted actions (using fabric softener, wearing perfume, having a summer barbecue) are harming someone else is anger and defensiveness: "That's their problem, not mine. I'm not going to change my actions. They need to move or protect themselves better." This is the same type of thinking that allows wealthier folks to feel smug and protected in their gated communities, while outlying districts wallow in their higher crime rates; that self-important "It's your problem not mine" attitude. What many fail to see is that we are always part of a larger community. If we choose not to take everyone's needs in our community into consideration, it will come back to us eventually.

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If individuals are not willing to curb their use of toxic chemicals and EMF-emitting devices, the growing ranks of the chemically and electrically sensitive will be forced out of the workplace and onto disability benefits, where they will burden the community as a whole. If individuals are not willing to curb their use of toxic chemicals and EMF-emitting devices, animals and plant life will continue to bear the toxic brunt, resulting in more

species' mutations and extinctions, imbalances of our precious biodiversity, and pollution of our food sources. If individuals are not willing to curb their use of toxic chemicals and EMF-emitting devices, their children will continue to suffer from early exposure to estrogen-mimicking chemicals implicated in a host of childhood illnesses and low-level radiation, which has been thought to be linked to childhood leukemia and other diseases. If we choose not to take the needs of everyone in our communities into consideration (human and nonhuman, adult and child, rich and poor, powerful and vulnerable, alike), it will come back to us eventually.

The truth is that industry's use of chemicals is on the rise, as is our own use of chemicals in home and personal care products, triggering a rise in environmental illnesses. The issue of a safe home will continue to be a problem—and might even become your problem. We are in need of a complete overhaul of the architecture and design industries, including how these subjects are taught in our schools. Even the "green" bandwagon many have jumped on does not completely address the issue of toxicity when it comes to building materials. Ask any person with environmental sensitivities who has tried to build green.

In an effort to better understand the basic housing needs for those with environmentally based sensitivities, I surveyed eighteen families who had built housing for someone with moderate to severe chemical and/or electrical sensitivities. What became clear was that what was good for the environment (using sustainably managed woods, renewable energy sources, etc.) was not necessarily good for people.

Case in point: Wood-burning stoves are commonly used in sustainable residential projects, making use of a local, renewable resource, and yet wood is one of the most polluting sources of heat. Gerd Oberfeld, M.D., an epidemiologist from the public health office in Salzburg, Austria has said, "I saw very strong and significant associations between tonsillitis, frequent cough, pseudo-croup, exercise-induced wheeze, food allergies and wood smoke exposure in our school children. I think that wood smoke is one of the most harmful air pollutants we have on earth."

Many eco-villages require chemical-free lifestyles of their members and would make ideal communities for those with chemical sensitivities; however, their frequent choice of wood-burning stoves as a heat source unfortunately removes them as a housing option. It's my hope that the designers, builders, and community planners of this world take heed of this discrepancy between green and non-toxic and start changing the way our homes are built.

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The health effects of today's common construction materials on those with environmental sensitivities are not to be taken lightly. This is a serious issue affecting millions of people worldwide, and the numbers are growing. Not just affecting those with asthma, respiratory disease, and environmental sensitivities, or vulnerable populations like the elderly and children, the toxic burden created by indoor air pollution impacts us all. The issue isn't just about assisting those with special needs. This is really about building the kind of world we all want to live in.

There is one thing we can be sure of: if we do not start cleaning up our world, nature will do it for us in the form of an unpleasant—to put it lightly—collapse of our ecosystem. All

the signs are pointing in that direction. It's imperative also that we stop further polluting our planet. I would love to see a proliferation of chemical-free, electrical-free, pedestrian-based communities that return to an agrarian way of life using natural farming methods, providing for the needs of all their members, including the non-human ones. Only then can we ensure that all of us sharing this planet will have a safe place to call home.

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Julie Genser has a degree in design and environmental analysis from Cornell University. She is certified in ecovillage and permaculture design. She is the founder and director of [PlanetThrive.com](http://PlanetThrive.com), a grassroots community for personal wellness with a focus on healing from environmental and other chronic illnesses. A PDF download of "Safer Construction Tips for the Environmentally Sensitive" is available through [Planet Thrive](http://PlanetThrive.com).

This essay was first published in the [November/December 2007 issue of DESIGNER/builder](#): A Journal of The Human Environment, an independent and nontraditional magazine that brings social justice and issues of equity to the debate over the built and human environments.

#### Notes

1 Pamela Reed Gibson and Amanda Lindberg, "[What Do We Know About Multiple Chemical Sensitivity?](#)".

2 Rhonda Zwillinger, "[No Safe Haven](#)," E: The Environmental Magazine, Volume IX, Number 5, September/October 1998.

3 William J. Rea, M.D., "[The Environmental Aspects of Chemical Sensitivity](#)," Japanese Journal of Clinical Ecology, 3.1 (1994): pp. 2-17.

4 [Kim Palmer](#).

5 [Cindy Duerhing](#).

6 [Dan Allen](#).

7 Jennifer Bogo, "[Children At Risk: Widespread Chemical Exposure Threatens Our Most Vulnerable Population](#)," E: The Environmental Magazine, Volume VII, Number 5, September/October 2001.

8†National Safety Council, "[Sources of Non-Ionizing Radiation](#),".

9†Julie Genser with Melinda Honn and Greg Conrad, "[Safer Construction Tips for the Environmentally Sensitive](#)," 2007.

10†Gerd Oberfeld, M.D., "[International Study of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood](#),".

If you enjoyed Julie's article check out her most recent News Target article [MTV: Smut-Peddlers or Eco-Activists? Make Up Your Mind](#) If you are going to be remodeling or building take a look at Julie Genser's [Safer Construction Tips for the Environmentally Ill](#). A 38-page guide for those in the planning stages of building safer housing for someone with environmental sensitivities, requiring a home free of chemicals, mold, and / or electromagnetic frequency (EMF) waves.