



# ALL-AROUND RUSTIC

SILO TAKES SHAPE AS A GUEST HOUSE

by AMANDA BELL

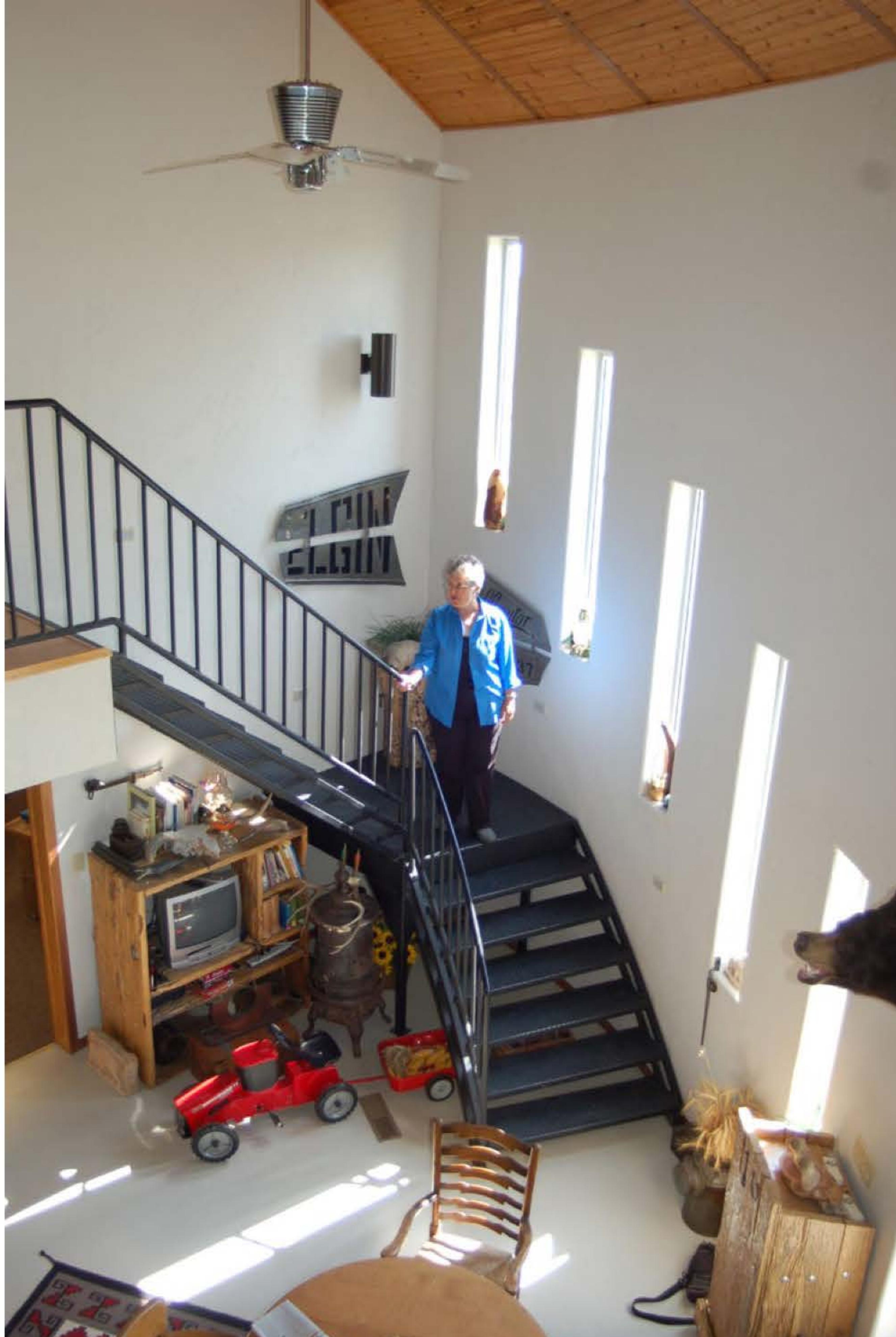
VANCE AND LOUISE EHMKE

**VANCE AND LOUISE EHMKE** of Healy, Kan., first considered more traditional options to house an office and storage for their growing feed and seed business.

But they ultimately opted for a more cost-effective and avant-garde project — transforming a 42-foot diameter grain silo into guest living and workspace in 2001.

Today, thousands of international visitors traveling for business and leisure have visited the Scale House, so named because part of the structure houses the scale used to weigh truckloads of feed and seed. "It's one of the most fun things we've ever done," Vance says of the 2,400-square-foot building in the round, complete with office space, guest quarters, kitchen and bathrooms. Vance and Louise share their story below.





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What better says ‘rural America’ than a grain bin?

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— VANCE EHMKE

## AN EXTENSION OF RURAL AMERICA

In addition to living here on the farm, we have a certified feed and seed business. We needed to update equipment and get 80-foot scales, then instantly also needed a scale house and office. We looked at several steel buildings and ready-built buildings, but ultimately decided that, as Frank Lloyd Wright believed, architecture should look like its environment. What better says “rural America” than a grain bin?

## INVESTING IN A PLAN

The best money we spent was making sure we had a plan. We knew we wanted some basic space and offices, so we hired a local interior architect and spent \$800-\$1,000 on the blueprints. He thought a round building should have round rooms, with a core center that's round, and outer rooms that use the exterior curve. We have offices downstairs and a conference room, then the bigger entry opens up to the ceiling. The second floor is only three quarters of a floor.

The project was new territory for everyone and a leap of faith. Our architect gave us a figure that terrified us, but we were able to reign in the budget and discover we'd be able to keep it fairly reasonable. We bought a new bin for around \$30,000; the entire project ended up at \$210,000-\$215,000.

“It’s a blend of rustic and high tech, but it works.”

— VANCE EHMKE

## EQUAL PARTS RUSTIC AND HIGH-TECH

The grain bin is 31 feet from the floor to the peak, 18 feet on the side walls and 42 feet in diameter. If you were to put grain in it, it would hold 25,000 semi-truck loads. It's probably the only one you'll ever be in that has central heat and air, computers, phones, carpeting, offices and running water.

It's a blend of rustic and high tech, but it works. It's really open, although we're filling it up with antiques. We wanted to use things from here on the farm or around the county for the historic value, but also for the cost value. We went to farm sales where we bought stacks of lumber that would have some weathered, antiqued boards that Vance built furniture out of. He also made some pieces from locust and black walnut trees that his grandparents planted on the farm 100 years ago.





## 'COOLER THAN ANY OTHER HOUSE'

One of our sons lived here for a year before he went to grad school, and some of our short-term workers stay here. As part of our seed business, we've also had thousands of people from all over the world come to tour it, including a former governor of Kansas and people from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, China, Chile and Bangladesh. Since we developed it from start to finish, we never had a first impression of the completed project, so our favorite thing is being there when people see it for the first time.

Working on this house, we learned you don't have to be like everyone else. You can build a grain bin cooler than any other house on the block. In a lot of structures, there are some materials you just totally ignore, and that's a tragedy. There are some neat things out there that can be incorporated into a building.

Photos courtesy of Tanner Ehmke.



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