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Mick Hilleary, an industrial designer who builds zoo exhibits and trade show displays, and who expanded into residential pools five years ago, has found that Americans have a clearly defined idea of what constitutes a proper swimming pool.

"It's a white-tiled thing," said Hilleary, whose company, Total Habitat, in Bonner Springs, Kan., specializes in what could be called the opposite of the white- or blue-tiled things found in millions of backyards across the country.

The "natural pools" that Total Habitat builds are bordered with wood, planted with lush vegetation and free of chemicals like chlorine; they resemble nothing so much as a swimming hole. "It's natural-looking, like a pond," Hilleary said. "But the water looks so clean. People really want to swim in it, more than in a farm pond."

Natural swimming pools (or swimming ponds, as they are called in Europe, where the concept originated 20 years ago) are self-cleaning pools that combine swimming areas and water gardens. Materials and designs vary - the pools can be lined with rubber or reinforced polyethylene, as in the case of Total Habitat's, and may look rustic or modern - but all natural pools rely on "regeneration" zones, areas given over to aquatic plants that act as organic cleansers.

The pools have skimmers and pumps that circulate the water through the regeneration zone and draw it across a wall of rocks, loose gravel or tiles, to which friendly bacteria attach, serving as an additional biological filter. Unlike artificial ponds, which tend to be as murky with groundwater runoff and sediment from soil erosion as the natural ponds they're modeled on, in a natural pool the water is clear enough to see through to the bottom.

The pools, which cost about the same as or slightly more than conventional ones, depending on landscaping, appeal to gardeners because of the great variety of plant life that can be grown in them, as well as to green advocates and others who don't want to swim in chlorinated water.

"Many, many people don't like chlorine," said Bryan Morse, who runs a landscaping company in Vista, Calif., called Expanding Horizons, that builds water features and branched into natural pools five years ago.

Taking advantage of the Southern California climate, Morse created a sort of jungle lagoon in his own backyard, building a natural swimming pool with a thatch-roof palapa and a regeneration zone filled with tropical foliage like Madagascar palm and varieties of canna lilies.

The business is hardly a growth industry, at least in the U.S. Total Habitat has built eight natural pools, mostly in the Midwest. (Hilleary said he has formed a trade organization, the Natural Swimming Pool Association, "to protect the integrity" of the industry; he has certified himself under its requirements.

The group has only two members, Hilleary and Michael Littlewood, a builder in England.) Morse said he has built four pools, including his own, mostly for "ex-hippies."

The pools are more popular in Austria, where a company called Biotop has been designing them for residential and public use since 1986 and now installs about 50 a year, according to Peter Petrich, Biotop's owner and the person credited with inventing the concept.

Petrich said he and his colleagues have given much consideration to why natural pools haven't caught on in the U.S. and have concluded that "perhaps in Europe people have more contact with nature and life is not so clinical."

Toni Schneeweiss of Biotop said that private pools in Austria, unlike those in the U.S., generally do not require building permits, which can be harder to obtain for projects using unfamiliar technology. But it is also true that natural pools are not well known in the U.S., and that it is hard to find people to build them.

For builders like Hilleary and Morse, natural pools are a side business, and mainstream pool contractors don't seem to offer them at all.

Penny Johnson, the chairwoman of the Association of Pool & Spa Professionals, an industry trade group, said she had never heard of the concept until she was asked about it for this article. She expressed skepticism about the technology. "I don't know how plants could filter the water for bathing use," she said, adding that in her experience outdoor pools have to be "shocked" with chemicals to kill bacteria.
