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Inside Story



**Concrete Masonry Just Got Charming**  
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# Concrete Masonry Just Got Charming VOBB - Dry Stack (Mortarless) Concrete Block

By Katie Keefe Smith

## Built To Last

Steve and Cheryl Doerr's Lafayette, Louisiana, home is anything but ordinary. Dark, twisting iron and a towering archway complement the home's front double doors, copper embellishments and working gas lanterns contribute to an old-world charm, and green ivy has begun to make its way up the antique brick outside. Inside, knotted wood cabinetry, warm colors, and distinctive chandeliers accent Cheryl's personal oil paintings and hand-made drapes and linens.

But for all this one-year-old home's beauty, it isn't anything visible that sets the house apart—it's what's underneath. The Doerr's is one of the first homes in the area that's built to last. Hidden below the sheetrock, stucco, and brick are interior and exterior walls made of solid concrete. That's right, concrete blocks secured to the foundation by vertical rebar that run 18" apart. "We've built a bomb shelter," kids Steve. "No," interrupts Cheryl, "we've built something that's going to last."

The choice to forgo a traditional wood structure was an easy one for the Doerrs. Steve, a mechanical engineer who constructs oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, made the decision during a trip to Europe. "I went to France in 1992. All of the houses there are hundreds of years old, and they're all made of anything but wood. Only in America," he laughs, "do we build big houses out of termite food."

And so, determined not to feed the bugs, Steve kept a lookout for a company that could help him secure the supplies, labor, and technical support to build a home of concrete block. He was also on the lookout for the perfect piece of property.

## Concrete Fate

Call it fate, providence, or luck, he found both in John "JG" Guy, President of Verot Oaks Building Blocks (VOBB), the premier technical support provider for dry stack concrete building block



Steve and Cheryl Doerr's kitchen is located in the heart of their spacious VOBB home. Rich granite countertops open up to generous living areas on both sides of the house, creating the perfect space for entertaining.

projects in the U.S. Of course, JG also happens to sell land for residential development on the side. And naturally, he owned the very piece of property Steve and Cheryl Doerr wanted to buy. And in the deed to that land, JG just so

happened to specify that homes on the property had to be constructed in concrete. The rest, as they say, is masonry.

## The Dry Stacking Difference

In the past, concrete masonry



Sandy and Suzanne Payne, satisfied VOBB homeowners, relax in their large, well-lit kitchen. VOBB allowed them the durability of concrete block walls *and* the beauty of granite countertops, recess lighting, crown molding and other design details found in traditional wood homes.

projects have been somewhat limited, due to the time involved in construction and the expense associated with labor. But VOBB has developed a technique that greatly reduces the time, cost, and difficulty involved in concrete masonry construction. It's called dry stacking. Dry stacking eliminates the weak mortar joints used to assemble typical concrete masonry units (CMUs). With these vulnerable, slow-to-construct mortar joints gone, labor costs go down and wall strength goes up. After all, if a concrete block wall breaks, it's almost always at the mortar joints that hold the blocks together. But with dry stacking, gravity does the work. A concrete mix is poured directly into block cavities, and then rebar is inserted vertically for tensile strength.

The durable simplicity of dry stacking was an important factor in Steve and Cheryl Doerr's decision to use

VOBB. "We were impressed not only with the strength, but also the simplicity of the VOBB dry stacking method," says Steve. JG agrees, "VOBB blocks are changing the way people view concrete masonry projects. Builders are starting to realize they can construct a structure that's going to last without racking up outlandish labor and supply costs, and they don't have to sacrifice a thing when it comes to look and design. In the aftermath of unprecedented damage by hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes, that's very good news for homeowners all over the country."

#### Style That's Safe

In fact, homes made of VOBB concrete blocks are not only better protected against wind and water, they're also safer when it comes to fire, mold, and other hazards. JG understands, "Parents rest better when they know their children,



84 Lumber joins Lowe's Home Improvement as VOBB concrete block distributors. Members of the 84 Lumber team David Gorsha, Rudy Brown and Lance Lebourgeois stand before VOBB blocks that range in size from 6", 12" and 18". Vertical grooves allow the blocks to be clipped together until cement and rebar can hold them permanently in place.



asleep in rooms across the house, have more time to escape in case of fire. Concrete just doesn't burn like wood." The Doerrs cite those concerns as additional factors in their decision to use VOBB concrete blocks. "Why build our dream home only to be destroyed by fire, flood, or termites?" asks Steve. "We were willing to pay a little extra *today* to prevent disaster *tomorrow*," adds Cheryl.

#### Training a Workforce

As the demand for VOBB concrete block construction continues to grow, so does the need for trained labor. VOBB has partnered with Louisiana Technical College to offer students dry stacking training courses as part of the LTC curriculum. Dean of Workforce





The Payne's centered their living room around a large fireplace. Their decision to use the VOBB dry stack method didn't mean they had to sacrifice when it came to choice of floor plan or interior design.

Development at the college, Debbie Burkeiser attests to students' interest in the technique. "Not only will there be a new kind of skilled worker coming out of LTC, but contractors will be more inclined to use dry stack concrete masonry as a means of lasting construction that will withstand winds, rains, and other environmental dangers. It's a good thing for the industry and a good thing for home owners," she says.

