

David Cook of San Rafael has a slightly different take on building a home. He teaches people how to build their own homes, inexpensively, in a popular course called "Build your Own Dream House for a Song." He started teaching it at Redwood High School through the Tamalpais Union High School Community Education Department, and has expanded his reach by teaching in 30 locations in Seattle, Washington, D.C., and throughout California.

When he first came to the United States from London, he hired a contractor to build a home in the East Bay, but in the mid-'80s followed friends who had bought property in the Sleepy Hollow area of San Anselmo — and did the same.

"I decided I wanted to build my own house this time, and I spent a year collecting materials," he explains. "I bought an old steel building for \$900 at an auction in Richmond, and I put an ad in the UC Berkeley Architecture Department and worked with a couple of students for awhile. But I actually got a talented architect to design the house for \$1,000," he added.

He moved his family into a mobile home parked on the property while the house was being built, saving \$20,000 in rent, and building his house for \$40 a square foot. "It would probably cost about \$200 now. Even back then, it would have cost about \$150 a square foot."

In his class, he says, he teaches people "to do what I did — save money on land and keep the design simple." He shows how to buy land at tax sales directly from the county, "but you have to be diligent and read public notices every day," he advises.

The biggest mistake people make, he says, "is getting carried away with the design. The plans are complicated, difficult and expensive." A better way, he suggests, is to keep the design simple so that less costly, standard, off-the-shelf products from Home Depot or major home improvement stores can be used; or go to auctions, as he did, where doors and windows can sell for \$10 each. Then design the house around the collected materials.

"People get really excited about that," he adds.

But is it feasible to do this in



Illustration courtesy of David Cook

IN YOUR DREAMS: David Cook recommends that, when you design your dream house, you keep it simple and use off-the-shelf components.

the class, I show people the various ways to do it — the conventional way, buy land from a Realtor, get an architect and a general contractor, and then get the plans approved."

You might guess Cook has a background in construction, but he freely admits he doesn't. He grew up in London "with five women who knew nothing about construction," he deadpans, then tells a story: "I was teaching a class in San Francisco and someone asked what kind of people shouldn't build their own house. I said, 'I guess a professional pianist and brain surgeons — people who have to be careful of their fingers.' At the break, though, a man came up and said, 'I'm a brain surgeon and I want to build my own home.'"

"Build Your own Dream House" will be held at Redwood High School, Room 163, on Wednesday from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. The fee is \$29. For more information, call 945-3780.

Cook's book, "Build your Dream House for a Song," can be purchased for \$25 at www.buildyourdreamhouse.com.

