Rebuilding Wine Country, Eight Cottages at a Time

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It happened in a matter of hours. When the Wine Country fires started in California the night of October 9, 2017, they rushed over 30 miles of canyons, from Calistoga west into the hills, exploding in the Fountaingrove neighborhood of Santa Rosa just after midnight. By morning, the neighborhood was gone, all but two houses burned by the fires.



A rendering of the Habitat Wildfire Cottages.

Much of Coffey Park, Mark West and Larkfield Estates were also destroyed in the fires. In Santa Rosa alone more than 2,800 homes and 5,100 structures were burned, creating a housing emergency in a city that already had a housing crisis.

Within days, Chris Strieter, Max Thieriot and Myles Lawrence-Briggs of Senses Wines in Occidental created Rebuild Wine Country, partnering with Habitat for Humanity to build and repair structures after the fires. This October, their efforts began to turn into homes.

On the one-year anniversary of the Wine Country fires, Rebuild Wine Country and Habitat for Humanity held a groundbreaking ceremony in the Fountaingrove neighborhood to install the first of what will be eight to ten Sonoma Wildfire Cottages. Congressman Mike Thompson and designer Marianne Cusato were also on hand for the ceremony. Medtronic, a medical equipment company, donated a portion of its Fountaingrove campus for the community of cottages. The project is just the first step of a longer-term plan to help rebuild affordable, safe housing in the region.

“We plan to build 600 new homes over the next six to eight years,” Habitat for Humanity interim president John Kennedy says, “so that very low- to moderate-income families can have affordable housing.” But the initial cottages being built now are also test cases for innovations in building technology.

“We are creating transitional homes for immediate need that can be swiftly built but still provide long-term use,” says Cusato. “This project is a laboratory for the future of residential home building nationwide.”

Cusato designed the cottages in collaboration with Cypress, a nonprofit specializing in disaster-response housing programs. She cites the shacks built after the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco as an inspiration. “Some still exist today, have been added onto, and sell for over a million dollars,” she says. “We want to build a structure that is part of the long-term rebuilding. These Wildfire Cottages will help the immediate need, and, I hope, still be around in a hundred years to inspire others.”

Habitat for Humanity is using a lottery system to select families for the 750-square-foot homes. There are multiple designs for the cottages as a way to compare different construction methods side by side. Some cottages are designed with traditional woodframe construction, but the newest innovation relies on steel frames with Styrofoam walls covered in a material similar to adobe, which is both aesthetically pleasing and strong. The foam cottages are light, insulated and easy to transport. They’re also easy to build. Entire homes can be manufactured in sections and then installed on location in a matter of days. The Medtronic site stands as the first public test of the new steel-frame-and-Styrofoam approach.

“Without housing, you don’t have a community,” Representative Thompson said during the ceremony.
Without housing you also don’t have the workforce

that keeps the community intact.

In a study conducted prior to the fires, the Sonoma County Winegrowers group examined the most pressing needs of the region's agricultural workers. Top among them was housing. After the fires, the need increased. Wineries and vineyard growers responded by purchasing RVs, trailers and mobile homes for their employees. Now the shift is being made to install more durable, long-term homes such as these cottages.

In addition to donating the land for this first step of the Sonoma Wildfire Cottages project, Medtronic also donated $100,000 to building the homes. Rebuild Wine Country has successfully raised $1 million of their $5 million goal. To donate or learn more, go to rebuildwinecountry.org.

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