

Rob Andrys finds common ground



Rob Andrys and horse Sofie. EVAN WILLIAMS/FLORIDA WEEKLY

Rob Andrys driveway lies at the end of a road in Alva where the asphalt meets gravel. Another meeting at this semirural juncture includes that of an old Florida cracker and modern architect, two types intersecting in Mr. Andrys, who at 50 describes himself tongue-in-cheek as an “overeducated farmer.”

Raised on the North Dakota prairie, he’s now living in lush, sun-dappled Alva. Yet, in a typically generous, magnanimous moment, he finds a place where those two contradictory worlds connect as well.

“Florida reminds me so much of North Dakota because both of them are flat and they’ve got wonderful skies and both have some pretty intense thunderstorms,” he said.

Mr. Andrys is also a mediator of sorts when it comes to his profession. At least since he was a college student, he admired an architect’s ability to let nature and landscape guide his work. Frank Lloyd Wright’s work inspired him for having that quality. He’s continued in that mode, helping found the Florida Green Building Coalition, and in the last 10 years focusing his firm’s operation around energy efficient, sustainable buildings.

One recent example is a bathroom facility with an observation deck he designed. The structure, built on Bunche Beach in Fort Myers, makes its own electricity, captures water from the rain and has no wires or pipes connected to it.

“It doesn’t need any umbilical cords,” Mr. Andrys said. “It’s its own self-sufficient system.”

He also teaches a course on “green” building practices at High Tech North. His students will work as contractors, homemakers and plumbers. Mr. Andrys tells them about how three-quarters of electricity in the Southeast comes from burning coal. “We’re responsible every time you turn on your light switch for taking the tops off the West Virginian and Kentucky mountains,” he tells them. And he talks about the importance of insulation and how, for example, it would be more energy efficient to reinsulate all the homes in North Carolina than build a nuclear power plant.

“But (insulation) is not very sexy,” he said.

Mr. Andrys’ own home is a seamless integration of two seemingly disparate objects. A one-bedroom house already built on the property has been affixed to a pink cottage that he moved there years ago from a beach resort. The cottage was going to be torn down. With his wife, Sandy, he maintains a vegetable garden on their 10 acres in the winter, as well as a yearround “petting zoo” that includes five horses and a handful of cats and dogs.

“I really love being surrounded by trees and having a stream going just a few feet from the house,” he said. “We love the peacefulness

of it.”

From there he has a better vantage point on a youth that included repairing air conditioners in California (where he was friends with a Mensa-card-carrying lion tamer), sweeping up tennis courts in Southwest Florida and studying ancient Chinese architecture in Beijing.

He had been inspired to travel in North Dakota, where his father was a barber in a small town about 15 miles from an Air Force base. "He could do a mean crew cut," Mr. Andrys said.

He listened to stories from the people who worked there, and wanted to see the places they had seen.

"From that moment on, man, I've wanted to see the world, and I've seen a fair amount of it," he said.

His father also fixed up houses and rented them out, providing the chances to work with wood and plumbing, experiences that later gave way to his career.

"I guess I was a seeker, and now I've become a lot more. I know who I am and have a whole lot better balance," Mr. Andrys said. "Back then, I grew up next to an Air Force base in a tiny town that was so boring."

Now he's happy to live at the end of the asphalt, or the beginning of the gravel, in sun-dappled Alva. He plans to keep teaching the principles of green building and energy efficiency for a long time to come.

"At some point we have to be a little easier on the planet," he said. ♦