JG attests, "I never have to convince people a concrete block home is a better investment than wood. Their concerns are about the availability of labor and supplies, the overall cost, and the look of the project upon completion." All very fair questions that, he says, have attractive answers.



VOBB concrete block structures employ vertical electrical wiring and plumbing. The top plate is easily fastened to the concrete block using 18" J-Bolts. The VOBB dry stack process is also mortarless. The durability of the VOBB method makes it a natural choice not only for residential construction, but also for commercial ventures when safety and protection are paramount (e.g. schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and storage facilities).

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Thanks to \$15 million in funding from Louisiana's Governor's office through the Pathways to Construction Employment Initiative, Louisiana Technical College offers free dry stack training classes on Saturdays to interested builders and homeowners. Classes of 10 will continue as long as funding provides.

Free workshops are offered to builders and homeowners interested in the VOBB dry stacking process. "It's surprisingly easy," says JG. There are also plans to train a prison labor force. "It's a great way to put taxpayer dollars back into the community. The prisoners involved would all be low-security, low-sentence inmates. For them, the advantage would be to work hard so that they can learn a trade useful to them later." Essentially, skilled dry stackers are becoming more available all the time, with VOBB placing interested builders in touch with required labor and supplies.



**Before at left:** During construction of the Doerr's Lafayette home, the house resembled a bomb shelter more than anything else. But from the very beginning it was clear just how durable the home would be. **After picture above:** Now that the Doerr's house is complete, antique brick, splashes of stucco, and copper details veil the VOBB concrete blocks underneath.

### Construction without Many "Cons"

Distributors of this environmentally friendly product are now available too. Both Lowe's Home Improvement and 84 Lumber sell VOBB materials. As for cost, JG admits VOBB homes are still more expensive to build, but not by much. "And," he smiles, "the difference is getting less all the time." He estimates homeowners should expect to pay somewhere between 2% to 7% more (of the home's total retail cost) when using VOBB concrete blocks. This makes VOBB an affordable product for homeowners building moderate, 1500-1700 square foot homes who also want to take advantage of the added safety and protection that VOBB provides.

But the long-term safety benefits may well outweigh the initial expense. A concrete block's "thermal mass" allows it to store energy, meaning structures stay warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer, thereby reducing cooling and heating bills. Concrete also doesn't rot or decay, so maintenance costs are lower. And forget about VOBB walls

requiring treatment for termites. Even the insurance industry has been known to reduce the cost of homeowner's insurance on houses constructed in concrete.

### Concrete Charm

But JG knows those benefits won't be enough if, in the end, a VOBB home isn't beautiful. "People ask me all the time, how do I hang a picture on the

wall? I laugh and tell them, with a nail." For the especially ambitious, there's always a Tapcon screw. "Either way," he says, "homeowners can decorate a VOBB home as attractively as they would any other house." And he's right—Steve and Cheryl Doerr's home looks no different from any other. Brick, sheetrock, and stucco veil the concrete blocks underneath.



The Payne's choice to blend stucco and brick on the exterior of their home demonstrates VOBB homes look no different from other houses in the neighborhood once construction is complete.



Many coastal homeowners faced with rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina are choosing the VOBB dry stack method. This Mississippi two-story home sits right on the Gulf of Mexico, but unlike its predecessor, will enjoy solid protection against future inclement weather.

“When we were building, it looked like a bomb shelter,” says Steve. “And it is. But you can’t tell a difference from our home and our friends’ houses anymore.” In fact, the Doerrs didn’t have to compromise a thing when it came to choosing a floor plan or making interior design selections. “If anything, it made it easier,” says Cheryl, who drafted the floor plan herself.

That’s because VOBB concrete blocks come in standard units. Each block is made based on a grid of six inches. All VOBB blocks are 6” high

and 6” wide. Block lengths come in 6”, 12”, and 18” increments. Therefore, by basing plans on a 6” grid, not only are floor plans made simpler, but unnecessary cutting and wasted materials are eliminated as well. VOBB builders adopt the position, “Why cut it with a saw when you can draw it with a pencil?”

**No “End” in Mind**

The VOBB process benefits homeowners of all budget types. “It’s not just high-end homeowners who are using the dry stacking process,” says JG.

“After recent natural disasters, many people who lost their homes want to make sure it never happens again, even if, as in the case of coastal homeowners, they get another category 4 hurricane.” They’re people like Tony and Sandy Abshire whose Louisiana home was swallowed by Hurricane Rita. The Abshires are rebuilding with VOBB blocks. A FEMA trailer sits in front of the concrete block house the Abshires are constructing, mostly themselves. “Dry stacking is so easy that homeowners who have the gumption can do it themselves,” says JG, “and VOBB is happy to teach them how.”

**Stone Silent**

Back inside the Doerrs’, Steve and Cheryl take time to notice the silence. “You know,” Cheryl begins, “there have been unexpected blessings from this concrete castle we’ve constructed too.” She smiles, “It’s always this quiet.” But as news about the dry stacking method spreads, the quiet VOBB has afforded the Doerrs is resulting in a loud and decidedly interested roar in the community outside. VOBB just might be the future of home building in the United States.

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As interest in the dry stack method grows, the use of VOBB concrete blocks for other types of construction projects increases as well. Rocky Landry, owner of this horse barn in Iberia Parish, chose concrete block after a long search for a product that would remain cool, even in Louisiana’s humid climate.